# CONNEKT

## COUNTRY PAPER
## ON MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

# Country based national reports on prevention of extremism

Tasnim Chirchi (Ed.)



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# COUNTRY BASED NATIONAL REPORTS ON PREVENTION OF EXTREMISM

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# Introduction

Dr.Tasnim Chirchi

This publication aims to share the findings of the second phase of WP5 research within the CONNEKT project. While the first phase of WP5 examined the drivers and social contexts of radicalization and VE in the MENA regions and the Balkans, this phase is focused on the factors of prevention. Both phases take place at the meso-level involving communities and local stakeholders and realities, in line with the project's methodology. This work package is the back-bone of the project methodology as the meso-level connects both the micro-level and the macro-level findings for a more refined understanding of the social contexts that can have a pivotal role in both radicalization and its prevention. This is also a level enabling a dynamic understanding of social phenomena being studied within CONNEKT.

The findings shared within this publication have been collected through 16 case studies, as two case studies were implemented in each of the 8 participating countries: Jordan, Morocco, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Bosnia Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Egypt and Tunisia. The research activities included 17 focus groups involving 147 youth between 18 and 30. As to the interviews, they have engaged 42 varied profiles from civil society activists to practitioners, experts and academics. The 16 case studies build on the multi-level previous findings on the drivers and contexts of radicalization and VE in both region to interrogate the factors of prevention as they are manifest on the meso-level, within community dynamics since the project considers communities as a central actor in the analyzed social dynamics. The conceptual framework guiding this second part of the research on communities is based on some fundamental methodological principles and theoretical considerations.



As WP5 emphasizes the role of communities in the examined social contexts, assessing community resilience as a central concept in the project's theoretical framework at this level was crucial. The project addresses the challenge of assessing community resilience through a three-dimensional approach: awareness (recognizing radicalization as a problem), attitude (willingness to take action), and action (plans to address the challenge) (CONNEKT, 2021, p.9). These dimensions are pivotal in understanding factors contributing to community resilience.

CONNEKT's concept of community resilience emphasizes several key aspects:

1. Emphasis on Community Resilience: CONNEKT prioritizes community resilience over individual resilience, recognizing the historical oversight of the community's role. It views resilience as a community attribute rather than an individual mindset (Torrekens and De Le Vingne, 2020). This emphasis aligns with the need to involve local and civil society actors in preventing violent extremism (PVE) to ensure effectiveness, ownership, and sustainability of prevention efforts.

2. Departure from Passive Connotations: CONNEKT's view of resilience surpasses passive connotations linked with acceptance of the status quo. It rejects notions of resignation or uncritical acceptance, advocating instead for societies capable of understanding and responding to complex

events by utilizing or developing systems and practices to manage and mitigate shocks (Torrekens and De Le Vingne, 2020).

3. Responsibility of State Actors: CONNEKT adopts a critical stance on resilience that challenges undue pressure on communities, potentially absolving state actors of their responsibility to ensure broader human security. While community resilience is crucial, it should not shift all responsibility from those spreading extremist ideologies or from governments accountable for addressing the issue. The focus should be on building community agency without stigmatization (CONNEKT, 2021).

4. Replicability of Positive Practices: CONNEKT emphasizes identifying positive practices that can be replicated across countries and regions. This approach seeks to move beyond securitization-focused research and institutional approaches, enabling a more comprehensive investigation at macro, meso, and micro levels. Country research teams should explore practices offering learning opportunities for other actors, countries, or institutions, fostering new knowledge and understanding in preventing violent extremism (CONNEKT, 2021).

These conceptual and practical considerations have guided the selection of the case studies. Within CONNEKT, combining prevention and intervention tools and adapting them to specific contexts is deemed crucial for effective prevention, reducing commitment and recidivism, and increasing resilience. Prevention is seen as a long-term social investment in building resilient communities. CONNEKT emphasizes a community-level approach, aligning with the need for context-specific and tailored prevention programs that consider subcultural dynamics, codes, and symbols of collective identity within social environments.



CONNEKT adopts the classification of these factors within the methodological guidelines proposed in CONNEKT for researching and understanding prevention factors. The theoretical framework within the project categorizes prevention factors based on their nature or function, suggesting a classification into protective, resilience, and resistance factors.

Protective factors are inherent to the community and naturally shield it from harm, such as demographic composition, geographical features, and economic conditions. While these factors can be bolstered or encouraged, they originate from within the community itself.

Resilience factors encompass the practices, habits, rituals, laws, policies, and other tools developed by the community or institutions to adapt to change and counter negative influences that threaten the community's well-being or cohesion.

CONNEKT recognizes that some factors driving radicalization can also be turned into elements of prevention, either as protective or resilience factors. Although these factors have not been fully analyzed, previous research has hinted at their potential. For instance, while religion has historically been viewed as a primary driver of radicalization, religious education and literacy may serve as protective and resilience factors. Traditional religious figures and institutions respected by the community can promote resilience

by establishing boundaries on the legitimacy of violence. Countries like Morocco and Jordan include religious leaders in their PVE strategies, indicating their potential impact. Interventions to enhance resilience in this area might involve providing PVE training for religious leaders, educating young people about religious principles, designing campaigns to reclaim religious narratives, and promoting interfaith dialogues.

Education is another factor that can foster resilience. Youth representatives at the Cross-Regional Youth Forum in Skopje emphasized education as crucial for building community resilience, particularly education that encourages critical thinking and facilitates interactions between diverse communities. Exposure to different perspectives and openness are seen as key resilience factors. Potential interventions in the field of PVE might involve educating youth about their rights to empower them, promoting critical thinking and civics education in schools or alternative educational settings, and training teachers or youth workers.

Identifying resistance factors is also important. These are defined as purposeful nonviolent actions against the root causes, drivers, and manifestations of violent extremism.

On the basis of these conceptual considerations, the research teams engaged with various local communities and local stakeholders who helped them better gage the various potentials of prevention in the studied contexts and formulate recommendations in this sense at the end of each report. Following the cumulative methodology of the project, the reports start by summarizing the previous findings on the factors and contexts of radicalization and then address the potential prevention factors revealed through the analysis of fieldwork findings.

# EGYPT

Al-Warraq: Prevention Factors within an Informal Coptic Community – Greater Cairo. *Maye Kassem*

Informal Communities in Greater Cairo: Prevention Factors in the Case of Bahtim. *Maye Kassem*





# Al-Warraq: Prevention Factors within an Informal Coptic Community – Greater Cairo

## Introduction

Building upon the first phase of Work Package 5 (WP5), which delved into investigating the drivers of violent extremism (VE) at the meso level, the significance of meso-level institutions within specific social contexts was examined. This second phase of analysis aims to expand upon this topic by examining factors that can potentially lead to preventing violent extremism (PVE).[1] As such, the focus of this part of the study seeks to examine why in certain instances, communities like Al-Warraq exhibit resilience against VE despite the presence of conditions that can be regarded as conducive to radicalisation and VE. The aim here is to analyse what the preventative factors are within such communities. In turn, the objective is to understand the manner in which such communities navigate and mitigate the risks of VE. In this regard, Al Warraq is an interesting case study in that it sheds light on the social context of interaction of its Coptic youth with both the local church – which appeared to play a major role as a meso-level institutions in the first phase of analysis – and the dynamics and manner in which this target community interacts within the majority based Muslim community at large. Furthermore, the aim of this research is to delve into the specificities of Al-Warraqs' preventive landscape, with the aim of understanding how meso-level institutions contribute to these factors. The socioeconomic, political, religious and education dynamics within Al-Warraq are assessed to extract a clearer understanding of the preventative framework that could contribute to the development of effective prevention strategies applicable not only in Al-Warraq but could potentially be applied in other more diverse settings. In this regard, this research examines the following:

- To what degree does the specific context of social interaction foster the development of preventative factors within the community of Al-Warraq?
- To what extent does the identity of the Coptic Christian youth within the community affect both VE and prevention factors?
- How do factors such as primary socialisations, moderate understanding of religion, the presence of safe spaces, and engagement in volunteerism contribute to prevention?
- What are alternative approaches that may be more effective in preventing violence and extremism within the local context?



[1] CONNEKT's Methodological and Conceptual Framework adopts Koehler's definition of prevention. In particular, the aim of the analysis is to focus on "primary prevention, addressing societal issues and related individuals before violent extremist groups and ideologies are encountered and specific risk factors begin to form" (Koehler, 2020).

As we delve into this second phase of this research, it is first necessary to provide a recap of the research findings of the first phase of analysis. The research methodology provides the criteria for selecting the case study and the participants and the challenges encountered during the selection process. The analysis of the meso-level dynamics on prevention investigates the specific social interactions and existing prevention measures, focusing on protective, resilience and resistance factors within the community of Al-Warraq. The analysis will further identify some neglected factors that stakeholders can further adopt in their engagement strategies. Lastly, areas for potential social intervention derived from the meso-level research are discussed. In conclusion, the overall aim is to extract transferable experiences and best practices that benefit not only this case study but also the wider field of violence prevention.

# Research methodology

## RECAP FROM RESULTS FROM THE FIRST PHASE OF THE MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

Al-Warraq is an informal settlement in the governorate of Giza. Background research indicates that the region has a high unemployment rate, low education quality, and high levels of poverty (Participatory Development Program in Urban Areas, 2017). Despite Al-Warraq being identified as an area with conditions conducive to VE, the Christian community that participated in the first phase of this research displayed resilience towards this phenomenon (Kassem,2023).

The findings of Al-Warraq further solidified the fact that no single driver explains youth susceptibility to radicalisation and VE. Rather, it is the complex interactions between different drivers within a specific social context that potentially lead youth to radicalisation and VE. In this regard, the case study presented interactions of drivers related to economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, limited access to leisure and cultural opportunities outside the church. These intertwined factors in turn led to political grievances within a community that perceives itself to some extent disenfranchised due to its minority status. Nonetheless, it seemed that the specific social context of interaction and local dynamics, particularly between the youth and the church, played an important role in preventing the occurrence of VE among youth (Kassem, 2023).



Consequently, the first phase of research further indicated that the lack of secular meso-level institutions potentially creates a void within the community. This void has the capacity to foster a divided community whereby Muslims and Christians are more susceptible to the rise of radicalisation and VE. Al-Warraq, specifically the Coptic community and its church, demonstrates the vital role of meso-level institutions in shaping youth in Egypt. Institutions like the church serve as intermediaries for the drivers of VE and radicalisation, contributing to the development of moderate and stable youth. These youths, in turn, do not view VE and radicalisation as solutions to their broader socioeconomic, political and various other challenges (Kassem, 2023).

## DESCRIPTION OF THE CRITERIA FOR THE CASE STUDY SELECTION AND CRITERIA FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

Al-Warraq Coptic Christian youth community was chosen as our case study to explore the potential indicators for prevention within the community. Despite the complex interplay of different drivers, the focus is to understand how youth within the community remain resilient to such factors and drivers. In other words, the Al-Warraq case study was chosen to shed light on the existing prevention indicators within the community, with the role of the Coptic Church being the focus of the research. It is important to note that, during the first phase of analysis, the youth who participated in the focus groups and interviews expressed concern regarding the lack of affordable and safe cultural and leisurely opportunities offered outside the scope of the church. The lack of cultural and leisurely opportunities and the limited role of secular meso-level institutions (such as sports clubs, youth clubs and affordable training institutes) appear to have created a vacuum within the community that could potentially contribute towards a religiously divided youth, who may become susceptible to the emergence of radicalisation and VE. The case study of Al-Warraq is, therefore, intended to scrutinise why in such circumstances, the Christian youth appear to be insulated

from the risk of radicalisation and VE within the community. To do so, the research examines the nature of religious education within the Coptic community, the availability of safe spaces tailored for youth, encompassing cultural and leisure opportunities within their church. The role of the family as well as participating in volunteerism will also be explored to assess the degree to which such dynamics potentially act as additional preventative factors against VE.

### Sample description

The target population in this research comprises the Al-Warraq Coptic community. The selected sample for the focus group comprised 10 participants (6 males and 4 females) between the ages 18-30 years who attend regular church services and, in some cases, actively engage in charitable volunteerism on behalf of the church.

Regarding the selection criteria for identifying the three individuals participating in one-on-one interviews, the criteria entailed that everyone had to be a local resident possessing extensive knowledge and understanding of the community. Second, their in-depth knowledge of the community was expected to be derived from their professional involvement within the church or community. In other words, the aim of the fieldwork interview selection criteria was to gather comprehensive insights into this particular community from the views of stakeholders active within it. Additionally, the selection sought to capture the perspectives of community leaders, to enable an in-depth assessment of their influence, particularly over the youth.



The interviews in the case of Al-Warraq were conducted with the following three community leaders:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Interviewee 1** | Youth volunteer and director of theatre at local church |
| **Interviewee 2** | Female community leader and senior volunteer at local church |
| **Interviewee 3** | Male community leader and senior volunteer at local church |

All the focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted at a local church in Al-Warraq.

The fieldwork conducted by Egypt's research team was used to compile this report. The principal investigator (PI) and at least two senior researchers were present throughout the entire fieldwork. The entire research team completed a course in social and behavioural research and conducted in-depth background research on all the selected case studies prior to the actual fieldwork. Focus groups and in-depth one-on-one interviews were used to collect primary data.

A series of questions, designed to identify the factors and actors of prevention of VE, were presented to the focus group and individual interviewees. The structure of the focus group and interviews was implemented in a semi-structured manner (see appendix I), allowing participants the flexibility to elaborate on the predefined questions and share their individual perspectives and personal experiences. The overarching interview questions served as a fundamental framework for guiding the in-depth interviews. It is essential to acknowledge that, at times, the questions were adjusted to accommodate the unique areas of expertise of each participant.

## CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

Due to the cooperation of the local Coptic Church as a result of our previous research interaction, we did not face any particular challenges. The subject matter in this phase did not require any adaptations during fieldwork.

# Meso-level dynamics of prevention

## CONTEXT SPECIFICITIES (DESCRIPTION, IDENTIFIED DRIVERS, TYPE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION CONTEXT, TARGET POPULATION AND STAKEHOLDERS MAPPING)

Al-Warraq presents a unique and complex social context that forms the basis of our fieldwork. This community is characterised by its informal nature,[2] an essential aspect of our research, which exposes its youth to a variety of factors that can act as drivers of VE. The population faces a multitude of socioeconomic challenges, including economic grievances, limited access to cultural and leisure opportunities offered outside the scope of the church, territorial inequalities, and political grievances (Kassem, 2023). Moreover, a major aspect of the community is its status as an impoverished area. Its residents struggle with high unemployment rates and a low standard of education quality, further complicating the socioeconomic challenges faced by its youth (Shaheen, 2012).

Within this context, the Coptic Christian youth in Al-Warraq emerge as a particularly unique target population for our research. Their interaction with the local church serves as a distinctive focal point of study. This interaction offers an illustration of the vital role of specific social contexts in preventing radicalisation and VE. The local church, acting as a significant meso-level institution, provides the youth with an array of opportunities that act as a counterbalance to the prevailing socioeconomic challenges, as will be presented below.



In this regard, our chosen target population for this study comprises Coptic Christian youth who are actively involved in volunteering or who benefit from the services and support offered by the local church in Al-Warraq. These young individuals play a pivotal role in our research, as they exemplify the resilience and protective factors against VE within the community. Their interaction with the church and engagement in volunteer activities, aimed at both personal growth and community enhancement, present a compelling subject of study. Understanding the perspectives of these youth allows us to gain a comprehensive perspective on the multifaceted approach to prevention within Al-Warraq, which involves the active participation of its youth and the guidance of community leaders.

In addition to Coptic Christian youth volunteers and community leaders, several other stakeholders have been identified within the Al-Warraq community. These stakeholders include government institutions, cultural and sports groups, youth and social workers, and media outlets. However, it is essential to acknowledge that these stakeholders have varying degrees of influence and involvement within the community. It is worth noting that, during our fieldwork, youth participants and community leaders expressed criticisms regarding the roles played by different stakeholders within the community. This dynamic further underscores the need for an approach that considers not only the presence of

[2] Informal communities, like Al-Warraq, are characterised by their illegal development on empty predominantly state-owned land. As such, these neighbourhoods lack formal building licences and planning and, consequently state provided infrastructure, services, and amenities are extremely limited. These settlements typically emerge due to rapid urbanisation and consequently low-income housing shortages. For more information, please see: Diab, El Shaarawy, & Yousry (2020).

these stakeholders but also the perceptions and interactions between them in order to create effective strategies for preventing the potentialities of VE in Al-Warraq.

## LOCAL DYNAMICS PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

### Protective factors

The definition of protective factors adopted in this report is derived from the formal CONNEKT methodology. According to the methodology, protective factors are defined as "factors that somehow 'naturally' protect the community, these protective factors might be enhanced or promoted but they stem organically from the community (demography, geographical characteristics, economic conditions...)" (CONNEKT, 2023). In other words, protective factors in the context of PVE are interpreted as conditions and factors that act as a shield against the influence of radicalisation.

In this regard, the family unit within Al-Warraq can be considered one of the most crucial factors in existing prevention efforts. The family is perceived by the majority of youth participants during fieldwork as the most critical source of stability, protection, and support. This is justified by the participants who believe that familial support acts as a protective buffer that also bolsters the resilience of young individuals against potential radicalisation influences. All the youth in the focus group live in a two-parent household. According to studies, growing up in a household with both parents has been empirically linked to greater parental involvement and resources (Thomson & McLanahan, 2012). The socialisation role that the family plays in the Coptic community of Al-Warraq, according to most youth participants, is regarded as the most influential protective factor. As one participant noted: "I believe that if the youth are brought up the right way it is more likely that once they get married and have their own children, they will raise their children with similar values in which they were raised."[3]



The church also acknowledges the important role of the family in providing stability for its offspring.[4] As another participant noted: "The church provides mandatory pre-marriage services and counselling. A prominent part of this service focuses on the raising and socialisation of the couple's future children. The underlying message that is imparted by the priest on this topic is that we have to create a tiny church within our homes [and] that men must not only treat their wives but, equally important, their children with respect as both are a major blessing bestowed by God."[5] Overall, the Coptic youth within the community of Al-Warraq appear to perceive the importance of familial relationship and supervision as the primary source of socialisation and thus the most significant protective factor from violence. One interviewee further stated: "A supportive and nurturing family environment provides a foundation of values, guidance, and emotional stability that can act as a deterrent against violent behaviours. Families that instil a sense of responsibility, moral values, and purpose in their youth contribute significantly to young person's upbringing."[6]

[3] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[4] In-depth interview with male community leader and volunteer at local church, Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[5] In-depth interview with youth volunteer at local church, Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[6] In-depth interview with female community leader volunteer at local church, Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023

Coptic Christians identity-related concerns stand out alongside perceived relative deprivation as one of the two most frequently recurring factors in explaining radicalisation. Identity in general tends to play a significant role in providing individuals with a sense of purpose and belonging (Echelmeyer, Slotboom, & Weerman, 2023). In this regard, an important aspect that seems to protect Coptic Christian youth is their strong sense of identity and belonging within their own community. During focus group discussions, participants stated that they have a sense of shared communal identity that makes them feel protected against external ideas including radicalisation and violence.[7] Identity, in this context, becomes a protective factor, countering the narrative that young people may be susceptible to radicalisation due to a lack of belonging or purpose. This close-knit identity and their deep-rooted connection with their community potentially serves as a robust shield against external forces that might otherwise lead them down the path of radicalisation.

Another potential protective factor identified during fieldwork is the peaceful co-existence among Muslims and Christians in the community of Al-Warraq. Studies have shown that peaceful coexistence among groups of people belonging to different religions has always been a pre-requisite for social security and peace. It has also been considered as an integral component of ensuring human rights (Islam, 2018). In this regard, one focus group participant has expressed how close they are to their Muslim neighbours and friends and how much time they spend together. One male participant explains: "I have a friend with whom I have to spend the whole first day of the feast. We sit together along with his entire family, and he does the same with me. He is like a brother to me and me to him."[8] The community leader further clarifies: "We have always lived together in harmony. We have always been one family. We have never experienced any religious strife. In Al-Warraq, Muslims and Christians have always lived together as neighbours."[9]



### Resilience factors

According to CONNEKT's methodological and conceptual framework for this report, resilience is characterised by a distinct focus on communal rather than individual resilience, while also involving civil society actors in efforts to contain VE. Resilience, according to the CONNEKT methodology, is "the capacity of an individual, community or institution to adapt, react, and recover from shocks with the aim of reducing the vulnerability of the entity to future shocks" (CONNEKT, 2023). Importantly, CONNEKT rejects the notion of transferring responsibility solely onto communities, emphasising a critical stance that avoids exonerating state actors from their obligations in providing broader human security. While community resilience is prioritised, responsibility must not be shifted entirely to local and civil society actors, recognising the need for engagement with state institutions (CONNEKT, 2023).[10] Focusing on this societal definition of resilience, Keck and Sakdapolrak state that: "All definitions of resilience concern social entities – be they individuals, organisations, or local communities – and their

[7] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[8] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[9] In-depth interview with female community leader volunteer at local Church, Al-Warraq, 14th October 2023.

[10] For more information, see: Torrekens, & De Le Vingne (2020), *Concepts and Analytical Framework. Debating Notions and Approaches to Radicalisation and Violent Extremism*, CONNEKT Project [online], European Institute of the Mediterranean, Barcelona. Available at: https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/concepts-and-analytical-frameworkdebating- notions-and-approaches-to-radicalisation-and-violent-extremism/

abilities to tolerate, absorb, cope with, and adjust to threats of various kinds" (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013: 8). In other words, resilience can be defined as the capacity of individuals or communities to recover from difficulties, adapt to challenges, and therefore the capabilities to withstand the drivers that might lead to VE.

A positive sense of self-worth has always been connected to resilience (Masten et al., 1990) and, inversely, is linked to youth engaging in risk behaviours including delinquency and violence (Paschall & Hubbard, 1998). In this context, one female participant appears to endorse this perception. As she stated: "When a person feels they are valued by their family and community, it is unlikely for them to deviate and resort to extreme behaviours such as violence."[11] In this regard, it seems that valued individuals generally develop a strong self-worth that encourages positive contribution within their families and communities. This sense of value and self-worth in turn contributes greatly to their resilience when navigating major challenges. Consequently (as will further be elaborated below), focused efforts aimed at building youth confidence may be a paramount aspect to include in potential prevention and intervention programmes for adolescents, in particular those exposed to community violence.

An additional factor that potentially contributes to the building of community resilience is the availability of cultural and leisurely opportunities offered by the local church. Access to such activities offered by the church appears to further strengthen the resilience of its youth members. According to one participant: "If you like theatre, it is easy to become a member of the church theatre club and participate in all aspects related to the production of plays which are regularly preformed on the stage in front of the audience largely comprised of the church's congregation. If you like singing, you can join the church choir, other activities such as a subsidised café, a basketball court, and other leisurely pursuits are available in our church."[12] Therefore, within the social context of interactions within the community, art and cultural activities as well as sports serve as important sources that foster community cohesion through reinforcing its shared identity and sense of belonging. In other words, these opportunities not only provide an avenue for creative expression but also appear to strengthen social bonds amongst youth, hence contributing towards a more resilient community.



The engagement of youth in sport activities also appears to play a fundamental role in discouraging violence and promoting community resilience against VE. As one youth participant commented during the focus group discussion: "I am very grateful to the church for giving us [youth] access to leisurely pursuits as it allows us to exert our extra energy in a useful and healthy way and prevents us from hanging around in the streets where we can get exposed to harmful behaviour such as participating in violent acts."[13] This quote indicates the significance youth attach to sport activities and illustrates their understanding of the potential vulnerabilities they may be exposed to if such avenues did not exist.

The findings of this study point to volunteerism as the third most important aspect of creating community resilience. In this regard, it is important to note that all community leaders participating in

[11] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[12] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[13] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

the interviews participate in volunteer work. Most focus group participants also partake in some form of volunteerism. Hence, several participants throughout both interviews and focus group discussions emphasised the important role of volunteerism for themselves and the community at large. According to one participant: "Volunteerism fills many voids; on the one hand, its assists individuals and families within the community that face adversity and cannot address it alone … as a volunteer you try to meet their needs as realistically as possible. Additionally, volunteerism gives a person a sense of purpose in that you are contributing positively towards your community, and this in turn makes community members feel less isolated and more connected."[14] Another focus group participant added: "…it is also important to create and promote a culture of volunteerism within the community as it promotes value and self-worth in youth when given the opportunity to help others and therefore could be a significant deterrent of violence."[15] Therefore, it seems that the opportunity and resources to participate in community service provides a degree of empowerment that allows the community to constructively confront its problems (Gullan et al., 2013; Zeldin et al., 2016). Moreover, studies have shown that participation in volunteer work also enables youth to be socially reliable, connected, and integrated, thus promoting safety and security (Sherrod et al., 2002). On an individual level, volunteerism, as one youth participant pointed out, also plays an important role for one's own "inner and psychological peace."[16]

### Resistance factors

According to CONNEKT's methodological and conceptual framework, the proposed working definition of resistance is "purposeful non-violent action against the root causes, push and pull factors, narratives and acts" (CONNEKT, 2023). Moreover, PVE refers to the active and collective efforts of individuals or communities to counteract and oppose factors leading to radicalisation. It may, for example, involve challenging extremist narratives, promoting alternative perspectives, and fostering a communal environment that rejects violence. In this regard, resistance can manifest through community engagement, social cohesion, and proactive measures that disrupt the appeal of extremist ideologies, contributing to the overall PVE.



The nature of religious education received by the Al-Warraq youth at their church is yet another indispensable facet of prevention efforts that promotes youth resistance to VE narratives. As such, the church strongly appears to provide them with a moral compass and a deeper understanding of their faith, aiding in their ability to not only be resilient to extremist ideologies, but also in resisting extremism and VE. During the fieldwork, it became clear that the church priests feel a huge responsibility for instilling in the youth the importance of religious education and understanding. The supervision of its youth congregation means that the church is alert to the behaviour and attendance of individual members. As one participant noted: "Our priest, whenever he realises that one of the youth is not attending church sessions, he would go and look for them at the local coffee shops and other youth hangouts and encourage them to return to the church fold."[17] This tactic highlights the significance of

[14] In-depth interview with youth church volunteer, Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[15] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[16] In-depth interview with female community leader and volunteer at local church, Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[17] In-depth interview with youth church volunteer, Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

ensuring that the youth congregation does not fall behind in their religious education. Accordingly, as another participant adds: "To know that there are some people in the community like our priest who are concerned about our wellbeing and help us, whether from a socioeconomic or religious perspective, provides us with a reassuring form of stability outside the primary unit of the family… why would I engage in any illegal or violent act when I have so much support from my community leaders."[18]

The church is perceived by all members of the focus group to be the sole meso-level institution that provides them with the opportunities and venues to help deter youth violence. According to one youth participant: "Apart from its religious education and teaching, the church, for example, organises an annual summer football tournament. By engaging us in activities of this nature, the church provides us with constructive avenues that keep us off the streets."[19] In addition, the church encourages its youth to have an impactful role in their community by encouraging them to develop their individual skills and talents, whether it be sports or the arts. As such, it is clear that the local church plays a crucial role in providing a secure and supportive environment for its youth, as well as empowering them to openly discuss concerns, seek guidance, and interact with their fellow community members. This nurturing space provided by the church appears to actively promote positive engagement thus strengthening the resistance of the community towards VE. In this regard, the church constitutes the main space for constructive dialogue and shared experiences that fosters a sense of unity and shared purpose that invariably contributes to community resilience.

## EXISTING OR POTENTIAL VULNERABILITY INDICATORS



The possible sense of religious, cultural and economic exclusion that the majority of Egyptian youth may experience can arguably be further recognised and regarded as a significant vulnerability indicator for the minority Coptic Christian youth. According to studies, the feeling of alienation can be regarded as a form of societal exclusion that encompasses a sense of psychological alienation and a lack of belonging, which in turn tends to be accompanied by psychological stress that strongly affects an individual's central sense of belonging, self-esteem, and overall existence (Wesselmann et al., 2016). Low self-esteem and isolation from the community at large can potentially enhance the susceptibility of such an individual to engage in violent acts and behaviours. In this regard, while the Coptic youth expressed their strong sense of identity which increases their resilience, and the fact that within their own community they claim to have good relations with their Muslim neighbours, it is worth noting that some youth expressed the occasional existence of religious based discrimination. As one participant stated: "I believe that I lost my job as a chef in a restaurant as a result of my religious affiliations. So I had no choice but to just leave and look for another job."[20] Along these lines, another participant added that "some youth I know have experienced discrimination when attempting to join community sports clubs outside the realms of the church."[21] As he adds: "With regard to sports clubs, Christian youth are more likely to be denied membership than the Muslim youth, and I firmly believe this is due to religious discrimination."[22] Such forms of social discrimination are undoubtedly a potential

[18] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[19] Interview with male community leader and volunteer at local church, Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[20] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[21] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

vulnerability indicator due to the alienation it creates for certain members of the community. This, in turn, potentially increases the possibility of additional resentment and grievances of the Coptic community (Wuthnow, 2005).

The lack of governmental support can be viewed as a factor that potentially contributes to further vulnerability. Indicative of this is that, while youth participants have acknowledged the major role of the church in building community resilience, some youth participants criticised the fact that this is not the case outside the scope of the church. The government is expected by the youth to perform an equal if not bigger role than the church in providing more accessible and affordable opportunities. This, however, is not the case according to all members of the focus group. As one participant noted, "the government does not really offer any opportunities for us youth. We don't expect or want the government to support the churches and mosques; we would much prefer that it focuses on our needs independently and provides us with more official, secular operated services such as government run youth clubs for example."[23] In this regard, providing secular, accessible and affordable youth centres offers positive and safe environments for youth to attend classes or participate in leisure activities such as the arts and theatre. Therefore, cooperation between different local stakeholders including governmental institutions is of the utmost importance, as it can potentially support the community in long-term change in attitude, and this can be garnered through a multifaceted approach from different stakeholders, who aim to address the vital issues that would help youth be resilient to VE (Faulkner, 2018).



Additionally, participants also criticised the fact that, as youth, they feel largely excluded from society at large. As one participant explains: "As youth, I believe our ideas and contributions are generally rejected and disregarded primarily due our age and perceived lack of experience."[24] One can argue that, if certain sectors of youth perceive their concerns as disregarded and overlooked within society, this can potentially generate a deep sense of frustration. Such frustration, in turn, when left unaddressed, potentially encourages and expands the breeding ground for radicalisation and VE.

[22] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[23] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[24] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

# Filling the gaps

## MISSING OR NEGLECTED PROTECTIVE, RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE FACTORS

While the Coptic Christian youth on which this case study was based seem to present strong community resilience, it appears that neglected factors within the community remain apparent. One such factor expressed by the youth is the lack of employment opportunities that align with their education levels and skills.[25] According to youth participants, finding employment for the sake of employment is demoralising. As the focus group explained, the majority of college graduates for example find themselves working in restaurants and cafes or other menial jobs that do not provide professional satisfaction or promotion opportunities.[26] As one interviewee explained: "The availability of jobs is limited to informal, low income types, which is very frustrating and at times leads the frustrated youth to engage in violence."[27] Another focus group participant stated: "At my current work I am paid a very low salary that does not cover my personal expenses for the entire month. I am searching for a better paying job as my current job is economically unsustainable. As a university student, I need to earn more money to spend to raise my living standards."[28] Indeed, these views are reinforced by the fact that previous studies have shown that when challenges "are associated with specific identity groups, unemployment and in particular the systematic denial of opportunities for upward mobility can lead to alienation, frustration and, from there, to radicalisation and violent extremism" (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). On another level, the majority of young participants expressed concerns regarding the complexities of establishing self-employment opportunities for themselves. Self-employment opportunities are an alternative avenue that can provide youth with the opportunity to create their own independent business. However, as it currently stands, pursuing such an avenue seems riddled with challenges, in particular the aspect of funding. According to one young participant, for example, acquiring a start up loan is a complicated and convoluted process in that "it is necessary to provide banks with various guarantees to secure the loans and the interest payments. The process is not only tedious but is also exclusionary for most of the youth since such guarantees are almost impossible to obtain."[29]



Youth attitudes toward volunteerism seem to be positive within the community of Al-Warraq, specifically that the church plays a major role in encouraging youth to participate in volunteer activities. However, some participants explained that the main factor that hinders youth volunteerism is the fact that, due to socioeconomic restraints, paid work takes priority. In the words of one participant: "It makes no sense for me to prioritise volunteer work over work that financially compensates me. It is an amazing thing and all. No one objects to volunteer work on principle, but, at the same time, we are

[25] For more on this, see: International Labour Organization (2023).

[26] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[27] In-depth interview with male community leader and volunteer at local church, Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023

[28] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[29] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023. It is worth pointing out that some financial institutions independent of banks provide microfinance loans which are relatively easy to acquire. However, the interest rates are much higher than banks.

always looking for any paid work that would enables us to increase our standard of living." [30] Moreover, another participant remarked: "My university schedule is from 9 am to 1pm. I am also employed and therefore it is rare that I return home before 3 am after I finish work. I am generally left with four hours of sleep. So, when can I participate in any volunteer work? I have no time for anything else except for my university and my work because I need the money. If my economic circumstances were different and I had more free time, I would certainly be interested in participating in volunteer work."[31] Another participant suggested: "If volunteer work is made mandatory – for example, if volunteer work became implemented in the university curriculum, students would be more than willing to participate. I personally did not appreciate the importance of volunteer work and the personal satisfaction that I derived from it until I actually participated. I am sure other youth can only experience and appreciate its value when they actively participate too."[32]

Overall, it seems that the young participants understand the benefits of volunteerism and express their desire to actively engage in volunteer service, but in the face of economic challenges, volunteerism is not considered a priority. Therefore, it is important that prevention and intervention strategies target this shortcoming on various levels that target the root causes that hinder/prevent youth from participating in volunteer activities.

## ENGAGING OTHER STAKEHOLDERS AND NEW TARGETS

It is important to engage different and diverse types of stakeholders in order to achieve a higher level of success in the fight to eliminate VE and strengthen community resilience and resistance. The necessity to include and engage a variety of stakeholders also needs to be complemented with active cooperation between these different entities. In the absence of such cooperation, it would be extremely difficult to create a comprehensive, sustainable, and therefore successful framework for preventing VE. In the process of engaging different stakeholders, it is necessary to focus on deliberate inclusive efforts that produce a balanced and fair representation of the different communities that exist. As such, representatives of religious communities, as well as representatives of local entities such as women and youth groups should be encouraged to participate to enhance the discourse and, equally important, empower these groups to form stronger bonds and alliances that foster strong collaboration within civil society (Doda & A Mclellan, n. d.).



**Civil society organizations (CSOs) and local non-governmental organizations (NGO)s.** As mentioned above, CSOs and NGOs which operate within these communities constitute the most effective stakeholders if equipped with the necessary tools and environment. Indeed, CSOs play a critical role in terms of assisting the development of sustainable intervention measures within the communities specifically because they possess the advantage of in-depth knowledge within their local communities. Such in-depth knowledge is largely the result of regular interaction with the locals, and the relationship of trust that develops as a result can in turn argue that CSOs are a very useful asset that can be utilised in the implementation and success of VE prevention programmes (United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and Department for Field support, 2016).

[30] Focus group (18-30), Al Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[31] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

[32] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

**Youth groups.** Another important stakeholder that cannot be overlooked is the youth themselves. Youth groups within the local communities exist whether as volunteers or club members or affiliated to NGOs or religious institutions, yet their potential is currently under-used. Given the resources and guidance, youth groups can play a pivotal role not only in providing recommendations but also actively participating and engaging in achieving such recommendations, as they have a vested interest in bettering their communities and hence their future. As one participant remarked: "Youth need to feel they are valued and their opinions matter. I am not saying that their opinions should be accepted regardless; however, they need to feel heard and be given the opportunity to make a difference."[33] Increasing the channels of communication between the youth and officials can have multiple benefits within the local community and society as a whole. As one report points out, youth "often have an openness and willingness to take risks, they have great potential to come up with outside the box, innovative ideas… in fact, young people shape programmes in response to the needs they experience first-hand and/or see among their peers" (USAID, 2014). Additionally, youth participation can be very beneficial for the development of their personal communication and leadership skills. Enabling youth participation in such endeavours would give a sense of purpose, which indicates that this would be a mutually beneficial endeavour (USAID, 2014).

**Religious institutions.** The local religious institutions such as the local church are potentially one of the most vital stakeholders in the community. For example, the local churches in Al-Warraq run programmes that assist youth in ventures such as education and welfare. The potential for mosques to perform similar ventures is something that should also be encouraged since local collaboration with different churches, mosques and secular local organisations could potentially support the creation of successful and inclusive intervention measures and expand the scope of the implementation and reach of PVE initiatives. In short, it is important to view religious actors as an "integral component of broader civil society" (Mandaville & Nozell, 2017).



## GENDER SPECIFICITIES

While disparities in gender played a vital role in the Bahtim case study, it does not appear to be the case in the Al-Warraq community, as no gender specificities have been identified.

## CAPACITY-BUILDING POTENTIALITIES AND AREAS FOR INTERVENTION

In order to develop effective mechanisms to combat VE, it is critical to engage the existing stakeholders within the Al-Warraq community, as they have an in-depth understanding of the community and its dynamics and needs. Given that they have existing programmes, building upon, and collaborating with such programmes would further strengthen and enhance the implementation of VE prevention and intervention initiatives. The importance of religious institutions in the area potentially guarantees an entry point for the implementation of potential intervention measures, and also guarantees higher participation of community members in these initiatives.

Below are potential capacity-building initiatives and areas of intervention:

- **Stakeholder training and cooperation.** As mentioned previously, the church plays a pivotal

[33] Focus group (18-30), Al-Warraq, 14 October 2023.

role as a major stakeholder in the Al-Warraq community, engaging both youth and other adults in various activities including volunteerism. Recognising the important role of the church within the community, it is imperative to invest in training programmes for youth volunteers and community leaders in the local church. While the church effectively addresses a substantial void for youth, its reach may have limitations. Therefore, fostering collaboration with other churches, religious institutions, and civil organisations within the area is crucial. This collaborative effort can be facilitated through training sessions conducted by larger CSOs. By providing the necessary skills and knowledge, these training initiatives aim to strengthen the capacity of the church and other local entities, enabling them to work cohesively in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by the community. This collaborative approach enhances the collective impact of interventions and ensures a more comprehensive and sustainable response to the needs of both youth and the broader community.

- **Skill development programmes.** Assisting youth through the provision of programmes aimed at developing their existing skills and providing them with additional skills that would better prepare them to enter the workforce in light of the economic challenges currently faced by the youth. Such programmes can potentially aim towards developing their practical, technical and digital skills to expand their income generating options. Such programmes can include but are not limited to how to run a successful business; how to utilise the social media as a tool for business development, IT skills, marketing skills and foreign language courses, and so on. These programmes can be provided through collaboration between the local church and training organisations.



- **Youth empowerment and career development programmes.** Guidance programmes to help in career and skill development are also important capacity-building tools for youth empowerment. Counsellors guiding such programmes are in a position to potentially direct youth towards taking effective steps in reaching their desired career path (Stanzler, Hanley, Nabi, Bean, & Radday, 2012). Additionally, career development workshops can serve as a potential platform for empowering youth via refining their personal skills in communication, problem-solving and leadership capabilities. These workshops are significant not only for the individual but also for the community in terms of providing youth with the capabilities and confidence to take active and productive roles in their respective communities. Most importantly perhaps, such opportunities potentially deter youth from the temptation to participate in illegal activities.

## SETTING INDICATORS FOR A FUTURE ASSESSMENT TOOL

To assess the effectiveness and impact of potential intervention strategies, it is important to set indicators that can assess the outcomes of these initiatives. For example, one indicator could be looking at the increase of employment rate of the youth who engage in the skills and career development initiatives. This can potentially assist in measuring the economic empowerment and independence achieved by the youth following the completion of their respective training. Additionally, stakeholders implementing such initiatives could track the number of people who attend such programmes in order to assess the relevance and success rate of the implemented programmes. This would allow

stakeholders to eventually tailor the initiatives according to the particular needs of the local youth. In addition, qualitative indicators can also be used to reflect behavioural changes amongst community members. For instance, assessment tools such as conducting surveys, interviews and focus group discussions to assess whether youth grievances and overall negative perceptions of their community have changed, and, if so, to what degree. Additionally, participant responses can provide insight into whether certain intervention measures have failed or succeeded in tackling the identified drivers of VE. Furthermore, the local church and NGOs can report on whether mutual collaboration increased their resources and capabilities to reach more people in the community and whatever difficulties may have been encountered in the process.

# Conclusion:
## analysis of the meso-level prevention indicators and identification of transferable experiences or best practices

The social context of interaction for the Coptic Christian youth in Al-Warraq significantly influences the availability of prevention factors against VE. Family, with its protective role, emerges as a crucial factor safeguarding youth from VE, coupled with the strong sense of identity and belonging that youth feel as a result of their interactions with each other through the local church. Additionally, this phase of research highlighted the fact that a combination of various factors contributes towards resilience-building amongst the youth. The opportunities provided by the church such as arts and cultural opportunities, sports and a culture of volunteerism fostered within the church community play a pivotal role in the bonding and socialisation of its members, thus enhancing their overall resilience to VE. As such, the church and the tight knit family units act as the primary meso-level institutions for the local youth in terms of protecting them from the vulnerabilities of being susceptible to radicalisation. Furthermore, not only does the local church offer religious education and cultural opportunities but it also serves as a safe space for the youth, thus enhancing their resistance to VE narratives. In this regard, it is important to note that protective, resilience and resistance factors are interconnected and overlapping. For instance, the strong sense of identity fostered within the church community protects youth from VE influence and serves as a resistance factor, whereby this strong sense of identity actively assists youth in countering external influences that potentially lead to radicalisation.



It is worth noting that, while the youth in Al-Warraq exhibit and demonstrate resilience through the social interactions in their community, it is crucial to recognise that this strength is also their vulnerability. The close-knit nature of the Coptic Christian community, while fostering resilience, also raises concerns about potential isolation and exclusion from broader society as a whole. It is therefore essential to develop a deeper understanding of the community in order to formulate more effective long-term prevention strategies that tackle the broader societal dynamics impacting the youth in Al-Warraq.

On a final note, the aim of this research is to call attention to the need for context specific interventions that consider the unique nature of the community, and, while the church plays a central role in building certain prevention factors within the community, collaboration with other institutions and stakeholders becomes imperative to address gaps and broaden the scope of preventive efforts. Hence, as mentioned above, intervention measures should focus on strengthening the existing youth programmes offered by the church. Equally important is fostering collaborations among external stakeholders such CSOs, training institutes, and youth clubs. Other initiatives can also include the training of youth volunteers and community leaders as well as implementing skill development programmes targeting youth empowerment. Ultimately, empowering youth through career guidance

workshops and skill-building initiatives can potentially enhance their employability prospects and strengthen the sense of community cohesion. In turn, such opportunities can potentially act as deterrents for youth violence. Furthermore, in order to assess the effectiveness and impact of such interventions, relevant stakeholders including the local church can monitor programme attendance to tailor future initiatives and monitor youth employment rates post-training to measure the effectiveness of these programmes. In addition, the relevant stakeholders can potentially employ qualitative measures such as surveys and focus groups to better measure the effectiveness and impact of these initiatives in addressing VE drivers within the Al-Warraq community. As such, the aim of such interventions is to empower the youth to be active partners and acknowledge their role as agents and the important insights they can provide in shaping effective prevention initiatives. Such interventions should also aim at further research into the complexities of identity, socioeconomic exclusion and the overall challenges faced by the Coptic Christian youth in Al-Warraq.

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# Appendix I

**Interview questions:**

1. How has your work on the prevention of violence and extremism developed since 2014?

2. In your opinion, what is the one most important concern potentially contributing to violence in your community?

3. In your opinion, what prevents violence or violent extremism from developing within the community and helps in creating community resilience, even though youth may face many concerns (for example, lack of employment, economic deprivation, lack of culture and leisure activities)?

4. In your opinion, given that there are high unemployment rates among youth, what are the possible factors and barriers that prevent youth from creating self-employment opportunities?

5. Are there other approaches that you think would be more adept in regard to the prevention of violence and extremism in the local context?



6. How can local community leaders and actors support local youth communities (for example, in offering cultural opportunities and offering employment for youth)? And what are the best tools and ways to create a positive impact for youth within the community?

7. Do you think that there is room for improvement or change in the roles and activities of local civil society organizations and community leaders to better target violence and extremism among youth?

8. How can the local environment encourage greater youth engagement and involvement in preventing violent extremism? What might be prohibiting that from happening?

9. Do you think there are spaces and actors who are already contributing to safer practices or better services? How are they doing so?

10. Which local actors within the community would youth trust the most and would have a positive impact?

11. How can cooperation between actors be created and improved within the community?

**Focus group questions:**

1. Do you engage in any community activities or volunteer work within the community? And is this engagement affiliated to specific local institutions?

2. Despite the challenges and factors potentially conducive to violence within the community, in your opinion, what are some of the factors that encourage youth to stay away from violence and extremism (for example, religious education, the role of the family, employment opportunities, having access to cultural and leisurely opportunities).

3. Take a moment to think of barriers that hinder engagement of youth (males and females) in society in a positive way (for example, volunteer work and the creation of self-employment opportunities). What do you recommend so that these barriers can be overcome?

4. Throughout our research we found that youth consider factors such as having employment opportunities, cultural and leisurely opportunities and moderate religious education to be crucial factors in preventing radicalisation and nurturing tolerance. Do you agree with this? If not, then what is the most influential tool for preventing radicalisation and violence?

5. What tools, mediums, and activities can improve the role of prevention of violence and extremism to promote understanding and tolerance/prevent VE in your community?



6. In your opinion, do you and other people within the community you know of have the skills, knowledge and means to create for yourselves economic/employment opportunities to limit the impact of violence and violent extremism? Can you give examples of some of these skills?

7. Take a moment to think of successful examples of people you know/have heard about who have made use of their individual skills and available means (for example, the creation of self-employment opportunities), why and how do youth think they succeed?

8. What are the tools (for example the internet) that are needed in order to maximise the use of individual skills to create self-employment opportunities?

9. How can the local government, educational institutions, NGOs, the private sector, and other stakeholders support the creation of self-employment opportunities as a means to address economic deprivation and lack of culture and leisurely opportunities?

10. In your opinion, how can youth be more involved and play a bigger role in the prevention of violence and extremism? How can youth be included (have a say) in the organisation of preventative initiatives in the community led by civil society and other stakeholders?



# Informal Communities in Greater Cairo: Prevention Factors in the Case of Bahtim

## Introduction

Building upon the foundations established in the first phase of WP5, the second phase of our research at the meso level aims to deepen our understanding based on the insights gained from the initial phase. The aim of this phase is to examine the dynamics that operate at the meso level, contributing to preventing violent extremism (PVE),[34] with a specific focus on factors of protection, resilience, and resistance present in the community.[35] The meso level plays an important role in shaping the social fabric within which prevention efforts unfold. This phase will not only understand the contextual nuances discovered in the first phase, but also examine the meso-level context that influences the prevention landscape, and analyse the local dynamics in the informal community of Bahtim that potentially deter violent extremism (VE), with the aim of providing pertinent elements for research on prevention. While in the case of Bahtim there are many conditions or contexts that typically propel individuals towards VE, we will be analysing the social dynamics within the local community that help in creating a community resilient to VE. In other words, we will be looking at those youth who benefit, volunteer, or attend classes at the local non-governmental organization (NGO) to assess how the social context of interaction with it supports them in building resilience despite the presence of the drivers of VE in the community, and despite their interaction with a community that seemed to have a culture of violence and youth deterrence. In this regard, the case study will look at the following:



- To what degree does the specific context of social interaction foster the development of preventative factors within the community of Bahtim?
- How does a moderate understanding of religion, the presence of safe spaces, and engagement in volunteerism contribute to resilience among youth, especially in the presence of factors that could potentially lead to VE?
- To what extent do the aspirations of youth for a better economic future aid in building resilience and protect them from VE?
- Are there alternative approaches that may be more effective in preventing violence and extremism within the local context?

[34] According to CONNEKT's Methodological and Conceptual Framework, Koehler's definition of prevention is adopted, where the aim of the analysis is to focus on "primary prevention, addressing societal issues and related individuals before violent extremist groups and ideologies are encountered and specific risk factors begin to form" (Koehler, 2020).

[35] Protective, resilience and resistance factors are defined in section 3.2.

Furthermore, as we delve into this second phase of our research, it is imperative to recapitulate the key findings from our initial analysis. The research methodology provides the criteria for selecting the case study and participants as we revisit the challenges encountered in the selection process. The analysis of the meso-level dynamics on prevention investigates the specific social interactions and existing prevention measures, focusing on protective, resilience and resistance factors within the community of Bahtim. The analysis will further identify missing factors, suggesting stakeholder engagement strategies, and scrutinise gender-specific aspects to refine our VE prevention approach. Lastly, we outline areas for potential social intervention grounded in our meso-level research. In our conclusion we extract transferable experiences and best practices that benefit not only our work but also the wider field of violence prevention.

# Research methodology

## RECAP OF RESULTS FROM THE FIRST PHASE OF THE MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The findings from the first phase of research in the informal settlement of Bahtim highlighted the connection between poverty, marginalisation, and factors such as limited education, unemployment and lack of culture and leisure opportunities, as aspects potentially contributing to youth vulnerability towards violence (Kassem, 2023). Marginalised communities, whether in urban informal settings or impoverished villages, witness heightened criminal activities, including drug trafficking, theft, and other forms of violence (Krivo and Peterson, 1996). During the first phase of research, it was emphasised that civil society organizations (CSOs) and Islamic charitable organisations have previously played a crucial role in these areas, as they helped in addressing the welfare support gap sometimes overlooked by the state. Such charitable organisations provided welfare systems for socioeconomically deprived communities (Kassem, 2023).[36]

Additionally, during the first phase of research, our analysis revealed that informal settlements, such as Bahtim, face challenges due to their lack of official recognition, resulting in the denial of basic services and city infrastructure. This situation exposes residents to risks of eviction, poverty-related health issues, and high crime rates. In Bahtim, the closure of Islamist-related meso-level institutions post 2014 seemed to have reshaped the community's dynamics. Bahtim is home to a local NGO – one of the only few legally registered establishments in post-2014 Egypt – dependent on limited finances from charitable donors, primarily residing in more affluent areas of Greater Cairo. It was further highlighted during the initial phase of research that drivers such as economic grievances and limited educational and cultural opportunities interact, specifically that youth have very limited finances to put towards a culture of leisure activities.



Moreover, it appeared that, among many of the youth, education is not a priority, as they often contribute economically to their families at a young age. The prevalence of violence and abuse in schools discourages the importance of education. Public schools in informal areas like Bahtim lack stringent classroom protocols, adequate funding, and cultural and leisure activities. Moreover, political grievances in Bahtim seem intertwined with economic deprivation. The shutdown of informal civil society since 2014 left a significant socioeconomic vacuum. State-led initiatives introduced as replacements have not been as beneficial to the community. The absence of affordable cultural and leisure spaces, along with closures of informal NGOs, suggests a current state of apathy in Bahtim. However, despite the multitude of drivers within the community, a noteworthy observation is that the specific social context fostered by the local NGO in Bahtim, aimed at assisting youth, seems to play a pivotal role in building resilience within the community (Kassem, 2023). The NGO's provision of enabling preventative factors such as economic support and religious education appears to contribute to potentially creating a resilient community and to preventing youth from potential involvement in VE.

[36] For more information, see: Sieverding, Roushdy, Hassan, and Ahmed, 2019.

Consequently, the focus of this research will be directed towards how factors like the role of the family, availability of opportunities, and religious education contribute to the establishment of resilient communities. Moreover, we aim to identify any additional protective or resilience factors present in the community that may further enhance the community's ability to deter involvement in VE.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE CRITERIA FOR THE CASE STUDY SELECTION AND CRITERIA FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

The choice of Bahtim as our case study stems from a deliberate focus on investigating potential prevention indicators within the community, notwithstanding the presence of intertwined drivers such as economic grievances, limited cultural and leisure opportunities, and territorial inequalities. In further analysing the social dynamics within the community and the role of meso-level institutions on youth, our aim is to shed light on how specific factors contribute to the community's resilience against VE. In addition to examining these dynamics, our research will comprehensively shed light on several key prevention indicators within the community of Bahtim. A primary focus will be on assessing the impact of religious education on youth, while it is important to note that during the first phase of analysis it seemed that formal education (formal schools) played a minor role within families. Religious educational opportunities offered by the NGO emerged as an alternative and influential form of education for the community. Remarkably, those engaged in the NGO's religious educational initiatives, and taking part in activities offered by the local NGO, demonstrated a reduced inclination towards violence within the community. This aspect will facilitate understanding of the role and influence of religious education in preventing radicalisation and VE. We will also examine the role of the family and availability of employment and leisurely opportunities in protecting youth and building community resilience.



Furthermore, our research will delve into the availability of safe spaces for youth, encompassing the role of these spaces in potentially enhancing youth resistance towards VE. A significant prevention indicator to be analysed is the role of meso-level institutions such as CSOs in building resilience among youth, and this will further allow us to unveil the complex dynamics of PVE. Additionally, since Bahtim is an informal and impoverished community, our study will further enable an in-depth investigation into the effectiveness of prevention measures related to specific social contexts.

### Criteria for sample selection and stakeholders involved

Within the Bahtim case study, our selected sample for the focus group consists of youth aged between 18 and 30. These individuals represent a demographic that directly benefits from various forms of assistance provided by the local NGO chosen for this case study. Assistance encompasses crucial elements such as financial support, participation in religious classes organised by the NGO, and the receipt of essential items like food and clothing. The NGO plays a pivotal role beyond material assistance, serving as a channel for social interaction within the community. In specific situations, community residents turn to this institution to engage with other community members or seek guidance and moral support from NGO workers, highlighting its broader impact on the social fabric of Bahtim. In this regard, and for the purpose of the focus group, 10 individuals aged 18-30 participated, 5 male and 5 female.

Regarding the selection criteria for identifying the three individuals participating in one-on-one interviews, each chosen individual had to be a local resident possessing an extensive understanding of the community. Secondly, their profound knowledge of the community was derived from their professional involvement, or background in and knowledge of prevention. The overarching aim of the fieldwork interview selection criteria was to gather comprehensive insights into this particular community from the views of stakeholders active within the community. Additionally, the selection sought to capture the perspectives of individuals perceived as community leaders, enabling an assessment of their influence, particularly over the youth.

The interviews in the case of Bahtim were conducted with the following three community leaders:

**Interviewee 1** Secretary General of the local NGO resident of Bahtim with extensive experience with the local community, teaches Quran and head the local NGO. Female, age early 40s.

**Interviewee 2** Instructor at the local NGO and conducts fieldwork within the community for the NGO in order to help with the community's needs. Female, in her 30s.

**Interviewee 3** Volunteer at several NGO's, including the local NGO case study in this research. Female, in her 20s.

The focus group and in-depth interviews were conducted in-person on the Bahtim NGO premises. The Egypt research team compiled the report. The principal investigator (PI) and at least two senior researchers were present throughout the entire fieldwork. The whole study team completed a course in social and behavioural research, prior to the actual fieldwork, and in-depth background research was conducted on all selected case studies presented.



A series of questions, designed to identify the factors and actors of prevention of VE, were presented to the focus group and interviewees (see Appendix I). The structure of the focus group and interviews was implemented in a semi-structured manner, allowing participants the flexibility to elaborate on the predefined questions and share their individual perspectives influenced by personal experiences. The interview questions served as a fundamental framework for guiding the in-depth interviews. It is essential to acknowledge that, at times, the questions were adjusted to accommodate the unique areas of expertise of each participant.

## CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

Due to the cooperation of the local NGO and the community at large as a result of our previous research interaction, we did not face any challenges. The subject matter in this phase did not require any adaptations during fieldwork.

# Meso-level dynamics of prevention

## CONTEXT SPECIFICITIES

**Description, identified drivers, type of social interaction context, target population and stakeholders mapping**

Bahtim witnesses unique factors that potentially contribute to the dynamics of VE and radicalisation. It serves as an interesting case study due to the presence of various conditions that are conducive to the emergence of VE, mainly economic deprivation, lack of education, cultural and leisure opportunities, and territorial inequalities. Being an informal settlement, Bahtim shares the characteristics typical of these areas, making it susceptible to numerous drivers. Historically, such informal neighbourhoods have been hubs for extremists, given their unregulated and segregated nature (Al Hawari, 2016). This, coupled with the absence of state support, often led to these areas being marginalised, fostering an environment conducive to illicit activities. Bahtim has also witnessed a rise in domestic violence and youth delinquency, reflecting the social issues that informal communities struggle with. The underlying challenge in these informal communities like Bahtim stems from the lack of government support, which results in the marginalisation of residents (Kassem, 2023) The youth in such areas frequently face stigmatisation, with insufficient protection from the prevalent issues of drugs and violence. This systemic neglect forces these communities to rely on self-resolve to address conflicts, often leading to an exclusionary mindset (Kipper and Fischer, 2009).



It seems, however, that the social context of interaction of youth with the local NGO plays a significant role in countering VE. The NGO provides financial support, religious education, and moral guidance, contributing to the youth's resilience against VE. For many of these young individuals, this local NGO serves as the primary or dominant meso-level institution they depend on for support. Thus, Bahtim's distinct social context, defined by its informal nature, lack of government support, and reliance on meso-level institutions like the local NGO, creates a unique environment where youth resilience to VE is fostered despite the presence of numerous driving factors. Understanding these context-specificities is vital in developing effective VE prevention strategies within the Bahtim community.

## LOCAL DYNAMICS PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

**Protective factors**

For the sake of this report, we will be adopting CONNEKT's definition of protective factors, accordingly protective factors are defined as "factors that somehow 'naturally' protect the community, these protective factors might be enhanced or promoted but they stem organically from the community (demography, geographical characteristics, economic conditions, culture…)" (CONNEKT, 2023). In other words, protective factors in the context of PVE could be conditions and factors that act as a shield against the influence of radicalisation.

In this regard, the sense of responsibility that many youths within the Bahtim community feel towards their families serves as a compelling protective factor. This commitment to family support, often necessitated by challenging circumstances, acts as a powerful deterrent against engaging in violent behaviours. For many, their families, particularly parents and siblings, depend upon them for financial stability. In this regard, according to one male participant: "My father is deceased. I only have my mother. The idea of not having anyone for me is on its own a reason why I should deter from violence. If I get involved in anything, I will not be able to take care of my mother and my siblings and they will also suffer. If my mother has to suffer for my own actions, who will take care of my siblings? Even if I suffer and bear the consequences, if I get physical with any of my colleagues and I get hurt and stay at home, there will be some financial suffering. I will also suffer on the psychological level."[37]

It also appears that the willingness of youth to become a source of support and stability for their families fosters a sense of responsibility and purpose among the youth. This seems to make them recognise that their actions have a direct impact on the livelihood and happiness of their family members. This awareness, along with a deep sense of duty, further solidifies their commitment against participating in violence and reinforces their resilience against the appeal of VE. According to one focus group participant: "Being the eldest in the family, I feel a need to guide my younger siblings and present a positive model for them. I believe anyone should have a role model… I am not talking only from an educational perspective. Even when it comes to work, it is important to have a role model and follow this person's work ethics. This will lead to generating more income and being treated with respect and dignity."[38] Interview participants also highlight the fact that some youth feel the need to better themselves from their current living conditions, which gives them a sense of purpose, and also helps to protect them from partaking in violence and being influenced by VE narratives.[39] In this regard, it is important to note that protective and resilience factors often overlap. For instance, a positive family environment, which can be seen as a protective factor, contributes to the overall resilience of an individual.



Another potential protective factor identified by one male participant in the focus group discussion was the absence of government support, including the notable lack of a police presence within the Bahtim community. While this may lead to more violence among certain youth, this has fostered a unique situation. According to one participant, in this void, the community has grown increasingly self-reliant, depending on its own resources and social structures to tackle various challenges.[40] According to another participant, "the lack of police presence makes me want to avoid any form of violent conflict, as no one will be able to get me my rights."[41] Interestingly, this circumstance has acted as a double-edged sword, serving as a deterrent against youth involvement in violence. In other words, while the absence of a visible police force might raise concerns about lawlessness, it has simultaneously compelled the community to develop its own mechanisms for maintaining order and resolving disputes

[37] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[38] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[39] Interview with NGO Secretary General, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[40] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[41] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

while also avoiding conflict. In this context, the potential risks and consequences of participating in violence are magnified, as there is no external authority to provide protection. As a result, some youth are potentially discouraged from engaging in violent activities, given the perceived dangers of engaging in violence.

**Resilience factors**

According to CONNEKT's methodological and conceptual framework for this report, resilience is characterised by a distinct focus on communal rather than individual resilience, while also involving civil society actors in efforts towards PVE. CONNEKT's understanding of resilience emphasises societies' capacity in understanding and uniting in response to complex events, relying on developed systems to manage and mitigate shocks to their way of life. Importantly, CONNEKT rejects the notion of transferring responsibility solely onto communities, emphasising a critical stance that avoids exonerating state actors from their obligations in providing broader human security. While community resilience is prioritised, responsibility must not be shifted entirely to local and civil society actors, recognising the need for engagement with state institutions (CONNEKT, 2023).[42] Focusing on this societal definition of resilience, Keck and Sakdapolrak (2013, p. 8) state that "all definitions of resilience concern social entities – be they individuals, organisations, or local communities – and their abilities to tolerate, absorb, cope with, and adjust to threats of various kinds." In other words, resilience can be defined as the capacity of individuals or communities to bounce back from difficulties, adapt to challenges, and therefore withstand the pressures that might lead to VE. Resilience involves adaptive coping mechanisms, a sense of purpose, and the capacity to navigate stressors.



In this regard, resilience factors, within the Bahtim case, represent the community's ability to rebound from socioeconomic challenges that the community has faced, and an example of this is the impact of closure of charitable meso-level institutions, as previously mentioned and in the first phase of research. The closure of CSOs and Islamic NGOs that previously used to offer financial assistance to individuals in the community left a void within the community (Kassem, 2023). Currently, community members can access only limited forms of extra support, and the repercussions of this shift are multifaceted. On the one hand, this change has led to incidents of youth delinquency and violence within Bahtim, as previously highlighted in the first phase of our analysis. However, this situation has served as a catalyst for building resilience for some youth within the community. In response to this change, youth in the focus groups explained that, due to the economic challenges they face, they have actively sought employment opportunities to provide both themselves and their families with much-needed support.[43] This adaptive response showcases the resourcefulness and determination of youth in the face of adversity. While the closure of charitable institutions initially disrupted the community's support structure, it inadvertently empowered some youth to explore alternative pathways, effectively equipping them with the means to weather the socioeconomic challenges. The impact of this both negative and positive change underscores the complexity of resilience dynamics within the Bahtim community and the various ways in which its members navigate and adapt to changing circumstances.

[42] For more information, see: Torrekens, C. and De Le Vingne, D. (2020). Concepts and Analytical Framework. Debating Notions and Approaches to Radicalisation and Violent Extremism, CONNEKT Project [online]. European Institute of the Mediterranean, Barcelona. Available at: https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/concepts-and-analytical-frameworkdebating- notions-and-approaches-to-radicalisation-and-violent-extremism/

[43] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

The aspiration to improve one's economic circumstances and actively seek employment opportunities not only contributes to resilience but also operates on a deeper level for some of the youth in Bahtim. On one side, it instils in them a sense of purpose and a clear vision for the future. They are driven by the ambition to attain something meaningful in their lives. As expressed by one youth participant, "the prospect of work holds the promise of not only financial stability but also personal growth and influence, whereby other people will try to learn from me and therefore I will have a positive influence on the community."[44] In this regard, it appears that this mentality allows youth to envision a future where their accumulated experience and knowledge become valuable assets, inspiring others to learn from them and seek their guidance. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the local NGO plays a pivotal role in reinforcing these positive narratives. The organisation actively endeavours to instil in youth the belief that there are alternative paths to improving their lives and finding purpose, apart from turning to violence. Through its encouragement and support, it empowers young individuals to seek opportunities that lead to a better life, thereby steering them away from the path of VE.[45] This collaborative effort between motivated youth and the local NGO underscores the multifaceted nature of building resilience among youth and influences constructive narratives, often supplemented by religious teaching in guiding youth.

Another substantial aspect that has been instrumental in fostering community resilience among both the youth participating in the focus group and the interviews is the practice of volunteerism. This commitment to volunteer work serves as a unifying factor, reinforcing a collective sense of purpose and shared responsibility within the community. Notably, all three interviewees actively engage in volunteer activities, and a significant portion of the focus group participants have actively participated in volunteer initiatives. Additionally, the majority of youth who participated in the focus group acknowledged the role of volunteerism in creating community resilience. According to several participants, volunteerism allows them to have a sense of purpose, especially when it comes to helping their larger community.[46]



Participation in sports holds a pivotal role in deterring violence and cultivating community resilience against VE. Sport has a long history of being seen as an effective means of promoting human values such as tolerance, diversity, inclusion, respect, cooperation, and a sense of community. Additionally, sports can be a useful tool in the PVE context for addressing the underlying beliefs and causes of violent extremism (UNODC, 2021). Engaging in sports activities not only provides a physical outlet for the youth but also contributes to their overall wellbeing. This aspect was articulated by one youth participant who highlighted the significance of sports in his life. For him "taking part in sports activities is of significant importance as it allows me to consume and use my time towards something positive, and also helps me release negative energy."[47] In other words, sports activities offer a constructive avenue for releasing frustration for youth, particularly in a community where socioeconomic challenges and limited opportunities can potentially foster feelings of frustration and restlessness among youth,

[44] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[45] Interview with volunteer and instructor at local NGO, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[46] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[47] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

as it potentially allows them to channel their energy in a productive and non-violent manner. However, it is essential to acknowledge that, due to the deprived nature of this community, participating in sports activities often proves to be a significant challenge. As one interviewee explained, there is a financial burden associated with sports activities, and this can be a substantial barrier for many youths. She further clarified that "for the male participant to join the gym, he had to work throughout the entire summer vacation just to be able to collect the six months gym subscription fees… he does not want to be violent. He would much rather let all this negativity out playing at the gym. Additionally, we don't have any sports centres over here. The government does not build sports and youth centres for the community."[48] Therefore, it seems that this financial impediment adds an extra layer of complexity to the youth's pursuit of positive outlets for their energy, underscoring the ongoing socioeconomic challenges faced by the community.

As will further be elaborated in the section below, religious education plays an important role in building not only resilience for youth but also allows them to resist VE narratives (Estrada, M., Lomboy, Gregorio, et al., 2019). During focus group discussions and interviews, it appeared that the religious instructors at the local NGOs hold a distinct and influential role in building community resilience, especially among youth who often regard them as role models. These leaders appear to also promote peaceful and constructive aspects of religion that help youth navigate the challenges they face. This guidance is particularly critical in communities with socioeconomic difficulties, such as Bahtim. Religious leaders serve as a source of inspiration, encouraging the youth to seek alternative paths to address grievances and challenges. According to one interviewee, "through religious education, we try to support and motivate youth to have positive influence in the community, be productive and stay away from violence."[49] Additionally, acknowledging religious leaders as role models, the youth in these communities are more inclined to emulate their values and behaviours. According to one youth participant in the focus group who is also a volunteer at the local NGO, "I have been part of this NGO ever since I was five years old. The instructors here have taught me so much. Due to the way they treated us and the amount of learning they taught us, I wanted to become just like them. Why? Because, of course, we owe them a lot. They taught us God's words. They always guided us and they taught us what was right and what was wrong. Also, their role in my life made me look up to them and made me want to become like them."[50]



### Resistance factors

According to CONNEKT's methodological and conceptual framework, the proposed working definition of resistance is "purposeful nonviolent action against the root causes, push and pull factors, narratives and acts" (CONNEKT, 2023). Moreover, resistance in PVE refers to the active and collective efforts of individuals or communities to counteract and oppose factors leading to radicalisation. For example, it may involve challenging extremist narratives, promoting alternative perspectives, and fostering an environment that rejects violence. In this regard, resistance can manifest through community

[48] Interview with Secretary General of Local NGO, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[49] Interview with volunteer and instructor at local NGO, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[50] Focus group participant who is also a youth volunteer at local NGO, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

engagement, social cohesion and proactive measures that disrupt the appeal of extremist ideologies, contributing to the overall prevention of VE.

In Bahtim, the moderate religious education opportunities provided by the local NGO appears to potentially serve as a resistance factor for some youth within the community (Crawford, Wright, and Masten, 2006). Youth engaged in these educational initiatives seem to resist the potential pull towards violence, indicating how religious education contributes to their ability to adapt positively to challenges. Therefore, in communities like Bahtim, religion often serves as a foundation for moral values and ethics. A moderate and balanced understanding of religion can therefore provide youth with values and a sense of belonging to a larger community. This understanding not only discourages violence and radicalisation but also fosters a sense of responsibility and accountability. One youth participant who attends religious classes at the local NGO noted: "There are drug dealers in the community who employ minors to engage in theft, drug use, and sales. This not only affects the youth but also has repercussions for the community and the entire neighbourhood. We are not living in a healthy environment, and a major contributing factor is the absence of strong religious faith. The lack of religious faith makes the problem worse."[51] Furthermore, another interviewee highlights the significance of religious education in limiting violent behaviour, highlighting the closure of mosques that once provided religious lessons. This lack of available spaces for religious education has led to a noticeable gap in informing youth on the values of non-violence, which were previously emphasised.[52] It therefore appears that those youth participating in the focus group who also attend religious classes at the NGO are more able to resist radicalisation and violence through teachings that emphasise peaceful and constructive aspects of their faith. In this way, religion becomes a source of inner strength and resilience, offering an alternative path to addressing grievances and challenges, and encouraging the youth to contribute positively to their community. It is important to note that religious education does not only help in allowing youth to resist radicalisation and VE but it also plays a significant role in building community resistance.



The local NGO in the community plays a significant role in not only providing religious education but also in supporting youth to resist violence. Beyond the religious aspect, the NGO acts as a safe space for the youth, fostering an environment of trust and security. Many young individuals within the community look up to the NGO and its instructors as role models, both in terms of their moral values and their dedication to the betterment of the community. This moral support system that the NGO offers to the youth creates a sense of belonging and purpose, which significantly contributes to their resistance of VE. According to one interviewee, "I love it when I walk anywhere, and I realise that my students consider me as their role model. Whenever they have no answer to their question, they come up to me and I advise them, I guide them and I talk to them on a one-to-one basis very calmly. I find it an amazing thing to come to work and talk to my students and realise that they trust me and ask me for advice and guidance. It also prevents the spread of violence. When you realise that someone is about to do something wrong and you advise them and guide them, this prevents violence from

[51] Focus group (18-30). Bahtim. 20 October 2023.

[52] Interview with volunteer and instructor at local NGO. Bahtim. 20 October 2023.

spreading all over."[53] In this regard, the NGO and the instructors within it seem to offer a secure environment, where youth are empowered to discuss their concerns, seek advice, and engage with others in the community. This potentially offers a space that actively encourages positive engagement, thereby fortifying the community's resistance to VE.

## EXISTING OR POTENTIAL VULNERABILITY INDICATORS

While the youth and community leaders who have volunteered in this research seem to be resilient and resistant to notions of VE, within the larger community of Bahtim there still seems to be drivers of VE at play and factors that exist within the community that can be regarded as potential vulnerability indicators. As mentioned above, it was highlighted by some focus group participants that the lack of police presence in some cases has a positive impact in protecting and deterring youth from participating in violence.[54] However, it was also emphasised by other participants and interviewees that this situation may be a factor that leads youth to participating in violence. According to one interviewee, "with the absence of formal institutions, many youth feel the need to resort to violence in order to get what they want, as they feel there is no formal form of support that can give them their rights."[55] Another interviewee stated that "many people have come to the conclusion that they won't get their rights except through violence and the use of their hands."[56] In other words, the lack of police presence can be regarded as a potential vulnerability factor, as it implies that the youth are more inclined to engage in violence when they believe there is a low likelihood of getting caught or facing legal repercussions. Moreover, without formal institutions like the police, some youth may resort to violence to resolve personal disputes or conflicts. This further emphasises a lack of trust in the formal institutions and the belief that they must take matters into their own hands to secure their rights. This approach can lead to further violence and grievances, contributing to a potential vulnerability to VE.



The influences of social media and digitalisation have also been emphasised by youth as a potential vulnerability indicator. Research has shown that "excessive exposure to media violence makes the youth less emotional and desensitised towards real life violence which ultimately leads to aggressive behaviour" (Zulficar, 2020). In this regard, during focus group discussions, a consensus emerged among the youth participants, highlighting the significant influence of media and movies, along with certain actors in the film industry, in encouraging youth to participate in violence. Many expressed their concerns about the transformation of role models in contemporary media. They observed that the portrayal of the "hero" characters involved in violent behaviour appears to have negatively influenced youth behaviour. It seems that more youth imitate these figures, regardless of the moral or ethical values being presented.[57] Youth participants acknowledged this concern, as they believe that this influence poses a significant challenge in shaping the community. Therefore, the influence

[53] Interview with Secretary General of Local NGO, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[54] Focus group (18-30). Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[55] In-depth interview with NGO Secretary General, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[56] In-depth interview with volunteer at local NGO, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[57] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023, and interview with volunteer at local NGO Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

of media and certain actors on impacting youth behaviours towards violence emphasises the pressing need for alternative narratives and role models that promote peaceful coexistence.

Another major potential vulnerability indicator is the sense of lack of governmental support within the community. For example, one major concern addressed by participants is the lack of available cultural and leisure opportunities for youth offered by the state. This issue seemed to be widespread within the community and impact a substantial portion of the Bahtim's youth population.[58] The absence of such opportunities can potentially make youth vulnerable and susceptible to VE. Firstly, when young individuals lack access to cultural and leisure activities, they often find themselves isolated and bored, which can make them susceptible to extremist narratives (Wood, 2020), as they are more likely to be searching for other outlets to fill this void. Furthermore, cultural and leisure opportunities provide spaces for personal growth and social interaction, which are instrumental in building community resilience against extremism. Additionally, all participants in the focus group and interviews criticised the government's role in not offering such opportunities and facilities for youth. For example, according to one interviewee, "there is almost no one in schools. Most children study at private centres. When it comes to healtcare, we also pay for it. And we are poor people. When it comes to sports, we work so that we can earn money in order to be able to play sports or join a club/gym in order to release our energy. As for employment, we are also the ones who create job opportunities for ourselves." [59] Hence, this situation not only exacerbates the vulnerability of youth to extremist narratives but also creates a sense of exclusion and resentment among them. Therefore, addressing the lack of cultural and leisure opportunities within the community should be recognised as a crucial aspect of PVE and in creating resilience amongst its youth.



[58] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[59] In-depth interview with NGO Secretary General, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

# Filling the gaps

## MISSING OR NEGLECTED PROTECTIVE, RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE FACTORS

The widespread economic challenges, characterised by high unemployment rates and a lack of adequate employment opportunities for youth, emerge not only as a neglected resilience and protective factor but also a potential vulnerability indicator. These conditions not only signify a pressing socioeconomic crisis but also raise concerns regarding the susceptibility of youth to extremist ideologies and actions (Adelaja and George, 2020). With limited prospects for stable employment and financial security, youth may find themselves facing a lack of a clear sense of purpose. The absence of viable economic avenues could potentially make them more vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups. One participant asks: "Where are the opportunities available for us that could enable us to create self-employment opportunities? To improve our linguistic skills, we have to take courses; we do not have enough money to do that. So, it is all a cycle."[60] Additionally, another interviewee further confirmed that it had become very difficult for youth to create for themselves self-employment opportunities, as they would require some form of capital in order to start, and many of those living in the community can barely afford even their basic needs. Indicative of this, "some young women in the community can work in textiles but they cannot afford to buy a sewing machine to start their small business."[61] Therefore, it is imperative to offer youth employment and skill development opportunities and integrate them in the employment market. One of the most significant drivers highlighted throughout all levels of analysis was the impact of economic deprivation and unemployment on VE.



Youth focus group participants also voiced significant concerns about the role of time constraints in discouraging their participation in volunteer work. Many of them explained that, while they are eager to engage in volunteer activities, they often find themselves with limited time due to the demands of their educational pursuits or employment commitments. They said that volunteer work has, in a sense, become an aspiration they cannot afford. The need to balance their studies and work was emphasised as a practical necessity, as they rely on their employment to meet financial obligations for themselves and their families. According to a male youth participant, "unfortunately, we have no time. Whatever free time we have, we rest, because the majority of our time spent is either at work or at college. We barely have any time to engage in any volunteer work or see our friends. I don't even go to college regularly. I am supposed to go three days a week; I still don't go on these three days simply because work won't allow me to not show up on these days."[62] Additionally, while most of the youth who participated in this research do participate in volunteer work, it seems that within the larger community of Bahtim, outside the scope of the local NGO, not many youths participate in volunteer activities. Within the community there seems to be a prevailing absence of a culture of volunteerism, and this can

[60] In-depth interview with volunteer and instructor at local NGO, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[61] In-depth interview with NGO Secretary General, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[62] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

be seen as a potential neglected prevention factor. One female participant expressed that a significant number of parents actively discourage their children from engaging in volunteer work, primarily due to the perceived lack of financial benefit associated with such endeavours. According to her, "many parents see that volunteer work is suitable. They think that if their children have free time, they should use it for work in order to financially support the family. They should not engage in any volunteer work that will not provide financial compensation. It is very rare that you find parents who actually encourage their children to engage in volunteer work."[63] This mindset reflects the economic pressures and financial constraints faced by families within the community, where the necessity of earning income often takes precedence over partaking in volunteerism.

Participants within the community expressed a growing sentiment that the government is falling short in its responsibilities concerning the prevention of the drivers of VE. While there is considerable pressure on the community to build resilience and attempt to address the issue internally, the community feels that government involvement remains absent from these efforts. This raises concerns among participants, as they feel that, without government support and active engagement, their resilience-building efforts are significantly hindered, and all pressure is placed on the community. According to one participant, "no one entity can address what is happening; the government cannot solve all the problems we are facing on its own. However, the government should play a much bigger role than it currently does, especially institutions such as the Ministry of Education, the media and the mosques and churches. The local governments also need to fulfil their obligations to their local communities."[64] Additionally, participants further expressed that the limitations imposed by the government on the roles of CSOs further emphasised these challenges. The community's ability to address VE effectively is limited as these organisations, which could contribute significantly, are restricted in their actions. Consequently, participants perceive a disconnect between the community's willingness to prevent extremism, the limitations placed on CSOs, and governmental efforts or lack thereof. According to one interviewee, "if the government is applying a lot of restrictive laws and regulations on organisations like ours, well then they have to provide substitutes. If they are unable to provide me with the salary or even the job opportunity that will generate enough income that will allow me to live a decent life, let other institutions help me out. But, they can't continue to shut down everything."[65] Additionally, another focus group participant stated that "while a limited number of youths in the community have attempted to play an active role, it is virtually impossible to take any initiative. This is not only due to the lack of time, but because of the legal restrictions imposed by the government on CSOs. We used to do that in the past but not anymore. We used to raise awareness about the effects of drugs, violence and social problems."[66] Therefore, there is a need for comprehensive and coordinated approaches to effectively prevent VE. Additionally, such an approach should involve a wide array of institutions and stakeholders that recognise the importance of a collective effort in building community resilience (Faulkner, 2018). Such a multifaceted approach can better address the dynamic challenges posed by VE.



[63] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[64] In-depth interview with youth volunteer at local NGO, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[65] In-depth interview with youth volunteer at local NGO, Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

[66] Focus group (18-30). Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

## ENGAGING OTHER STAKEHOLDERS AND NEW TARGETS

Engaging stakeholders in social prevention efforts is of utmost importance in order to assist in the sustainability and effectiveness of peaceful and moderate communities. By actively engaging different stakeholders and different CSOs, we are more able to reach vulnerable individuals, particularly in areas with high levels of social challenges and limited accessibility to resources. Moreover, involvement and collaboration between different stakeholders is beneficial and essential in addressing the root causes of radicalisation and VE. Another important aspect is including and recognising that youth are not only targets of VE, rather it is imperative to engage youth and allow them to recognise that they too are potential stakeholders in order to strengthen their vulnerability against VE (UNDP, 2022). This approach ensures that prevention efforts are tailored to the unique circumstances and challenges faced by the community.

Community-based CSOs are important stakeholders whose significance cannot be overlooked. While such organisations have become somewhat limited within the community, as presented in both phases of analysis, it remains important to allow for the establishment and potential cooperation of different civil society entities in Bahtim and similar communities. In this regard, the local NGO that actively participated in this research phase could also play a crucial role in identifying and partnering with organisations outside the realms of the community – whether government or not – that specialise in youth empowerment and social cohesion. Furthermore, to tackle the root causes of VE comprehensively, collaboration with CSOs is essential (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2018). These organisations have the capacity to offer specialised training and programmes designed to address the root causes of VE and potentially serve to extend the reach of prevention efforts, creating a more comprehensive strategy. It is equally important to empower youth to be more involved in these organisations and in prevention efforts. This could allow them to contribute to shaping initiatives that resonate with their peers and with the specific needs of the community (CONNEKT, 2022). This approach potentially ensures that prevention strategies are not only comprehensive but also directly address specific concerns relevant to the community and relatable to other youth.



Another significant stakeholder is the family unit. Incorporating family engagement programmes is a crucial component for PVE (Nevisi, 2022). These programmes can focus on parental awareness, as well as providing parents with the tools to recognise signs of radicalisation in their children. Providing resources and training can also empower parents to engage effectively with the concerns and frustrations of their children. Furthermore, encouraging families to provide a safe space for their children to discuss sensitive topics would also foster mutual trust and understanding amongst family members. This is particularly the case since primary socialisation has a significant impact with regards to youth involvement in violence.

Throughout both phases of the research, the significant role of religious leaders in PVE within the community of Bahtim became evident. Religious leaders serve as spiritual guides and moral authorities, offering a unique platform to disseminate messages of tolerance and community cohesion. Therefore, it is important to include religious leaders in prevention efforts within the community of Bahtim. Essentially, religious leaders' participation in Bahtim's preventative initiatives demonstrated their ability to be constructive change agents, bearing in mind that the vast majority of adult family members are

not educated and, therefore, cannot necessarily provide their offspring with the educational and spiritual guidance of the local religious leaders. As such, the religious leaders perform more crucial tasks in deprived areas such as Bahtim. In this regard, collaboration between religious institutions and larger community-based preventative activities is crucial because religious leaders in these communities are trusted and for the reasons mentioned above are highly influential. [67]

## GENDER SPECIFICITIES: ROLES, SOCIAL STRUCTURES, DRIVERS, NARRATIVES, INEQUALITIES

During the first phase of the meso-level research it was highlighted that many females in the Bahtim community are not educated and therefore are only able to secure the most basic forms of employment whether within the informal market (for example, vegetable sellers) or as factory workers or domestic help in more affluent neighbourhoods. The consequence of such educational limitations invariably impacts their economic prospects in a negative perspective. Lack of education limits work to minimum wage level and also job security and promotional opportunities. This aspect was further emphasised by participants during the first phase of research (WP5-1). Indicative of this is that the female factory workers interviewed all claimed to receive lower wages compared to their male colleagues in these factories. According to these participants, factory managers justify this wage gap based on gender-based stereotypes as women are perceived to be unreliable compared to the male workforce because they believe females see work as a temporary pursuit and their ultimate goal is to stay at home when they marry and start families. However, it is apparent that this justification primarily serves as a way for factories to exploit cheap female labour since all participants pointed out that many married women also work alongside them in those factories (Kassem, 2023).



It was further highlighted that within the community of Bahtim, women often find themselves as the sole breadwinners of their households, and this in turn reinforces the weakness of factory management justifications and strengthens the notion that such justifications are more a tool to financially exploit female workers. Indeed, most women have no choice but to work in such an unfair environment because it is not uncommon for male heads of households to abandon their families and financial obligations due to issues such as drug addiction, imprisonment, or their inability to find stable employment. Consequently, many women find themselves with little choice but to acquire the majority[68] of (if not all) the financial responsibility for their families (Kassem, 2023). Given the complex circumstances young women face, it is important that potential assistance and intervention efforts within the Bahtim community must include and focus on women. Such interventions would be of particular benefit should the aim be to empower and support women especially within the social and economic realm. In confronting such challenges, this would not only have a potentially powerful and positive impact on women's lives, but also on that of their children, whom may be vulnerable to VE should the current situation remain unchanged.

[67] For more information on the role of religious leaders in preventing VE, see: The United Nations Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Plan_of_Action_Religious_Prevent_Incite.pdf

[68] In most instances, older children are also expected to financially contribute to a female headed household, yet it is predominantly the female head of the household who financially contributes the most to the family budget.

## CAPACITY-BUILDING POTENTIALITIES AND AREAS FOR INTERVENTION

To establish effective prevention initiatives and identify potential areas of intervention within the community of Bahtim, it is important to note that collaboration with CSOs and external stakeholders is crucial since the community is very limited in resources. Capacity-building programmes and interventions could potentially focus on identifying, enhancing and developing new as well as existing skills in order to help alleviate economic grievances and unemployment – previously identified as prominent drivers of VE. Initiatives that encompass skills development, capacity-building, and socioeconomic empowerment, cannot only target these grievances but must also provide individuals with opportunities to enhance their livelihoods and encourage community resilience. It is important that these initiatives are inclusive and target various segments within the community, particularly women and youth whose empowerment is essential in prevention efforts (Wallner, 2021). Below are potential capacity-building initiatives and areas of intervention that could assist in this regard:

Utilisation of existing skills. As identified during the first phase of analysis, many young women in Bahtim work in the textile industry. Therefore, one intervention initiative could be building on their sewing skills by providing them with further training and microfinancing once training is completed to allow them to establish small businesses, such as producing handmade textile goods such as clothing, curtains or even simply focusing on tailoring services such alterations. On one level, such an initiative would target some of the root causes of VE by expanding the economic opportunities for these women through independent employment that offer many more outlets for financial growth and independence than simply working in an exploitative factory (United Nations Development Program, 2008). On another level, such an initiative would undoubtedly create a positive environment, and psychological benefits and incentives that are more likely to emerge with such employment skills and the empowerment and economic independence it provides. In the case of Bahtim, it would seem that the local NGO is currently a viable option to act as the main coordinator and intermediary of such an initiative. As it stands, its networks within the community can allow it to identify suitable local women to join and participate in such an initiative.



Skills training and vocational programmes. Implementing vocational training and skill development programmes in Bahtim could potentially empower youth and address the economic challenges they face. Such training programmes may also be beneficial as youth feel that little, if any effort, is established by stakeholders to target their specific needs and concerns, thus preventing them from acquiring the relevant opportunities to fulfil their professional and socioeconomic ambitions.[69] Suitable programmes that would potentially contribute successfully to such ambitions can be directed towards providing practical skills, such as carpentry, tailoring, plumbing, computer programming, and similar types of vocational jobs. Equipping youth with these skills not only enhances prospects for gainful employment and socioeconomic stability but would also provide psychological benefits such as contentment from finding a sense of purpose in life and pride in their own accomplishments. Moreover, entering the workforce with such training not only encourages self-sufficiency and independence but would also allow them the opportunity to positively contribute to their community as a whole. Most

[69] Focus group (18-30), Bahtim, 20 October 2023.

importantly perhaps, such opportunities would act as a deterrent to the youth who are currently tempted to participate in potential illegal activities.

Training of local NGO volunteers and civil society cooperation. As previously mentioned, volunteers and instructors in the local NGO seem to play a crucial role in implementing and sustaining prevention initiatives within the community. Therefore, by providing them with specialised training, they can better serve as community leaders and mentors to the community members. This training will enable them to effectively engage with the community, identify their needs, and deliver programmes that address specific challenges. Specifically, the unique and extensive networks of local CSOs allow them to be highly knowledgeable and aware of the nature and needs of their community. In turn, this role can benefit the local NGO too in terms of expanding its official network scope especially given the chance to collaborate with governmental organisations and other NGOs. In other words, collaborating with other organisations would allow access to more resources, expertise and exchange of knowledge allowing for comprehensive and sustainable programmes. The benefit of such cooperation is reinforced by the Global Center on Cooperative Security (2020), which also points out that through cooperation it is possible to enhance NGO services and cover a broader scope of needs that promote community resilience against VE.

## SETTING INDICATORS FOR A FUTURE ASSESSMENT TOOL



To assess the effectiveness and impact of the potential intervention strategies, it is important to set indicators that can assess the outcomes of these initiatives. For example, one indicator can examine the increase in employment rate amongst young women who participate in the handmade goods initiative. This could potentially help measure the economic empowerment and independence achieved through the programme. With regard to vocational training and skill development programmes, assessment tools may include the number of youth who participated in the programme to assess the popularity and success rate of the training. It is equally important to monitor the former trainees to assess the degree of gainful employment secured and measure the success rate of those who opted for creating self-employment opportunities for themselves. The local NGO in Bahtim and other cooperating organisations could manage the role of monitoring the number of participants who successfully transition into these income-generating activities.

In addition, qualitative indicators can also be used in order to reflect behavioural and attitudinal changes amongst the participating trainees. For example, conducting surveys, interviews and focus group discussions to measure changes in the perception of VE is one potential assessment tool. Additionally, participant responses can provide insights into whether certain intervention measures have failed or succeeded in tackling the drivers of VE and to what degree. Furthermore, the local NGO can also be responsible for reporting on whether collaboration and cooperation between other organisations has helped or hindered such programmes. On this basis, the local NGO would be able to provide further feedback on whether these initiatives contributed towards strengthening community resilience.

# Conclusion:
## analysis of the meso-level prevention indicators and identification of transferable experiences or best practices

In conclusion, the second phase of analysis illustrated that within the community of Bahtim there are several drivers that would potentially drive youth towards the path of VE. The main drivers include but are not limited to economic deprivation, limited educational and leisure opportunities, and territorial inequalities. Nevertheless, it seems that the Bahtim community also exhibits contradictory characteristics that counterbalance the stated drivers. These preventative factors (protective, resilience and resistance) play a crucial role in protecting the community from VE susceptibility. The analysis of these factors reveals a multifaceted framework of the strengths and vulnerabilities of the community in view of VE activities. Furthermore, it appeared that the active engagement of youth with the local NGO serves as a catalyst for activating these preventative factors. In this regard, the unique social context created through interaction with the local NGO is a major factor that appears to have contributed towards fostering an environment whereby youth are encouraged to discuss their concerns, seek guidance, and positively engage with their community.



The findings of this research indicated that the community exhibits protective factors, such as overall youth commitment towards supporting their families both financially and emotionally, and highlighted why the lack of formal institutions such as the police – while a double-edged sword – may potentially deter violent behaviour. The resilience of the community is also reflected in its adaptability to economic challenges, with youth actively seeking employment and aspiring for a better future. Additionally, even minimal involvement in volunteerism, sports, and religious education seems to play a role in strengthening this resilience. Furthermore, the seemingly strong resistance of the Bahtim youth to VE is reflected in their moderate religious education and subsequent views. The local NGO performs a vital and supportive role in this respect. Overall, the interplay of protective, resilience and resistance factors, catalysed by the local NGO, seems to help create a prevention framework for the community youth who attend and participate in its activities. It is important to note that while these factors independently strengthen the community against VE, it is crucial to recognise that they are interconnected. For example, protective and resilience factors often overlap, as a strong sense of responsibility toward families not only deters violence but also encourages youth to seek any available employment opportunities in order to financially protect their families, and, in turn, the employment and family responsibilities faced by the youth encourage their resilience from a young age. Similarly, resistance to VE is affected by the moderate religious education they receive at the local NGO. This, in turn, further enhances resilience in that it promotes non-violence, moral ethics, and a sense of responsibility.

The analysis also revealed that while the community exhibits preventative factors, there are still areas that require specific attention and intervention since not all youth within the community portray

resilience to violence. Indeed, some of these youth are potentially more vulnerable than others for various reasons discussed earlier in the paper. In this regard, recognising and addressing the vulnerabilities of these youth is crucial to creating a comprehensive strategy for VE prevention in order to enhance community resilience. The inclusion of different stakeholders collaborating with other organisations to achieve a unified goal is essential for the establishment of successful intervention strategies.

On a final note, this research phase calls attention to the need for context specific interventions that consider the unique nature of the community. Hence, in order to effectively address the drivers of VE in Bahtim, it requires collaborative efforts and focused capacity-building initiatives – particularly targeting women and youth. Such measures stand as pivotal tools in addressing economic grievances and unemployment. In this regard, intervention measures may potentially include harnessing the textile skills of young women for entrepreneurial pursuits and providing diverse vocational training to empower youth in order to encourage economic independence. Strengthening local NGO volunteers' training and fostering civil society cooperation significantly encourages community leadership and resource networks. In regard to evaluating the impact and success of these initiatives, the local NGO can track the number of individuals who join their programmes and also the number of those who were able to secure income generating opportunities as a result. Moreover, qualitative assessment tools can be used to measure the opinions of the youth participants regarding the impact of the initiatives and overall feedback to assist in refining future programmes. Monitoring the outcomes of organisational collaborations led by the local NGO further sheds light on the extent of success of these initiatives. This evaluation by the local NGO would potentially offer a comprehensive understanding of intervention efficacy in addressing VE drivers within the Bahtim community.

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# Appendix I

Interview questions:

12. How has your work on the prevention of violence and extremism developed since 2014?

13. In your opinion, what is the one most important concern potentially contributing to violence in your community?

14. In your opinion, what prevents violence or violent extremism from developing within the community and helps in creating community resilience, even though youth may face many concerns (for example, lack of employment, economic deprivation, lack of culture and leisure activities)?

15. In your opinion, given that there are high unemployment rates among youth, what are the possible factors and barriers that prevent youth from creating self-employment opportunities?

16. Are there other approaches that you think would be more adept in regard to the prevention of violence and extremism in the local context?



17. How can local community leaders and actors support local youth communities (for example, in offering cultural opportunities and employment for youth)? And what are the best tools and ways to create a positive impact for youth within the community?

18. Do you think that there is room for improvement or change in the roles and activities of local civil society organizations and community leaders to better target violence and extremism among youth?

19. How can the local environment encourage greater youth engagement and involvement in preventing violent extremism? What might be prohibiting that from happening?

20. Do you think there are spaces and actors who are already contributing to safer practices or better services? How are they doing so?

21. Which local actors within the community would youth trust the most and would have a positive impact?

22. How can cooperation between actors be created and improved within the community?

Focus group questions:

1. Do you engage in any community activities or volunteer work within the community? And is this engagement affiliated to specific local institutions?

2. Despite the challenges and factors potentially conducive to violence within the community, in your opinion, what are some of the factors that encourage youth to stay away from violence and extremism (for example, religious education, the role of the family, employment opportunities, having access to cultural and leisurely opportunities)?

3. Take a moment to think of barriers that hinder engagement of youth (males and females) in society in a positive way (for example volunteer work and the creation of self-employment opportunities). What do you recommend so that these barriers can be overcome?

4. Throughout our research we found that youth consider factors such as having employment opportunities, cultural and leisurely opportunities and moderate religious education to be crucial factors in preventing radicalisation and nurturing tolerance. Do you agree with this? If not, then what is the most influential tool for preventing radicalisation and violence?

5. What tools, mediums, and activities can improve the role of prevention of violence and extremism to promote understanding and tolerance/prevent VE in your community?



6. In your opinion do you and other people within the community you know of have the skills, knowledge and means to create for yourselves economic/employment opportunities to limit the impact of violence and violent extremism? Can you give examples of some of these skills?

7. Take a moment to think of successful examples of people you know/have heard about who have made use of their individual skills and available means (for example, the creation of self-employment opportunities). Why and how do youth think they succeed?

8. What are the tools (for example the internet) that are needed in order to maximise the use of individual skills to create self-employment opportunities?

9. How can the local government, educational institutions, NGOs, the private sector, and other stakeholders support the creation of self-employment opportunities as a means to address economic deprivation and lack of culture and leisurely opportunities?

10. In your opinion, how can youth be more involved and play a bigger role in the prevention of violence and extremism? How can youth be included (have a say) in the organisation of preventative initiatives in the community led by civil society and other stakeholders?

# JORDAN

Case Study on Meso-Level PVE Factors: Karak.
*Neven Bondokji and Hani Rawashdeh*

Case Study on Meso-Level PVE Factors: Ma'an.
*Neven Bondokji and Hani Rawashdeh*





# Case Study on Meso-Level PVE Factors: Karak

## Introduction

This case study examines meso-level factors for preventing violent extremism (PVE) in the Karak governorate in Jordan. The analysis of PVE factors and the recommendations offered are mainly addressed to civil society organizations (CSOs) operating in local communities. Since CSO contributions to PVE efforts are part of larger national approaches to PVE, the recommendations are also addressed to relevant national stakeholders.

The emphasis on community-level PVE strategies and efforts stems from research findings whereby radicalisation is found – at least in Jordan – to be a community-level phenomenon in contrast to earlier studies that examined radicalisation on the individual level (Abu Rumman and Shteiwi, 2018).This emphasis is also based on the trust CSOs enjoy in local communities. This trust varies, and CSOs are in no way the most trusted local or national entity.[70] However, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and CSOs bridge the gap between youth and national stakeholders, are able to navigate different PVE themes and type of activities, and are able to design creative and participatory PVE programmes that respond to local needs and contribute to resilience in local communities.



This case study is part of the CONNEKT project – a Horizon 2020 project funded by the European Union (EU) that examines drivers of violent extremism (VE) and pathways to PVE in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Balkans.[71] This case study can be read in conjunction with a forthcoming publication of case studies on local PVE approaches in MENA region and the Balkans. The case studies focusing on PVE complete earlier field research within the CONNEKT project that focused on drivers of VE on the meso (community) level (Chirchi, 2022). This particular case study complements earlier research examining meso-level drivers of VE in Karak that was conducted in March-April 2022 (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022).

All the findings on the meso level within CONNEKT complete research on the macro- and micro- level drivers of VE. This includes the report on micro-level drivers of VE among 408 youths in Jordan (Bondokji, Štikovac-Clark, Bint Faisal, forthcoming), and a report analysing macro-level drivers of VE in Jordan (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal, Štikovac-Clark, 2020). This case study on PVE, along with a forthcoming one on PVE in the Ma'an governorate, will inform the design of a national toolkit for PVE in Jordan published in 2023.

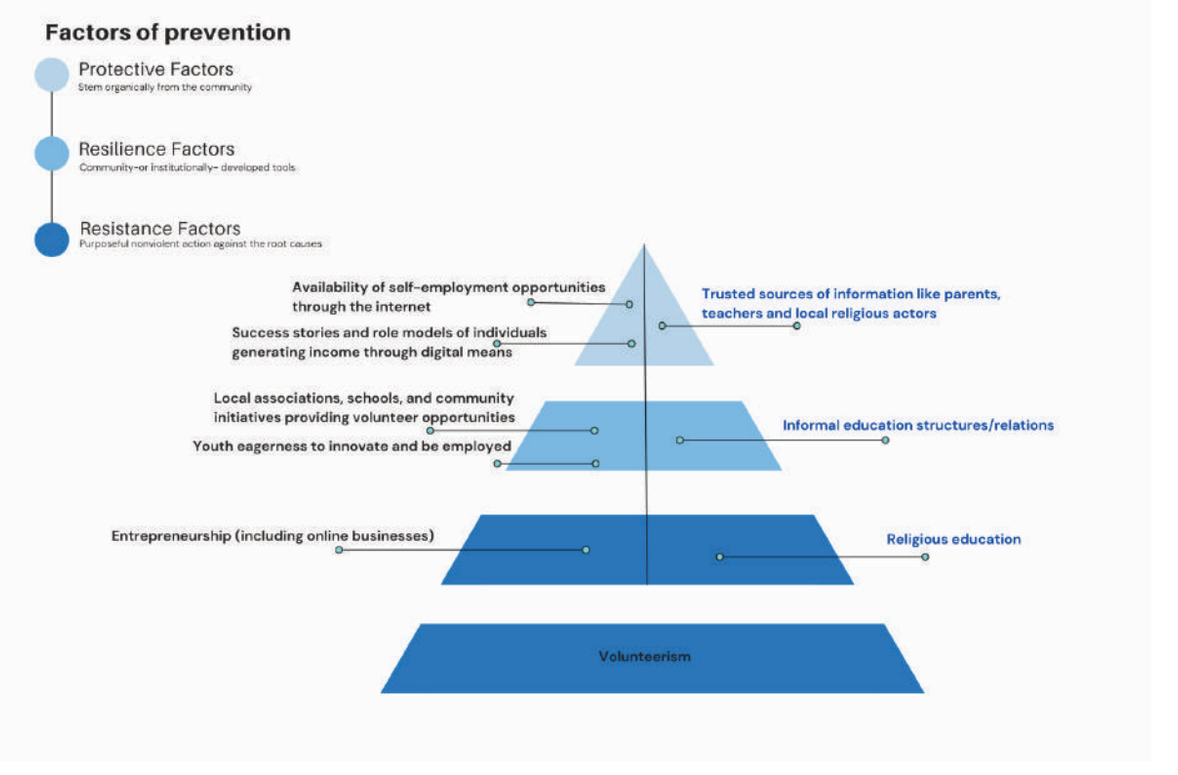
[70] CONNEKT findings on micro-level drivers of VE found that 41% of youth generally trust and 17% fully trust NGOs, compared to 89% who generally trust and fully trust the army, for example (Bondokji, Štikovac-Clark and Bint Faisal, forthcoming).

[71] Connekt, "Homepage", Connekt, n.d., https://h2020connekt.eu/

The analysis here offers an in-depth understanding of PVE efforts that can respond to the interactions between drivers of VE as identified in CONNEKT (religion/ideology, economic deprivation, political grievances, culture and leisure opportunities, digital literacy, territorial inequalities, and transnational dynamics). Although the analysis on the meso level also recognises the intersections between different social contexts, the analysis here acknowledges the dual role certain factors can play. For example, religious education can be both a radicalisation factor and a PVE factor. The same applies to digital socialisation.

The discussion is based on the distinction within the CONNEKT project between protective, resilience and resistance factors.[72] Protective factors are those that protect the community against vulnerability to VE. These can be promoted, but they stem organically from the community. Resilience factors are practices, laws or policies that help a community adapt to change and respond to threats to it. Resistance factors are non-violent action against the root causes of VE and its push and pull factors. Figure 1 details this as applicable to Jordan in the two case studies of Ma'an and Karak.

**Figure 1. Categories of PVE factors in Karak and Maan-Jordan**




Earlier survey findings in Jordan pointed to youth conviction that economic deprivation is the most prominent driver of VE in Jordan, whereas religious education is the most effective PVE factor (Bondokji, Štikovac-Clark, Bint Faisal, forthcoming). Despite this mismatch between economic and ideological factors as drivers and PVE factors, the findings in the Karak and Ma'an case studies on PVE examine these two

[72] Internal methodology note delivered by Connekt to consortium research members.

findings with a PVE perspective. In addition, the survey established a negative correlation between volunteerism and engagement in physical violence.

As a result, the analysis is based on the understanding of volunteerism as a key enabling factor to PVE efforts and as a resistance factor that can be purposefully designed to resist push and pull factors of VE. The findings also identify entrepreneurship through digital means as a key resistance factor that can effectively inspire youth to alleviate their economic deprivation. While the Ma'an case study will focus on religious education, we have incorporated here elements on religious education given its applicability across Jordan and due to the demographic makeup in Karak discussed shortly.

# Methodology

The findings are based on one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and three Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted in June 2023 in the Karak governorate. The FGD included 12 youths (6 males and 6 females) aged 15-30 years old. The FGDs aimed to elicit their perspectives and insights into the interactions between identified drivers of VE in Karak and to solicit input on PVE (protective, resilience, and resistance) factors. The KIIs were conducted with three key informants as per the details in Table 1.

**Table 1. Details of KIIs**

| Position | Gender | Date |
|---|---|---|
| CSO manager and government senior official of preaching services | M | 13 June 2023 |
| Priest | M | 14 June 2023 |
| Project manager at Karak office of national NGO | M | 14 June 2023 |



The selection of the Karak governorate for this case study and the earlier one examining drivers of VE in the meso level (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal, Štikovac-Clark, 2022) relates to three factors. First, Karak has a history of political activism. Despite the changing role of tribes who have been a central political actor in Karak (Gubser, 1985), they still have a prominent role in the political scene and act as a safety net in Karak (Todman, 2019).Although research participants did not refer to tribal actors, this was a reason behind the selection of Karak for this case study to examine whether tribal actors are still prominent in the local community. However, they were not referred to at all in the discussions.

Second, Karak has a relatively significant Christian population. Although accurate numbers of Christians in the governorate are not available,[73] the discussion on religious education in Karak cannot avoid the relation between youth and religion in Karak religious communities in general.

Third, the difficult socioeconomic situation in Jordan has left a mark on the city that manifests through the limited opportunities for young people and a prevailing sense of inequality (Bondokji, AlHaj, 2019), which makes Karak a suitable case study to examine potential resistance factors against economic deprivation as a driver of VE.

Although the case study is limited to Karak, its findings are applicable to different communities in Jordan, and the national toolkit on PVE will be based on findings in this case study along with the case study on PVE in Ma'an.

[73] No accurate data is available. Fr. Fares Siryani of Latin Church, and Fr. Rifaat Bader, Director of Catholic Media Centre in Jordan where unable to provide accurate numbers, particularly that churches keep records by families and not individuals. Two phone calls with Fares Siryani and Rifaat Bader by Neven Bondokji, on 29 October 2023.

In earlier meso-level analysis on drivers of VE in Karak, young people have identified economic deprivation as the main driver of VE. They referred to problems of nepotism and limited employment opportunities among other factors. This driver intersects in Karak with the social context of cultural and leisure activities. Youth argued that unemployment combined with ample free time along with lacking cultural and recreational activities can push them towards radicalisation or drug use. Lacking parks and public spaces that encourage creativity, which in turn can encourage entrepreneurship or self-employment, presents a key driver of VE in Karak (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal, Štikovac-Clark, 2022).

Economic deprivation is the main driver of VE in Jordan according to youth in six governorates (Bondokji, Štikovac-Clark, Bint Faisal, forthcoming). Likewise, youth complaints about lacking public spaces and limited structural and local opportunities that encourage entrepreneurship are applicable to all Jordanian governorates, where the ratio of public parks and spaces is below the global average.[74] Therefore, the findings from Karak in this case study on entrepreneurship and lacking public spaces will apply to Jordan nationally. Although religious education, addressed in this case study, was not identified as a main driver of VE in Karak earlier, youth surveyed in Karak and elsewhere in Jordan have identified religious education as the main PVE factor in Jordan. Given the religious makeup in Karak of Christians and Muslims, it was important to analyse this PVE factor in Karak.

### Volunteerism

Volunteerism is considered a PVE enabling factor and a resistance factor mainly due to the findings in the national survey with 408 youths in Jordan, which established a negative correlation between volunteerism and engagement in physical violence, as clarified in Table 2. This makes volunteerism a resistance factor to be encouraged and invested in as part of national PVE efforts. This attains more importance since meso-level PVE efforts are more suitably carried out by CSOs, which also happen to be the main provider of volunteering opportunities locally.



**Table 2: The crosstabulation of volunteering experience and engaging in physical violence**

| Location or target of violence | Volunteering experience and no involvement in violence | No volunteering experience and involvement in violence |
|---|---|---|
| Neighbourhood | 191 | 33 |
| Club or café | 205 | 17 |
| Sports hall/football pitch | 209 | 23 |
| School/university | 187 | 33 |
| With religious/political other | 233 | 2 |
| With the police/protests | 236 | 2 |
| With a partner | 172 | 2 |

[74] Number of parks per residents is based on Jordan Yearbook of Statistics for 2020, http://dosweb.dos.gov.jo/databank/yearbook/YearBook_2020.pdf

Youth participants in earlier research on drivers of VE in Karak explained that abundant idle time among youth contributes to radicalisation, since it increases exposure to online extremist content and also pushes youth to explore new/alternate worldviews (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal, Štikovac-Clark, 2022). Therefore, the findings on the national survey on volunteerism encouraged a research approach where volunteerism is also considered a suitable way to balance the abundance of idle time among youth.

Youth participants in the FGD actively volunteer.[75] Ten out of 12 participants have engaged in diverse volunteer activities including humanitarian work, community services, and school-related community services like the charity "Back to School" campaigns. This volunteerism is motivated by the desire to make a positive difference and a search for purpose and belonging.

This volunteerism is mainly not incentivised, meaning that volunteers do not earn any income or receive any compensation for their services, except for two youths who sometimes received incentives. This underlines a genuine commitment among youths to contribute to the prosperity and well-being of their communities.

Volunteerism as an embodiment of both the search for purpose and belonging as well as the desire to make positive change makes it a perfect tool for CSOs and local actors to encourage PVE activities. In addition, volunteerism itself is a PVE factor as it gives a sense of purpose and meaning, increases sense of belonging in local communities, and offers youth different worldviews on life. It also minimises their idle time, which makes them vulnerable to radicalisation through online content.



Naturally, volunteerism is not totally altruistic. According to a programme manager in an NGO, there has been a surge in local volunteering among youth in the last five years in Karak. This surge can be attributed to how youth view volunteering as a stepping stone to employment. Volunteering equips them with valuable skills and practical experience, increasing their chances of securing jobs in international non-government organizations (INGOs) or CSOs.[76] This perspective is true. Even if volunteerism is not totally altruistic, it at least signifies a level of proactiveness in self-education and self-development among youth in the hope of landing an employment opportunity.

However, volunteerism is mainly led by local and international NGOs and CSOs. The private sector offers no volunteering opportunities, although the largest private sector companies in Jordan, the Jordan Phosphate Mines Company and the Arab Potash Company, are located in the Karak governorate. In the case study on VE drivers in Karak, youth acknowledged the high rate of unemployment in Jordan, which reached 23% in 2022 (Department of Statistics, 2023), and demonstrated an understanding of their need to develop self-employment opportunities. Volunteering with the private sector offers youth exposure to business and entrepreneurship skills and contributes to their development. On a basic level, it can improve their networking.

Volunteering can be encouraged through dissemination of stories of local role models who can inspire

[75] Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Karak on 22 June 2023.

[76] Interview with project manager at a national NGO, Karak, 14 June 2023.

youth. Notable initiatives like "Mai and Melh (Water and Salt)" by a young woman in Karak, Morouj al-Nawaisa,[77] is an example of a platform designed to encourage volunteerism and coordinate volunteering opportunities. The initiative received support from the Crown Prince Foundation. Furthermore, the provision of training certificates and experience credentials was identified by youth as another means to stimulate volunteer engagement.[78]

According to youth, barriers to volunteerism include lack of information about organisations where youth can volunteer. In addition, youth complained that CSOs limit available volunteering slots to individuals who are acquaintances of the workers in those organisations.[79] Lack of transparency about financial compensation for volunteers also creates suspicions among youth. Divergence in financial compensation among volunteers creates suspicions about whether the CSOs are keeping funds that are otherwise allocated to volunteers in project budgets.[80]

Other barriers include lack of appreciation in some families about volunteerism as a key skill-building and social cohesion tool. Some families will encourage youth to find employment instead and not waste time on volunteering for free.[81] In addition, volunteering costs money. Transportation costs and the need for clothes or food place a burden on unemployed and/or poor youth. There are basic costs for getting outside the house that are not accounted for. Promoting volunteering as an enabling factor for PVE efforts and as a resistance factor necessitates reducing the financial burden on youth in this regard. Youth have recommended that the government sponsor volunteer programmes should focus on skills acquisition and capacity-building for youth, and that the Ministry of Education should play a greater role in fostering an appreciation for volunteering and providing opportunities tailored to different age groups, starting at a young age.[82] These views can be considered within the larger framework of volunteering as a PVE resistance factor that can creatively and positively channel youth energies towards an improved sense of belonging and self-employment opportunities, particularly that economic deprivation is the main driver of VE in Jordan according to Jordanian youth.[83]



### Entrepreneurship through digital means

Although both economic deprivation and digital socialisation are among the seven drivers of VE in the CONNEKT project, findings on micro-level drivers of VE in Karak have highlighted the interaction between economic deprivation as a driver and digital socialisation as an opportunity to overcome deprivation. This relation was influenced by COVID-19, when youth recognised the potential and sustainability of digital means for income generation (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022). The role of digital socialisation is also emphasised by the fact that 31% of youth in a CONNEKT non-

[77] An initiative by youth to encourage and disseminate info about, and encourage, volunteering opportunities, https://petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=222745&lang=ar&name=news

[78] Interview with project manager at a national NGO, Karak, 14 June 2023.

[79] Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Karak on 22 June 2023.

[80] Participant in Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Karak on 22 June 2023.

[81] Interview with project manager at a national NGO, Karak, 14 June 2023.

[82] Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Karak on 22 June 2023.

[83] Youth in Jordan, and also in Morocco and Egypt, agree to the ranking of economic deprivation as the most important driver of VE. (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, forthcoming) Neven Bondokji and Hani Hani Rawashdeh, *Regional Report on Individual Drivers of Extremism: Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco* (European Institute of the Mediterranean, forthcoming).

representative national sample use the Internet for over four hours daily, mainly on social media platforms and to communicate with peers and family (Bondokji, Štikovac-Clark, Bint Faisal, forthcoming). The FGD in Karak reveals that the digital space is increasingly becoming an economic empowerment and self-employment tool among youth. For example, three males and four female participants indicated that the online purchasing market is strong in Karak, as there is a demand on online stores.[84] In addition, youth referred to specific examples of individuals who leveraged the Internet to establish businesses and engage in online marketing. One participant (27 years old) shared the fact that a woman in Karak succeeded in establishing a commercial mediator business. She works mainly online and mediates between customers and companies. Another example is a success story of a 20-year-old man offering marketing services for various products and companies through his social networking pages. Participants confirmed that many young men and women were able to succeed in online marketing and education via e-platforms, which spread during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

These success stories motivate youth to experiment to alleviate their economic deprivation through digital means. Apart from meeting material and psychological needs, digital tools have disrupted the interaction between economic deprivation and digital socialisation as drivers of VE, whereby frustration and unemployment increase youth vulnerability to VE through exposure to online extremist narratives. On another level, self-created economic opportunities operate as resistance factors against extremism. Success based on one's own initiative and struggles enhances self-esteem and pride, thus balancing the despair created by unemployment and social pressures associated with it. Self-employed youth earn the respect of their peers and families. Failure is inevitable sometimes, but the experience offers pride and a sense of agency. CSOs can capitalise on these experiences by celebrating the attempts whether they succeed or fail. The economic situation in Jordan is challenging, and several procedural and structural restrictions are in place (Alawamleh, Hanna-Francis, Jamal-Alawamleh, 2023). But youth should find encouragement and support from local community actors and the media. By fostering economic self-sufficiency and encouraging legitimate employment opportunities, digital tools can contribute to building a more stable and resilient society.



Youth also highlighted the importance of developing skills for the digital job market. Self-education was identified as a crucial factor, but this education should be supplemented with training opportunities. The lack of training opportunities, especially in areas such as e-marketing, online store development, and programming of mobile applications are significant skill challenges for youth.[85]

Expert interviewees focused more on barriers to digital entrepreneurship. These include a lack of available opportunities, the fear of exploring uncharted territories, inadequate skill-building opportunities, and the general community perception that traditional full-time jobs are more secure. Two actors from an NGO and a CSO stressed the need for the private sector and the banking sector to foster digital entrepreneurship.[86] However, the interviewees were unable to delve into the specific

[84] Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Karak on 22 June 2023.

[85] Participant in Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Karak on 22 June 2023.

[86] Interview with project manager at a national NGO, Karak, 14 June 2023; and interview with CSO manager and government senior official of preaching services, Karak, 13 June 2023.

strategies or policies these entities might employ to encourage youth in this regard due to their areas of work.

While the government has taken control of certain aspects of PVE, the institutional response, detailed in an earlier report (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2020), has largely overlooked structural factors like skills development and employment opportunities in its PVE efforts. More alarming is the fact that institutional stakeholders did not recognise the crucial role of digital socialisation as a driver of VE on the macro level. This was instead highlighted in meso- and micro-level findings in Jordan (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022; Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, forthcoming). Apart from the digital space, youth also shared success stories from emerging areas of employment for which they lack knowledge or skills, such as hydroponic agriculture. The success stories shared on this represent the potential for economic diversification. Youth consider hydroponic agriculture as a sustainable and efficient sector that could create job opportunities, particularly in regions with limited arable land and water resources like Jordan. By focusing on the development of such sectors and providing educational and capacity-building support, youth can find alternative pathways to traditional employment. The development of sustainable agriculture, alongside digital entrepreneurship, contributes to economic resilience and decreases the vulnerability of youth destructive influences.

For example, drug consumption was pointed out by youth in earlier research as another threat to them in Karak besides VE.[87] Entrepreneurship as well as volunteering discussed above can both enhance youth and community resilience. VE should be viewed as one of several forms of vulnerability. A comprehensive multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder effort can enhance community resistance to various types of threats in local communities.



### Religious education and digital socialisation

Around 46% of 408 youths in Jordan believe that religious education is the most influential PVE factor (Bondokji, Štikovac-Clark, Bint Faisal, forthcoming). For this case study, it was important to unpack this finding, particularly that Karak hosts a diverse Christian and Muslim population, and to understand how youth interact with religion. All 12 participants in the FGD agreed that religious education is a critical factor in preventing intolerance, extremism and violence. One participant (30 years old) indicated that ignorance of religion is what leads to extremism. For her, religion is a source of mercy and good relations with others. It serves as a moral compass.[88]

Given the prominence of religious education as a PVE factor according to youth, and the prominence of digital socialisation in informal religious education, which became evident in an earlier case study in the Ma'an governorate in Jordan (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022), this case study examines the interaction between religious education and digital socialisation for PVE purposes, with the understanding that religious education is a resilience factor. That is, a community or institutionally developed tool that helps a community resist negative impulses that risk the safety or integrity of the community.

[87] Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Karak on 22 June 2023.

[88] Participant in Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Karak on 22 June 2023.

The discussion with youth and key informants was also based on the recognition of the dual role religious education and digital socialisation play. Both contribute to radicalisation if misused, and can also enhance resilience against VE.

The FGD participants emphasised that transformative power of religious education, which plays a pivotal role in nurturing character, enhancing moral values, and steering individuals away from violence and hatred.

Interestingly, when discussing the effectiveness of religious education, eight participants argued that informal religious education offered outside of official institutions (schools and mosques) is more effective. Because it is not mandatory, informal religious education attracts individuals who genuinely want to learn. For youth participants in Karak, informal religious education is mainly based on the activities of the Tabligh and Da'wah group, which holds a prominent and accepted position in society. Readers are warned that several groups globally hold similar names and variations of it, some of which are considered extremist groups. In Jordan, the Tabligh and Da'wah group is considered relatively mainstream focusing on spirituality of Muslims with no political concerns or agendas. However, further research into the group in Jordan is needed, although the government in Jordan has involved it in its PVE efforts as well as other religious groups like Sufis.[89]

The participants pointed out the limitations of formal education within schools, where educators face the challenge of completing a predefined curriculum in a limited timeframe with large numbers of students in each class. In contrast, informal education can be more engaging and personalised.



Two points deserve highlighting here. First, the views of youth stress that PVE initiatives that focus on religious education should be offered in cooperation with trusted local religious actors. The challenge of course remains as to who to trust and whether empowering religious actors is a sound approach for PVE efforts, particularly that some extremist groups have recruited youth through informal religious actors. Second, the findings also point to the need for trust-building measures between formal imams and youth, who seem to be less trusted. It was beyond the scope of this research to explore this aspect further but more research is necessary to examine this.

Engaging religious actors for PVE purposes can be done both online and offline. Some participants highlighted the potential of digital tools, particularly social media, in enhancing religious education. "A video clip that you might see on a social media platform can be more effective than a school lecture," noted a 20-year-old youth.[90] Participants also recognised the need for filtering information and monitoring content to ensure the dissemination of accurate and moderate content.

A senior government official of preaching services agrees. He stressed the need to capitalise on using social media for religious education by formal and informal entities, mainly due to the wide reach and

[89] Interview with Mohammad Abu Rumman, expert on extremism and Islamic groups, Amman, 15 October 2023.

[90] Participant in Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Karak on 22 June 2023.

influence of social media content.[91] This is to counteract the influence of the Internet on religious education. This government official and a priest of a church in Karak denounced digital content where extremist narratives prevail. The priest referred to "cursed" websites and social media platforms that radicalise youth.[92]

However, it will be a tricky effort to ensure that the online religious education content is credible. The government cannot be responsible for the monitoring of religious content, according to the priest, and he vaguely proposed a role for youth in this regard.[93] In contrast, youth primarily looked to the government, emphasising its significant role and responsibility in advancing digital tools and regulating content across various platforms. One participant (21 year old) noted: "Most people take fatwas (religious verdicts) issued by the relevant government agencies, and believe the content presented by representatives of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs."[94] This might open the way for a potential role of a semi-formal entity that monitors online content, building on the experience of Egypt's Observatory of Extremist and Takfiri Fatwas.[95] However, this will infringe on freedom of expression and might turn into another platform to propagate official Islam, i.e., the state preferred interpretations of religious texts. It might then alienate youth further from state-supported or semi-formal entities like this. When asked about who should contribute to religious education beyond the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, youth expressed a shared belief that parents bear the foremost responsibility for instilling religious values and concepts in their children. Some participants also highlighted the role of teachers and schools in shaping the religious education of young generations. Others referred to formal imams in mosques and informal religious actors who are in their view instrumental in religious education. A female noted that in a village of Karak, the informal religious education provided by one imam is effective in imparting knowledge and understanding for women of the village.



A multi-stakeholder approach on religious education for PVE is more necessary than ever. Inaction risks leaving this space open to extremist actors. This is even more necessary given the transformation taking place in youth's relation with religion. The priest categorised youth into three groups in this regard. The first embraces extremist religious discourse, the second reacts to extremism by becoming atheists, and the third is disenchanted with religion due to the extremist discourse and has turned to drug use. Further research is needed to examine this changing relation and to solicit input from different religious actors. However, a serious effort that recognises the need for religious education for PVE purposes via online and offline mediums is necessary.

### Trusted and capable actors

Figure 2 below clarifies trusted actors that youth participants in the FGD and interviewees highlighted in relation to enabling factor (volunteerism), and PVE factors (entrepreneurship through digital means and religious education).

[91] Interview with CSO manager and government senior official of preaching services, Karak, 13 June 2023.

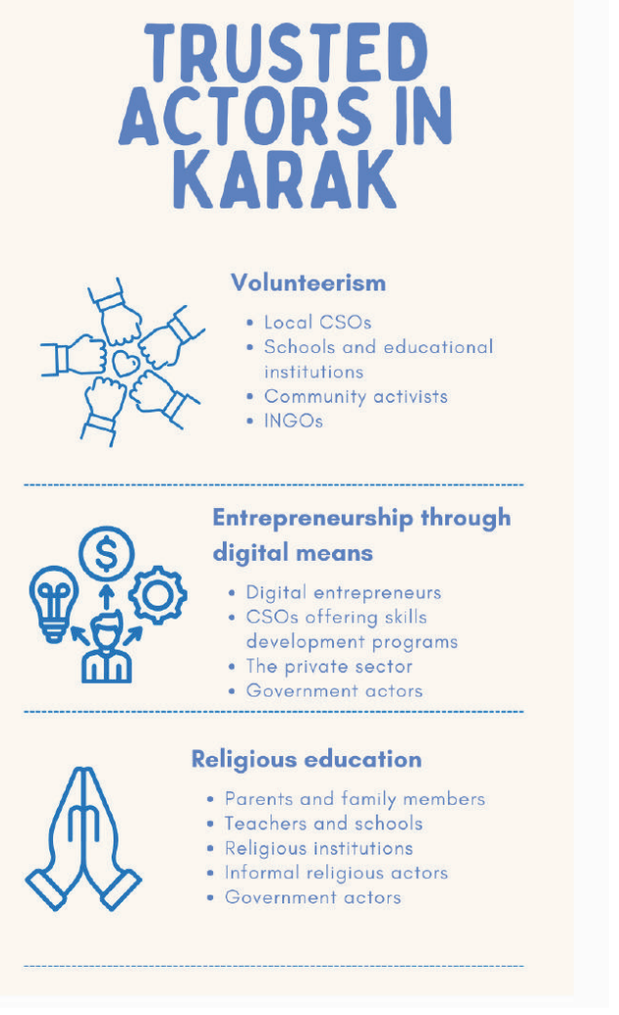
[92] Interview with a priest, Karak, 14 June 2023.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Participant in Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Karak on 22 June 2023.

[95] https://www.dar-alifta.org/en/hip

**Figure 2: Trusted actors on PVE in Karak**



# Conclusion

The case study examines PVE factors in the local community of Karak in Jordan and emphasises the role of CSOs in PVE efforts. The analysis is based on the classification of prevention factors within the CONNEKT project into protective, resilience, and resistance factors. It identifies volunteerism as an enabling factor, and digital entrepreneurship and religious education as the main PVE factors for CSOs to address.

Volunteerism is considered a key enabling factor based on earlier findings that established a negative correlation between volunteerism and engagement in direct physical violence among youth in Jordan. Volunteerism can pave the way for CSOs to engage directly with youth on key resistance efforts. CSOs should address volunteerism-related challenges within their realm of action like offering incentives and developing an inclusive approach to volunteerism.

As for specific PVE factors, entrepreneurship was identified by youth participants as a potential PVE tool to address economic deprivation, which is a main driver of VE in Jordan. There is a need to introduce entrepreneurship in all economic sectors by explaining what it is and what it entails. Entrepreneurship is not an easy road but can be encouraged through advocacy efforts with national actors and skills development efforts with youth. In addition, educational and civil society actors can engage in efforts to introduce youth to prospects of entrepreneurship and successful entrepreneurs. Digital entrepreneurship offers new prospects with lower starting costs, but greater structural challenges related to the regulations in Jordan.



Religious education is considered the main PVE factor in Jordan by 408 youths surveyed earlier in the CONNEKT project. Although religious education was not identified as a main driver of VE in Karak earlier, it attracts attention since Karak has a sizable Christian population like other communities in Jordan. Youth and informants all emphasised the transformative power of religious education, placing more emphasis on informal religious education by trusted local religious actors. A multi-stakeholder approach that involves parents, teachers and formal imams is important to galvanise the potential of informal religious education in both traditional and online formats.

The recommendations that follow are mainly addressed to CSOs as the most capable PVE actor on the local community level.

# Recommendations

On volunteerism:

National PVE stakeholders should develop a joint public-private sector youth volunteering programme to disseminate information about volunteering or unpaid internship opportunities available in the private sector. As a PVE measure, and to avoid placing a burden on youth, transportation costs and a minimum stipend should be offered to youth.

The private sector should independently offer volunteering opportunities that contribute to sector-specific personal and professional development of the youth and bolster the spirit of community service and engagement in Karak and beyond.

To foster volunteerism as a PVE strategy, a multi-stakeholder approach should be adopted as part of national PVE efforts, whereby government actors, education institutions and local community initiatives can provide skill-building opportunities to encourage youth to volunteer locally. This should be grounded in the understanding that volunteerism promotes community engagement, offers positive role models, instils non-extremist values, builds resilience, and overcomes barriers to participation, ultimately contributing to a more cohesive and inclusive society in Jordan.



The Ministry of Education should raise awareness in schools on the importance of volunteering and offer information on volunteering opportunities suitable for different age groups. This effort can be organised in cooperation with local CSOs.

Encourage media professionals to disseminate stories on volunteering experiences and their social and economic impact on youth.

On entrepreneurship:

Encourage public-private sectors partnership to offer training on entrepreneurship and digital skills to foster growth of the digital economy.

CSOs should organise activities and/or campaigns to share success stories of local individuals who succeeded in entrepreneurship with or without digital means to encourage creativity and inspire others.

CSOs should disseminate online content to share new ideas and areas of entrepreneurship. This can be based on local, regional and international success stories.

Encourage partnerships with the private sector, whereby CSOs and INGOs can organise creativity labs and capacity-building activities on entrepreneurship skills. These are to be organised locally based on the understanding of local needs and aspirations.

CSOs and NGOs should launch campaigns encouraging the government to amend regulations to reduce taxes and increase incentives for youth-led projects and digital ventures. This requires a mapping of existing laws and regulations and policy discussions to brainstorm alternative mechanisms to meet state interests and encourage youth.

CSOs should cooperate with the media to publicise success stories of young entrepreneurs and also stories of failures to encourage a national and local discussion on encouraging and empowering entrepreneurs.

On religious education:

The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs should invest in the use of digital tools to disseminate religious content via audiovisual means on social media platforms to formats that appeal to youth.

CSOs, NGOs, Churches and government actors should cooperate to create and disseminate youth-lead PVE content that is based on religious principles that correspond to Muslims and Christians in Jordan.



CSOs and government actors should explore the implementation of informal religious education activities/campaigns with trusted informal religious actors. This should be preceded by a mapping of trusted religious actors and subjected to content monitoring of religious narratives and content in these activities.

CSOs and the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs should jointly organise interactive sessions for parents on best approaches to address questions related to extremism from children and teenagers. This necessitates input from education specialists as well to advice parents on best methods to discuss complex issues with children.

The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, and through its local preaching management units, should develop a mechanism whereby informal religious actors are acknowledged and are involved in planning of religious education efforts. This should avoid alienating informal religious actors and build on the trust they enjoy in local communities.

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# Case Study on Meso-Level PVE Factors: Ma'an

## Introduction

This case study delves into meso-level factors related to preventing violent extremism (PVE) in the Ma'an governorate in Jordan. The recommendations offered here are directed toward local civil society organizations (CSOs) as key actors in local communities. This emphasis on CSOs and community-level PVE efforts is based on research findings that highlight radicalisation as a community-level phenomenon in Jordan (Abu Rumman and Shteiwi, 2018).

The discussion examines, first, religious education as a PVE factor and briefly refers to the interaction between religious education and digital socialisation in PVE efforts. This is informed by an earlier case study on drivers of violent extremism (VE) in Ma'an that examined the role of female preachers in Ma'an. It confirmed the interaction between religious education and digital socialisation as potential key drivers of VE, mainly due to the wide internet access and use of female preachers of regional religious education platforms. While the case study did not establish any signs of radicalisation among female preachers, it argues that dependence on digital peers and educational platforms makes preachers vulnerable to transitional dynamics that can contribute to radicalisation (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022).



However, the discussion on religious education is limited. This case study mainly addressed the role of CSOs in PVE, whereas all endeavours on religion/ideology in PVE in Jordan are managed and controlled by an official entity. Therefore, CSOs cannot work directly on major religious education efforts. The discussion offers research insights on religious education for PVE and offers basic recommendations for CSOs in this regard.

The analysis also examines the relation between digital socialisation and entrepreneurship. This stems from research findings in Jordan whereby most youths identified economic deprivation as the main driver of VE (Bondokji, Štikovac-Clark, Bint Faisal, forthcoming). Earlier research findings also pointed to greater awareness of online self-employment opportunities that became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022). This discussion examines entrepreneurship through digital means as a PVE resilience factor.

This case study and the aforementioned research findings are part of the CONNEKT project, a European Union (EU)-funded project that aims to examine drivers of VE and pathways to PVE in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Balkans.[96] It should be considered alongside forthcoming case

[96] Connekt, "Homepage", Connekt, n.d., https://h2020connekt.eu/

studies on local PVE approaches in the eight examined countries. These studies complement earlier research that focused on meso-level drivers of VE in these countries (Chirchi, 2022), including a case study on Ma'an, which was conducted in December 2021. These case studies can be compared with findings on the macro level (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2020) and micro level in Jordan (Bondokji, Štikovac-Clark, Bint Faisal, forthcoming).

This case study on PVE in the Ma'an governorate will contribute to the development of a national toolkit for PVE in Jordan to be published in 2023. The analysis offers an understanding of PVE efforts that address interactions between specific drivers of VE as identified in the CONNEKT project (religion/ideology, economic deprivation, political grievances, culture and leisure opportunities, digital literacy, territorial inequalities, and transnational dynamics).

While religious education is examined here as a PVE factor, it should be noted that, within CONNEKT, religion and ideology are examined as a driver of VE. But like digital socialisation, drivers in most cases can operate also as PVE factors depending on how they are utilised. While certain religious interpretations have been used to drive extremism, religious education is considered a key preventive factor to protect against VE by youth in Jordan (ibid).

The discussion builds on the distinction within the CONNEKT project between protective, resilience and resistance factors. Protective factors are organic elements that safeguard communities against vulnerability to VE. Resilience factors encompass practices, laws or policies that help communities adapt to change and respond to threats. Resistance factors represent non-violent actions against the root causes of VE and its push and pull factors (Figure 1). In the discussion on religious education and entrepreneurship as resistance factors, volunteerism is considered as the main entry point for PVE efforts in Ma'an. Volunteerism is a manifestation of the desire among youth to actively engage in efforts for societal wellbeing and personal benefits.



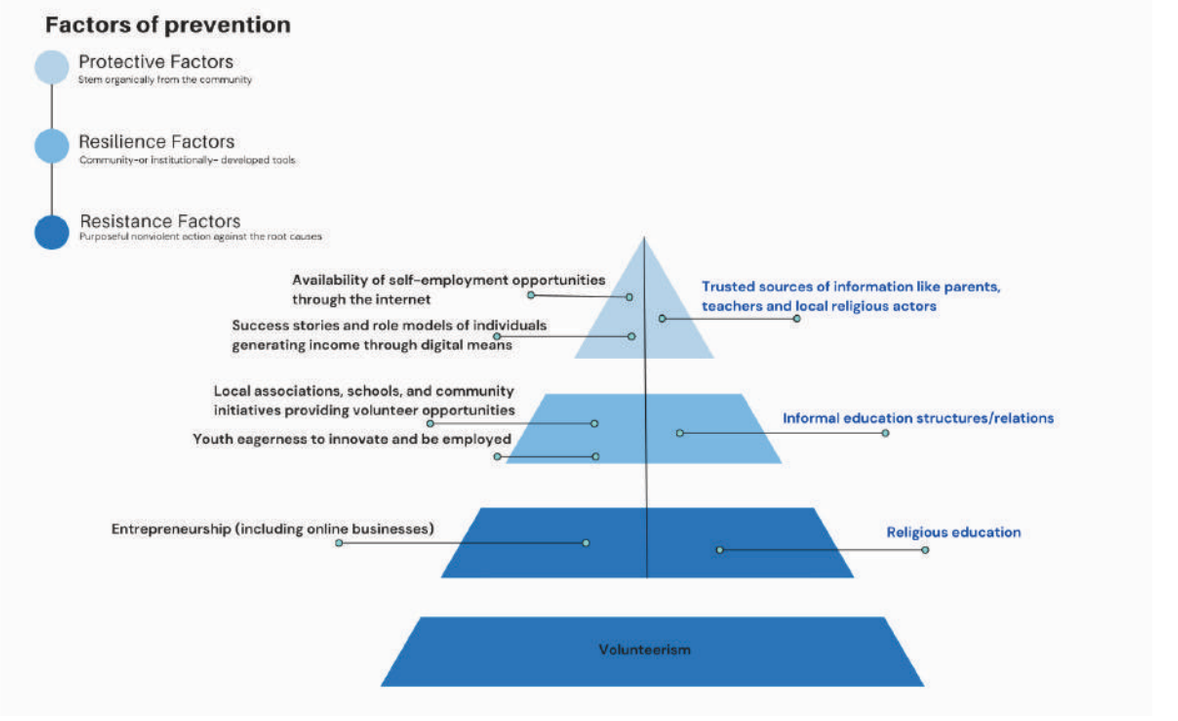
The trusted sources of religious education like family and teachers protect individuals from the vulnerabilities associated with extremists' manipulation of religious texts. By imparting a deep understanding of religious values and principles, it equips individuals with the values needed to discern between authentic spiritual teachings and extremist distortions, thus protecting against extremism. On the level of resilience, the existing structures of religious education, including informal structures, act as tools for disseminating religious education that guard against extremism. The existing relations, spaces and trusted network of actors, such as mosques, churches or community groups, is a resistance factor that can be utilised to capitalise on religious education for PVE purposes. They also foster a sense of belonging and community cohesion. As a resistance factor, religious education empowers individuals and communities to engage in non-violent actions against the root causes of VE. It inspires active counter-extremism efforts, such as promoting peace and tolerance.

On entrepreneurship, the wide use of the internet and digital tools as well as local success stories offers the basic protective factors to capitalise on. The eagerness of youth to innovate and find employment, and the availability of training and capacity-building structures, act as resilience factors. Entrepreneurship through digital means involves resistance efforts that can guard against economic

deprivation. Although it cannot act as a PVE factor on its own, it can contribute to economic satisfaction, which guards against VE.

It should be noted that the research for this case study took place during the assault[97] on Gaza in October/November 2023. Although the discussion did not directly delve into translational dynamics, the Israeli occupation of Palestine has long contributed to the collective sense of grievances among Jordanian youth as Arabs and Muslims. The injustices in Palestine, and the total disregard of United Nations (UN) resolutions on Palestine by Israel, as well as the disrespect for humanitarian international law during the assault, which amounts to genocide, has influenced the discussion based on the distinction between VE and Palestinians' right to resist an illegal and brutal occupation. PVE in Ma'an, and in Jordan, requires first addressing the injustice towards Palestinians and a recognition by all international actors of their right to national state.

**Figure 1. Categories of PVE factors in Ma'an-Jordan**






[97] Although different terminology is used to refer to the violence, assault is a preferred option here since Israeli retaliation to Hamas attack was highly disproportional and could amount to genocide.

# Methodology

The findings are based on one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and four Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted in October-November 2023 in the Ma'an governorate. The FGD included 13 youths (7 males and 6 females) aged 18-30. The FGDs aimed to elicit their perspectives and insights into the interactions between identified drivers of VE in Ma'an and to solicit input on PVE (protective, resilience and resistance) factors. The KIIs were conducted with three key informants as per the details in Table 1. PositionGender Date

**Table 1. Details of KIIs**

| Position | Gender | Date |
|---|---|---|
| Field Coordinator at an NGO | M | 25 October 2023 |
| Former Director of the Ma'an Directorate – Ministry of Awqaf [Endowments] and Islamic Affairs | M | 25 October 2023 |
| Staff member at Ma'an Youth Center, Ministry of Youth | F | 21 November 2023 |
| Founder and Manager of a youth initiative | F | 21 November 2023 |



The selection of Ma'an governorate for this case study relates to several factors. First is the unique socio-political context of Ma'an and its relevance to VE. Ma'an has been associated with an active Salafi-Jihadist movement, making it one of the key hotspots for radicalisation in Jordan with the highest number of persecuted extremists compared to governorate population (Abu Rumman, Gouda and Bondokji, 2022). Ma'an also has a history of active social movements, opposition, and anti-government protests, dating back to the famous 1989 April Uprising, which played a crucial role in driving reforms in Jordan (Tell, 2015).This legacy of activism, coupled with a strained relationship with the state and a notable security presence, has characterised Ma'an over the years. These are combined with Ma'an's economic challenges, such as high unemployment rates and poverty levels, which were the highest in Jordan (Ministry of Finance, n.d).

Earlier research on meso-level drivers of VE in Ma'an has identified four drivers of VE: religious education, digital socialisation, transnational dynamics, and territorial injustices on a subordinate level. These drivers interact with three social contexts as defined by the CONNEKT project: socialisation/education, employment and labour relations, and urban and peri-urban spaces. That research exposed potential vulnerability areas that might affect female preachers in Ma'an (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac Clark, 2022). This case study on PVE factors that CSOs can tackle in Ma'an focuses on volunteerism as an enabling factor, and religious education, particularly through digital platforms as a PVE factor. It also addresses entrepreneurship through digital means as a key PVE factor to address economic deprivation and employment and labour relations in Ma'an. While this factor was

not highlighted in earlier research on VE in Ma'an to allow for a particular focus on religious education, it is addressed here as economic deprivation has historically impacted the high rates of extremists from Ma'an.

### Volunteerism as an enabling factor

According to experts, the desire for volunteerism has been on the rise in Ma'an,[98] with a noticeable improvement in the qualifications of youth who are eager to volunteer.[99] Youth did not articulate reasons for this rise, but, in addition to personal choices, volunteerism has become one way to establish credentials in the hope of landing a job in Jordan.

While volunteering is a general enabling factor for PVE efforts because it increases youth local engagement and participation, it is also an enabling factor for informal religious education as a PVE resistance factor. "Some youth perceive volunteerism as part of the good deeds (العمل الصالح) encouraged in Islam," notes a field coordinator at an NGO. Apart from volunteerism as a productive activity, volunteerism fulfils a desirable religious goal of doing good towards others.[100] In this realm, informal religious education ceases to become a lecturing activity. Instead, it becomes a proactive mechanism to work for communal good. This energy can be channelled with mentoring and guidance to contribute to PVE efforts. CSO PVE efforts need not focus specifically on extremism but encourage youth engagement in local community efforts.

Any invitation for an activity with a religious discourse attains higher participation. Religion is a strong motivating factor for youth in general.[101] Ma'an also has a history of religious charity work through the Pilgrims City, an open free space for pilgrims on their way to or from Mecca where they can get food and rest. Therefore, volunteerism is enshrined in the general ethos of Ma'an citizens. They take pride in their centuries of voluntary service to pilgrims. This energy for volunteerism in its religious meaning is a capital to be utilised and channelled creatively and effectively.



However, three main obstacles affect volunteerism in Ma'an. First is "the seasonal nature of voluntary opportunities" determined by internationally-funded projects that NGOs and CSOs implement in Ma'an.[102] Generally, there is a shortage of volunteering opportunities in Ma'an compared to other cities like Irbid or Zarqa.[103] Apart from the Pilgrims City voluntary work, which is again seasonal, there is hardly a locally organic structure that provides volunteering opportunities.

Second, NGOs and CSOs that offer volunteering opportunities set a criterion for volunteers that discriminate against some individuals. For example, some volunteering opportunities require that the volunteer holds a BA degree discriminating against a wide sector of youth.[104] It also further alienates

[98] Interview with staff member at Ma'an Youth Center, Ministry of Youth, Ma'an, 21 November 2023.
[99] Interview with Field Coordinator at a NGO, Ma'an, 25 October 2023.
[100] Interview with Field Coordinator at a NGO, Ma'an, 25 October 2023.
[101] Interview with staff member at Ma'an Youth Center, Ministry of Youth, Ma'an, 21 November 2023.
[102] Interview with Field Coordinator at a NGO, Ma'an, 25 October 2023.
[103] Interview with staff member at Ma'an Youth Center, Ministry of Youth, Ma'an, 21 November 2023.
[104] Interview with staff member at Ma'an Youth Center, Ministry of Youth, Ma'an, 21 November 2023.

school dropouts. Others require English language proficiency, which is a key challenge for many youth in Jordan.

Third is the financial cost associated with volunteerism, most notably transportation, but also other costs like food, clothing, and so on. Volunteerism costs money, and this hinders youth voluntary engagements as they cannot afford it. Fluctuations in available funds for minimal compensations affect trust between youth and CSOs or create unrealistic expectations.[105]

CSOs should work to overcome these obstacles and capitalise on the desire and general pride Ma'an takes in volunteerism as an entry point to promote and work on PVE. The experts interviewed also stressed that unemployment is the main local concern and view it as the mother of evil in Ma'an, leading to drug use, extremism, or crime. Encouraging volunteerism will, therefore, enhance community resistance to these three factors, making it an overarching resistance factor.

### Religious education

In a national survey in Jordan, around 41% of young respondents identified religious education as the most important PVE tool, and another 46% strongly agreed that religious education can prevent VE (Bondokji, Štikovac-Clark, Bint Faisal, forthcoming). It is, however, unclear how respondents understand religious education. Given the respondents' high rates of religiosity and of practising their religion as indicated in the survey, it is possible to conclude that they view misunderstanding of religious teachings as a source of extremism, hence their emphasis on religious education as a preventive tool.



Youth participants in the FGD emphasised that "religious education is instrumental in preventing destructive beliefs and actions," highlighting the role of religious teachings in guiding individuals.[106] One participant specified the protective nature of religious education as a "tool in combating bigotry, extremism, and violence."[107]

For youth, "addressing extremism and violence through religious education is a collective responsibility that extends beyond religious institutions." Participants emphasised the community-wide endeavour that engages not only formal institutions but also informal actors, such as families.[108] The role of families, particularly mothers, in promoting constructive religious education was highlighted, emphasising grassroots involvement. While the discussions with youth do not unveil groundbreaking revelations, they confirm the previous understanding of the multifaceted role of religious education in preventing intolerance, extremism, and violence in Ma'an (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022).

However, the discussion above on the religious perspective on volunteerism might encourage CSOs to cooperate with formal religious actors[109] to organise activities on religious education for PVE purposes

[105] Interview with staff member at Ma'an Youth Center, Ministry of Youth, Ma'an, 21 November 2023.

[106] Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 11 October 2023.

[107] Participant in Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 11 October 2023.

[108] Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 11 October 2023.

[109] Working with informal religious actors is sometimes advisable, but requires caution about the entities and individuals involved.

utilising creative and participatory tools that respect youth religious perspectives and educates them on religious concepts that contribute to communal wellbeing and resilience. A notable example to get inspired on these activities is the Saudi TV host Ahmed Al-Shugairi, who worked on a number of programmes that promote the Islamic concept of Ihsan (doing good) to discuss several innovative, scientific, commercial or social issues to encourage youth optimism and proactivism (Zaid, Fedtke, Donghee-Shim, El Kadoussi, Ibahrine, 2022). Several other local ideas are possible between CSOs and formal religious actors.

### Religious education through digital socialisation

Earlier findings in Ma'an examining drivers of VE highlighted the role of digital means in religious education. Female preachers attained some of their education through digital means, communicate with regional peers through digital tools, and some –particularly informal preachers– capitalised on their digital literacy to disseminate religious teachings via digital means through COVID-19 lockdowns (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022).

These findings encouraged an examination of religious education as a PVE factor through digital means. Although religion and digital means are examined as drivers of VE in the CONNEKT project, throughout the analysis it became obvious that both drivers can operate as resistance factors within the preventive framework of CONNEKT clarified in Figure 1.



With around 31% of youth using the internet for more than four hours daily (Bondokji, Štikovac-Clark, Bint Faisal, forthcoming), fertile ground exists to invest in religious educations for PVE purposes through digital means. The strength of the approach lies in "leveraging both formal and informal religious education."[110] When these efforts are well-coordinated multi-stakeholder interventions, they empower protective factors (trusted actors like families, religious organisations, and educational institutions) by utilising resilience factors (institutions and structures). PVE interventions will, therefore, carry a success potential since they are based on necessary preventive factors.

Although religious education through digital media can attract wider viewership and engagement, the risks cannot be ignored. Youth are alert to this. Discerning reliable sources as well as the ability to distinguish between religious content online is critical, according to youth.[111] "Cooperating with knowledgeable and qualified individuals to provide religious guidance through digital platforms is paramount."[112] This perspective shifts the focus on trusted individuals, even if the process is managed by relevant formal state entities, who can be engaged in this effort through digital means. Although research participants were unable to comment on this specifically, they have stressed the need for multi-stakeholder efforts on religious education.

### Entrepreneurship through digital means

As mentioned earlier, most Jordanian youth in a survey of 408 youth identified economic deprivation

[110] Participant in Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 11 October 2023.

[111] Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 11 October 2023.

[112] Participant in Focus Group Discussion, conducted in-person in Ma'an on 11 October 2023.

as the most important VE driver in Jordan (Bondokji, Štikovac-Clark, Bint Faisal, forthcoming). Given the high levels of unemployment in Jordan, which reached 23% in 2022 (Department of Statistics, 2023), and the wise internet use,[113] this case study opted to examine the role of entrepreneurship through digital means as a PVE factor.

The digital economy is relatively new and faces several challenges in a remote and marginalised governorate like Ma'an. Most of the challenges discussed by experts apply to all Jordanian youth but are aggravated in Ma'an due to lacking supportive services or providers of specific skills.

The discussion here clarifies the challenges preventing youth from exploring entrepreneurship through digital means. The discussion should guide CSOs to potential areas of PVE efforts, based on the understanding that entrepreneurship is a resistance factor against VE, by addressing the main driver of VE: economic deprivation.

Challenges can be classified into skills, perceptions, and structural challenges. On skills, the most important shortage is English language, which is a must for any online business, given that all internet infrastructure is in English.[114] Another skill shortage has to do with developing business time plans. Youth need to develop a clear and realistic business plan. Apart from the skills shortage, there is also a lacking exposure about the pros and cons to expect in online businesses, and in entrepreneurship in general.[115]



On perceptions, there is a lack of awareness among youth on the scope of entrepreneurship and the opportunities it carries.[116] Entrepreneurship need not be through digital means. It is about creating chances and exploring innovative options.[117] It is also a personality type as some individuals are more willing to pursue their aspirations, whereas others accept existing circumstances.[118] More importantly, there is a general fear of engaging in digital businesses either as customers or owners of businesses due to the high rate of online crimes and financial scams.[119] According to the Anti-Cybercrime Unit of the Public Security Directorate (PSD), cybercrime-related cases in Jordan have surged six-fold since 2015. The unit stated that cybercrime cases rose from 2,305 in 2015 to 16,027 in 2022. Meanwhile, Jordan has witnessed an increase in cases of digital fraud, which reached 2,118 in 2022 (Public Security Department, 2022).

On another level, youth need to develop the understanding that businesses/entrepreneurship requires innovation. "I have seen several online initiatives and businesses that lost due to lack of innovation and adaptability to wider changes in different sectors."[120]

[113] There were 5.59 million users aged 18 and above using social media in Jordan at the start of 2023, which was equivalent to 79.4% of the total population aged 18 and above at that time (Kemp, 2023).

[114] Interview with Founder and Manager of a youth initiative, Ma'an, 21 November 2023.

[115] Interview with staff member at Ma'an Youth Center, Ministry of Youth, Ma'an, 21 November 2023.

[116] Interview with Field Coordinator at a NGO, Ma'an, 25 October 2023.

[117] Interview with Founder and Manager of a youth initiative, Ma'an, 21 November 2023.

[118] Interview with staff member at Ma'an Youth Center, Ministry of Youth, Ma'an, 21 November 2023.

[119] Interview with Founder and Manager of a youth initiative, Ma'an, 21 November 2023.

[120] Interview with staff member at Ma'an Youth Center, Ministry of Youth, Ma'an, 21 November 2023.

Structurally, the challenges reflect policy shortages/misfits. According to a female entrepreneur and founder of the Digital Clinic, institutions of higher education are unable to offer academic and technical skills in emerging and innovative sectors. The academic knowledge and skills attained in higher education does not match advances worldwide. She also clarified the several policy challenges that exist in relation to registering and licensing online businesses and initiatives. These are bureaucratic obstacles that fall short of understanding the actual needs and scope of digital entrepreneurship.[121] Another expert referred to the shortage of informal and semi-formal entities that can offer necessary skills in digital and even vocational entrepreneurship in sectors like hybrid car maintenance or AI.[122] All these challenges are areas CSOs can work to address in their PVE efforts. While these might seem farfetched in their relation to VE, it is important to note that unemployment was considered the single most important challenge in Ma'an by the interviewed experts. Any efforts to improve youth employment in Jordan can contribute to PVE.

CSOs have a wide scope of areas of PVE engagement with youth, either by soliciting experts to enhance capacity-building or creatively educating youth exposure online and in traditional local media or participatory events of local success stories of local entrepreneurs. CSOs can also advocate for policy changes in relation to education or licensing and registration policies nationally. These will require a multi-stakeholder approach, even alliances with CSOs from different governments, and a participatory approach with youth to co-design and implement these efforts.

Youth participants in the FGD did not delve much into these areas, partly due to low level of exposure on the potential of entrepreneurship, as noted by one interviewee,[123] or perhaps they could not establish the link between entrepreneurship and PVE. Nevertheless, CSO efforts in this regard must be participatory considering gender variations and needs as well.



### Trusted actors

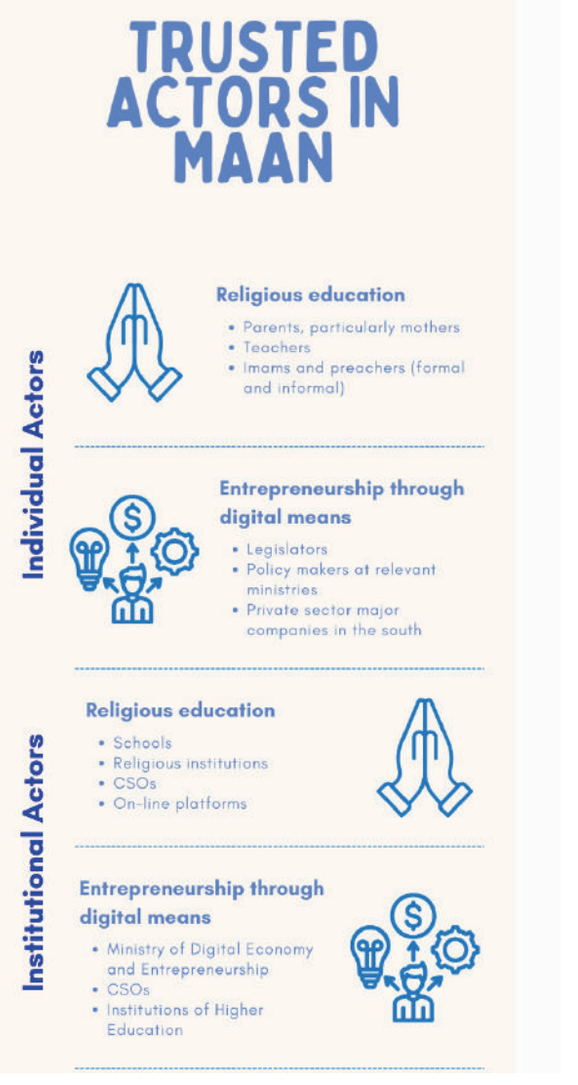
PVE efforts in local communities require multi-stakeholder and participatory approaches to the extent possible on religious education, and on entrepreneurship through digital means. This includes different actors and structures as clarified in Figure 2 below.

[121] Interview with Founder and Manager of a youth initiative, Ma'an, 21 November 2023.

[122] Interview with Field Coordinator at a NGO, Ma'an, 25 October 2023.

[123] Interview with Field Coordinator at a NGO, Ma'an, 25 October 2023.

Figure 2. Trusted Actors on PVE in Ma'an



# Conclusion

This case study examines pathways for PVE efforts on the meso level in Ma'an, Jordan. The analysis emphasises volunteerism as an enabling factor for PVE efforts and addresses two main PVE factors: religious education, and entrepreneurship through digital means. The analysis is informed by CONNEKT framework of prevention factors that includes protective, resilience, and resistance factors. Both religious education and entrepreneurship are considered resistance factors that CSOs can act upon to prevent VE in Ma'an. However, these efforts will require coordination with several stakeholders like governmental entities, other civil society actors, and families and educators.

Although CSOs in Jordan are not allowed to work on formal structures and actors on religious education, the case study offers youth perspectives on the role of religious education in PVE and how it can be enhanced. Youth emphasise the role of trusted actors such as families and teachers in communicating religious values, which guard against extremist manipulation of religious texts. They also express a preference for informal religious education that is more interactive and responsive to personal questions and confusions. Religious actors and stakeholders hoping to utilise its PVE potential can no longer ignore the need for religious education through online platforms, despite the challenges posed by informal online religious education platforms. Formal religious actors have to actively engage in these efforts, which can strengthen the role of religious education as a resilience factor, whereby it contributes community cohesion and offers a sense of belonging, which are essentials in countering the root causes of VE.



Entrepreneurship through digital means is another resistance factor that addresses economic deprivation, a significant driver of VE in Jordan. Challenges related to skills, perceptions and structural issues are outlined by youth, providing CSOs with areas of focus for PVE efforts. The case study suggests that CSOs enhance youth capacities for entrepreneurship, advocate for policy changes that limit structural barriers facing youth, and showcase local success stories.

Although a viable enabling factor, several obstacles limit youth volunteering experiences in Ma'an. These include the seasonal nature of opportunities, discriminatory criteria, and financial costs associated with volunteerism. Overcoming these challenges is crucial for CSOs to leverage the desire for volunteerism as an entry point for broader PVE efforts.

As part of the larger body of research under the CONNEKT project, this case study provides a foundation for understanding and addressing the intricate interplay of meso-level factors in PVE in Ma'an and, by extension, in Jordan. The findings and recommendations laid out in the next section offer practical guidance for CSOs involved in PVE efforts, emphasising the importance of a holistic and community-driven approach.

# Recommendations

These recommendations aim to guide CSOs on potential areas of PVE efforts in Ma'an on the specific enabling and resistance factors discussed in this case study.

**On volunteerism:**

CSOs should integrate an inclusive volunteering approach that does not discriminate based on language skills or level of education. This can be achieved through a local coordination mechanism among NGOs and CSOs in Ma'an for volunteering based on an appreciation for volunteering as a protective factor against VE, crime, and drug use.

CSOs should incorporate in their budgets, including for projects funded by donors, compensation for volunteers to cover basic costs.

CSOs should coordinate with local educational institutions and media to encourage volunteerism and publicise its role as a preventive factor and youth capacity-building tool. This can include religious discourse on encouraging volunteerism but should not be limited to it.



**On religious education:**

Although the role of CSOs in religious education is limited in Jordan, local initiatives can work on the following aspects in coordination with formal religious institutions and structures:

CSOs can collaborate with local religious institutions to offer religious education activities that promote values of moderation, tolerance and peace.

Create partnerships with religious leaders, imams, and educators to introduce informal religious education activities that are interactive, innovative and participatory to promote values of justice and respect for human life.

CSOs can introduce initiatives in collaboration with formal religious institutions to produce creative audiovisual religious education content geared towards social media platforms.

**On entrepreneurship through digital means:**

CSOs should create alliances to advocate on a national level for policy reforms to encourage the licensing and regulation of online businesses/initiatives, or ease procedural obstacles facing youth in this regard. This can include lobbying with relevant legislators at the local and national levels.

CSOs can coordinate nationally to lobby educational institutions and relevant ministries to introduce academic courses that respond to current needs and advances. CSOs can coordinate the effort to identify specific suggestions, with estimates on the impact for national economy, education institutions, and national vocational training bodies, and to combine these with skills needed for the digital economy.

CSOs should organise activities or disseminate content online that familiarises youth with opportunities offered through digital entrepreneurship by showcasing local, national, and regional success stories.

CSOs can organise creativity labs that bring entrepreneurship experts and local entrepreneurs to encourage group brainstorming on individual ideas. These should include sessions that familiarise youth with expected challenges and possible opportunities to make them aware of the entrepreneurial landscape and its challenges.

CSOs can cooperate with the private sector and educational institutions to offer capacity-building activities on business planning, e-marking, English language, specific vocational skills, and so on, based on a local needs assessment.

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# TUNISIA

Prevention Case Study: Ben Guerdane. *Tasnim Chirchi*

Prevention Case Study: Hammam Lif. *Tasnim Chirchi*





# Prevention Case Study: Ben Guerdene
Dr. Tasnim Chirchi

## Introduction

This report summarises the findings of a case study implemented in Tunisia within the second phase of WP5 in the framework of the project CONNEKT (Context of radicalisation and VE in the Middle East and North Africa [MENA] region and the Balkans). The research activities were conducted in Ben Guerdene, a semi-rural and semi-urban community located in the governorate of Medenine in south Tunisia. This report consolidates the results of previous research on the macro, meso and micro levels in Tunisia on the social context and the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Zoghlami and Toumi, 2019). This case study builds on the multi-level previous findings to interrogate the factors of prevention as they are manifest on the meso level within community dynamics since the project considers communities as a central actor in the analysed social dynamics. This report will first summarise the previous findings on the factors and contexts of radicalisation and will then address the potential prevention factors revealed through the analysis of fieldwork findings.

# Methodology

## SOME CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS: ON RESILIENCE AS A CONCEPT WITHIN CONNEKT

Assessing the resilience of communities poses significant challenges. For this reason, CONNEKT adopts a three-dimensional approach to gauge resilience, encompassing awareness (recognising radicalisation as a problem), attitude (willingness to take action), and action (plans to address the challenge) (CONNEKT, 2021, p. 9). These dimensions are crucial when identifying factors contributing to community resilience.

In addition, CONNEKT's concept of community resilience emphasises the following:

**Emphasis on community resilience:** CONNEKT focuses on community resilience over individual resilience, acknowledging the historical oversight of the community's role. Resilience is viewed as a community attribute rather than an individual mindset (Torrekens and De Le Vingne, 2020). This emphasis aligns with the need to involve local and civil society actors in preventing violent extremism (PVE) to ensure effectiveness, ownership, and sustainability of prevention efforts.

**Departure from passive connotations:** CONNEKT's view of resilience transcends passive connotations associated with acceptance of the status quo. It rejects notions of resignation or uncritical acceptance, advocating instead for societies capable of understanding and responding to complex events by utilising or developing systems and practices to manage and mitigate shocks (Torrekens and De Le Vingne, 2020).



**Responsibility of state actors:** CONNEKT takes a critical stance on resilience that places undue pressure on communities, potentially absolving state actors of their responsibility to ensure broader human security. While community resilience is crucial, it should not shift all responsibility from those spreading extremist ideologies or from governments accountable for addressing the issue. The focus should be on building community agency without stigmatisation (CONNEKT, 2021).

**Replicability of positive practices:** CONNEKT underscores the importance of identifying positive practices that can be replicated across countries and regions. This approach seeks to move beyond securitisation-focused research and institutional approaches, enabling a more comprehensive investigation at macro, meso, and micro levels. Country research teams should explore practices that offer learning opportunities for other actors, countries or institutions, fostering new knowledge and understanding in PVE (CONNEKT, 2021).

These conceptual and practical considerations led us to choose to examine the case study of Ben Guerdene in Tunisia.

## CONTEXT SPECIFICITIES AND CRITERIA OF SELECTION OF THE CASE STUDY

Ben Guerdene, situated in the Medenine governorate in southeastern Tunisia near the Libyan border,

is a commune with a population of 79,912. The community has an average age of 30 years, an illiteracy rate of approximately 19%, and an unemployment rate of 18.85%. The youth unemployment rates in Ben Guerdene stand at 68.31%, among the highest in Tunisia. Notably, university graduates constitute most of the unemployed youth, with a rate of 34.14%, significantly surpassing the national average of 20.06%.

Over the post-independence period, Ben Guerdene has grappled with political and economic marginalisation. Its fragile economic situation is marked with a sharp decline in employment observed in sectors such as manufacturing (5.12%) and agriculture and fishing (7.47%).

The absence of an inclusive and sustainable development, coupled with the erosion of traditional agricultural structures, has led the local economy to heavily depend on cross-border trade and smuggling with Libya. Concurrently, civil conflict in post-Gaddafi Libya and the rise of VE activities on the southern borders have significantly impacted livelihood resources in Ben Guerdene

In addition to economic challenges, Ben Guerdene faced a severe security threat in March 2016 when armed groups attempted to occupy the city and declare it an ISIS-affiliated emirate, known as the "Epic Battle of Ben Guerdene". Despite these adversities, previous research by the Jasmine Foundation indicated that the area is no longer a hub for radicalisation.

This report consolidates findings from previous research on radicalisation drivers and more recent activities under the CONNKET project. The goal is to understand the preventive factors in Ben Guerdene that explain the community's resilience against radicalisation attempts. Despite existing factors and real attempts by violent extremist groups to establish a foothold, the community has consistently rejected hosting them. Beyond the resilience of the community, this report aims to investigate further factors that might further strengthen individual and collective resilience to VE in Ben Guerdene and prevent radicalisation in a sustainable manner.



## RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

In the framework of the second phase of WP5, the Jasmine Foundation for Research and Communication (JFRC) team in Tunisia conducted three in-depth interviews with experts and civil society activists and one focus group with six participants aged from 18 to 25, two females and four males. The participants were recruited through collaboration with our local coordinator in the region and a local civil society organization (CSO).

## CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

The local context in all of Tunisia has been marked during the implementation of the second phase of WP5, particularly in the months of November and December, by the preparations for local elections in a complicated economic, social and political context. These elections are taking place after the dissolution of the democratically-elected local councils and in a context of a shrinking civic space and a crackdown on associations and political parties to eliminate any public discourse other than the official one of the regime. Organising public events was tricky in these circumstances. For fieldwork implementation we relied on our local networks in a region where we have already implemented several projects in the previous years and decided to limit the number of participants.

# Summary of previous findings

## IDENTIFIED VE DRIVERS IN BEN GUERDENE

Previous fieldwork conducted by the JFRC in Ben Guerdene extended over a five-month period, spanning from August 2018 to January 2019, and involved a total of 104 participants, comprising 54 females and 50 males. The participants represented diverse sectors, including local and regional government, international and civil society organizations, as well as imams and individuals hailing from marginalised communities identified as particularly susceptible to recruitment by radical groups. The findings presented in a previous research report (Zoghlami and Toumi, 2019) summarised the perspectives and opinions articulated by the participants. These insights were gathered by the JFRC through a range of qualitative research methods, encompassing 12 individual interviews, focus groups, and two workshops.

The field study findings reveal a severe lack of human development dimensions in the Ben Guerdene region. Participants highlighted an acute sense of discrimination against their region and neglect emphasising deep regional inequalities between the central and peripheral regions in Tunisia, leading to disparities in access to public services, particularly regarding the access of their region to economic and social services, employment, political participation, and social justice.



Economic demands and employment are major concerns. The central state's lack of encouragement for investment in the region, coupled with high taxes, financing difficulties, and administrative obstacles, discourages the establishment of businesses that could generate employment. The weak private sector and an inability of the public sector to absorb new employees drive youth migration and involvement in smuggling activities.

Unemployment in Ben Guerdene was also linked to shortcomings in Tunisia's education system, leading to high unemployment rates among university graduates. The absence of clear strategies for educational reforms and the mismatch between the education system and labour market needs discourage young people from pursuing education.

The report also highlighted that political participation faces challenges in Ben Guerdene due to deteriorating economic conditions, unfulfilled electoral promises, and a perceived prejudice against the region in political appointments. Residents express a loss of trust in political representatives and a growing desire for withdrawal and rejection of political participation.

Social justice issues arise from the absence of adequate programmes to address the region's social demands for inclusion and recognition. The lack of basic necessities, such as food and medicine, leads to extortion and inflated prices. The scarcity of essential items is exacerbated by the region's distance from the centre and the absence of industry. Overall, the study emphasises the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to address economic, political and social challenges in Ben Guerdene.

In the absence of these reforms, the report emphasised the negative impacts of the economic and social situation on youth. Chronic unemployment among higher education graduates in the region poses the risk of crime, deviation and extremism. Flaws in public policy approaches and service provision, particularly in addressing social justice grievances, intensify feelings of injustice and resentment toward the state, potentially fuelling violent reactions. The subpar performance of state institutions and the prevalence of administrative bureaucracy contribute to the growth of parallel illegal economic activities and smuggling through the Libyan border, fostering an environment facilitating crime and radicalism networks.

The inadequacies of public policies also impede the effectiveness of civil society projects in Ben Guerdene. The lack of state support for associations diminishes their impact on the social environment. The widespread issues of poverty, unemployment and corruption create fertile ground for the rise of extremism and increase susceptibility to violent ideologies.

The absence of inclusive development in Ben Guerdene relegates individuals to the periphery of state policies. This marginalisation is evident in the reliance on hard security measures, fostering a sense of exclusion and deep injustice amongst the inhabitants of the region. The state's absence in improving the social situation, coupled with its omnipresence through security apparatus, exacerbates feelings of marginalisation that become so pervasive that the margin becomes a constitutive element of the identity and self-representation of Ben Gurden and its inhabitants.



The margins operate parallel to the "national" order, covering spaces beyond the state's authority and excluded from its projects among the population, which constitutes a favourable breeding ground of VE and radical ideologies. The sphere of the "informal" or "parallel" extends in Ben Guerdene, indeed, beyond the economic realm, manifesting as a phenomenon that permeates various aspects of life, giving rise to a traditional, community-based order governed by shared social norms. This order exists outside the modern nation-state's projects, rendering it a distinct entity referred to as "margins". This traditional-type order, deemed "independent/excluded" from the national project, serves as an environment conducive to mobilisation and rallying, meeting the conditions envisioned by VE strategists. The region lacks essential human development, making it susceptible to what extremists' term "savagery". Or "tawahush". A convergence of factors created a conducive environment for VE groups to look for a foothold in the region. These include weakened border control following the political uprisings of 2010-2011, allowing for the unimpeded flow of weapons. The proximity to the war situation in Libya further heightens vulnerabilities. In addition to this, Ben Guerdene is characterised by a traditional social order marked by robust religious inclinations, but its established religious institutions have witnessed a decline in appeal due to past political periods' reductive containment policies. This created opportunities for the affiliation of certain individuals with the VE narratives, fostering an environment susceptible to mobilisation and rallying for extremist causes.

These various objective factors made Ben Guerdene an attractive target for the VE networks. It was not merely viewed as a favourable social environment but rather as a "region of savagery" deemed easy to control and transform into an Islamic emirate. In March 2016, armed groups from Tunisia and Libya, including some locals, attempted to realise this vision based on social and religious legitimacy.

However, the inhabitants of the city unexpectedly rose against what they perceived as treacherous invaders, shattering both forms of legitimacy. This marked a remarkable display of social resilience and resistance, countering the most extreme form of VE.

## FACTORS OF RESILIENCE OF BEN GUERDEN TO SAVAGERY

Contrary to the passive interpretations of resilience, Jore (2020, p. 13, cited in Torrekens and De Le Vingne, 2020, p. 30) suggests that resilience involves acknowledging the potential and agency of individuals and communities. CONNEKT's understanding of prevention aligns with the idea of building social resilience and focuses on stages preceding radicalisation. The project primarily targets primary prevention, addressing societal issues and individuals before they encounter VE groups or ideologies, and specific risk factors emerge. It may also address secondary prevention, which aims to impede the solidification of risk factors or the radicalisation process in its early stages. Looking at the social resilience of Ben Guerdene's communities in the face of VE groups and their attempts to establish an Imara in their region, it is possible to identify factors that enabled this resistance and resilience.

Based on these considerations, we can say that the apparent sudden shift from an environment conducive to VE to one actively repelling it was not truly abrupt. Several resilience factors enabled the population of Ben Guerdene to reject and prevent the establishment of ISIS in an organised political form. The social resilience that enabled the firm stand against dangerous forms of VE is rooted in the same factors that initially attracted the phenomenon of VE in the region. In fact, it is worth noting that in the community-based/traditional order in Ben Guerdene, those who rebel against it are perceived as rogues and traitors. Also, as highlighted by our interlocutors, religious commitment in popular forms rejects secessionist religious views, which made the local communities reject the attempts by the radical group to establish their rule. Moreover, in Ben Guerdene, the informal network of economic activities is seen as a means of earning a livelihood rather than a path to accumulating wealth, distinct from "macro-smuggling", which involves money laundering and human trafficking. This made the local communities refrain from allowing the VE groups to find a stronghold in their region.



From the perspective of this analysis, the events in Ben Guerdene are real signs of resilience and a demonstration of the potential for reconciling the "community-based" and the "national." This reconciliation is a crucial prerequisite for a national state that encompasses the entire social space, while also emphasising the principles of decentralisation and local government.

## CURRENT CASE STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: FURTHER FACTORS OF PREVENTION OF VE IN BEN GUERDENE

Within CONNEKT, combining prevention and intervention tools and adapting them to specific contexts is considered as crucial for effective prevention, reducing commitment and recidivism, and increasing resilience. Prevention is seen as a long-term social investment in building resilient communities. CONNEKT emphasises a community-level approach, which aligns with the need for context-specific and tailored prevention programmes that consider subcultural dynamics, codes, and symbols of collective identity within social environments. Strengthening the organic and existing social resilience of communities in Ben Guerdene can be pursued by addressing the factors of vulnerability and the risk factors of radicalisation. This can be done by strengthening the human security of communities

and individuals in Ben Guerdene. Indeed, a report from the Wana Institute (2019) underscores the potential of human security approaches in PVE by enhancing resilience to conflict. According to the report, human security can be understood as "a state of individual and communal peace achieved through an environment that meets the basic needs of individuals and through legislation that guarantees the rights and duties of all citizens. It is a state that promotes confidence in state institutions and fosters a sense of citizenship and belonging" (Bondokji and Mhadeen, 2019, p. 9, cited in Torrekens and De Le Vingne, 2020, p. 29).

To further investigate the factors of prevention in Ben Guerdene beyond this organic resilience dynamics stemming from within the community in that region, the JFRC team went back to Ben Guerdene in November-December 2023. The team conducted two focus groups with the participation of 15 people (eight males and seven females) from the age of 21 to the age of 30 as well as three interviews with experts and civil society activists. In the following section we will share the findings of these consultations and present the recommendations for prevention that were formulated.

To further continue the exploration of prevention factors in Ben Guerdene, the Jasmine Foundation adopts the classification of these factors within the methodological guidelines proposed in CONNEKT for researching and understanding prevention factors. Indeed, the theoretical framework proposed within the project in this regard categorises prevention factors based on their nature or function, thus suggesting a classification into protective, resilience, and resistance factors.



Protective factors are inherent to the community and naturally shield it from harm, such as demographic composition, geographical features, and economic conditions. While these factors can be bolstered or encouraged, they originate from within the community itself.

Resilience factors encompass the practices, habits, rituals, laws, policies, and other tools developed by the community or institutions to adapt to change and counter negative influences that threaten the community's well-being or cohesion.

Also, CONNEKT recognises that some factors driving radicalisation can also be turned into elements of prevention, either as protective or resilience factors. Although these factors have not been fully analysed, previous research has hinted at their potential. For instance, CONNEKT's findings suggest that, while religion has historically been viewed as a primary driver of radicalisation, religious education and literacy may actually serve as protective and resilience factors. Traditional religious figures and institutions respected by the community can promote resilience by establishing boundaries on the legitimacy of violence. Countries like Morocco and Jordan include religious leaders in their PVE strategies, indicating their potential impact. Interventions to enhance resilience in this area might involve providing PVE training for religious leaders, educating young people about religious principles, designing campaigns to reclaim religious narratives, and promoting interfaith dialogues.

Education is another factor that can foster resilience. Youth representatives at the Cross-Regional Youth Forum in Skopje emphasised education as crucial for building community resilience, particularly education that encourages critical thinking and facilitates interactions between diverse communities.

Exposure to different perspectives and openness are seen as key resilience factors. Potential interventions in the field of PVE might involve educating youth about their rights to empower them, promoting critical thinking and civic education in schools or alternative education settings, and training teachers or youth workers.

Identifying resistance factors is also important. These are defined as purposeful non-violent actions against the root causes, drivers, and manifestations of VE.

## FURTHER PREVENTION FACTORS

The research teams highlighted with the focus groups participants the previous research main findings and conclusions drawn within the CONNEKT project fieldwork in Tunisia, as well as the results of previous research conducted in 2018-2019 in Ben Guerdene. As the WP2 phase is focused on prevention, we invited them to reflect on how the local resilience against VE and radicalisation can further be sustained by broadening our understanding of prevention and considering the classification proposed within CONNEKT.

## PROTECTION FACTORS

When it comes to protection factors as defined within CONNEKT, it is worth noting that all the participants of the focus group agree that the geographical as well as the economic situation and social conditions, rather than protecting Ben Guerdene, continue to constitute high risk factors. The region continues to suffer from the absence of proper development policies and lacks proper service provision.



The focus group participants confirmed that the radicalisation risks highlighted in previous research in Ben Guerdene are still present as the social and economic situation did not change. The geographic situation of the region inescapably places it in a risk zone close to the Libyan conflicts and warring groups. As this location is an external factor out of local control, the participants chose to mostly be focused on the local and national social contexts and factors of prevention. The discussions show that there is a consensus amongst the participants and interviewees that sustainable protection and resistance of the region to the attraction of VE must necessarily go through a comprehensive approach that helps foster inclusive economic growth and social cohesion in the region.

It is worth noting that, although Ben Guerdene suffers from real risk factors, real resilience comes from the community dynamics and strength of the social ties, where the community and family are still deeply connected and where traditional values and meanings of solidarity are still operative. This confirms the previous findings that were highlighted earlier. Other noteworthy factors of resilience are the awareness, attitude and action of the communities that are connected to their agency against radicalisation and VE. The resistance of the community and its rejection of VE groups still has a deep effect on the community's inhabitants and especially youth. It now holds a deeply symbolic and seminal image of pride and agency contradicting the dire and difficult conditions of the region, elevating it symbolically and culturally to a heroic position that is becoming the counter-image of terror and radicalism that the VE groups worked to attach it to the region on the basis of its real multi-dimensional marginalisation and its multiple grievances against the central state.

This is a strong potential foundation for future PVE initiatives that could build on this sense of agency and of pride that is still very palpable within the communities.

This sense of agency is more and more translated into a vibrant associative life in all civic sectors in Ben Guerdene that it is possible to witness and that the participants emphasised during our discussions with them. Also due to the fact that the local population is familiar with being left out of public development plans and policies, this has developed a strong sense of entrepreneurship and private initiative. These three factors combined have great potential for further creating a common vision for the development of the region if the public, local and regional authorities take into account the role of these factors and actors. The Jasmine Foundation has already worked with local civil society actors as well as with municipalities and representatives of the private sector on supporting local and regional initiatives for the local development of Ben Guerdene. The participants at the focus group expressed their confidence that their region has all the human potential to strengthen its resistance and resilience to the threats of VE. Their recommendations were centred around the following main components of a comprehensive support strategy to their human potential that would strengthen human security in Ben Guerdene rather than securitising their legitimate demands for better and more equitable public policies and service provision in their region. This will provide the relevant resistance factors to radicalisation and VE.

# Resistance factors and suggested initiatives

## A- ADDRESSING THE PROLIFERATION OF THE INFORMAL

The participants and interviewees emphasised the importance of addressing the proliferation of the "informal", parallel and "underground" subcultures not through sanctions and punitive regulations but through recognising the potential for initiative that their region has. They insisted that this is not a problem which is limited to the economic sector, where individuals and groups engage in informal economic activities. The informal engulfs all the social and even the symbolic space and becomes an identifier for the region, the community and of their sense of belonging. As such, belonging to the margins transforms into deep rejection of the formal, of the organised social and political forms and of the nation-state itself as a recipient of their identity. This is not a problem that can be found only in Ben Guerdene, although its marginalisation is felt more acutely and in a very pronounced way; this is a problem that is concomitant with the development of the nation-state in Tunisia as its development meant the continuous production of multiple exclusions: the economic and political exclusion of whole regions, in the south, north west and centre of Tunisia, as well as the cultural exclusion of those regions from being represented in the national media, where that culture was mocked and degraded as the participants reported.

The focus groups participants and interviewees recommended that addressing the deep sense of marginalisation, as well as social, economic and political grievances, is of paramount importance to sustain the local resilience to radicalisation and VE. Their recommendations can be summarised as being cantered around the priorities outlined as follows:



## B- ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF BEN GUERDEN

**Ingrate the informal economy**

Implement measures to curb the parallel economy, integrating it into the official economy through reduced customs duties and the activation of free trade zones, considering the region's economic and social conditions.

**Support social and solidarity economy**

Encourage the establishment of startups focusing on the social and solidarity economy. Implement the existing law pertaining to social and solidarity economy organisations and assist local communities in conducting feasibility studies, providing legal aid, and offering expertise essential for project success.

**Promote local products and heritage**

Create a quality label specific to the region, promoting local products and particularly original handicrafts, and establish centres dedicated to preserving traditional work methods and popular memory.

**Build investment partnerships**

Form a coalition of associations aimed at attracting investments, promoting the region, and positioning it as an investment incubator.

**Strategic city development planning**
Develop a strategic plan for Ben Guerdane's long-term development and set an implementation plan that takes into consideration the region's unique characteristics and residents' needs, with a participatory approach involving experts.

## C- YOUTH ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

**Enhance financial access and regional development**
Encourage the creation of development banks and regional development funds and facilitate youth access to the loan system by simplifying administrative processes and revising interest rates.

**Empower youth through education and training**
Organise regular training courses on employment and investment mechanisms. Focus on raising awareness about the benefits of the 2016 Investment Law and necessary project procedures, with a special focus on women and higher education graduates.

## D- ENHANCE LOCAL PEACE AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

**Specialised mediation system**

Establish a mediation and conflict resolution system tailored to the cultural and social characteristics of the region. Form specialised committees composed of local community leaders, providing training and tools for effective mediation.

**Develop the religious space**
Enhance the religious space by granting imams greater freedom in contributing to intellectual, economic and social development. Provide imams with training on religious, legal, rule of law, democratic and human rights issues, and reinforce the role of imams as actors of social peace and mediators in dispute resolution.

**Support for local associations and cultural initiatives**
Provide support to local associations and youth activists by facilitating access to funding, project design and fundraising, and encourage and recognise cultural initiatives and debating activities amongst youth to strengthen critical skills. Local associations also have a great role to play in civic education and encouraging civic and political participation of youth.

**Enhance the sense of belonging**
Recognise youth initiatives and artistic projects and give them sufficient recognition to fight marginalisation and enhance the sense of belonging.

**Potential risks**
Potential risks are related to the political environment and the shrinking of civic and political space.

Working on the development of Ben Guerdene necessitates a comprehensive strategy and a shared vision between national, regional and local authorities with the local communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private sector. In the current context, communication channels between these stakeholders is no longer as easy, fluid and transparent as it used to be during the democratic transition years. A real foundation for a multi-holder collaboration was laid out during that phase. Local NGOs have to look for opportunities to continue their positive work and build their own resilience to the current pressures to be able to be beneficial to local communities.

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# Prevention Case Study: Hammam Lif

## Introduction

This report summarises the findings of a case study in Tunisia implemented within the framework of the second phase of WP5 in the project CONNEKT (CONtexts of extremism iN mEna and balKan socieTies). The research activities were conducted in Hammam Lif, one of the suburbs of the capital Tunis. This report consolidates the results of previous research within CONNEKT on the macro, meso and micro levels in Tunisia on the social context and drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (VE). This case study builds on the multi-level previous findings to interrogate the factors of prevention as they are manifested on the meso level within community dynamics since the project considers communities as a central actor in the social dynamics analysed. This report will first summarise the previous findings on the factors and contexts of radicalisation and will then address the potential prevention factors revealed through the analysis of fieldwork findings.

# Methodology

For the purpose of researching the factors of prevention in Hammam Lif, the Tunisia research team organised one focus group with the participation of seven young people from the age of 18 to 26, with the participation of four males and three females. The activity took place in Hammam Lif in collaboration with a local association working with youth with whom the team has already collaborated in the first phase of WP5. Fieldwork also included two interviews with a psychologist/educator who is involved in the youth reform centres and a civil society activist working closely with youth in Hammam Lif.

## CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

The local context throughout Tunisia has been marked during the implementation of the second phase of WP5, particularly in the months of November and December, by the preparations for local elections in a complicated economic, social and political context. These elections are taking place after the dissolution of the democratically-elected local councils and in a context of a shrinking civic space and a crackdown on associations and political parties to eliminate any public discourse other than the official one of the regime. Organising public events was tricky in these circumstances. For fieldwork implementation, we relied on our local networks in a region where we have already begun several projects in the previous years, and decided to limit the number of participants.



## SOME CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS: ON RESILIENCE AS A CONCEPT WITHIN CONNEKT

Assessing the resilience of communities poses significant challenges. For this reason, CONNEKT adopts a three-dimensional approach to gauge resilience, encompassing awareness (recognising radicalisation as a problem), attitude (willingness to take action), and action (plans to address the challenge) (CONNEKT, 2023). These dimensions are crucial when identifying factors contributing to community resilience.

In addition, CONNEKT's concept of community resilience emphasises the following:
**Emphasis on community resilience.** CONNEKT focuses on community resilience over individual resilience, acknowledging the historical oversight of the community's role. Resilience is viewed as a community attribute rather than an individual mindset (Torrekens and De le Vingne, 2020). This emphasis aligns with the need to involve local and civil society actors in preventing violent extremism (PVE) to ensure effectiveness, ownership, and sustainability of prevention efforts.

**Departure from passive connotations.** CONNEKT's view of resilience transcends passive connotations associated with acceptance of the status quo. It rejects notions of resignation or uncritical acceptance, advocating instead for societies capable of understanding and responding to complex events by utilising or developing systems and practices to manage and mitigate shocks (Torrekens and De le Vingne, 2020).

**Responsibility of state actors.** CONNEKT takes a critical stance on resilience that places undue pressure on communities, potentially absolving state actors of their responsibility to ensure broader

human security. While community resilience is crucial, it should not shift all responsibility from those spreading extremist ideologies or from governments accountable for addressing the issue. The focus should be on building community agency without stigmatisation (CONNEKT, 2023).

**Replicability of positive practices.** CONNEKT underscores the importance of identifying positive practices that can be replicated across countries and regions. This approach seeks to move beyond securitisation-focused research and institutional approaches, enabling a more comprehensive investigation at macro, meso, and micro levels. Country research teams should explore practices that offer learning opportunities for other actors, countries or institutions, fostering new knowledge and understanding in PVE (CONNEKT, 2023).

These conceptual and practical considerations led us to choose to examine the case study of Hammam Lif.

# Context specificities

Neighbourhoods near the capital are among the areas where the drivers of VE are important. Hammam Lif is a northern suburb of the capital that suffers from economic and social marginalisation. Its popular and poor neighbourhoods experience a high level of crime and delinquency among young people. Several sources (interviews, workshops) identified youth between the ages of 16 and 30 in Hammam Lif as particularly vulnerable to the threat of VE, especially unemployed youth or those living in poor neighbourhoods and coming from a vulnerable socioeconomic situation. As a result, it created a sense of hopelessness and frustration, making individuals more susceptible to extremist ideologies that promise change or empowerment. However, fieldwork findings have shown real resilience of local communities to the discourses of radicalisation. We would like to further explore these factors of resilience as well as other resistance and protection factors (CONNEKT, 2023).

## PREVIOUS FINDINGS ON THE DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION AND VE IN HAMMAM LIF

Based on macro- (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2021) and meso-level research (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2022; 2023), Hammam Lif's poor neighbourhoods near the capital show significant vulnerability to VE, particularly due to drivers related to socioeconomic grievances and dissatisfaction with the political system. Youth aged 12 to 30 are vulnerable to the threat of VE, especially unemployed youth or those living in poor neighbourhoods and coming from a vulnerable socioeconomic situation. Hammam Lif is one of the neighbourhoods where VE networks have erupted in Tunisia since before 2011.



The meso-level findings have more specifically highlighted that marginalisation by the state's political system and economic policies over decades has produced a sense of disappointment and frustration among young people in the region. In addition to this, the consultations with youth, practitioners and experts in the first phase of WP5 have shown that in popular urban and semiurban social contexts, neighbourhoods are marked by normalisation with violence, which occurs in the family and at school, where there is a tense relationship with education staff, especially in the poor neighbourhoods of the area.

The report also emphasised that a punitive justice system prevents the reform and rehabilitation of delinquents and reproduces their delinquency as it is part of the income of police officers who are involved in corruption where drugs networks and police networks are intertwined. Radicalisation is also reported to take place in prisons.

In the absence of adequate social integration of youth suffering from multidimensional exclusions (economic, social, cultural and political), many young people in the region develop alternative belonging to several local subculture groups (Ultras, RAP, gangs, etc.) as well as to closed online groups (discussion, gaming, etc.). But these groups do not only have negative connotations but are alternative spheres where they develop a sense of solidarity and strong social ties and where they exercise their hobbies and create strong virtual relationships around a common passion (sub-affiliation). Nonetheless, these closed groups, where the feeling of belonging to a sub-culture grows, contribute to the

abandonment by young people of the values of acceptance of others and tolerance of difference. As a result, young people become intolerant of other views and adopt monocultural thinking, which makes them more easily engage in hate speech online and increases the risks of engaging in violent behaviours towards those who do not share their views, as well as the risks of accepting extremist narratives. This can be illustrated by the violent verbal repertoires mobilised in these groups, often conveying rejection of all forms of authority, messages about the grievances of their neighbourhood and their constant battle with the "police'' in response to brutality and what they perceive as severe abuse. The consultation with youth reveals these spaces as having the potential for prevention also as they are spaces of expression and socialisation for marginalised young people and adolescents, provided that they are given the right guidance and supervision to create constructive meanings and foster positive belonging rather than disconnection with the national identity and the public sphere. Some potential preventive factors have thus been highlighted in the first phase of the meso-level research in Hammam Lif, and the objective of the second phase of the research is to shed more light on these factors.

## FINDINGS ON POTENTIAL PREVENTION FACTORS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Within CONNEKT, combining prevention and intervention tools and adapting them to specific contexts is considered crucial for effective prevention, reducing commitment and recidivism, and increasing resilience. Prevention is seen as a long-term social investment in building resilient communities. CONNEKT emphasises a community-level approach, which aligns with the need for context-specific and tailored prevention programmes that consider subcultural dynamics, codes, and symbols of collective identity within social environments (CONNEKT, 2023).



The theoretical framework proposed within the project also categorises prevention factors based on their nature or function, thus suggesting a classification into protective, resilience, and resistance factors.

Protective factors are inherent to the community and naturally shield it from harm, such as demographic composition, geographical features, and economic conditions. While these factors can be bolstered or encouraged, they originate from within the community itself.

Resilience factors encompass the practices, habits, rituals, laws, policies, and other tools developed by the community or institutions to adapt to change and counter negative influences that threaten the community's wellbeing or cohesion.

Resistance factors are also important. They are defined as purposeful non-violent actions against the root causes, drivers, and manifestations of VE.

The findings of the first phase of WP5 (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2022) have already explored some potential factors of resilience in Hammam Lif, and the survey findings have helped delve into some of them in a more detailed way and fieldwork within the current phase aimed at further discussing these findings and collecting the perceptions, reflections and recommendations of youth, practitioners and experts to reach a more comprehensive understanding and guidelines for prevention of VE and radicalisation in Hammam Lif.

Previous findings in Hammam Lif have shown a strong sense of belonging of youth to their neighbourhoods, as well as to several types of subcultures: football fan groups, RAP groups, online communities. Moreover, the city is characterised by local and historical social and cultural diversity that keeps a high sense of tolerance amongst the local communities. Also, local traditions of long-term moderate religiosity are against extremist ideas. How can these potential factors be mobilised for the protection of youth in Hammam Lif and other similar social contexts in Tunisia against the attraction of VE narratives and dynamics? The discussions with youth, practitioners and experts revolved around the CONNEKT project's delineation of protective, resilience, and resistance factors. Protective factors encompass elements that shield a community from vulnerability to VE. These factors can be advocated for, but they inherently originate within the community itself. Resilience factors refer to practices, laws, or policies that enable a community to adapt to changes and effectively respond to threats. Resistance factors involve non-violent actions aimed at addressing the root causes of VE and mitigating its push and pull factors (CONNEKT, 2023). We can summarise the most salient reflections and recommendations formulated by the participants to our consultations as follows.

## RESISTANCE FACTORS

**Improving the quality of public services: education, health, employment: inclusive and quality service provision**

The analysis of the drivers of radicalisation in Tunisia through the previous multi-level research works led us to consider at their centre the role of the state in providing inclusive governance and addressing social and economic issues. The lack of effective public policies exacerbates social and economic grievances, leading to a strong sense of injustice and relative deprivation among youth. The accumulated effect of economic, social and political grievances contributes to radicalisation by fostering feelings of alienation and exclusion. Dissatisfaction with public services, especially education and employment, further fuels these grievances.



Urban areas such as Hammam Lif are particularly susceptible to radicalisation due to various forms of exclusion, requiring tailored responses. Disparities in infrastructure, economic opportunities, and services in Hammam Lif proved to contribute to feelings of marginalisation and injustice among youth.
The complex interplay of political, economic and social factors in the MENA region creates fertile ground for radicalisation, highlighting the need for comprehensive strategies that address governance deficits, social inequalities, and youth grievances.

In Hammam Lif, following the discussion of the previous results regarding the drivers of radicalisation, we asked the participants of the focus group about the possible prevention factors and measures. The role of public policies was at the centre of these recommendations. According to them, efforts for protecting youth against the attraction of VE must be boosted by focusing on improving public policies and services in the following ways: firstly, enhancing the quality of public services such as education, healthcare and cultural access is crucial. Secondly, developing inclusive urban policies that take into account the changing dynamics of cities, the diverse populations they contain, and marginalised regions is essential. Lastly, concentrating on enhancing transportation, constructing recreational and cultural facilities, modernising markets, and promoting local products while involving the community in decision-making processes is important.

### Addressing territorial inequalities

Part of addressing the role of good and inclusive governance and service provision in a way that strengthens local communities and avoids youth being attracted to VE involves dealing with the grievances arising from territorial inequalities. A great deal of the frustration of youth and the inhabitants of Hammam Lif in general is related to their feelings of alienation and injustice, despite the fact that their coastal city enjoys great economic potential but still suffers from territorial inequalities as it has been left out of central government development plans. To promote territorial equality that contributes to sustainably protecting youth and communities against VE, our interviewees recommended ensuring transparency in resource allocation and conducting strategic communication campaigns to document government public services, which will help build trust and accountability.

Both our interviewees[124] insist that recognising the provision of public services as a national security priority and addressing territorial inequalities can help mitigate feelings of resentment among youth. According to the first interviewee,[125] this include the informal economic sector and providing incentives for better resource management, which will contribute to economic growth in marginalised regions. Additionally, encouraging investment in regions with high unemployment by offering tax benefits to projects that create jobs and add value to the region can spur economic development.

The focus group participants[126] emphasised the need for simplifying administrative procedures for projects and making them accessible to marginalised regions will help reduce barriers to development. They also proposed facilitating cooperation between local communities and municipalities, as well as promoting cultural and economic exchanges with other regions that can provide valuable experiences and funding for marginalised areas.



### Youth economic empowerment

Our findings on protection factors give high priority to the promotion of youth economic empowerment as a powerful obstacle to the spread and attraction of VE narratives in Tunisia's marginalised regions and communities. This objective requires several measures to be taken: firstly, reforming administrative structures to streamline bureaucratic processes that currently hinder youth entrepreneurship and innovation; secondly, facilitating access to low-interest loans specifically tailored for young entrepreneurs to encourage their ventures; thirdly, establishing legal frameworks and policies that actively promote self-employment, creativity and innovation among youth; fourthly, investing in vocational skill training for young people, providing them with information about emerging career paths, and fostering regional collaboration to create job opportunities in innovative sectors; and lastly, forging partnerships with the private sector to incentivise local hiring through financial support and skill enhancement programmes, thereby boosting youth employment.[127]

[124] Interviews with 2 KIIs (one practitioner working with delinquent youth and one civil society activist in Hammam Lif), October-November 2023.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Focus group, Hammam Lif, 9 November 2023.

[127] Focus group results analysis.

## THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: STRENGTHENING LOCAL RESILIENCE AND PROTECTION THROUGH EDUCATION

In terms of religion, as previously highlighted (Chirchi et al., 2022), Hammam Lif has a historical legacy of hosting Christian (Saint Mary's church) and Jewish communities. The ancient Hammam Lif community was recognised for its tolerance of religious diversity and the extensive coexistence among different faiths, which shielded it from the influence of religious extremism. However, like other cities in the country, Hammam Lif underwent a prolonged period during which religion was excluded from the public sphere, especially under the rule of Ben Ali. One of the results of this ban is that despite the strong local traditional religious practices in Hammam Lif, Salafist Jihadi narratives gained traction in several neighbourhoods prior to 2011, where Salafist Jihadi cells were active. However, the focus groups with youth aged 12 to 30 in previous phases of CONNEKT in Hammam Lif suggested that, these narratives do not appeal to the younger generation. Moreover, the state's counterterrorism efforts in the past decade appear to have curbed the influence of Salafists in local mosques, but their narratives have shifted to digital platforms and social media networks. Research findings have shown that digital recruitment now occurs in closed online groups where the radical discourse is more direct and candid.

Religion appears to be identified by youth as having a dual role both as a factor of radicalisation and a factor of prevention. It seems to be given along with economic and social grievances and regional inequalities as a key role as a combination of drivers of VE. This combination of drivers has been already highlighted at the macro and meso level (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2021; 2022; 2023). To address these drivers, the young focus group participants, like the survey respondents (Kahloun, 2023) have identified the role of religious education as the first factor of prevention along with the role of public policies for more inclusive development and public services provision



As highlighted in the micro-level research report, young people's religiosity appears through the survey to be closely tied to their education level. Notably, 40% of those with primary or secondary education develop a strong religious attachment. The under-25 demographic, most significantly influenced by this trend, exhibit considerable religious commitment, with over 37% actively participating in religious activities, such as mosque attendance and frequent prayer (Kahloun, 2023).

The participants of the focus group[128] discussed the role of religion in prevention and how this can be implemented. They talked about the importance of non-dogmatic approaches to education in relation to the topic of education. They mentioned the need for innovative programmes and approaches where young people can contribute to creating contents, show creativity, and discuss values, ethics and difficult issues in relation to violence, and dogma with other youth without dogmatic limitations. "We often think about religion and religiosity as being packaged in traditional forms and attire. Young people are no longer attracted by these forms. They are concocting our own style, mixing inspirational modern content with religious content from the Quran and history. They should have the right to take part in designing educational materials addressed to other youth."[129] The interviewee also adds that religion for youth is an affirmation of their identity in an age where they are pressed by questions of

[128] Ibid.

[129] KI 1

meaning and purpose and looking for role models.[130] Positive content, encouraging their critical analysis skills should be part of the skills needed to be able to "make their way through the jungle of meanings and contradicting narratives, to be able to develop their own narratives."[131]

The survey showed that family and school are considered by young people as the main social institutions in the prevention of radicalism, as they play a crucial role in consolidating religious culture among young people. This role can be supported by other religious institutions (mainly the mosque) as well as the virtual environment (internet, social networks, etc.), whose influence is estimated by the respondents at 13% (Kahloun, 2023).

### THE ROLE OF POSITIVE CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Religion appears for the participants of the focus group as deeply linked to identity and identity formation. It can become a vehicle for expressing frustrations with social, political and economic exclusion but it is possible to still orient towards positive participation in the public sphere and towards the community rather than let it transform into rage that turns into violence. They insisted that volunteering and positive civic initiatives are encouraged by their religion and that they should help protect young people at risk of dangerous behaviours and find their way towards a positive contribution in the community, which gives them recognition and helps them transition towards positive and successful adult life.[132] They mentioned several examples of local associations helping through charitable activities and engaging young people and how that helped several youths move from drug consumption and drinking addiction to positive engagement in their community and positive self-affirmation that helped them stay sober and go back to school or take on artistic activities or entrepreneurship.[133]



The participants further said that the opening of possibilities for civic participation enabled many of them to discover their potential and transform their paths and lives in a positive way. They think that, just like them, young people in marginalised neighbourhoods should be given opportunities to express their negative feelings such as anger and frustration into a positive energy for change and for action that would help them get out of the circles of dangerous behaviours like delinquency, crime, and violence.[134]

This sector, which engages a significant portion of young people in voluntary activities (as indicated by 59% of respondents in micro-level research [Kahloun, 2023]), presents a crucial opportunity for preventing radicalisation. Recognition of youth potential and creativity, especially those coming from popular neighbourhoods, represents an important way of engaging them in civic life according to the participants of the focus group. They insisted that these young people's "cry for attention is not only

[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Focus group.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid.

happening through violence but also through underground art and street art."[135] They suggested that recognising youth underground art forms, by supporting them, giving them opportunities for participation in local and regional culture and arts festivals, could be one of the ways of creating positive examples for other youth sharing the same conditions and giving them hope that they can one day be recognised.[136] Their frustrations, grievances and opposition to symbols of power are already being expressed through forms of underground RAP, dancing, graffiti, and poetry, and can still take other forms such as theatre if they find the necessary training as well as support in developing versions that find opportunities in local, regional and national seasonal festivals as well as in local and national media.

The participants insisted that it is important to also work on helping young people build their own projects and engage in activities that generate income for them, suggesting that proper support can be delivered through local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and CSOs (civil society organizations).

### THE ROLE OF REFORM INSTITUTIONS: REPLACING A PUNITIVE SYSTEM WITH AN EFFECTIVE REFORM MULTI-ACTOR AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY SOCIAL STRATEGY

The participants mentioned the necessity for addressing the lack of proper and effective reform institutions to address issues like drug consumption, drinking addiction, delinquency, and small crime. The Hammam Lif report has analysed the lack of proper reform institutions as well as a punitive justice system as a combination of social contexts exacerbating the effects of the social, economic and political grievances of young people. This combination of radicalisation and VE factors was again mentioned by the participants, but they also emphasised that it is possible to reverse the effects of this combination by properly addressing drug consumption and other addiction through the education system, raising awareness and, most importantly, providing the right healthcare services to young people. These services are right now absent. They also mentioned the relationship between drugs, and gangs' groups and the police, saying that protection can only be effective through a real strategy where the schools collaborate with the family, with local youth centres, and local authorities to shift the dominant approach from criminalisation of delinquents to collective responsibility of youth wellbeing and protection. Creating rehabilitation centres for multiple forms of addictions (drugs, alcohol, gambling, etc.) with the collaboration of the public and private sectors and with the contribution of several types of expertise: health, social work, psychologists, educators, imams, civil society, reform institutions, the police) can help protect young people who go through these processes from being an easy prey to radicalisation.



[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid.

# Resilience factors

The role of positive belonging and strong social ties: the family and the community as safety networks
Both the meso-level report and the micro-level survey note that young people in the urban contexts, in popular neighbourhoods not only in Hammam Lif but in Tunisia in general, are exposed to violence in several spheres of socialisation whether through agents of primary socialisation such as the family or secondary socialisation such as school. The survey specifies that "young people's involvement in violent conflict is a risk that is increasing in schools and universities, as well as in residential areas and public spaces."[137] The report further emphasises that this exposure to violence is "closely linked to the living environment of young people, who either live in families or with separated parents and that young people who live alone or with separated parents are the most exposed to violent conflict, both in public spaces (neighbourhoods, cafés, clubs, with the police, etc.) and in schools and universities."[138]

Discussing such urban insecurities, the focus group participants highlighted the role of the family in the protection of youth from the risks of violence and the culture of violence as a way of expressing disagreements and conflicts. The family is considered in research findings as being one of the most important stakeholders, yet the least attentive to radicalisation and VE as it is exercising less mentoring and framing than it should because of the absence of dialogue with children, teenagers and youth in general. Nonetheless, the participants still mostly considered the family to be the first antidote and barrier to VE through an education that fosters confidence, trust, self-respect, critical thinking, and leadership. These skills are important to be able to find their way in life towards success but also in facing hardships and solving conflicts.[139] Thus, in the absence of proper public policies addressing youth needs, the participants and interviewees seem to consider the family in Tunisia as the main guarantor of young people's social integration and their protection against violent radicalisation. This belief is strengthened by the fact that, in Tunisia, 80% of young people live with their parents since it is the easiest solution for the family.[140]



The participants in Hammam Lif insisted on the role of two important factors in deterring radicalisation and VE: the family and closely-knit community.[141] The survey findings also highlighted that young people's perception of safety varies according to their environment and the area they live in. In neighbourhoods with strong social ties, the perception of safety is positive. This perception decreases as you move further away from the neighbourhood, opening to wider and more uncertain territories, particularly in towns and urban areas of larger cities.[142]

[137] Kahloun, loc. cit.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Focus group.
[140] Kahloun, loc. cit.
[141] Focus group.
[142] Kahloun, loc. cit.

## YOUTH AND THE ROLE OF SUBCULTURE

The participants highlighted in the same vein the role of strong affiliation to subcultures like the football fan groups and the rap fan group in poor areas in Hammam Lif that can be a factor of prevention by strengthening self-expression and channelling frustration in a positive way through sports and art.

One of our interviewees proposes that it is important to mobilise the strong local social ties and most importantly the camaraderie between youth and strong connections with friends from the same neighbourhoods for the success of PVE initiatives, as well as the relationship of trust between young people towards each other.

Another interviewee also emphasised the need for encouraging social mixing between youth of the newer poor neighbourhoods and those of the older middle-class neighbourhoods to encourage common civic engagement projects and common advocacy for the needs of their city. This would help bridge the social class gap, lower social discrimination against the poorer neighbourhoods, and strengthen individual and community resilience to violence and extremism.

## PREVENTION ENABLING FACTORS (PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM TOOLS AND FOCUS AREAS)

### The role of cultural clubs. Arts and sports clubs



According to one of our interviewees working in a local youth reform centre, [143] the creation of spaces/platforms of dialogue where young people have the final say and can design their own initiatives is important for engaging them in PVE efforts. He insists that cultural and artistic clubs and "individual sports in particular" are the most important prevention enabling factors. They are however known to lack sustainability. These cultural, sporting and artistic activities and their institutions have to become more open, appealing and inclusive by involving youth in designing their missions. They also must create platforms enabling youth to access a wider social network helping them find new opportunities for education: connecting artists, entrepreneurs, educators, and helping them create revenue generating activities, develop their talents, and create their own projects. Another interviewee[144] insisted that there are opportunities for youth that are available through government agencies, but they need to be properly informed about them and be connected with them. She proposes that local youth clubs and cultural clubs be transformed into open platforms for cultural inclusion and local development initiatives.

### Civil society as an enabling stakeholder for informal education for better PVE

Our interviewees highlight the importance of the accumulated experience of civil society in engaging youth and present them with attractive educational contents and materials that are informal, where they learn through games, through interaction with peers and by doing. In the context of an ongoing crisis of the educational model in Tunisia and the high level of school dropouts, our interviewees emphasised the importance of prevention initiatives that are designed according to the same

[143] KI 1.

[144] KI 2.

pedagogies of learning by doing. They highlight the importance of social and board games as well as strategy games where young people learn to strategise and acquire critical thinking skills. Thus, interviewee 1 insists that: "What is needed are spaces that play an entertainment role with a personal development dimension (board games and strategy games)."[145] Engaging youth in public life through informal education programmes not only can provide them with valuable life and critical thinking skills but can also help transcend the trust gap that young people have towards official institutions.

**Digital socialisation: an opportunity rather than a risk**

Previous meso-level results showed a strong social digital use amongst youth in Hammam Lif (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2022). This fact can be useful in PVE initiatives as young people could be mentored and guided to create platforms for awareness and building of critical thinking as well as constructive meaning.

As the survey conducted within CONNEKT indicated, internet access is becoming increasingly easy in both urban and rural areas (Kahloun, 2023). According to the focus group participants, rather than constituting a risk for radicalisation, the internet and social media constitute an opportunity for youth in several ways.[146] The survey report highlights that at least 57% of young people spend more than three hours a day using the internet (Kahloun, 2023). In a context marked by the lack of leisure facilities and of attraction of the official traditional cultural institutions such as youth centres, cultural centres and clubs, the internet provides currently the most accessible alternative for young people. The internet has thus become a primary alternative for young people due to the decline of traditional cultural institutions and limited access to sports and leisure facilities. The digital environment (internet, social networks) is considered to play an important role in prevention as respondents estimate to have an influence on prevention at a percentage of 13% (Kahloun, 2023).



One of the ways the internet can contribute to PVE efforts is by providing opportunities for youth employment and encouraging initiatives, and learning new skills. The focus group participants in Hammam Lif mentioned "content creation" as one of the most attractive and popular types of professional occupation in the digital sphere.[147] For this reason, it has to be considered as an important enabling factor for the participation of youth in PVE efforts, as they are using digital platforms to go beyond the challenges and difficulties that they are facing in other faltering paths. Providing youth with opportunities to create digital content to be shared online can contribute to creating alternative narratives to fight hate speech and VE narratives.

[145] KI 1.

[146] Focus group.

[147] Ibid.

# Conclusion

The findings of the research on prevention factors in Hammam Lif can also be relevant for other marginalised youth and communities in Tunisia. These findings highlight that to counteract and prevent the consequences of multidimensional exclusion in Tunisia, a multifaceted approach is recommended. This approach involves creating cultural and civic spaces that foster dialogue and participation across various dimensions such as cultural, social, economic and civic (political). Implementing multilevel and multipurpose programmes over an extended period, with activities addressing different aspects of inclusion, is essential for long-term impact. Another important necessary element of sustainable PVE approaches in Tunisia is to recognise and integrate informal economic and subcultural activities into the mainstream economy and culture. This absorption of the informal sector into mainstream society can be a significant deterrent to VE. Achieving this requires efforts in economic and cultural empowerment, which could be facilitated through collaborations with local youth centres, cultural clubs, CSOs, and NGOs. However, it is noted that economic empowerment institutions, often burdened by bureaucracy, have not been successful in absorbing small economic activities into the mainstream.

In the context of prevention, civil society is seen as playing a crucial role due to its direct or indirect involvement in addressing VE. However, there is a noted lack of emphasis on developing individuals' resilience to radicalisation in schools, which do not adequately address the underlying drivers.



Our interviewees highlighted that, for effective inclusion of youth, educational, youth and cultural institutions must coordinate to maximise their capacity, production and achievement. Also, these institutions need a programmatic structure that accumulates and strengthens its capabilities and the achievement of its goals. These are unfortunately lacking. They also highlighted the lack of collaboration between civil society and these official institutions, emphasising that it is necessary for the bureaucratic official structures to adopt a different attitude from the current one to be able to efficiently collaborate with civil society as a partner, not a competitor.

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# MOROCCO

The Case of the Moroccan organisation for childhood and youth in Kenitra.
*Sara Azim, Amina Er-rifaiy, Khalid Mouna*

The case of the Amal association in El Hajeb.
*Sara Azim, Amina Er-rifaiy, Khalid Mouna*



# The Case of the Moroccan organisation for childhood and youth in Kenitra

## Introduction

To broaden our understanding of violent extremism (VE), it is essential to analyse the different levels: macro, meso and micro. These are the levels that the CONNEKT H2020 project aims to study in both the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Balkan regions.

As part of this research, a second phase of WP5 is dedicated to the study of VE at the community level. The aim of this phase of the investigation is to highlight prevention factors against VE, to understand how stakeholders work at community level to protect young people from violence and to shed light on how young people are changing the risk factors of VE towards factors of prevention and resilience.

# Research methodology

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS FROM THE FIRST PHASE OF MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

During the first phase of WP5, the research work focused on analysing the seven drivers of VE at the community level. As for the micro level, the survey respondents confirmed that there are multiple reasons why young people turn to violence, including political exclusion and religious upbringing.

Regarding the drivers of VE, individuals belonging to the groups participating in the study confirm that their integration into different social activities like volunteering enables them to express their socioeconomic and political situation. The meso-level study enabled us to take stock of young people's position in different territories, and their relationship to violence, whether through integration into violent groups or involvement in the anti-violence process.

## DESCRIPTION OF CASE STUDY SELECTION CRITERIA AND SAMPLING CRITERIA

In this phase, we have a new community that has not entered a path of violence, despite the presence of a set of factors that lead to VE. In addition, specific criteria allow us to compare the different characteristics of each selected community.

The first step before starting the fieldwork was to adapt the project's ethical guidelines and obtain the authorisation of the presidents of each of the participating organisations as well as recruiting the participants in the focus groups and in-depth interviews.



For this case study, we chose the group after prior contact with the organisation's national coordinator, who gave us details of the projects where the organisation was involved, and specifically the one linked to the issue of VE, notably as part of an international programme on preventing violent extremism (PVE) through art. The project coordinators agreed to our request to carry out a focus group with the young beneficiaries of the programme given that they have some understanding of it on the one hand, and that they come from neighbourhoods with different characteristics, on the other.

The focus group participants were young people aged between 18 and 26. They were secondary school pupils and students at the OFPPT vocational training centre. We took the gender approach into account, with five girls among the nine participants.

These young participants come from working-class neighbourhoods in the city of Kenitra. Selection is based on age, gender and membership of social programmes established by the case study the "Moroccan organisation for children and youth".

# Challenges and adaptations

We encountered some challenges in organising the field activities, mainly in bringing together young people who met the selection criteria. In this case, we chose the weekend to attend an environment-related activity with them. This is an activity organised by the association around environmental issues in the Rabat-Kenitra region, where young people of different kinds are present.

To facilitate communication, we translated the interview grid into Arabic to express ourselves clearly with young people and avoid any kind of ambiguity, which gave the participants more room for expression. During the discussion, we also gave examples to help them understand some of the questions, which are sometimes in a language different from that used by young people.

## MESO-ECONOMIC DYNAMICS OF PREVENTION

### Context-specific features

The Rabat-Salé-Kenitra region, where our case study is located, is characterised by a wealth of forest and mining resources, giving economic and social strength to all the towns in the region.



The city of Kenitra has enjoyed a dynamic economy over the last 10 years thanks to the establishment of multinational companies, particularly in the automotive, chemical, para-chemical, and agri-food industries. The arrival of PSA in Kenitra has significantly boosted the region's automotive sector[148]. This provides an opportunity to change the socioeconomic situation for young people in the region and contributes to the fight against unemployment.

## DESCRIPTION, TYPE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION CONTEXT, TARGET POPULATION

Mapping of actors and stakeholders, relevant data, and available research. Existing P/CVE measures.
The actors chosen to conduct in-depth interviews are both civil society actors and members of the organisation who took part in our research activities. The choice of these actors is justified by their experience in the associative field and especially in the socioeconomic integration of young people from disadvantaged areas.

The organisation's regional coordinator has been involved in community work for many years. He works specifically with young people in the city of Kenitra, organising training courses and artistic activities. He coordinated with a donor to set up a national programme PVE.

The second interviewee is an art coach within the organisation, a university graduate in the psychology department. He has worked on a permanent basis as a supervisor in the organisation's internal programmes, following up the implementation of the VE prevention programme with young people.

[148] See the presentation of the Rabat-Salé-Kénitra region on: https://siredd.environnement.gov.ma/Rabat-Sale-Kenitra/Home/Region

The third interview was conducted with a national representative of the organisation, a 29-year-old who has piloted development-related programmes and led a number of social programmes financed by the INDH. She runs a local centre for social and artistic activities within the foundation, as well as coordinating with the foundation's various branches in Morocco to set up international activities and programmes.

# Local dynamics preventing VE

## PROTECTION FACTORS

Analysis of protective factors against violent radicalisation is based on the case study of the Moroccan organisation for childhood and youth, located in the Rabat-Salé-Kenitra region. A region with strong agricultural potential, significant water resources and various agro-industrial infrastructures, it is considered today in Morocco as an economic hub, attracting private and public investment in both the agricultural and industrial sectors.

This is a region that enjoys a wealth of investment projects and economic activities in the agricultural, industrial and commercial fields. This economic factor is considered a privilege, which reduces the risk of violent radicalisation for young people belonging to this community. In other words, despite the precarious conditions of poverty experienced by these young people in their social environment, their geographical location is Kenitra. Being from the middle class or poor, and therefore belonging to working-class, marginalised or poor neighbourhoods, does not mean that the region lacks economic potential, but that they can enter the professional world once they complete their education as their geographical position within the Rabat-Kenitra region favours this integration. According to statistics from the Kingdom's Haut-Commissariat au Plan (High Commission for Planning, n.d), 7 out of every 10 employed people in the city of Kenitra are salaried workers, and 69.6% of the population is professionally active, compared with only 23.6% who are inactive in the various fields of trade, public services and industry (ibid).



On the other hand, it is a community that belongs to the centre of the country; in other words, young people benefit from different possibilities and ease of mobility and from public services and spaces where they can enjoy different economic alternatives, proximity to public services, and openness to other possibilities and opportunities for insertion into cultural and social life.

During our fieldwork, we also observed that in no situation did young people express dissatisfaction with the region's economic position, economic deprivation, lack of investment in the region, or territorial marginality linked to the centralisation of resources and powers. This situation has helped young people to raise their standard of living, to become autonomous and aware of their social rights, and to protect themselves from the risks of violence and radicalisation.

## RESILIENCE FACTORS

Regarding the analysis of resilience factors within the community studied, some of the young people belonging to the "Moroccan organisation for childhood and youth", consider that one of the mechanisms mobilised by the association to encourage the involvement of young people in the social life of the community is the ongoing organisation of training courses for young people in theatre and music, cultural activities, and meetings between young people. This is aimed at developing young people's communication skills through training in techniques for speaking on stage in front of the camera or an audience. During the interviews, the young people presented us with an example of an

activity run by the organisation in the form of a play without text; the principle is to invent a text dealing with a subject linked to the experience of a category of Moroccan youth living in working-class neighbourhoods and from poor families. The originality of the idea lies in the fact that it encourages young people to reflect and innovate by transforming their social realities into text, but also to master the mechanisms of passing on and expressing a lived reality.

These strategies are promoted and developed by the association to make it a space for the acquisition of skills and techniques, but also to fill the void experienced by young people, particularly as many young people in focus groups and in-depth interviews have said that it is the only space where they can apply their talents and enrich their souls and spirits. They feel that Moroccan schools, especially public ones, do not take the inclusion of cultural and leisure activities seriously in their curricula, and if they have organised anything in this direction, it will be a privilege for bright students only. "At public schools, activities are privileges for the brightest in the class; the first in each class. And sometimes they ask students for money so that they can benefit from the activities. But if we're weak in class, we're automatically excluded from the activities... it's a form of exclusion from leisure activities, voluntary work and training. For example, when a school organises an activity, the teacher selects the students he feels deserve to take part in it; he has a list of those he wants to take part, and these are the ones who can, and will, be treated with good manners." This situation is seen by young people as unfair, since it condemns their skills and talents to silence, forcing certain categories of youth to watch passively, even though they have the necessary abilities to benefit from and participate in these activities. This exclusion alters young people's relationship with their surroundings, such as state institutions and the social structures, while destroying the spirit of initiative in them, because of the fear of reliving situations of exclusion once again. So, for them it is not a question of non-participation in activities and initiatives that protect them from the risks of violence but of inequality that handicaps this participation.



Indeed, the association has worked on this aspect, moving young people from a situation of exclusion to one of inclusion, while starting from their shortcomings. It is not just organising activities and training courses, but also adopting a set of strategies to familiarise themselves with the young people and create relationships of closeness and trust with them and their parents. The association takes charge of organising free out-of-town trips for all young people belonging to the association, from maths to soccer, communicating with the young people's parents and speaking their language. Some of the young people interviewed mentioned that the association's leaders come from the same working-class neighbourhoods where they live and represent role models for them. This proximity is important in building resilience to violent radicalisation as it opens possibilities for the development of young people as well as for better future prospects. "What's important in the support process is that even these responsible actors in the association started at zero before arriving at this point, so it gives us hope for opening to the future"[149]. It is a strategy of providing positive role models who share similar socioeconomic and cultural conditions; "young people need models to follow, which pushes them to seek these models elsewhere, namely in the figures of Daesh and Jihadists because they do not find

[149] Focus group of the Moroccan organisation for childhood and youth.

in their entourage convincing examples to follow and imitate"[150]. In this context, one of the association's other leaders believes that what drives them to promote this point is that "young people don't have examples in life, and some of them find that in extremist ideology. And a very simple example is that when Morocco reached the semi-finals of the World Cup everyone had this feeling of pride and belonging concretely"[151].

In our case study, some of those interviewed mentioned the importance of the roles and responsibilities assigned to young people by the association. One of the most striking strategies adopted by the association is to give young people the floor to speak, interact and express their opinions, but also to give them the freedom to decide. As well as boosting their self-confidence, communication and dialogue skills, and their spirit of initiative, it also enables the association's staff to identify their ways of thinking, ideas and opinions. So, they can redirect them if they see a shift towards extreme or violent ideas.

On the other hand, it is a resilience factor linked to valuing young people and their experiences, and encouraging their initiatives. It is all about identifying their strengths, involving them in activities aimed at developing their preventive skills. This has a long-term impact, enabling young people to reconfigure and reposition themselves by opening up to the future via support adapted to their conditions and language, far from any labelling, exclusion or devaluation.

## RESISTANCE FACTORS



The resistance factor represents a form of action against violence. For our case study, the actors of the organisation are more active in the artistic and social activities. Their main objective is to produce a counter-discourse that reinforces the values of sociability and acceptance of the other, whether their cultural or religious affiliation. This type of engagement is not always direct, but it is also present in the digital space.

The civil society actors taking part in this study consider that, despite the problems of marginality, exclusion and inequality regarding integration into the leisure and voluntary activities organised within public institutions, they have turned to the involvement of young people in civil society activities as a form of resistance to these forms of exclusion. This involvement enables them to fill the void left by the lack of initiatives for inclusion, integration and skills development among young people, or even the presence of such initiatives that are not compatible with their needs.

The development of young people's capacities, by encouraging their participation in organised activities and training courses, has been a major challenge for the association's players. It is the strengthening of this aspect that is considered to be one of the factors of resistance. This means inventing tools and techniques to encourage young people to take part in the association's cultural activities, which take the form of art workshops, music and plays. These activities must take account of young people's norms and value systems, as the latter should not feel remote or excluded from these activities.

[150] In-depth interview.

[151] Ibid.

Indeed, mastering the language of communication with young people, and the strategies for adapting to their age categories, gender, abilities and levels of education, remains very important in the process of resisting the risks of radical violence or any form of violence produced within society.

## EXISTING OR POTENTIAL VULNERABILITY INDICATORS (WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE EU)

We noticed that, before talking about their involvement in the association, young people highlight their previous experiences with other associations. They describe these experiences as being marked by exclusion and marginalisation, which have an impact on their representations and ways of seeing civil society and its institutions. These experiences are mainly linked either to a history of conflict between a member of the association and one of the young people's parents, or to the stigmatisation of young people based on their belonging to disadvantaged neighbourhoods: "Because we belong to working-class neighbourhoods, we have suffered forms of exclusion and stigmatisation"[152]. This is linked to the fears of civil society players about the image of the association and its reputation in the city. In other words, taking on a young delinquent or former delinquent from a working-class neighbourhood could have a negative impact on the image of an association or organisation. This can even lead some parents to take their children away from the association, so that they do not find themselves in the same space with these young people or doing the same activities together. Some research participants confirm that there are even associations that are located in working-class neighbourhoods, but which seek to integrate only profiles that belong to the upper classes. This is one of the associations' strategies for attracting media attention, as it is a privilege for them to work with this category.



This is a way of promoting their activities; the practices adopted by associations condemn young people from poor classes and disadvantaged neighbourhoods to exclusion and marginalisation.

[152] Focus group of the Moroccan organisation for childhood and youth.

# Filling the gaps

## MISSING OR NEGLECTED PROTECTION, RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE FACTORS

With regards to neglected factors, we noticed from our fieldwork that the young people we studied felt that what was lacking and needed to be taken into consideration within the association was to integrate digital content into the training process organised for young people because there is a lack of training and awareness of how to interact with digital content and social networks. Particularly since most young people have increased access to the Internet, some of those interviewed mentioned that they often observe a generalisation of violence, criticism, sometimes insults or threats... In this context, they consider that they do not benefit from support to overcome these forms of violence in the virtual space. Hence there is no protection for them from reproducing them in their daily life.

Young people today are part of other networks related to the virtual world and digital tools, other types of limits and boundaries, which produce other ways of reacting and acting. It is a dynamic of transformation, of opening up to other points of reference, all via a form of displacement of parental or institutional figures towards other figures in a "transitional dynamic" (Colin et al., 2020) and a transition and transformation of figures and sources of education and socialisation, which are based mainly on parental figures and institutions of the family or school to other virtual and digital sources, which also contribute to this process of socialisation. However, this is a process that can lead to violent change due to lack of control and awareness and knowledge of good manners and practices to deal with the risks of internalising violent content and the reproduction of such content by young people. Indeed, such radical changes are not previously linked to social anchoring but to the lack of knowledge, awareness and support on the part of civil society in this context.



## MANAGING RISK FACTORS: MOBILISING OTHER STAKEHOLDERS, NEW TARGETS...

Regarding this point, we can consider that, based on the field results, this management is linked to the way in which the actors mobilise their attachment to the activities of public institutions and involvement in the activities of civil society. This is linked to what we mentioned in previous sections, the exclusion of activities organised within public institutions, which for the actors surveyed are dedicated solely to the bright students in each class. Insofar as these activities become a privilege that is not given to everyone, it is this "absence and inequality in the face of the leisure and voluntary activities organised by the public institution"[153] that is at the heart of the problem, driving young people to detach themselves from public institutions and join associations and civil society. For them, civil society is "the last hope"[154]; in addition to its strategy of including young people and strengthening their capacities and skills in various fields, only players are close to them, who share the same language, the same concerns and sometimes the same living conditions.

Exclusion is not only linked to inequalities or lack of leisure activities in state institutions but also to

[153] In-depth interview.

[154] Ibid.

political non-participation, namely in political decisions due to lack of trust in political parties and their representatives, as they consider that nobody cares about them and their needs.

Based on the analysis we presented in the previous sections, the young participants expressed the view that the absence of equality within the school refers to the possibility that the latter may produce relations of conflict between peers. However, local associative actors played the role of intervening so that these young people from marginalised neighbourhoods could be integrated into social actions as an alternative.

## GENDER: ROLES, SOCIAL STRUCTURES, FACTORS, NARRATIVES, INEQUALITIES

During our fieldwork, the young people we interviewed considered that inequalities begin with the social environment in which they live and belong to, where they have become familiar with various forms of inequality and discrimination produced and reproduced by this same environment. For them, these forms are linked to inequalities in the distribution of household tasks, with girls serving men. The latter, they say, enjoy the freedom to come and go as they please. In this sense, they say," our society indirectly exerts forms of exclusion before moving on to other spheres"[155].

The girls in this case study feel excluded, even in public spaces. Football pitches are for boys only, and they use them all day long, without sharing them with the girls. Young girls are not taken into consideration in the management of public spaces in the city, and do not have the same right as men to benefit from these spaces. This is encouraged even by the society to which they belong, as some young people consider that "even the family culture favours this inequality; they don't accept a girl playing soccer, it's aiib."[156]



## CAPACITY-BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES AND AREAS OF INTERVENTION

In this area, we have noted that, in order to boost the association's capacity in its areas of intervention, it needs to integrate digital technology into the training process. This means programming activities within the association, taking into consideration the link between each activity and its potential uses and relationships on social networks. In fact, the young people of this community mention that violence is not only linked to radicalisation, not to radical ideology alone, but is constructed today in other spheres through other ways and other tools, namely, digital and technological tools. So integrating this aspect will be very useful in strengthening the association's capacities and areas of intervention.

Another idea is linked to strategies for diversifying the young people who contribute to the association's activities. For example, organising soccer matches with a team made up of young men and girls from working-class neighbourhoods and those from middle-class neighbourhoods. Teams and activities that do not segment young people on the basis of gender, colour or social class... Even though the group or association may be located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the young people must be diversified and include all categories.

[155] Ibid.

[156] Focus group of the Moroccan organisation for childhood and youth.

Better training is needed linked to the issue of raising awareness about the dangers of violent ideas because sometimes it is not a question of violent attitudes but of lack of awareness or knowledge. Thus, reinforcing this aspect is very important in order to provide more possibilities for preventing young people from embracing violence linked to radicalisation and extremism.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that some actors favour the integration of political parties to strengthen their capacities, but also to reinforce the confidence of young people in their mobilisations in their favour. Even though political parties may be far removed from citizens and young people, their strength remains very important in bringing their projects to life because change and the improvement of conditions could be achieved more rapidly through cooperation with political parties. "...But now it's the associations that are taking on this role with their modest means; because they understand young people better, they live with them, they master their languages and know how to communicate with them. The political parties don't master the language of communication with the people; they don't even speak the same language and automatically it's not going to meet their needs sufficiently if they don't cooperate with the actors of civil society"[157].

**Establish indicators for a future evaluation tool (what would be appropriate to choose as an indicator to measure the impact and effectiveness of the programmes/strategies/activities undertaken)**

When it comes to tools for evaluating and measuring the effectiveness of the programmes, strategies and activities undertaken, community players mention two important strategies for them, namely simplification and proximity. The simplification strategy involves simplifying the messages sent out by the association to young people, whether these messages relate to violence or other issues. Simplification is not only linked to the language of the message, but also to the ways in which it is conveyed and communicated. If a message is conveyed in a fluid, playfully humorous way, it can be more effective than a message conveyed in official language, or in a strict manner. As for the proximity strategy, the majority of the association's players and young people insist on the importance of the proximity of civil society players in the process of evaluating the effectiveness of the association's programmes. This proximity is linked first and foremost to the fact that the players belong to the same living conditions as the young people, to the same values and standards that they hold, so that the prevention tools are real and emerge from the reality of the young people, their needs and expectations. "We also talk to their parents, reassuring them that their children are training with the right people, with the right manners. We choose the time that suits them and their school schedules to organise activities"[158].



[157] Ibid.

[158] In-depth interview.

# General conclusion

To conclude the analysis of the interviews of this phase, we can say that the prevention, resilience and protection of VE is not produced only in the community but also in the interaction between young people and the creators of PVE programmes. Young people, from this perspective, try to produce and integrate other communities to strengthen their sense of belonging to a fair society and minimise the feeling of marginalisation and exclusion.

To cope with the failure of public policies in the socioeconomic integration of young people, they create their own preventive environment by taking part in social and artistic activities.

We also observed that attempts to promote the role of young people require strong synergy between state actors and NGOs that address the issue of radicalism to facilitate access to programmes. The European Commission is also working to strengthen the confidence of young people in public institutions.

# Recommendations

- Political actors must collaborate with civil society actors in order to facilitate the implementation of activities aimed at the socioeconomic integration of young people.
- Leisure has to be integrated as a key element in the youth education system.
- Youth programming needs to take a gender-sensitive approach into account.

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# Annex:
# Questionnaire in Arabic adapted to the Moroccan context

استبيان السياق المغربي:

أسئلة موجهة للأفراد

1. .1 في رأيك، ما أهم اهتماماتكم في ميدان اشتغالكم من ناحية إدماج الشباب؟
2. كيف يمكن أخذ هذا الاهتمام (الذي سبق ذكره) بعين الاعتبار من قبل أصحاب المصلحة المحليين بما في ذلك ممثلي الأحزاب السياسية؟
3. هل تروا أن اشتغالكم مع الشباب مكمل لمقاربة الدولة في مكافحة التطرف العنيف خلال السنوات العشر الماضية؟
4. كيف تصف التعاون بين المؤسسات المحلية ومؤسسات الدولة في جهود الوقاية من التطرف العنيف؟
5. كيف تنظر إلى الوضع الحالي للشباب من ناحية الثقافة والمشاركة الاجتماعية في المجتمع المحلي؟
6. ما الذي يمنع الترويج للثقافة والتعليم المناهضين للعنف في الشبكات الاجتماعية بمجتمعكم ومحيطكم؟
7. ما هي الطرق التي تعتقدون أنها ناجعة من أجل تشجيع وتقوية أساليب الوقاية أو (la resilience) من التطرف؟
8. إذا كان الشخص المستجوب يعتبر عامل (la resilience) غير مهم، له آثار سلبية ولا ينبغي تشجيعه؛ طرح السؤال؛ كيف يمكن تأطير استراتيجية مقاومة التطرف لإحداث تغيير إيجابي بالمجتمع؟

9. وعلى أي المستويات ينبغي تطبيق التغيير؟ هل يمكن ان توضح؟
10. هل هناك نهج آخر تعتقد أنه سيكون أكثر ملاءمة للسياق المحلي؟
11. كيف يتفاعل الشباب مع عوامل الرقمنة والترفيه والفرص الثقافية؟
12. كيف غيرت الأدوات الرقمية التعليم الثقافي للشباب؟
13. كيف يمكن للجهات الفاعلة في مجال منع التطرف العنيف الاستفادة من تأثير الرقمنة في التعليم الثقافي؟
14. من هي الجهة المحلية الأكثر قدرة على زيادة هذا التأثير الإيجابي في المنطقة؟
15. كيف ترون تأثير الرقمنة على التعليم الثقافي على الجهات السياسية والدينية المحلية؟
16. على الرغم من التحديات والضغوط والقيود الحالية التي يواجهها،(الفاعل المؤسساتي الرئيسي) بشكل عام، كيف يمكن للتعليم الرقمي أن يساهم في الحد من العنف ومنع التطرف؟
17. كيف تنظرون إلى دور الجهات الفاعلة السياسية والاجتماعية والدينية في هذا المجال من منع التطرف العنيف؟
18. هل تعتقد أنه من الممكن تغيير الفاعلين أو الجهات التي تؤثر في عوامل منع التطرف العنيف؟ (على سبيل

المثال المؤسسات المحلية أكثر كفاءة من المؤسسات المركزية، أو منظمات المجتمع المدني الأقرب إلى المجتمع من المؤسسات، وما إلى ذلك)؟

19. على المجتمعات المحلية كيف يمكن تحسين مهاراتهم وتأثيرها؟
20. وكيف يمكن تحسين مهاراتهم وتأثيرهم على الشباب بشكل خاص؟
21. ما هو العامل الذي من شأنه تحسين العلاقة أو التصور لدى الشباب تجاه هؤلاء الممثلين؟
22. في السياق الوطني، هل يعبر الشباب عن نقص وغياب الفضاءات الترفيهية؟ في رأيك، ما الذي يمنع هؤلاء الشباب من تحسين هواياتهم على شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي واستخدام الإنترنت للتعبير عن أنفسهم على نطاق واسع؟
23. ما هو تأثير الثقافة الإقليمية، المحلية على ثقافة الرقمنة؟ وما هي الأشكال الإيجابية والسلبية لهذا التأثير في نظركم؟
24. كيف يمكن للبيئة المحلية أن تشجع على مشاركة الشباب وانخراطهم في الحياة الاجتماعية والثقافية؟ ما الذي يمنعهم من ذلك ؟
25. ما هي المساحات أو الأنشطة أو الخدمات المتاحة التي يمكن أن تعزز الإبداع والابتكار لتشجيع المشاركة الاجتماعية للشباب؟
26. في مجتمعك المحلي ما هي المساحات أو الأنشطة أو الخدمات المطلوبة والغير متوفرة؟
27. هل تعتقد أن هناك فضاءات وجهات فاعلة تساهم بالفعل في ممارسات أكثر أمانًا أو خدمات أفضل للوقاية من التطرف العنيف؟ كيف يقومون بذلك؟
28. من هم الجهات الفاعلة الأكثر موثوقية وفعالية للمساهمة والحد من التطرف العنيف في مجتمعك المحلي؟
29. هل هؤلاء هم الفاعلون الأكثر قدرة على التأثير و التغيير؟
30. من هو الفاعل الذي يتمتع بالثقة المحلية والقادر على إحداث التغيير؟
31. هل تعتقد أن هناك تعاوناً بين هذه الجهات؟
32. كيف يمكن تحسين التعاون بين الجهات الفاعلة؟



## أسئلة موجهة للمجموعات

1. هل تشاركون باستمرار في أنشطة الجهات الاجتماعية الفاعلة ؟
2. كيف كان انخراطكم ؟ هل تشارك بشكل متكرر أو في وقت فراغك؟
3. بشكل عام، ما هو المحتوى الذي يجذبك أكثر؟ لماذا تختاره على وجه التحديد؟
4. للتفكير في العوائق التي تعترض المشاركة الاجتماعية للشباب (الرجال والنساء). وبماذا يمكنكم أخذ لحظة تنصح للتغلب على هذه العقبات؟

5. ؟هل هناك اختلافات في كيفية تأثير هذه العوامل على النساء مقابل الرجال
6. ؟كيف يمكن تفسير ذلك
7. ؟كيف يتعامل الشباب مع التعليم الرقمي
8. في رأيك، كيف ينخرط الفاعلون في المجتمع المحلي في تعزيز دور الشباب في المجال الاجتماعي والثقافي المحلي فيما يتعلق بالمؤسسات الوطنية؟ من هو الممثل الأكثر نجاحا ولماذا؟
9. ما هي الأدوات أو الوسائط أو الأشكال التي يمكن أن تعزز دور الترفيه والفن في تعزيز التفاهم والتسامح في بلدك؟
10. من في مجتمعك المحلي الذي ينبغي عليه تعزيز التعليم الفني والثقافي والعمل عليه؟ هل وزارة الثقافة، أو الأحزاب السياسية؟
11. ؟ما هي القيمة المضافة التي ستضيفها هذه الجهات الفاعلة المجتمعية
12. خطاب الكراهية في الفضائين العام والرقمي، علينا تعزيز دور الشباب في انبثاق ثقافة السلام وجعل مكافحة التكنولوجيا في خدمة التواصل والانفتاح. / خذو الوقت الكافي للتفكير في قصص نجاح لها علاقة بالأمر
13. ؟أمثلة لأشخاص تعرفونهم أو سمعتم عنهم نجحوا في الترويج للأنشطة الثقافية بين الشباب في منطقتك
14. حققوا هذا الهدف؟ وما هي قدراتهم على جعل مبادراتهم لماذا تعتقدوا أنهم كانوا ناجحين؟ كيف تعتقدوا أنهم مفهومة على المستوى المحلي؟ وقد لاحظنا في الآونة الأخيرة أن العديد من الشباب بدأوا في نشر محتوى على موقع يوتيوب حول تاريخ الموسيقى والثقافة المحلية للتعبير عن قيمة الثقافة المغربية في قبول وقبول هذا الأمر ناجع الاختلاف الثقافي والديني. – هل تعتبرون؟
15. و أقاربكم المهارات والمعرفة اللازمة لاستخدام أدوات التواصل أنتم و أصدقائكم في رأيك، هل تملكون الاجتماعي للحد من تأثير الخطاب المتطرف و كذا نشاط الجماعات المتطرفة على الإنترنت؟
16. كيف يمكن للحكامة المحلية والمؤسسات التعليمية والمنظمات غير الحكومية والقطاع الخاص وأصحاب المصلحة الآخرين دعم استخدام الرقمنة وتعليم الفنون كوسيلة لمكافحة الخطاب المتطرف العنيف في المجالات العامة أو على الشبكات الاجتماعية؟

# The case of the Amal association El Hajeb

## Introduction

The work on VE is not limited to analysing the factors that drive young people to join radical groups but also focuses on the possibilities for protecting young people from this phenomenon. This research phase is a continuation of WP5. This time, we conducted focus groups and individual interviews to outline protection and prevention measures against VE.

The aim is not just to work on the question of how young people define or understand the phenomenon of VE, but to be able to explain how communities can contribute to C/PVE initiatives.

# Research methodology

In this phase, we maintained the same qualitative methodology used in the first phase. We carried out one focus group with young members of the Amal association, and three interviews with actors from the same Fès-Meknès region who are active in the field of education and the fight against violence.

Before organising the fieldwork activities, we coordinated with the association's president, who facilitated contact with the young people and brought them together at the association's premises. As already mentioned in the first report, the UMI team adapted the project's ethical guidelines to the local context and obtained the consent of the participants.

## DESCRIPTION OF CASE STUDY SELECTION CRITERIA AND SAMPLE SELECTION CRITERIA

The young participants in the focus group came from various districts of the town of El Hajeb. We have kept the same age and gender criteria, except that the members are different from those who participated in the first phase of WP5. There are six participants in the focus group, aged between 20 and 30, and including 4 girls.

The participants are high school students, as well as some students at vocational training centres in baking and tailoring.

# Challenges and adaptations

Although the target group of our case study is the same as in the first phase of WP5, we encountered difficulties in getting appointments with young people and actors because of their professional occupations, and the commitment of several civil society actors to the Grand Atlas regions to help the victims of the earthquake that Morocco experienced last September. In addition to this, we note the refusal of political actors to agree to interviews as we had planned at the very beginning.

We first organised the focus group in coordination with the members of the Amal association at their premises in El Hajeb. We also tried to invite other religious and political players to take part in the interviews, but they refused the invitation. This is why we decided to engage people who have direct contact with the association and who are involved in social projects targeting young people.

## DESCRIPTION, TYPE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION CONTEXT, TARGET POPULATION

Mapping of actors and stakeholders, relevant data and available research. Existing P/CVE measures.

We conducted three individual interviews with women involved in civil society, according to their occupations and fields of activity. The first interview was with a young woman studying at university and in charge of a social project to fight the marriage of under-age girls in the Fès-Meknès region, as well as fighting against violence. The second interview was with a woman in charge of the association's legal and social counselling centre, as well as monitoring various activities and projects in coordination with other local and national organisations. The third interview was with the association's vice-president, who coordinates its social projects.

All the interviewees are women involved in activism and projects to promote the role of young people, particularly in the context of the region's lack of economic opportunities for them, especially when it comes to young entrepreneurs and graduates.

The Fès-Meknès region is characterised by a lack of socioeconomic advantages, leading many social categories to a degree of marginality and exclusion. In our case study, the Amal association is an example of an alternative for young people that replaces the shortcoming at both social and cultural levels.

# Local dynamics preventing violent extremism

## PROTECTION FACTORS

The protection factor refers to conditions in a given community that may present social, economic and cultural conditions, and that promote a sense of security among individuals in terms of several types of risk. The protection factors in our case study associated with the risks of VE for the Amal association case study, located in the El Hajeb province in the Fès-Meknès region, are linked to the specific features of its location in a region with varied historical, cultural and artistic potential. It is a region with cultural advantages and historical value that have an impact on its population, as well as on tourism, with Morocco's inclusion on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage and good safeguarding practices (Direction Générale des Collectivités Locales, 2015).

Despite the low number of investment projects for young people compared to other Moroccan regions such as Casablanca, and the weakness of commercial activities, this demographic location means that the region has a social and economic life based on the craft sector, which enables the safeguarding of inherited know-how in both urban and rural areas.

Indeed, the cultural and historical potential of the region is fostered by the community in our case study. The Amal association works on the development of a social, cultural approach, dedicating its activities to promoting local culture among young people in their interactions within their family environment and in their social life.



It is true that there is a feeling of dissatisfaction expressed by young people in terms of the town's economic position and territorial marginalisation linked to the centralisation of most services in other regions of Morocco (Rabat and Casablanca). But at the same time, they talked about the strength of the young people of the region and the town of El Hajeb, who are intelligent and gave enormous cultural and artistic capacities... So they are just waiting for the opportunity to show off their talents and potential.

For our case study, one of the significant protection factors is the sense of belonging to the local space, because the Fès-Meknès region is characterised by historical and cultural heritage. This leads to a sense of security and a sense of cultural identity.

## RESILIENCE FACTORS

As far as the analysis of resilience factors within the association studied is concerned, they are linked to promoting social, cultural and economic integration in favour of young people, in order to balance their presence within society as it is based on an approach of guidance and support for women victims of violence, but also of training young people in different fields and disciplines (IT, cooking, sewing, languages...) that enable them to acquire life skills and know-how, to be easily integrated into the professional world.

The young people interviewed consider their involvement in associative life to be a means of forging new social relationships, insofar as this associative framework enables them to acquire new skills, such as communication skills as they learn to express themselves in front of an audience with confidence and express their needs and expectations. For example, these skills are acquired through competitions, with the coaches organising a cultural competition to disseminate their cultural production nationwide to young people. These competitions help to improve young people's artistic skills, while enabling them to pass on messages and values to society and other young people of their age via their artistic creations. The association is also working on disseminating these creations to young people's entourage, and on their pages and networks. "It's a means that contributes to the spread and generalisation of innovative and creative ideas, instead of the circulation of extremist and violent ideas. It's a way of countering the spread of violence and extremism."[159].

These young people find that exploring art as a means of acquiring new skills and getting their message across motivates and encourages them to interact in their own way, and then share these ideas as they see fit on their websites and social networks. They are proud of the fact that they have sometimes been able to produce documentaries and short films to specify their achievements in real life, and then broadcast them as a form of ensuring visibility for these achievements, but also promoting and highlighting them in the social circle.

The strategies of the community studied also lie in the active engagement of young people in voluntary activities, aimed at strengthening the spirit of solidarity among them. Some young people consider that the aid trip organised by the association during the recent earthquake in Morocco in cooperation with young people gave them a stronger sense of belonging not only to the association but also to society and the country in general.



The voluntary activities organised by the association are not limited to the consequences of the earthquake, but young people in the field are also organising activities in favour of the rural world. These include training courses offered by them to help rural children make up for their shortcomings in various school subjects. In addition to being a means of getting involved in voluntary work, this also enables young people to internalise a spirit of sharing information, and to acquire skills and abilities for exchange and communication, beyond the association's boundaries.

Another factor contributing to the community's resilience is simplification as the association has opted for a simple and clear discourse that takes into account the diversity of youth training, and the lack of training of certain young people involved in associative life.

On the other hand, the association has worked on a strategy to address the lack of opportunities for professional integration and for cultural training for a specific age. In this context, some young people talk about the fact that most public institutions limit their activities to primary school age; "this leads to an unbearable void, I haven't taken part in a voluntary activity since I was a primary school student."[160]

[159] Focus group. Amal association.

[160] In-depth interview.

## RESISTANCE FACTORS

The active community actors that we have engaged in the research activities consider that, to ensure effective resistance to the risks of violence, they opt for a continuity approach to activities and training, which they see as one of the essential factors of resistance to the risks of violence or certain shifts towards extremist ideas. According to them, continuity is linked to the fact of not limiting oneself to seasonal or temporary activities. However, it is important for the association and its players to ensure good management, to be able to address the needs of young people, and not fall into a disconnect between young people and associative life, which might lead to violent actions within their social environment. These violent actions that occur in this context of rupture between young people and the associative life, are nourished by the conditions of precariousness, inequalities, and lack of opportunity for professional integration.

The integration of young people into society and the strengthening of their resistance factors call for a renewal of social and cultural actions, tailored to the specific needs of each age group and the community to which they belong (i.e., young people from marginalised areas). This is an important point emphasised by civil society activists during the survey, which for them pushes young people to detach themselves from civil society. There is no perspective of renewal. "Associations don't touch the minds of young people; their expectations and needs. There's a big gap between what associative activity offers young people, and what they expect from it." Meanwhile, in the case of the Amal association, the players do their utmost to meet young people's expectations. At the same time, they encourage them to invent their own ways of resisting violence. It is a strategy of working not only on initiating talents but also on supporting and developing them, so that these young people can use their abilities in the right way. "For example, if a young person loves photography, we'll encourage them to develop this talent, but we'll also support and guide them in ways to explore it in their real and virtual lives."[161][17]



Renewal is not confined to programmes but also encompasses the association's managers and players. The latter are constantly updating their training courses in associative work management as well as in other fields linked to the association's concerns. Everything is designed to keep abreast of what is going on, the current conditions of young people, their potential, but also their weaknesses and shortcomings.

## EXISTING OR POTENTIAL VULNERABILITY INDICATORS (INTRA- AND EXTRA-COMMUNITY)

The vulnerability indicators for the community studied are linked, according to the field results, to both extra-community and intra-community factors.

In terms of extra-community factors, the players surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with the region's situation of inequality and marginality at territorial level, in relation to the economy, job opportunities for young people, and the non-proximity of most services. They also consider the fact that it is the context of inequality and marginality experienced by young people that is a source of violence in

[161] Focus group. Amal association.

society. A member of the association points out that "violent radicalisation is just a mask that hides the conditions and contexts that produce it"[162]. So we need to work on ways and tools of resilience and resistance to cope with these conditions, in terms of training, guidance or support.

The reasons for intra-community vulnerability are linked to the internal programming of the association's activities. Some young people express the view that the players sometimes fail to take into account the availability of young people as schedules are sometimes incompatible with school or professional programmes. And participants also mentioned that information did not circulate effectively between members of the association: "Sometimes we're not aware of the schedule, or the date or even the programming of certain training courses; they think we're aware of what's going to happen, but I think there's a problem with the dissemination of information here."[163][19]



[162] Ibid.

[163] Focus group. Amal association.

# Filling the gaps

**Missing or neglected protection, resilience and resistance factors.** Regarding the factors neglected within the association, some of those interviewed considered that, to avoid the risks of VE among young people, civil society players need to produce a discourse specific to them in order to combat radical discourse, especially on social networks or via digital tools in general. This is because one of the causes of the circulation and internalisation of radicalisation and violence among young people is that they are not previously trained to be resilient in the face of this type of discourse.

For other actors, young people today are not trained to defend their rights properly. They sometimes do not know how to communicate and express their needs and shortcomings properly, either virtually on social networks or in their social lives.

On the Internet, there is already a strong potential for violent discourse among young people, with influencers directly or indirectly disseminating violent content. "For example, some people may send violent messages to politicians or the king of the country. But some young people who also feel dissatisfaction or hatred towards the political system are also starting to circulate this discourse via these digital tools."[164][20]



Those working in the field believe that the problem lies not only in the circulation of hate speech and violence among young people but also in the lack of knowledge about the true intentions behind this speech, which accompanies the process of producing violence. "It's true that some know very well what they're spreading and are convinced by it, but others have no idea, no information. This is due to the lack of support in this direction."[165][21]

**Managing risk factors: mobilising other stakeholders, new targets...**

Right from the start of the case study investigation, young people express in different ways how a situation of economic marginality and territorial inequality has led, and can still lead, other young people to turn to VE. For them, however, this situation has been dealt with through engagement, which has enabled them to shift their needs, abilities and skills towards another more practical and concrete target, namely repositioning through involvement in civil society.

The respondents expressed their belief that, while waiting for the state and politicians to come back to them, they had dedicated themselves to associative work as a means of protecting themselves from the risks of violence. They see their involvement in civil society and its activities as a way of filling the void of political non-participation.

[164] In-depth interview.

[165] Focus group. Amal association.

For the young people and associative players studied, dissatisfaction with the region's economic position is mobilised towards involvement in civil society. For them, the activities offered by the associations in the fields of theatre, art, music or language training are a kind of support, a way of ensuring visibility for the future, but at the same time "a way of being in touch with society"[166]. It is not just a question of staying in touch with one's community, but of being able to organise and reorient oneself via one's values, norms and support.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that some people in the field believe that strengthening this connection within the associative framework of young people can subsequently foster strong resilience and resistance to the spread of violence and extremist ideas.

**Gender specificities: roles, social structures, factors, narratives, inequalities...**

Regarding gender specificities, the young women taking part in this survey see the integration of social activities dealing with the issue of combating violence against women as a way of strengthening their position in relation to men, enabling them to shape their vision and resist the forms of violence experienced within their community.

In conclusion, the Amal association's members work on a continuous basis in their communities, organising awareness-raising sessions for young girls to combat all forms of violence, and integrating young victims of violence into income-generating activities.



"It's true that before we found difficulties in organising activities, some young people didn't want to take part in mixed activities, but afterwards we managed via awareness-raising to create a balance among young people, not only in their actions but also in their ways and forms of thinking and reacting."[167][23]

**Capacity-building opportunities and areas of intervention**

Some young people believe that, in order to strengthen the association's capacities and areas of intervention, it is necessary to cooperate with the political parties, because they are the ones with the decision-making power, even if they do not have much concrete knowledge of the potential of young people. Thus, associations need to know how to cooperate and engage with local political stakeholders because sometimes the problem lies in the incompatibility of the objectives of associations, on the one hand, and of political parties, on the other. "When orientations and points of view are different, it's difficult to achieve anything"[168].

Indeed, according to those interviewed in the field, political players need to be integrated into this process of resilience and resistance to the risks of VE and radicalisation. For them, coordination can help reinforce efforts between actors. But it also strengthens mutual trust between them, insofar as the common objective becomes that of the interests of young people, their development and support.

[166] Individual interview.

[167] Focus group.

[168] Focus group.

**Establish indicators for a future evaluation tool (what would be appropriate to choose as an indicator to measure the impact and effectiveness of the programmes/strategies/activities undertaken)**

On indicators for a future assessment tool, field respondents highlighted several strategies that can serve as a means of resilience and resistance in the face of the risks of VE.

First and foremost, the aim is to innovate and create an approach that opens the association to other international experiences. This can strengthen the skills of the association, and then enrich the commitment of young people in associative work through the acquisition of know-how and interpersonal skills in different fields.

Secondly, young people insist on adopting a strategy that gives this generation the opportunity, the confidence, to reach positions of responsibility. Not only to decide on their current conditions and their future, but also so that they can practically and truly influence other young people; because "young people don't trust actors and politicians, so we need to give them the opportunity to be in their shoes, to decide in their own ways and with their own means"[169].

In this sense, some of the stakeholders focus on the notion of realism as a highly effective factor in achieving results in terms of resilience to the risks of violence. This means realism in terms of the association's objectives: in other words, not falling into idealism when programming activities and training for young people, "not always predicting excellent results."[170]. And, at the same time, starting with the most vulnerable, the most fragile, whether economically, culturally or psychologically, the least resilient to the risks of violence. It is prevention from the bottom up, to use the olive tree's apt term (Roy, 1992).



Thirdly, it is not enough to build a youth centre or set up an association, but we need to update the activities and training dedicated to young people, as well as the training of managers so that they can keep up with the current changes that young people are experiencing at all levels and be aware of what is new in order to provide proper guidance and support for young people.

In a different vein, some players talk about exploring the media in the service of associations and civil society, so that they can get their messages across. Especially when it comes to raising awareness in a fluid way, but also to highlighting their achievements and opening to other experiences and other ways of seeing the world and things.

Finally, one of the visions of indicators for future assessment tools opts for cooperation between academic and associative actors. This is a way of giving greater legitimacy and scientific validity to civil society initiatives and approaches. According to the members of our community, cooperating with this category means basing ourselves on a scientific vision and moving forward on a solid foundation.

[169] Focus group.

[170] In-depth interview.

# General conclusion

The case of the Amal association is an example of a community that works to strengthen the factor of resistance to the factors of marginality and territorial exclusion, especially the fact that young people in the region live in a context marked by the lack of economic opportunities.

The involvement of civil society actors is not limited to leisure activities and programming but is a form of expression in the face of the different forms of violence that young men and women encounter in their daily lives. The programmes that the Amal association focuses on in the fight against economic and cultural exclusion in order to strengthen the factor of resilience and resistance among young people to their disadvantaged situation.

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# Annex:
# Questionnaire in Arabic adapted to the Moroccan context

استبيان السياق المغربي:

أسئلة موجهة للأفراد

1. في رأيك، ما أهم اهتماماتكم في ميدان اشتغالكم من ناحية إدماج الشباب؟
2. كيف يمكن أخذ هذا الاهتمام (الذي سبق ذكره) بعين الاعتبار من قبل أصحاب المصلحة المحليين بما في ذلك ممثلي الأحزاب السياسية؟
3. هل تروا أن اشتغالكم مع الشباب مكمل لمقاربة الدولة في مكافحة التطرف العنيف خلال السنوات العشر الماضية؟
4. كيف تصف التعاون بين المؤسسات المحلية ومؤسسات الدولة في جهود الوقاية من التطرف العنيف؟
5. كيف تنظر إلى الوضع الحالي للشباب من ناحية الثقافة والمشاركة الاجتماعية في المجتمع المحلي؟
6. ما الذي يمنع الترويج للثقافة والتعليم المناهضين للعنف في الشبكات الاجتماعية بمجتمعكم ومحيطكم؟
7. ما هي الطرق التي تعتقدون أنها ناجعة من أجل تشجيع وتقوية أساليب الوقاية أو من التطرف (la resilience)؟
8. إذا كان الشخص المستجوب يعتبر عامل (la resilience) غير مهم، له آثار سلبية ولا ينبغي تشجيعه؛ طرح السؤال؛ كيف يمكن تأطير استراتيجية مقاومة التطرف لإحداث تغيير إيجابي بالمجتمع؟
9. وعلى أي المستويات ينبغي تطبيق التغيير؟ هل يمكن ان توضح؟
10. هل هناك نهج آخر تعتقد أنه سيكون أكثر ملاءمة للسياق المحلي؟
11. كيف يتفاعل الشباب مع عوامل الرقمنة والترفيه والفرص الثقافية؟
12. كيف غيرت الأدوات الرقمية التعليم الثقافي للشباب؟
13. كيف يمكن للجهات الفاعلة في مجال منع التطرف العنيف الاستفادة من تأثير الرقمنة في التعليم الثقافي؟
14. من هي الجهة المحلية الأكثر قدرة على زيادة هذا التأثير الإيجابي في المنطقة؟
15. كيف ترون تأثير الرقمنة على التعليم الثقافي على الجهات السياسية والدينية المحلية؟
16. على الرغم من التحديات والضغوط والقيود الحالية التي يواجهها،(الفاعل المؤسساتي الرئيسي) بشكل عام، كيف يمكن للتعليم الرقمي أن يساهم في الحد من العنف ومنع التطرف؟
17. كيف تنظرون إلى دور الجهات الفاعلة السياسية والاجتماعية والدينية في هذا المجال من منع التطرف العنيف؟
18. هل تعتقد أنه من الممكن تغيير الفاعلين أو الجهات التي تؤثر في عوامل منع التطرف العنيف؟ (على سبيل المثال المؤسسات المحلية أكثر كفاءة من المؤسسات المركزية، أو منظمات المجتمع المدني الأقرب إلى المجتمع من المؤسسات، وما إلى ذلك)؟
19. على المجتمعات المحلية كيف يمكن تحسين مهاراتهم وتأثيرها؟
20. وكيف يمكن تحسين مهاراتهم وتأثيرهم على الشباب بشكل خاص؟

21. ما هو العامل الذي من شأنه تحسين العلاقة أو التصور لدى الشباب تجاه هؤلاء الممثلين؟
22. في السياق الوطني، هل يعبر الشباب عن نقص و غياب الفضاءات الترفيهية؟ في رأيك، ما الذي يمنع هؤلاء الشباب من تحسين هواياتهم على شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي واستخدام الإنترنت للتعبير عن أنفسهم على نطاق واسع؟
23. ما هو تأثير الثقافة الإقليمية، المحلية على ثقافة الرقمنة؟ وما هي الأشكال الإيجابية والسلبية لهذا التأثير في نظركم؟
24. كيف يمكن للبيئة المحلية أن تشجع على مشاركة الشباب وانخراطهم في الحياة الاجتماعية والثقافية؟ ما الذي يمنعهم من ذلك ؟
25. ما هي المساحات أو الأنشطة أو الخدمات المتاحة التي يمكن أن تعزز الإبداع والابتكار لتشجيع المشاركة الاجتماعية للشباب؟
26. في مجتمعك المحلي ما هي المساحات أو الأنشطة أو الخدمات المطلوبة والغير متوفرة؟
27. هل تعتقد أن هناك فضاءات وجهات فاعلة تساهم بالفعل في ممارسات أكثر أمانًا أو خدمات أفضل للوقاية من التطرف العنيف؟ كيف يقومون بذلك؟
28. من هم الجهات الفاعلة الأكثر موثوقية وفعالية للمساهمة والحد من التطرف العنيف في مجتمعك المحلي؟
29. هل هؤلاء هم الفاعلون الأكثر قدرة على التأثير و التغيير؟
30. من هو الفاعل الذي يتمتع بالثقة المحلية والقادر على إحداث التغيير؟
31. هل تعتقد أن هناك تعاوناً بين هذه الجهات؟
32. كيف يمكن تحسين التعاون بين الجهات الفاعلة؟



## أسئلة موجهة للمجموعات

1. هل تشاركون باستمرار في أنشطة الجهات الاجتماعية الفاعلة ؟
2. كيف كان انخراطكم ؟ هل تشارك بشكل متكرر أو في وقت فراغك؟
3. بشكل عام، ما هو المحتوى الذي يجذبك أكثر؟ لماذا تختاره على وجه التحديد؟
4. للتفكير في العوائق التي تعترض المشاركة الاجتماعية للشباب (الرجال والنساء). وبماذا تنصح يمكنكم أخذ لحظة للتغلب على هذه العقبات؟
5. هل هناك اختلافات في كيفية تأثير هذه العوامل على النساء مقابل الرجال؟
6. كيف يمكن تفسير ذلك؟
7. كيف يتعامل الشباب مع التعليم الرقمي؟
8. في رأيك، كيف ينخرط الفاعلون في المجتمع المحلي في تعزيز دور الشباب في المجال الاجتماعي والثقافي المحلي فيما يتعلق بالمؤسسات الوطنية؟ من هو الممثل الأكثر نجاحا ولماذا؟
9. ما هي الأدوات أو الوسائط أو الأشكال التي يمكن أن تعزز دور الترفيه والفن في تعزيز التفاهم والتسامح في بلدك؟

10. من في مجتمعك المحلي الذي ينبغي عليه تعزيز التعليم الفني والثقافي والعمل عليه؟ هل وزارة الثقافة، أو الأحزاب السياسية؟
11. ما هي القيمة المضافة التي ستضيفها هذه الجهات الفاعلة المجتمعية؟
12. خطاب الكراهية في الفضائين العام والرقمي، علينا تعزيز دور الشباب في انبثاق ثقافة السلام وجعل مكافحة التكنولوجيا في خدمة التواصل والانفتاح. / خذو الوقت الكافي للتفكير في قصص نجاح لها علاقة بالأمر
13. أمثلة لأشخاص تعرفونهم أو سمعتم عنهم نجحوا في الترويج للأنشطة الثقافية بين الشباب في منطقتك؟.
14. حققوا هذا الهدف؟ وما هي قدراتهم على جعل مبادراتهم مفهومة لماذا تعتقدوا أنهم كانوا ناجحين؟ كيف تعتقدوا أنهم على المستوى المحلي؟ وقد لاحظنا في الآونة الأخيرة أن العديد من الشباب بدأوا في نشر محتوى على موقع يوتيوب حول تاريخ الموسيقى والثقافة المحلية للتعبير عن قيمة الثقافة المغربية في قبول وقبول الاختلاف الثقافي والديني. – هذا الأمر ناجع هل تعتبرون؟
15. و أقاربكم المهارات والمعرفة اللازمة لاستخدام أدوات التواصل الاجتماعي أنتم و أصدقائكم في رأيك، هل تملكون للحد من تأثير الخطاب المتطرف و كذا نشاط الجماعات المتطرفة على الإنترنت؟
16. . كيف يمكن للحكامة المحلية والمؤسسات التعليمية والمنظمات غير الحكومية والقطاع الخاص وأصحاب المصلحة الآخرين دعم استخدام الرقمنة وتعليم الفنون كوسيلة لمكافحة الخطاب المتطرف العنيف في المجالات العامة أو على الشبكات الاجتماعية؟

# BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Organised groups of football fans. *Sarina Bakić, Anida Dudić-Sijamija, Muamer Hirkić*

Two schools under one roof. **Anida Dudić-Sijamija, Sarina Bakić, Muamer Hirkić**



# Organised Groups Of Football Fans

## Introduction

The Work Package 5-2 research phase is guided by a core principle: to uncover the elements that prevent the transformation of conditions conducive to extremism into actual violent occurrences. In our specific case, football fans in Bosnia and Herzegovina are often accountable for urban violence, driven by a combination of fan-based subculture and political ideology, nationalism in particular (Bakić et al., 2022). Throughout the research, we uncovered elements of resilience of the local community (Mostar) despite the mainstream culture of hostility towards clubs and football fans of the ethnic "other". The selected case study scrutinises various aspects, including the identification of protective, resilience, and resistance factors that may have been overlooked or underappreciated. It endeavours to address the risk factors within these communities by engaging with diverse stakeholders, identifying new targets, and exploring the potential for capacity-building. Furthermore, it aims to delineate areas for intervention and set the groundwork for the development of comprehensive assessment tools by establishing relevant indicators. By undertaking this second phase of research at the meso level, our objective is not merely to understand the complexities of the phenomenon but to contribute to the development of effective preventative measures against radicalisation and violent extremism (VE).



Football fans and their behaviours in the context of VE and violence in general have been the subject of study by various theorists and researchers in the fields of sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. In the cultural context, according to Dunning (2015), these subcultures represent a set of rules, system of values, and behavioural patterns that are different from the cultural outlines of the wider community. It is important to underline that these subculture groups often express resistance towards the dominant cultures, also of their own ethnic group, and highlight radical political ideologies.

This research aim focuses on concrete organised football fan groups that, in many cases, openly advocate nationalism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia and homophobia, and who carry out violent attacks on various "others". On the other hand, we have tried to examine whether there is potential for preventing football fan-related violence. This requires a comprehensive approach that includes the efforts of the entire local community in many social segments.

We believe our findings will provide important insights into the potential presence of resilience factors in terms of strengthening the ability of communities to use their available resources to respond to radicalisation drivers (CONNEKT, 2021). In a previous report (Bakić et al., 2022) we already confirmed that cultural and lifestyle factors are the main drivers for this specific community. In other words, lifestyle factors play a significant role in shaping the identity, preferences and needs of football fans. Their passion for football teams is deeply embedded in cultural contexts, and football fans often find a sense of belonging and self-assurance through their support of a particular football team. Furthermore, it was more than obvious that these specific subcultural groups are often driven by political ideas, not only strongly influenced by them, but also very often manipulated by various political power centres.

# Research methodology

## RECAP OF RESULTS FROM THE FIRST PHASE OF THE MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

At the beginning of this report, it is important to briefly look back at the findings from our previous research (ibid). As already underlined, organised groups of football fans present an explicit challenge when speaking about radicalisation in divided and, in many cases, alienated societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was concluded that radicalisation mostly occurs due to political and nationalist ideologies that are strongly related to the identity of this subculture. This analysis clearly showed that, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this subculture is under the influence of political ideas and economic inequalities within society. The hostility, bitterness and resentment that members of the groups show towards the political system, represented mostly through police forces, and towards ruling politicians, were the most vivid indicators of potential radicalisation. In other words, these drivers can have a great impact on future radicalisation when combined with already existing exclusion and stigmatisation of group members in the public sphere where they are seen as hooligans, criminals and problematic individuals. The potential for radicalisation in this case can be measured through instances of political and nationalist violence, hatred in public speeches and symbols, physical fights between fans of rival teams, conflicts with police forces, and destruction of property. Based on the responses of our interviewees in the previous research it was possible to raise a question for almost each of their statements. Why does the socioeconomic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina block the ambitions and goals of young people from a background that is underprivileged? How does this impact their need for self-affirmation, and their plans and hopes for the future? This kind of socioeconomic injustice, related to social class stratifications, ingrained and institutionalised corruption, and resentment towards "young people with rich (politically connected) parents" that our respondents mentioned have indicated a lot about potential causes and triggers for their resentment and high levels of anger, which can all be a factor for their radicalisation.



When participants spoke about violence and its expressions in various areas of life, it is important to mention that all of them stressed that responses of government institutions are not adequate. Initially, they spoke about judicial institutions, which did not react in many cases of violence or try to address those responsible. After that, they mentioned political and social institutions that did not create efficient prevention programmes for combating violence, religious institutions and civil society organizations (CSOs) that did not use their authority strongly to warn about the serious consequences of violence. This detailed understanding of the complexity of connections among institutional actors coming from a potentially radicalised subculture group offered an added value of our first phase meso-level analysis. The members of football clubs' supporters' groups were fully aware of how institutions (do not) act to address radicalisation, extremism and violence.

Furthermore, related to Bosnia and Herzegovina's context, these findings could be in line with theories of Susan Brownell (Brownell, Besnier and Carter, 2017). While not exclusively focused on football, Brownell has conducted research on sport and nationalism, which can be applied to understanding the role of football in national identity and pride. This feature was clearly presented in our respondents' statements in the first phase of the meso-level analysis.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, football in particular has significant socialisation functions. It is about a process of spontaneous and organised transmissions of general and specific cultural contents such are regional and national identity, social and community connections, family and generational influence, cultural events and rituals, lifestyles and leisure activities, with considerable impact on younger generations who act as recipients (Vrcan, 2003, p. 252). It is obvious that this role is growing increasingly more important, also due to the lack of functioning key social institutions such as family and educational institutions. These traditional institutions of socialisation are today experiencing a crisis due to the strong influence of informal groups, corruption, digital social networks that are not engaged in socialisation functions, and a prevailing impact of political ideologies and market burden. This subculture, as demonstrated in this research, has developed and nourished a strong sense of collective identity and belonging, together with connective local, particular and universal specific subculture's values (Tilly, 1987). The integrational processes within this subculture are what lead members to exhibit extreme emotional belonging and, accordingly, strong deployment and utilisation.

As we stressed in our previous report, it would be inaccurate to conclude that the value systems, attitudes and conduct particular to subcultures of football clubs' supporters' groups are only determined by psychological factors (personal frustrations, disorders, lack of social control). We found that this subculture in Bosnia and Herzegovina is deeply influenced, established and conditioned through economic, social and political drivers. Observing these drivers can serve as a potential indicator for measuring increases and intensity of radical ideas and actions of this subculture. Furthermore, nationalist political strategies, displayed through the driver of political issues and ideas, are still very present and influential within mainstream politics and culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This driver is instrumental in stimulating political exploitation and manipulation of football fans through formal and informal institutions such as political parties and the media. While political ideas have not been able to achieve some of their crucial goals of societal and political division of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s, they are still very much relevant and active through ethnonationalist polarisation and ideological ethnonationalism. As such, these political concepts are not a "matter of the past" only related to the 1990s war, but very much find their expression in contemporary everyday relations. Consequently, organised groups of football clubs' supporters continue to be an impending ground for radical and divisive political attitudes, ethnonational polarisation, and political manipulation and mistreatment.[171]



2.2 Description of the criteria for the case study selection and criteria for sample selection

In the frame of the second phase of our research at the meso level, we conducted one more focus group with football fans from Mostar to check and endorse their opinions and statements, stressing their viewpoints on the role of the community they belong to in violence resilience and prevention. One focus group was held in Mostar with six members of Mostar's football team fans on 17 October 2023, who had already participated in the focus group that was conducted also in Mostar on 18 December 2021. The youngest participants were 19 years old and the oldest 31. All participants in the focus groups were male and living in Mostar. All of them are employed, and only one participant is in

[171] For example, governments or political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina use football events as a means to divert public attention from pressing social or economic problems. This diversion is very much intentional, aiming to shift focus away from "real problems". Additionally, political leaders may attempt to harness the emotions that are associated with football to promote nationalism. It is done through symbolic gestures such as attending matches, associating political messages with the team, and using football matches to boost national animosities.

secondary school. We also conducted two interviews with a well-known civil activist from Mostar and psychologist who is working with young people, using a previously prepared questionnaire. This second phase was easier to organise since the issue of mutual confidence and trust, especially towards us as researchers, mostly regarding the anonymity of football supporters and handling of potentially sensitive information, was resolved in our previous research. But our main challenge remained to overcome a certain "uneasy atmosphere" related to the heightened political and social tensions in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since communities such as Mostar football club fans are closed and do not appreciate "intruders", especially from another city and institution, this was a concern we had to keep in mind again.

# Meso-level dynamics of prevention

## CONTEXT SPECIFICITIES

Mostar represents a community with many issues, although they may not be visible. As a prominent civil society activist pointed out, Mostar and people in Mostar are situated in a internal political and national division, which most drastically affects the establishment of serious and impartial institutions that should function in line with what democracy should ensure, and that is equal access to all governance institutions. Currently, nobody wants to focus on strengthening democracy and human rights due to geopolitical concerns such as influences by Ukraine war and Middle East conflicts. In countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, all that matters is to maintain peace, and they do not care who they do it with.[172] On the other hand, our second interlocutor stated that, in their centre for psychological aid, they work with the local community, institutions, and young people, trying to minimise damage that is the result of vicious segregation of Mostar (on Croat and Bosnian sides).

"I think it's well-known that Mostar is often referred to as the 'special case city' due to stories of violence. The story starts with segregation of the city and people and ends with violence. This is a typical media story. My experience is related to working in schools. We worked with the Ministry of Education on a Protocol for Dealing with Violence. I'm primarily talking about primary schools. We saw that a lot of work was done, but I get the impression that employees and society don't recognise all the forms of violence. We have a low number of reported cases in schools, and, statistically, this is not possible, as we have clients coming to us due to peer violence, which is not registered through the system. There's an imbalance here. We also worked with school bodies. Besides the fact that violence is not recognised, there is distrust in institutions. Parents then take matters into their own hands because they don't believe that institutions can prevent it. This adds an extra layer of problems. We're talking about a very early age. I'm saying this more as an introduction to discussing young people because they don't get a good example. They see that silence is tolerated or that 'daddy will threaten'. They don't know how to constructively resolve problems."[173]



Both interlocutors spoke about young people, because both worked with various social groups (children, young people, women, war veterans) and mostly with youth. As we could notice, when it comes to politics at all levels, young people are not a priority. There are several factors that give young people better positions and contracts. According to civil society activists, everything in Bosnia and Herzegovina is designed so that young people could leave with their diplomas. The language is primarily English, so it is not difficult for young people to learn the language of the country they are going to. When we asked about the unresolved interethnic relations in Mostar that are influencing young people in this community to connect with violence and extremism, our respondent claimed that there is no concrete information on how many incidents there are. On the other side, our interlocutor

[172] In-person interview with civil society activist from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

[173] In-person interview with psychologist from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

confirmed that young people in Mostar have no positive role models to solve their identity crisis. Furthermore, the education system remains a huge problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a system where critical thinking is not encouraged enough. It is obvious that young people are exposed to hate speech and are more inclined to choose to belong to the group.[174]

Our interlocutor stated that organised football fans in Mostar simply represent a continuation of the organised politically-based structure we had at the beginning of the war.[175] In other words, these groups are organised and connected, ideologically and nationally. They are also connected financially, often in a way that could be called criminal. He claimed that, through fan groups, we can see everything happening in the country. "They visibly display it through violence, brutality, high levels of nationalism, and radical patriotism. They are structured like paramilitaries. They are armed, and when they are not armed, they function like criminal structures. Everything that should be protected by rules is allowed for them. There are no rules except their rules."[176] In contrast, our second interlocutor found no negative connotations there. Regarding fans and fan groups, the interlocutor claims that it can be a positive thing, giving them a sense of belonging and meaning. But, on the other hand, some of the football fans use radical narratives without knowing their meanings and without thinking about the consequences of it all.[177]

On our specific question – when a football fan tells us that he has never been on the other side of the town and does not want his daughter to ever go to the other side, what can be done or organised to change that? – our respondent from the psychology field indisputably replied that the answer is in contact. "We're talking about people who have become radicalised in their beliefs. This means that they were vulnerable at some point. The system didn't recognise some traumatic and transgenerational transfers. It didn't understand that children needed more help and became subject to radicalisation. I assume the answer lies in contact. I now remember that we worked in schools, and it was essential for us to enter all schools in Mostar and work on connecting with children. Schools used to demand that we only speak Croatian and not Bosnian. We found that absurd, but we agreed to enter schools. At the beginning, students were sceptical. The workshops were about activism, volunteering, and what they would like to see in this city. When their thinking is activated and they are made to feel important, you can work with them. We noticed that when they are given space, great ideas are born. We connected some schools that had similar ideas and interests. There were no problems whatsoever. When you work to recognise what is important to them and how they can help themselves, and when you remove the national prefix, this naturally progresses."[178]



Both interlocutors view education as a major problem but also as a major protecting and resilience factor when speaking about VE. In the context of education being the key problem, a part of an expressed pessimism related to the entire education system, it is highlighted that it is necessary to

[174] In-person interview with psychologist from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[175] In-person interview with civil society activist from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[176] In-person interview with civil society activist from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[177] In-person interview with psychologist from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[178] In-person interview with psychologist from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

bring informal education back into institutions. Both interlocutors agreed that it is important to work informally within formal frameworks to break out of the official educational programme framework.

Addressing main issues regarding problems in the educational system requires additionally a combination of efforts from education institutions, CSOs, international organisations and the football community itself. Accountability and the protection of human rights are crucial in ensuring that football fans as a subculture remain a positive and unifying force rather than a tool for political manipulation.

## LOCAL DYNAMICS PREVENTING VE (PROTECTIVE FACTORS, RESILIENCE FACTORS AND RESISTANCE FACTORS)

Our focus in both interviews was to find out about activities that are related to violence prevention. Both interlocutors strongly stated that it is (should be) a work and a contract for the entire society. It cannot be done in isolated cases or by someone attempting it on their own. As a non-governmental sector, they suggested policy avenues for prevention. However, institutions are not interested in it because they believe it would strengthen institutions of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is not their goal. "Any form of strengthening institutions in this country is not the goal of nationalistic political elites. They have parallel structures that have evolved out of the need to dismantle this system and create a new one according to their rules. Fan groups execute violence when an attempt is made to establish a system. They do it through violence and intimidation."[179] In other, more concrete, words, there is no restraint. "That process has developed well under the pretext of all political games, and they have realised different bodies that suited them. They play with the division of power and work in the field without rules, and make oral agreements. The entire war is based on a new mythical structure, which then turns into tradition. When that is translated into law, it becomes the most radical and rigid form. Ultimately, it becomes fascism. It involves hundreds of young people with a certain structure, even fan groups, showing their organisation, and this would not be possible without political support."[180] This opinion confirms, at least in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the critical link between political drivers and violence in many forms.



In order to prevent and combat violence, our civil society interlocutor stated clearly that Bosnia and Herzegovina's society needs protests.

"It's important to protest, but it's not happening. You go to a square, put up signs, but there's no internal drive. We don't feel what violence is; someone has to tell us what violence is. Why does someone have to tell us what violence is? This is what we missed. We created a language for non-governmental or corporate organisations. I don't understand the civil sector. I don't know if it's a kind of intermediary between the citizen and institutions, because if it is, then we have no idea about democracy. We have no idea about the representation. We have representatives in institutions who are too distant. Apart from the autonomous zone, they don't need a community. Every community has power and the ability to act. Our organisation, which experiments, has independent culture and is not needed by them. The whole country could have been a big laboratory after the war. We were late

[179] In-person interview with civil society activist from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

[180] In-person interview with civil society activist from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

because we forgot how things were after the war. No one wanted it. We could have been a big laboratory for coexistence and democracy. They immediately brought in money, and installed leaders and structures that are zombie-like. They have no ethical code, they are structured by certain rules and copied statutes. There should be a need in the local community before thinking about projects. Without a community, there's no future. The public space allows the community space. This doesn't mean leading a dialogue, but a community that meets starts to create the rules of the game. Procedures are imposed, but they need to be experiential. We are given a law from which philosophy should emerge."[181]

In the context of our question about the resilience element in this complex social and political environment, an interviewed civil society activist explained that there is a spatial-temporal and biological structure. "The spatial-temporal situation involves upheaval every 30 years, where the vocabulary imposed, which is not truthful, starts to function not with the meaning of what you have on the ground but with a narrow meaning. For example, you are my enemy, and there's no 'why?' There's no answer to why you are my enemy. Spatial-temporal action works in that sense, as it did in Germany regarding the issue of World War II. Children will be saturated with that vocabulary. Maybe it happens in 30 years, maybe never. Biologically, it's the duration of life. Those who were there are leaving, new systems are being established that forget oral tradition. It's political amnesia. We are determined by these structures. That means this system does not function in dialogue, debate, argument, or facts. All structures, both values and language, have been torn down."[182]



Bearing in mind the role of the international community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in Mostar, in the context of providing certain assistance related to prevention of violence and strengthening resilience and resistance factors, both interlocutors were distrustful about this specific matter. In their opinion, the European community agreed to empower those who treat the law according to their will. "The very elections in Mostar were the rule to accept the mafia. The same people who stole both in the elections and in reality were brought in. They even stood by their side. This worries me more, it's a form of hypocrisy, which I understand can be of benefit to lower-level diplomats, but then we remain in the mud as a lower-level society."[183]

The respondent from the psychology field expressed the need for further research on violence, in particular its more substantial influence on the generation of high school students than on older generations. This will contribute to preventing violent extremism (PVE) since today's specific local community is not adequately resilient to VE. In particular, because of political elites that are using Mostar's intense ambient for their own political and financial benefits.

In the context of our focus group interviews, and as it is previously noted, the relation between football fans and violence is a complex issue that has been a concern in many parts of the world as well as in

[181] In-person interview with civil society activist from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[182] In-person interview with civil society activist from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[183] In-person interview with civil society activist from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are some key points to be reminded of and considered. For understanding subcultures in the context of VE and in the context of the local community dynamic endeavouring to prevent it, it is important to assume that they are specific because they form a relatively cohesive and strongly unified cultural subsystem. As emphasised in previous the first-phase analyses, this implies that for subcultures we need to have three major backgrounds: a forced upon adversity or exclusion of individuals or social groups related to certain important values resulting in frustration, a confusion about societal systems of values, and a lack of social control. This is clearer when we understand that each individual and social group usually has its own system of values, arranged according to certain meanings and adopted and accepted by its members, which is also confirmed by our interlocutor from the psychology field in the recent interview. For subcultures it becomes evident that group values are often in opposition with the commonly accepted values of society in general. In other words, rather than being autonomous from the larger culture, subcultures of football fans contain and internalise some of its values and behavioural rules.[184] The causes of football fans relation with violence is often multifarious and complex, and they are influenced by social, cultural and economic factors, as confirmed in our first-phase analysis. Factors like unemployment, social inequality and lack of opportunities can contribute to the frustration, anger and aggression of some fans. Tainted with aggression in politics and economic deprivation, this subculture is proven to be one of the potential social groups for the further radicalisation not only in local communities but in entire society of Bosnia and Herzegovina in general. But what about their views on society, their social interactions, their own role within the local community, and their activities apart from going to football matches and their passion and vocal support for their football club? These questions could open a space for reconsidering the development of resilient communities, strengthening the ability of communities to use their available resources to respond to radicalisation drivers (CONNEKT, 2021). In this specific case, radicalisation drivers are economic, social, and political drivers meaning nationalist political strategies, displayed through the driver of political issues and nationalistic notions that are still very prevailing and influential within the public sphere and mainstream politics and culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



As previously noted, all other participants were supporters of their football teams, actively involved in the actions of the football clubs' supporters' groups. All respondents positively answered the question about whether they participate in any activities in the local community, volunteering as well. They stated that they participate whenever there are actions for the benefit of their fellow citizens. As a fan group, they do their best to help. "In humanitarian actions, and environmental city cleaning actions I don't mind that these actions are not paid when it comes to helping others and cleaner city."[185] They are very much active in activities related concretely to their football club (preparing for matches, putting up banners, raising funds, etc.), but they stated that entire group is known for their "blood donation drive" that isn't exclusively related to supporting the team. All respondents expressed high level of

[184] This commonality is not lasting; subcultures are distinguished from the larger culture by a fairly distinct mix of behaviours, lifestyle and conduct, as we were able to observe during our research. This specific subculture is also distinguished by a set of beliefs, interests, attributions, and values that are shared and developed through mutual interactions of members. They are characterised by a common fate and dilemma derived from their counter position to mainstream social structures. They are also characterised by patterned interactions and relationships within the subculture and between the subculture and a larger social structure (Arnold, 1970).

[185] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

awareness "for helping others as a group when it comes to financial assistance, like earthquakes and such. We've sent food and provided help. I mean, everyone helps as much as they can."[186]

Younger interlocutors, obviously less interested in the others that do not belong to their football fan group, stated that they are not sure why some youngsters do not participate in such activities (local even global level), but they are sure that young people need some kind of motivation and reason. Because the reason for them to be motivated is their "love for our club and everything we do as a group."[187] Another interlocutor stated that he thinks it is laziness regarding any initiative related to any outdoor activity. This laziness in his opinion comes partly from the mentality, and partly from the global internet context that traps young people in their small apartments and laptop worlds. "Social network influencers have an influence on young people, but I cannot say if it is positive or negative. It depends."[188]

Young people are certain that social networks have a great impact on their lives. But they are viewing this influence on an individual level. So, one of the main recommendations would be a stronger media and information literacy included within education at all levels.

## VULNERABILITY INDICATORS

In the context of the problems in the city, while most of them refused to say anything critical about their local community, the oldest respondent stated that unemployment defines community the most, as well as the exodus of young people leaving after high school and college for Croatia or other countries in the EU. "The exodus of young people is caused by unemployment, i.e., dissatisfaction among young people. It's not the inability to find a job, but that the job is not well-paid. It is about dissatisfaction with the entire system."[189] The others referred to a people's mentality of "managing problems" reflected in statements like this one: "If fuel prices were lower, more people would travel. It doesn't affect us, not even inflation. Salaries are low, but we know how to live."[190] In terms of a solution for better conditions for young people in Mostar, all respondents blamed the system and political structures. "To help young people with these problems, changes should be made at the system level. There is distrust of the state, the Federation. I think these are well-raised people, but, in their socialisation, they realise the country they live in, and then they leave. Fundamentally, changes need to come from the system."[191] Our respondents consider the media as a major element in society to blame for the difficult situation in the country, stressing that they do not play an important factor in society resilience to violence. "With these media, it's difficult. In the last six months, the media has been extremely biased."[192]

When talking about education in Mostar, our youngest interlocutor stated that "as far as schools are concerned, it's great. As for universities, more people come here to study than leave. I've met a lot of



[186] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[187] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[188] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[189] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[190] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[191] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[192] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

people who came from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina."[193] But others consider the creators of educational policies responsible because they don't bear in mind and or take into consideration the proper needs of a labour market. "They should live in the spirit of the times and the city. They should invest more in young people. Alongside more investments in sports, they should think about professions that are needed in Mostar."[194] But when asking them about their political engagement, almost all respondents stated that politics doesn't represent anything to them. "Precisely because of the disappointment that politics can change anything. Politics has produced the most corrupt individuals. Interest in politics as an instrument for change has been lost. Obedient people go into politics, those who can be blackmailed later."[195] Participants from this focus group were less inclined to talk about the political situation in Mostar than about the divisions within the town. "Everything that's good on one side isn't accepted on the other side (of the city)."[196] But one of them claimed he is a moderate optimist hoping that the wound will heal. In the context of changes within the political situation, those respondents who claimed that those positive changes can occur constantly considered politicians as the only accountable actors. "Those in power get along well with each other. All three representatives get along. I'm not pessimistic about the current situation. What they say – Željko Komšić for example, I don't take him seriously. Not just him, but politicians in general."[197] But they clearly stated that "the media, especially, are to blame for everything that's happening."[198]

Respondents who were more pessimistic blamed the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina for producing and disseminating damaging narratives and an atmosphere of divisions in society. "There's no chance in theory for another 50 years. Young generations are indoctrinated, and that's it. Especially with the media on top of it. The media fuels the fire. The media incites 90% of situations."[199] Apart from this segment, we could hear from our interlocutors many serious criticisms of the media regarding the public opinions that football fans are hooligans. "Because there's always news when they cause problems. It's not news when they walk normally and donate blood. It's a matter of perception. Of course, there is hooliganism, but, regarding Ultras,[200] I think it's a group that can be identified with many positive aspects.[201] "Again, it's all because of the media. It's not the same when you sit at home and read the headline 'clash of groups'. You'll immediately condemn it without looking at the larger picture. 90% of those who condemn only focus on what they read. In 99.9% of cases, it's not accurate. Especially here, the conflict between two fan groups in the city is a hot topic. Especially the misuse of names and photos."[202] One respondent clearly stated that only laws could prevent hooliganism and VE among organised football fans. "Punishment is the only solution. The best example is England in the 1980s."[203]



[193] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[194] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[195] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[196] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[197] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[198] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[199] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[200] Ultras is term as well in general to name some football clubs organised groups of hardcore fans known as "ultras". These ultras can be very passionate and vocal in their support of their team, but, in some cases, they can also engage in aggressive and violent behaviour.
[201] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[202] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

When speaking about digital media, Internet, and social networks, all respondents do not regard this media as very important to them. They are also critical towards it, claiming that violence is faster and wider spread via Internet. They react on violent messages that are related to them personally and their football team "sometimes verbally, mostly verbally when we have the opportunity. People I socialise with never approach violence with violence"[204]. Another respondent claimed this "nothing offends me, I have private profiles. When I see someone arguing, I read it and laugh."[205]



[203] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

[204] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

[205] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

# Filling the gaps

It was interesting but it also confirmed our assumptions that the most positive example of football fans community's organisation is basically the club they support. All interlocutors offered the same answer. Because "promoting Bosnian football through European competitions", "I hope this year's successes will further solidify that, and that they will end up in strong leagues and competitions. This is a big boost for the development of football in Mostar", "Mostar, which nobody had heard of worldwide, made people Google it. Those are sports reasons. For nothing else", "I think it's a tremendous contribution in terms of affirming the city and promoting the city and the country, especially in the context of European successes in competitions. What we achieved this year with the qualification for the Conference League, I think we did more for promoting the city and the country than politicians. I think this year's success is epochal."[206] It is more than obvious that love towards their football team and their collective emotions and loyalty towards it have contributed to the fact that their entire universe is around football and the team they support.

This provoked our additional question, as an added value to this focus group, in order to understand more deeply this high level of collective solidarity and unity. Explicitly, the new moto of these football club supporters is "we are family". We asked our focus group respondents how they comprehend and feel that motto. "I understand it as we're the closest, most important friends. That's how everyone who loves our club sees it."[207] "Here in Mostar, specifically, when something big happens, it affects those under 8 or 9 years old. They would then want to train too. We hang out, share the same sandwich. You must be made for that, to love the club to go to away games. You spend the whole day travelling to the other end of the country. We are family."[208] "We've become aware that, if we truly act as family members, we will succeed in taking our organised group to an even higher level."[209]"Unity."[210] To provide more testimonies related to their "only shelter in the world and around it", we asked them how they came to love the club and what they remember most about it. "My father was a Torcida fan. He went to Hajduk games before I was born. Then he cut back a bit. He took me to a game for the first time. As soon as I was born, family friends gave me a scarf. It went like that. Little by little, I started going to games. There was everything, but mostly positive things. Victories."[211] "Back in elementary school because my father took me. I always remember the emotion, passion, and identification with the group. And the excitement when we won our first title."[212] "Through sports, that's where love is born, just like in a family."[213]



[206] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[207] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[208] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[209] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[210] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[211] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[212] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.
[213] In-person focus group with football fans from Mostar, 17 October 2023.

Why is this segment important to us? Simply because it would be a challenge for the entire society to transfer this positive energy into a benefit related to the entire local community and society in general. Organised football fans could play a role in social and political issues. Their collective voice could be used to raise awareness and advocate for various issues. These subcultures are also known for their positive activities. It comes out from their incomparable passion, enthusiasm and unwavering loyalty towards their favourite club (King, .[214] What we would like to underline, in this context, is that organised football fans can reflect broader social and political dynamics in a positive manner as well. But as long as the football represents a platform for all of society's anomalies, there is no chance of this subculture transforming into the group that contributes to many aspects of life considering their energy and influence among young people.



[214] See more in: Anthony King's *The Fanatic's Guide to Football*. King's work, including this book, examines the psychological and emotional aspects of football fandom, offering insights into the passion and attachment fans have for their teams.

# Conclusion

It is more than noticeable that most of the issues related to PVE in the context of organised football groups lie within areas of social intervention. Promoting awareness and education about the consequences of violence (football-related violence) is crucial. It is about various initiatives that promote participation and activities of young people in education, culture, sport and art, nurturing the culture of volunteerism, nourishing responsible and respectful behaviour in and around the local community. Results of focus groups interviews showed that investment in sport, sport training and activities clearly contribute to quality leisure opportunities, which are protective, resilience and resistance factors for local dynamics in PVE. Sport clubs and authorities can engage together not only with organised fans, but everyone who is performing sport as leisure and professional activities, in club activities, events and decision-making processes. This can further develop a sense of ownership within the local community and responsibility among young people. Banning orders, as one interlocutor stated, is a measure that would restrict certain individuals from violence, hooliganism and other deviant or criminal behaviour.

Tackling nationalism, discrimination, racism and xenophobia among organised football fans is essential for PVE and preventing violent extremist behaviour. It is about anti-discrimination initiatives promoted by sport clubs, schools, and various public and civil society institutions. In other words, campaigns promoting tolerance and diversity are important in this context. Furthermore, clubs and organised football fans can engage in local community outreach programmes that aim to address social issues in their specific local community. These adequate and seriously designed programmes can help prevent and manage potential conflicts and VE in general.



One of the factors is media responsibility. The media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and can influence organised fan groups' behaviour. Responsible, objective and well-intended reporting, and avoidance of sensationalising violence are crucial in this segment.

Preventing violent extremism through protective, resilience and resistance factors such as local engagement on social responsibility are ongoing efforts that require the cooperation of all stakeholders, including football clubs, football fans, authorities, educational institutions, and the media together with CSOs fighting violence and extremism, and society. The goal is to create a safe and enjoyable environment for young people while promoting the positive aspects of sport, diversity, fair competition, social engagement and unity.

Still, the issue of education, which in many cases is indoctrinated by nationalistic ideologies, politics of division and animosities, remains a stepping stone towards PVE. It is media, cultural and political literacy that is much needed in Bosnia and Herzegovina society. In other words, in the question about how to build an education system that will be an authentic resilience factor, who can be the movers of such an important task? Who can "erase" an opportunistic culture from our society because this kind of culture does not recognise nationalism and radicalism as a stepping stone towards a better and more just society. There is no critical approach within an opportunistic culture; there is no critical and inclusive approach within an education system. And that is a vicious circle that must be broken as soon as possible.

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# Two Schools Under One Roof

## Introduction

The Work Package 5-2 research phase is guided by a core principle: to uncover the elements that prevent the transformation of conditions conducive to extremism into actual violent occurrences. Within this context, the phenomenon of "two schools under one roof" has emerged as a subject of profound sociopolitical significance for Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this carefully chosen case study, we will observe a community where all the contextual factors that seem to foster radicalisation are present, yet these conditions have not erupted into violence. The selected case study scrutinises various aspects, including the identification of protective, resilience, and resistance factors that may have been overlooked or underappreciated. It endeavours to address the risk factors within these communities by engaging with diverse stakeholders, identifying new targets, and exploring the potential for capacity-building. Furthermore, it aims to delineate areas for intervention and set the groundwork for the development of comprehensive assessment tools by establishing relevant indicators. By undertaking this second phase of research at the meso-level, our objective is not merely to understand the complexities of the phenomenon but to contribute to the development of effective preventative measures against radicalisation and violent extremism (VE).

# Research methodology

## RECAP FROM RESULTS FROM THE FIRST PHASE OF THE MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

In the initial phase of the W5 research, while analysing the determinants of potential radicalisation and VE among youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we presented a case study titled "Two Schools Under One Roof". The phenomenon of "two schools under one roof" stands as the most significant indicator of the sociopolitical reality in Bosnia and Herzegovina, grounded in social fragmentation along ethnonational lines. This is reflected in the education system, which is fundamentally shaped by divisions and conflicting policies.

The phenomenon of "two schools under one roof" mirrors the divided society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it is rooted in fragmentation, segregation, and differentiation of students based on their national identity (Bosniaks and Croats). These schools operate in a manner where, within the same building, two separate administrations exist, students are divided along national lines, and they follow different curricula (tailored to either Bosniak or Croatian perspectives). Often, the same school is referred to by different names, and students of different nationalities attend classes in separate shifts, in conditions that impede any interaction between students of different ethnic backgrounds.



The fact that a significant number of children and youth have already experienced or are still undergoing such an education system has raised a crucial research question about the (self)perceptions of the youth and their relationship to the society in which they live. In the initial phase of WP5 research, we concluded that deep ethnic divisions among youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina are nurtured within the family environment and further propagated through education, cultural activities, and leisure time. The media and its content also contribute to perpetuating these divisions, often using inappropriate reporting to instrumentalise religion in support of distorted perspectives and worldviews. In summary, the social life of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina is significantly shaped and subordinated to (ethnic) divisions. Given the absence of adequate institutional and social responses to the challenges that Bosnian-Herzegovinian society faces, political manipulations often fill these gaps. This creates space for deviant political ideologies and their proponents to influence the thoughts and actions of vulnerable young people.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE CRITERIA FOR THE CASE STUDY SELECTION AND CRITERIA FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

The research comprised two phases. In the initial stage, the participants were students from a high school recognised as "two schools under one roof", where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, situated in the Central Bosnia Canton in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Because the CONNEKT research team had previously conducted research in the aforementioned school, a request was submitted to the relevant Ministry of Education to facilitate the second part of the research. Upon obtaining approval, the school leadership was contacted, and the methods for conducting the research were agreed upon.

A qualitative research approach was employed through a focus group consisting of 8 third-year students (5 females and 3 males), all over the age of 15. Facilitation of the focus group was entrusted to members of the research team, and the research was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles and the guidelines of the European Union (EU), with prior approval from the Ethics Committee for Research at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo.

In the second phase of the research, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders actively engaged in the local community where "two schools under one roof" are situated. The first semi-structured interview was held with a member of a non-governmental organization (NGO) that emerged as part of a project aimed at supporting youth in local communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The distinctiveness of this NGO lies in its possession of a cultural and educational space for all youth, irrespective of their religious and national affiliations. Its objective is to encourage the active participation of youth in community life and to provide creative and quality ways for the use of leisure time. The second semi-structured interview was conducted with a member of an association that supports parents. The association's goal is to strengthen parental skills and train parents to recognise the initial signs of risky behaviour in children and adolescents.

Participants were asked for consent to audio record the discussions before conducting the research, with the assurance that the materials would be used solely for scientific purposes. All of the above contributed to a high level of trust between the participants and the researchers, resulting in valuable feedback and insights into the researched phenomenon. The data collected through the focus group and semi-structured interviews was treated as confidential and exclusively accessible to members of the CONNEKT research team.



## CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

In the first part of the research (focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof", where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language), the CONNEKT research team did not encounter challenges in the process of preparing and conducting the research. The research team collaborated with the school's principal and pedagogue, who provided a more detailed explanation of the research's purpose and objectives to the students. This contributed to greater motivation among the students to participate.

The selection of participants in the second part of the research (semi-structured interviews with stakeholders) was carried out by the CONNEKT research team based on available data on the activities conducted by NGOs and associations in the local community where the "two schools under one roof" are located. Based on the analysis of available data, two stakeholders were identified, who engage young people and their parents, regardless of religion or national affiliation, with the goal of socialising children and youth and increasing their resilience to unfavourable social phenomena.

While the CONNEKT team aimed to conduct three interviews with stakeholders for the purpose of report writing, this proved unfeasible due to the limited current presence of NGOs actively operating in the local community where the "two schools under one roof" function. Most of these organisations, whether directly or indirectly, are not actively engaged in activities related to preventing violent

extremism (PVE). In other words, the goals and missions of these organisations are directed toward empowering and assisting preschool-age children and children with developmental disabilities, who are not part of the target population of the CONNEKT research. The absence of NGOs involving youth in the local community presented a challenge for researchers in the data collection process. Concurrently, this signifies an important indicator that this is a small community lacking a significant presence of domestic and international organisations that could, through informal activities, promote a more substantial integration of youth into the local community.

# Meso-level dynamics of prevention

## CONTEXT SPECIFICITIES

The research was conducted in a small town in Bosnia and Herzegovina with approximately 30,000 inhabitants. Although not administratively divided, members of the Croatian and Bosniak nationalities lead almost entirely separate lives. Owing to evident divisions observable at every turn (separate streets, cafes, schools, etc.), this community is considered highly sensitive. Furthermore, two tragic events have highlighted the vulnerabilities of this area. In 2010, the town witnessed a terrorist attack on a police station, leading to the fatal injury of one police officer and causing severe injuries to several others. The attack was carried out by an individual who was previously known in radical circles and associated with extremist groups. Local and regional media extensively covered the horrifying incident. Some of the media headlines included: "Teroristički napad uzdrmao Bosni i Hercegovinu"[215](Terrorist Attack Shakes Bosnia and Herzegovina), "Šta je ojačalo radikalni islam u BiH"[216] (What Strengthened Radical Islam in B&H), "Teroristički napad: Uhićen navodni mozak vehabija"[217] (Terrorist Attack: Alleged Mastermind of Wahhabis Arrested), etc. Moreover, the peculiarity of the region is evident in the fact that in the surrounding areas of the town, several families have left Bosnia and Herzegovina to join armed formations in foreign conflict zones (in Syria and Iraq). According to the stakeholder,[218] these two events have had a negative impact on the perception of the town and, in some way, tarnished the reputation of the citizens living in that area. For this reason, the interviewee stated: "It saddened me that visitors coming to my town would say they are coming to a town of thieves, violent individuals, extremists, and the like..."[219]



### Description, type of social interaction context, target population, actors and stakeholders mapping

Due to the aforementioned events involving the continuous polarisation of society, maintenance of ethnonational tensions, and the incitement of intolerance, hatred and violence toward others, an international non-governmental organization (INGO) initiated a project in several vulnerable communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (including the community where the CONNEKT team conducted research) aimed at building resilience among youth. The INGO supported the initiative at the local level by establishing an NGO with the goal of providing support to youth.

The stakeholder[220] reports an intensive collaboration with key actors in the local community during the initial stages, aimed at developing high-quality programmes to enhance the role of youth in society, as well as establishing preventive initiatives. Special attention was given to partnering with schools, where students with poor academic performance exhibiting deviant behaviours, such as juvenile

[215] More information at: Teroristički napad uzdrmao Bugojno, ali i BIH – DW – 27.06.2010, accessed on 19 October 2023.

[216] More information at: Šta je ojačalo radikalni islam u BiH (slobodnaevropa.org), accessed on 19 October 2023

[217] More information at: Teroristički napad u Bugojnu: Uhićen navodni mozak vehabija - Index.hr, accessed on 19 October 2023.

[218] Interview with the stakeholder 1.

[219] Interview with the stakeholder 1.

[220] Interview with the stakeholder 1.

delinquency and violence, were identified. From this, the idea of programmes and workshops for children emerged, which have been successfully implemented in this local community for the past four years.

Moreover, in the local community where the research was conducted, a citizens' association was established with the aim of providing support to parents facing parenting challenges. The stakeholder[221] notes that the association originated within the framework of an international project dedicated to supporting youth in the local community, recognising the significant role of parents in promoting forms of pro-social behaviour in children and youth. In this regard, the stakeholder[222] states the following:

> "The motto for founding the association was to provide strength and support to parents to be more responsible, to have better communication with their children, and to help each other in the most important role – parenthood."

The professional team comprises psychologists and pedagogues who conduct workshops for parents, employing methodology developed with representatives from the academic community. Over some time, experts have organised approximately 10 workshops and collaborated with over 150 parents from the local community on topics such as responsible parenting, parenting styles, challenges in adolescence, recognising socially unacceptable behaviours in children and youth, and PVE. Through these educational initiatives, they identified issues in the local community and analysed the potential societal implications of unacceptable forms of behaviour in children and youth.



> "Educational initiatives have helped us understand that, even though there is no overt radicalism in our local community, there is a significant potential for its emergence, given the deep divisions within society."[223]

### Identified drivers, structural elements, specific variables

In previous research (WP5 and WP6), we identified political issues as the most significant driver. The importance of ethnic and/or national affiliation remains a political issue, which best reflects the deep divisions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and is mirrored through the education system. Specifically, the analysis of the obtained data indicates that behind the scenes of the "two schools under one roof" phenomenon, political issues are present, and there is an inability to reach agreements among political actors and find changes that would lead to a common approach to education (Bakić et al., 2022).

Building upon this data, the results of the youth focus group clearly indicate that young individuals perceive political issues as the source of other problems in Bosnian society. The youth expressed concerns about the impact of ethnonationalism on various aspects of their lives, including education, employment, interethnic relations, and overall social dynamics. On the other hand, the focus group participants did not mention political parties as significant actors in the local community that provide

[221] Interview with the stakeholder2.

[222] Interview with the stakeholder 2.

[223] Interview with the stakeholder 2.

support to youth in social engagement. Instead, while the youth are committed to activities in various associations and NGOs that are perceived as key actors in society, they are not involved in initiatives led by political parties and show no interest in participating in political events. One participant[224] mentioned that she needs time to see how the adult world works before she decides to join a political party. Her colleague,[225] however, with a sense of disinterest and scepticism toward the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, states that he sees no possibility of change regardless of the political option. This data correlates with the findings of the "Voices of Youth" research (2016), which showed that the majority of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina believe they have no influence on making important decisions, even those concerning themselves, leading them to be largely apolitical. Young individuals express their dissatisfaction and rebellion against the ruling political parties primarily through low turnout in the electoral process, which is often perceived as a "punishment for politicians". Furthermore, the youth consider the political situation as the "main culprit" hindering a more meaningful engagement of young people in educational, social, cultural and political activities in the local community.

In the interview, a stakeholder[226] who, through informal training, works with parents of young people on identifying risky forms of behaviour and PVE, shared the opinion that social problems emanate from the political scene, asserting that politicians exploit harmful narratives to fulfil their personal interests and maintain the power they hold:

> "Politicians stand to lose significantly if there is a shift in social dynamics. Their injurious rhetoric would likely falter in a democratic society. To sustain their power and position, they consistently promote a narrative of division. Citizens are influenced by such narratives."



## LOCAL DYNAMICS PREVENTING VE

### Protective factors

In recent decades, preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) approaches have been formulated with the primary aim of preventing individuals either from participating in or materially supporting ideologically motivated violence (Williams, 2017). Alternatively, they are conceived as non-coercive endeavours to mitigate involvement in terrorism (Harris-Hogan et al., 2015). CVE operates as a comprehensive framework that encompasses both preventive measures, implemented before an individual becomes entangled in extremism, and intervention activities, which include the deradicalisation and disengagement of violent offenders and committed extremists. CONNEKT's conceptualisation of prevention aligns with the foundational notion, emphasising prevention through the cultivation of social resilience and concentrating on stages antecedent to radicalisation. In this study, we primarily focus on "primary prevention", which involves addressing societal issues and associated individuals before they come into contact with violent extremist groups and ideologies, and before specific risk factors crystallise (Koehler, 2020). Furthermore, the

[224] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 3.

[225] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 2.

[226] Interview with the stakeholder 2.

implementation of "secondary prevention", aimed at hindering the solidification of risk factors or the early stages of the radicalisation process, is considered significant (Koehler, 2020).

Through this research, social networks have been identified as the most crucial protective factor in PVE among youth. Previous studies have demonstrated that strong ties with family, friends and the community can provide young people with a sense of belonging, thereby reducing the allure of extremist ideologies.

In the youth focus group, there was noticeable high motivation for participation in activities that promote unity and collaboration, such as sports teams, cultural groups, or volunteer projects. Participants in the focus group regularly spend their free time in extracurricular activities, various clubs, and sports associations. A few participants volunteer in an NGO that brings together young people of all nationalities with the aim of increasing youth involvement in the local community. Some young individuals mentioned participating in activities organised by religious institutions. Youth spend a significant portion of their free time on social media networks, predominantly using the internet as a source of information.

In addition to academic success, participants in the focus group mentioned that their primary motivations for spending their free time in extracurricular activities include socialising with peers, seeking entertainment, and the desire to learn something new while being part of the change. The influence of peers is exceptionally important, and many participants in the conducted research began engaging in sports, volunteering, or activities organised by religious institutions due to the positive experiences of older siblings or friends. They attribute their successes in extracurricular activities to the school and teachers who recognise their creativity. Almost all participants in the focus group emphasise school as the most significant actor that provides young people with opportunities for social engagement:



> "In school, we have the opportunity to do activities that we want…."[227]

> "I see that school provides the most opportunities. Besides school, we have fewer opportunities…"[228]

Furthermore, participants in the focus group believe that sports can be a significant preventive factor in combating social divisions and VE. In this regard, one participant[229] in the focus group states: "Sport and sports activities connect the youth. In my opinion, sport is the biggest reflection of society and all its problems."

Young people who participated in the focus group were organisers of the event "Sports Against Divisions", where they sought to encourage socialising and interaction with students attending "two schools under one roof" in the Croatian language. One participant[230] stated:

[227] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 1.
[228] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 5.
[229] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 4.
[230] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 4.

"We organised a tournament, it was excellent. It partially felt the same as playing with peers here (referring to students attending "two schools under one roof" in the Bosnian language), but the difference was still noticeable. Nevertheless, the love for sports overcame the ethnonationalism prevailing in society."

Participants in the focus group agreed that sports can be a significant factor in their divided environment, as it encourages students from "two schools under one roof" to collaborate, share goals, and work together to achieve success. This can help reduce divisions and promote mutual respect.

### Resilience factors

When attempting to define the term "resilience" one confronts a lack of consensus in the definitions. In this context, we adopt the definition of resilience as "the ability of political systems and (in)formal governance arrangements at the community level to adapt to shifting political and social conditions" (Pastuovic et al., 2021: 42).

In exploring resilience factors, in our research, media and information literacy have been identified as the most significant resilience factors against VE among young people. Media and information literacy empower youth to be informed, think critically, and resist manipulations that could lead to VE. These skills are essential for societal development in resisting extremist influences and promoting inclusivity, tolerance and peace. In line with this, a participant in the focus group[231] stated: "I think that improving media and information literacy among young people (and citizens) would help promote coexistence and eliminate divisions."



Digital tools play a significant role across all education levels in bringing important topics closer to young people. According to a stakeholder[232] who, through informal activities, works with young people from a divided community, strengthening social cohesion and preventing violent forms of behaviour, digital tools can help promote a society without violence, divisions, and ethnonationalism. However, without these skills, young people are often unaware of harmful narratives in the media and digital platforms and do not know how to react promptly to such narratives. Young people believe that the media contributes to divisions in their reporting, often resorting to manipulation, misinformation, provocative rhetoric, and sensationalist headlines. These findings align with prior research, suggesting that young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina typically do not trust the information and news they read, hear, or see, perceiving the media as biased and politically influenced (Turčilo, Osmić & Žiga, 2017; Hodžić & Sokol, 2019).

The stakeholder's[233] experience highlights that young people actively follow global events, particularly in the political domain. However, due to various interpretations presented in the media, they are often confused by the content they consume. This emphasises the need for educational initiatives to enhance media and information literacy among the youth.

[231] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 1.

[232] Interview with the stakeholder 1.

[233] Interview with the stakeholder 1.

"Young people are nearly 24 hours online. When the situation in the Middle East escalated (referring to the Israel-Palestine conflict), many different pieces of information were disseminated, confusing the youth in forming their own stance. They do not know how to react. The divisive narratives created in domestic media do not help the youth."

Through the initiatives of NGOs, the stakeholder[234] who educates young people from "two schools under one roof" organised panels, seminars and educational events intended for young people, parents and teachers. The purpose of these activities is to develop critical thinking in the analysis of media content and strengthen competencies to elevate the level of media literacy among youth. Summarising the professional experiences of participants in the research who, through informal education, strive to improve the quality of life of young people and their parents, and to strengthen the role of young people in the local community and bring preventive programmes closer to them in an interesting way in order to suppress VE, education on media and information literacy plays a crucial role in enhancing the resilience of young people to VE for several important reasons. Educated youth are better prepared to identify manipulations, misinformation and propaganda that can spread through social media and the internet. This enables them to think critically about the information they consume. The stakeholder[235] believes that schools should be the main actors in promoting media and information literacy, encouraging young people to seek various sources of information and diverse perspectives on specific topics. This approach would help them better understand the complexity of social, political and cultural issues.



### Resistance factors

Resistance factors in the context of preventing youth VE refer to specific characteristics, conditions or elements that act as protective factors or forces reducing the inclination of young individuals or communities to engage in VE. Identifying and strengthening resilient factors is crucial in prevention efforts to build resistance and deter the propensity towards adopting extremist ideologies or participating in violent activities.

In our research, the most significant identified factor in resisting youth VE is the active involvement of the local community. This implies that community members engage collaboratively to advance the common good. This would mean that, in the context of PVE among youth, people in the community recognise the importance of preventing radicalisation among young people and work together to create an environment in which the youth are protected from negative influences.

The data from the conducted research indicates that encouraging young people to participate in the local community through volunteer activities, community welfare projects, or other initiatives promoting positive values contributes to the formation of an inclusive community. Such a community protects the youth from harmful narratives. One participant in the focus group[236] highlighted several inspiring examples of young individuals actively working to overcome ethnic divisions among peers. These

[234] Interview with the stakeholder 1.

[235] Interview with the stakeholder 1.

[236] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 6.

positive experiences often stem from activities organised by NGOs and civic associations with the intention of fostering interactions among youth in a divided environment:

> "In the folklor club (Folklor is the term for various aspects of tradition within Bosnia and Herzegovina, here referring to the aspect of traditional dance), girls of different nationalities perform alongside us without any issues. I did not sense any trace of nationalism coming from them... Despite the presence of a Croatian artistic society, they chose to perform with us because they like our activities."

Another participant in the focus group[237], explaining how the local community can foster tolerance among young people, stated: "Divisions need to be suppressed. When we perform folklor, we dress in the traditional clothes of all three ethnic groups, and no one has an issue with that."

In the interview, one of the stakeholders[238] shared the experience of establishing an information technology (IT) corner in the "two schools under one roof". While acquiring IT skills, students of different nationalities also fostered face-to-face interaction and collaboration:

> "In projects like these, divisions can be overcome, and physical interaction can be facilitated. We bring young people closer to the idea that there is 'our environment', 'our church', 'our mosque', because they belong to all of us, thus strengthening the identities of the youth."



In the interviews,[239] the stakeholders also emphasised that collaboration among the local community, parents and teachers is crucial in creating a supportive environment for young people facing radical ideas and violent content. In this context, NGOs, where the interviewees are engaged, organise training sessions for teachers and parents, offering them guidance on identifying potentially risky behaviours in children and youth. This equips them to respond promptly to socially unacceptable behaviours. Given the specificity of the local community, the premises of the NGO are located near the centre for social work. This allows them to collaborate with experts (psychologists, social workers, pedagogues, sociologists) in identifying children from risky and vulnerable categories and preventing undesirable behaviours.

Considering that many children come from rural areas, stakeholders often use the facilities of local communities and religious institutions to organise workshops for children and youth in their natural environment. In a high school where numerous risky behaviours were identified among the youth, an Informal Education Corner was established. It conducts workshops with the aim of enhancing self-confidence, developing communication skills, promoting media and information literacy among youth, recognising harmful narratives on the internet, etc.

[237] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 4.

[238] Interview with stakeholder 2.

[239] Interview with stakeholder1 and 2.

## EXISTING OR POTENTIAL VULNERABILITY INDICATORS (BOTH INTRA- AND EXTRA-COMMUNITY)

While youth recognise the significance of schools as key participants in promoting a society without divisions and VE, the research indicates that additional efforts are necessary in both curricular and extracurricular activities to overcome differences among students in the "two schools under one roof". In this regard, the focus group participants believe that the education system, which has allowed political ideologies to infiltrate education, plays a crucial role in hindering interactions among students. One participant in the interview explains that she was not aware of the divisions undermining society until she started attending a school labelled as "two schools under one roof":

> "I have never thought about divisions. It should be completely normal for all of us to be together. I was surprised when I found that there is a separate class/school for students of Croatian nationality. They have different class times so that they do not encounter us in the hallways (referring to students attending the 'two schools under one roof' where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language)."[240]

Although the research yielded data indicating that students engage in discussions with teachers about divisions present in the school based on ethnic backgrounds, and have attempted on several occasions to organise joint activities to overcome differences and enrich relationships between students attending classes in the Croatian language, collaboration was not realised:



> "Last year, we talked to a teacher about the divisions in our school. We agreed that all students should be together and attend classes as one. In the end, the teacher told us that they (students attending classes in the Croatian language) refuse to be with us."[241]

This data suggests that it is necessary to organise various activities and contents within the education process to encourage youth to be open and tolerant towards different cultures, beliefs and perspectives, as well as to think beyond established frameworks.

The prevalence of divisions in all aspects of society becomes apparent in the experience of a student who, upon receiving an invitation from the coach, declined to join the basketball team because, as he put it, the team members had exhibited strong nationalist tendencies in the past.[242] This is further supported by a situation where the mentioned team rejected one of the best Bosnian-Herzegovinian basketball players to play for their team because he did not identify as a member of the Croatian nationality.

Furthermore, in the interview,[243] a stakeholder shared their experience from the educational sessions they conducted for parents. In most cases, these educational sessions are attended exclusively by

[240] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 8.
[241] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 1.
[242] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 4.
[243] Interview with the stakeholder 2.

parents of one ethnic group, whereas parents from other ethnic groups rarely participate. Low turnout of parents can be associated with several factors:

> "Ethnic affiliation posed a challenge for us; most attendees were from the Bosniak ethnic group. I believe parents have the wrong perception that the educational sessions are 'reserved' only for Bosniaks because they were held in a part of the city where the majority is Bosniak. However, in the last educational session held, we had a diverse group, including parents of Croatian nationality.
> It's just the way it is; we have divided kindergartens, schools, and cafes, and it is assumed that everything is divided. That is why people had misconceptions about our association and educational sessions."

One participant in the focus group[244] did not believe that his peers from another ethnic group avoided contact with him because of ethnic differences. Instead, he thinks that their interactions are hindered by the geographical distance between the places where Bosniaks and Croats live.

While it is important that the young participant seeks to understand and justify the reasons for limited contact with peers from another ethnic group, it is important to note that they live at a relatively short distance, and geographical barriers can be overcome if there is a desire to do so. Moreover, many reports have shown that young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina often live separately within cities due to political reasons (we mentioned earlier that they have separate kindergartens, separate schools, and separate cafes…), even though they are geographically very close. They face "invisible borders". The results of the "Voices of Youth" study (2016) show that young people do not want to form close emotional relationships when interacting with youth of another ethnic background. In other words, the research results indicate the need to strengthen social cohesion among youth of different ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



This suggests that, despite having a wide range of educational and cultural opportunities, insisting on ethnic divisions poses a barrier to multicultural education and creates an artificial "Us" versus "Them" world. On the basis of the above, we can conclude that education reform programmes in Bosnia and Herzegovina could play a role in reducing radicalisation and division in society by introducing curricular and extracurricular activities that would help prevent and combat radicalisation and VE.

[244] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 2.

# Filling the gaps

## MISSING OR NEGLECTED PROTECTIVE, RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE FACTORS

Although the research identified some key protective, resilience, and resistance factors, data analysis revealed the absence of important factors that could play a crucial role in PVE among youth.

First, we will address religion. Namely, data obtained in phase WP6 showed that almost half of the respondents — youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina — identify as true believers, with the majority considering that the influence of religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina society is significant. This data can assist us in understanding and perceiving the holistic perspective of religion as a driving force for tolerance, understanding, and social cohesion in preventing and combating youth violent extremism. By addressing key causes and employing multi-faceted strategies, including religion, societies like the Bosnian-Herzegovinian one can work towards creating environments in which young people are less susceptible to extremist influences and are empowered to actively contribute to their communities and the broader world.

Moreover, in PVE among youth, a crucial aspect is the reduction of inequalities stemming from deep ethnic divisions. These divisions often result in a subjective sense of injustice among young people. We have previously mentioned the experience of a student attending "two schools under one roof" in the Bosnian language. He chose not to join a basketball club where members of another ethnic group predominate because he believed he would not receive "equal treatment". In other words, he feared not being respected as a team member or being denied opportunities because he belonged to another ethnic group. Owing to the subjective perception of dissatisfaction, the common occurrence of injustice, neglect, and marginalisation of youth is evident (Perry, 2016), as seen in the responses of participants in the focus group:

> "I was raised to give everyone a chance, yet we are seldom given one..."[245]
> "Our generations should not be divided. We are not to blame for that (referring to wartime events and divisions that emerged in society)."[246]
> "We need joint activities (with students attending 'two schools under one roof' in the Croatian language). Anyone should be able to attend, regardless of religion and ethnic background. But such activities are not common."[247]

The data obtained indicates a lack of content in both curricular and extracurricular activities that could contribute to the positive shaping of youth identity. The implementation of activities (in schools, NGOs, associations, cultural, sports, or religious institutions) can help foster a positive sense of identity among



[245] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 4.
[246] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 5.
[247] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 6.

youth. This includes the development of cultural, religious and ethnic identities, which provide a counter-narrative to extremist ideologies that exploit feelings of marginalisation or identity crisis.

Additionally, the data points to insufficient focus and knowledge of the diaspora, which can play a significant role in PVE among youth by imparting rich experiences of cultural diversity. In the focus group, none of the participants could provide specific examples of individuals contributing to the local community through their work, nor did they have contacts with such individuals in the country or the diaspora. Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen the connections between youth and the diaspora, as this can contribute to understanding and respecting diversity, and reduce the potential for extremism. Successful members of the diaspora who have been integrated into society and achieved their goals can serve as inspiration and role models for youth in preserving and strengthening connections with their cultural heritage, contributing to the development of a positive identity. In addition, the role of the diaspora is crucial in financial and organisational contexts, as it can support programmes and initiatives focused on education, mentorship, and skills development of youth.

### ADDRESSING RISK FACTORS: ENGAGING OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Results from the youth focus group highlight the paradoxical role of schools in PVE and social divisions. Although schools are recognised as strong protective factors against VE, statements from young participants in the focus group suggest that the education system contributes to divisions, creating fertile ground for the development of harmful narratives among youth. One participant in the focus group[248] described a situation in which a teacher, discussing wartime events and the causes of social divisions, insulted members of other nationalities, despite the fact that students from different nationalities were present in the class. This vivid example illustrates the perception of young people in the focus group that even teachers, who are expected to embody democratic values, sometimes exhibit nationalist behaviour and convey harmful narratives in classrooms.



If there is a systemic commitment to eradicating discrimination, segregation, and the politicisation of education, curricula need to be enriched with content that fosters critical thinking, encourages interpersonal skills necessary for engaging with others, and strengthens social skills crucial for active participation in a democratic society. Teachers should be role models for democratic principles. In this process, alongside schools, the local community (NGOs, associations, cultural and religious institutions, and sports organisations) can contribute to improving the position of youth in society and preventing undesirable behaviours.

### GENDER SPECIFICITIES: ROLES, SOCIAL STRUCTURES, DRIVERS, NARRATIVES, INEQUALITIES…

In the conducted research, no significant presence of gender inequality was observed as a crucial factor to be analysed. However, other differences, such as ethnic affiliation or membership in a political party, proved to be more pertinent aspects for this case study. Despite their lack of interest in political issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the youth demonstrated an awareness of the political situation and the challenges that the country is facing. In line with this, one respondent states: "Politics is the problem.

[248] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 8.

In our local community, you cannot do anything if you are not a member of a party. That's clear to everyone."[249]

Supporting this statement is the reflection of a focus group participant[250] who believes that, if he does not join any political party, he will remain "undetermined", ultimately meaning that what the youth are identifying as politics, simply refers to practices of political clientelism rather then to politics as such. The focus group participants believe that young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina generally do not engage in politics, but politics engages with them. They view the phenomenon of "two schools under one roof" as the clearest indication of political manipulation, which is detrimental to children and youth. Considering the data from the research so far, it is not surprising that all focus group participants agree that the concept of "two schools under one roof" is a political initiative that should be halted in order to eliminate segregation in education. While there is doubt about the extent to which decision-makers and political parties prioritise the elimination of ethnic-based segregation in education, it is widely believed that they should play a key role in facilitating this process. In other words, the youth participating in the study showed a high level of consensus that the concept of "two schools under one roof" is considered part of the ethnonationalistic network in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## CAPACITY-BUILDING POTENTIALITIES AND AREAS FOR INTERVENTION

Despite the political challenges and segregation in the educational process in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the positive attitude of the youth toward abolishing "two schools under one roof" demonstrates their commitment to overcoming imposed divisions:



> "'Two schools under one roof' represents a barrier and should be abolished..."[251]
> "We should all rise above ethnonationalism, attend one school, and not make distinctions among children. A high-quality education system that promotes tolerance can help achieve this goal."[252]
> "I believe the solution lies in replacing current political leaders and providing an opportunity for young people to create new ideas, thereby ceasing to emphasise differences in society."[253]

The dedication of youth to overcoming imposed divisions brings a range of benefits, including the development of a more tolerant, understanding, and inclusive society. Therefore, investing in the youth and promoting their active role in society is crucial. Since youth believe that ethnic-based segregation in education is a pivotal political objective for preserving diverse ideologies, they consider that only the international community, through its influence and projects, can resolve the political crisis and enable coexistence in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

[249] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 3.
[250] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 6.
[251] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 3.
[252] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 7.
[253] Focus group with students from the "two schools under one roof" where classes are conducted in the Bosnian language, participant 3.

## SETTING INDICATORS FOR A FUTURE ASSESSMENT TOOL

According to the data obtained from focus groups and interviews with stakeholders, participants believe that NGOs implement more effective activities compared to governmental organisations in creating a conducive environment and encouraging greater youth participation in the local community. Therefore, it is crucial to support local NGOs in future steps, as participants in the research perceive them as key drivers of change.

"We need a critical mass of people who will think differently. NGOs should be initiators of change in society. The non-governmental sector corrects and shifts the boundary of what citizens unquestionably accept in society. The NGO sector can offer different solutions."[254]

As an example, we will mention stakeholders from the conducted research, who are deeply involved in the local community and can identify early signs of socially unacceptable behaviour among young people. In these efforts, collaboration between the government and non-governmental sectors is essential to develop programmes that promote critical thinking and the values of peace, tolerance and diversity. Exchanging experience is important for developing more effective prevention strategies, strengthening the role of youth, and preventing radicalisation. Ultimately, collaboration is crucial as it combines resources and expertise to create a comprehensive approach to preventing youth VE, and their active role in the community.



[254] Interview with the stakeholder 2.

# Conclusions

## CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS ON THE MESO-LEVEL PREVENTION INDICATORS

The data obtained in the research highlights the importance of a close connection between formal and non-formal education in reducing the vulnerability of youth to radical and extremist ideologies. This process should be accompanied by horizontal collaboration between education institutions and civil society organizations (CSOs) through various activities that offer young people knowledge and skills to navigate societal challenges. However, the data suggests that such activities and contents are insufficiently promoted and encouraged through the education system, which further deepens the harmful narratives to which young people are exposed daily. Meso-level analysis shows that the civil sector is more active than the governmental sector in strengthening the role of youth in the local community and PVE.

## IDENTIFICATION OF TRANSFERABLE EXPERIENCES OR BEST PRACTICES

The conducted research has demonstrated that PVE at the meso level in Bosnia and Herzegovina necessitates a comprehensive and coordinated approach involving all significant stakeholders: (1) Schools should engage in raising awareness among youth about the dangers of VE. This involves educational programmes that promote tolerance, coexistence, and an understanding of diversity. In addition to schools, the research has identified that (2) local NGOs and independent initiatives can play a crucial role in monitoring and preventing extremism. In this process, CSOs, local authorities, and educational institutions must collaborate to provide positive alternatives for youth (such as sports activities, arts, cultural activities, and other forms of engagement) to prevent socially undesirable behaviours. Finally, (3) successful young individuals can have a strong influence on their peers. It is essential to support their development and enable them to become positive role models in their communities.



## POTENTIAL AREAS FOR SOCIAL INTERVENTION IN PVE

Potential social interventions in PVE among youth should be grounded in the following: (1) quality education that promotes tolerance, diversity, and fosters critical thinking among the youth; (2) social engagement of youth in cultural, sports, humanitarian, and other positive activities; (3) the promotion of intercultural dialogue and programmes between different ethnic and religious groups to reduce polarisation and foster a sense of unity; (4) media literacy, involving education that helps young people recognise and resist misinformation, propaganda, and extremist content on the internet; and (5) psychosocial support to empower young individuals for a world of diversity.

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# KOSOVO

Gjakova Case Study. *Lulzim Peci*

Mitrovica South Case Study. *Lulzim Peci*



# Gjakova Case Study

## Introduction

The Municipality of Gjakova was selected for a case study because of its diverse religious practices and beliefs, making it a unique entity in Kosovo. This region has been home to Sunni, Bektashi, and various Tariqats within Islam, alongside the coexistence of Catholicism and Christian Orthodoxy for centuries. Additionally, after the Kosovo War of 1998-99, Protestantism has been gaining ground in this region (Peci and Demjaha, 2022).

After concluding research at the micro level, which focused on youth at the Kosovo level, the second phase of research at the meso level was initiated in this municipality. Within this framework, earlier analyses at the meso level have pinpointed three prevention indicators: education and knowledge, employment, and a secular ethnic identity (ibid).Contrastingly, the results of the micro-level research reveal that young individuals involved in volunteer activities show a significantly lower inclination towards physical violence compared to their non-participating counterparts. This implies that engaging in volunteerism serves as a crucial preventive factor in Kosovo. Additionally, the micro-level research highlights political and social participation as the foremost factor in preventing violent extremism (PVE) in Kosovo. This element fosters a sense of civic responsibility, empowerment, and active participation in decision-making processes, effectively countering apathy and disillusionment that could otherwise fuel radicalisation and violent extremism (VE).



By synthesising insights from prior research conducted at the meso level in this municipality, alongside micro-level findings on a national scale, and guided by a comprehensive understanding of the drivers of VE, it is possible to identify convergences among the factors impacting PVE. In this framework, PVE Factor_1 is outlined as the growing trust in state institutions and secularism. Conversely, PVE Factor_2 is associated with the reduction of religious, political, and social militant inclinations. The influence of these factors has been examined in this research undertaking.

Given this context, the aim of this research is to pinpoint the relevant protective, resilient, and resistance factors. Concurrently, the objective is to identify current or potential indicators of vulnerability and to address any possible gaps in their understanding and mitigation.

# Research methodology

## RECAP FROM RESULTS FROM THE FIRST PHASE OF THE MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The research outcomes reveal that religious social practices in Gjakova exhibit a liberal nature, and the social environment related to multi-religiosity is marked by a high level of coexistence. Additionally, the research establishes that national identity holds precedence over religious affiliation in the Municipality of Gjakova. However, the research findings suggest potential deviations from traditional secularism of ethnic Albanians. This could potentially give rise not only to inter-religious tensions but also tensions between secularists and those with religious affiliations, ultimately pushing certain social circles towards extremism (ibid).

Against this backdrop, the research results offer ample evidence that the impact of meso-level drivers in the Municipality of Gjakova generally aligns with macro-level drivers. Similar to the national level analysis, research participants perceive religion as a major driver of VE, intricately linked with the drivers of digital socialisation and transnational dynamics. Participants also acknowledge the impact of economic deprivation, with education and political grievances as sub-drivers, on radicalisation and VE. However, territorial inequalities and opportunities for leisure and culture are largely deemed insignificant to the occurrence of VE (ibid).



Establishing a causal relationship between radicalisation and VE cannot be attributed to a single driver, and no motivational factor at a singular level of analysis can definitively determine an individual's likelihood of becoming radicalised. According to meso-level analysis, some unemployed individuals lacking a decent level of social well-being may lean towards radicalism and extremism. Similarly, while political grievances are not identified as a significant push factor for radicalisation in research analysis, individuals consistently disappointed with the performance of political parties and governments may, in certain cases, turn towards radicalism and extremism. Lastly, research findings indicate that young participants allocate a substantial portion of their free time to digital social media, where they may encounter instances of extremist elements utilising digital technologies to propagate their ideologies and recruit individuals. However, not all these youth will undergo radicalisation due to extremist ideologies disseminated through digital social media (ibid).

To sum up, the research inputs indicate that the dominant narratives in the Municipality of Gjakova revolve around the experience of poverty, stemming from the lack of clear prospects for economic development and youth employment (ibid).

## DESCRIPTION OF THE CRITERIA FOR THE CASE STUDY SELECTION AND CRITERIA FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

The key criteria for selecting this case study are based on the presence of resilience factors. Despite the existence of conditions that could potentially drive people towards VE in the Municipality of Gjakova, such as multi-religiosity and economic deprivation, violence on the ground has not occurred.

This research endeavour seeks to identify the crucial protective, resilient and resistance factors among the youth population in the Municipality of Gjakova. Simultaneously, the Kosovo Country Report findings emphasise that a notable percentage of foreign terrorist fighters from Kosovo fell within the age bracket of 20 to 30 (Peci and Demjaha, 2020).

Given this context and taking into account the specific conditions in the Municipality of Gjakova, the criteria used for sample selection were based on ensuring gender and urban-rural representation. The focus group was specifically designed to include young participants aged 18 to 30. Moreover, three interviews were carried out with seasoned local civil society activists who possess extensive knowledge of the changing social landscape in the Municipality of Gjakova over the past two decades. This approach was adopted to gain a thorough understanding of this research.

All participants in this research belonged to the Albanian ethnicity. When it comes to gender, urban-rural representation and religious affiliation, out of the 21 individuals who participated in this research, five were male and 16 female, 17 Muslims and four Catholics, five were from rural areas and 16 from urban areas.

The focus groups of young participants of age 18 to 30 years consisted of 18 individuals, aged from 19 to 23 years, 13 of whom were female and five male, four were Catholics and 12 Muslims, five originating from rural and the other 13 from urban areas, whereas two interviews were with female respondents, and one with a male. All the latter were from urban areas.



## CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

At the outset, the meso-level research was designed to involve one focus group and three interviews. However, given the minimal feedback received from participants in the initial focus group, a second focus group was arranged with youth in Gjakova to address this shortfall.

# Meso-level dynamics of prevention

## CONTEXT SPECIFICITIES

**Description, type of social interaction context, target population, actors and stakeholders mapping, relevant data, and research available. Existing preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) measures.**

As per the latest census in Kosovo in 2021, the Municipality of Gjakova has a population of 94,556 residents, with 42% residing in urban areas and 58% in rural areas. The ethnic make-up of the municipality is predominantly Albanian (92.7%), followed by the Egyptian community (5.4%), Roma (0.78%), Ashkalis (0.65%), and Serbs (0.017%). In terms of religion, the majority of the population is Muslim (81.7%), followed by Catholics (17.20%), while members of other religions and atheists make up 1.1% of the population. About 39.6% of the population is economically active, with an employment rate of 51%. The percentage of people dependent on social assistance is 4.4%, and on pensions, 6.5%, while 5.8% of the population is supported by remittances from diaspora. The municipality is home to 60 pre-elementary, elementary and secondary schools, as well as a public university (Peci and Demjaha, 2022).



In terms of political participation, the Municipality of Gjakova experiences a low level of engagement, particularly with a more noticeable interest in national elections compared to local ones. In the general elections of 2021, the voter turnout was 41.36%,[255] while for municipal assemblies in the same year, it was 37.2%.[256]

Within the territory of the Municipality of Gjakova, there are 14 functional mosques (Council of Islamic Community Gjakova, n.d), the humanitarian organisation "Bereqeti" Gjakova Branch, and seven tekkes at the service of the Bektashiyyah community. Catholic believers have at their service 13 Catholic churches, protestant believers have one Protestant church and Orthodox believers have one Orthodox church.

On the other hand, the Municipality of Gjakova features a robust and dynamic civil society sector[257] that addresses a broad spectrum of issues affecting the well-being of its citizens. In this context, it is essential to highlight the significant role played by the educational non-governmental organization (NGO) "Bone vet - Do it yourself". This organization stimulates the curiosity, imagination and creativity of children and young people, encouraging them to learn through play and technology. Activities

[255] Elections for the Assembly of Kosovo 2021, Statistics of Municipalities, Central Election Commission of Kosovo, 2021, https://kqz-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/6.Statistikat-sipas-komunave-2.pdf

[256] Local Elections 2021, Statistics of Municipalities, Central Election Committee of Kosovo, 2021, https://kqz-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/02.-Statistikat-sipas-komunave.pdf

[257] See: List of Kosovo NGOs, Electronic System of Non-Governmental Organizations, Department for NGOs, Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kosovo, https://ojq.rks-gov.net/RaportiExcel.aspx

include creating games, programming robots, making prototypes with a 3D printer, collaborative problem-solving, developing communication skills, and engaging in reading and learning foreign languages. Between 2014 and 2022, a total of 4,246 students successfully completed various educational programmes offered by this organization. This demonstrates a significant impact on the youth development in this municipality (Foundation Bone vet, 2022).

In this context, it has to be noted that the Municipality of Gjakova has a functional Municipal Council for Community Safety. Its members include representatives not only from municipal and security institutions but also from religious and ethnic communities, NGOs, handicapped communities, local businesses, and the media.[258] The thorough examination of the minutes from the meetings of this council has unveiled that, in several instances, youth violence in schools has been addressed as a significant problem.[259] This reflects the sustained recognition and attention given by the Council to the issue, highlighting its importance and urgency. However, concerning religious-based radicalism and extremism, both Mayor Ardian Gjini and a civil society representative have asserted that its prevalence is very low. In contrast, the civil society representative suggests that political militantism tends to be higher during election campaigns (Dahsyla, 2022). This is also confirmed by one interviewee, who claims that radicalisation and VE has not been a topic for quite some time, and this is a reason for the lack of projects related to this topic recently (since the collapse of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISSI]), with no recorded cases of VE.[260]

In conclusion, the research on radicalism and VE in the Municipality of Gjakova is almost inexistent. Apart from KIPRED's study on the meso-level drivers in this municipality (Peci and Demjaha, 2022), there is no other research dedicated specifically to this region.



### Identified drivers, structural elements, and specific variables

Participants in this research have identified three drivers of radicalism and VE: low level of education, lack of economic opportunities, and religious extremism.

In this context, participants in this research contend that the low level of education significantly fuels the dynamics of radicalisation and VE. Their viewpoint underscores that individuals without education often lack awareness of their individual freedoms and rights, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation by radical and violent extremist groups.[261] Moreover, this educational deficiency, according to them, contributes to poverty, potentially exposing certain individuals to recruitment driven by their feelings of despair.[262]

Research participants asserted that the dearth of economic opportunities, resulting in high levels of youth unemployment, has a significant impact on the dynamics of radicalisation and VE.[263] Another

[258] Municipality of Gjakova, Municipal Council for Community Safety, https://kk.rks-gov.net/gjakove/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/12/FTESE-PUBLIKE-per-propozimin-e-anetareve-te-Keshillit-Komunal-per-Siguri-ne-Bashkesi.pdf

[259] Municipality of Gjakova, Minutes of the Meetings of the Municipal Council for Community Safety, https://kk.rks-gov.net/gjakove/?s=Keshilli+Komunal+per+Siguri+ne+Bashkesi

[260] Interviewee 1, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.

[261] F1, E2 Focus Group, Gjakova, 11 October 2023. Interviewee 2, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.

[262] A3, F1 Focus Group, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.

[263] A12, E13, Focus Group, Gjakova, 18 October 2023.

nuanced perspective on this driver is provided by other participants who believe that a high level of unemployment indeed influences radicalisation and VE. However, they emphasise that the fundamental causes are primarily rooted in the low level of education.[264]

Religious extremism is deemed an influential driver of radicalism and VE by participants in this context. According to one participant, the occurrence of religious extremism in Gjakova, with a predominantly secular society, took community and institutional stakeholders by surprise when several individuals joined ISIS. However, significant reduction has been achieved over the past decade through the intensive efforts of the Kosovo Police and other stakeholders, like local religious leaders, education institutions, NGOs, and so on.[265]. In contrast, another participant suggests that religious extremism can also be fuelled by aggressive secularism, particularly manifested in employment practices towards individuals wearing religious attire.[266] On the other hand, another participant notes that religious differences are quite pronounced in the schools of Gjakova.[267]

In this context, one of the most critical structural elements identified is the absence of prospects for the youth, which stands as their primary concern. Youth face a notably high unemployment rate, coupled with feelings of apathy and socio-political disengagement, along with a low level of education. These conditions amplify the inclination of youth to either emigrate to Western countries or to seek engagement with religion.[268]



Against this backdrop, the exploration of Gjakova has brought to light critical variables essential for preventing radicalism. These encompass education levels, the well-being of the youth, engagement in social and political spheres, and the prevalence of a secular ethnic identity. The intricate interplay of these factors paints a nuanced portrait of the municipality's social fabric, offering insights into potential avenues for protection, resilience and resistance against radicalism and VE. Educational disparities and challenges in youth welfare highlight structural elements that demand attention. Concurrently, the role of identity, both secular and ethno-national, coupled with socio-political participation, emerges as a significant factor shaping the community's ability to withstand radical influences. A more in-depth analysis of these variables provides a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political landscape, offering valuable insights for crafting targeted interventions and policies aimed at promoting social cohesion and countering radicalisation.

## LOCAL DYNAMICS PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

### Protective factors

The concept of protective factors in the context of CONNEKT's working definitions suggests that certain elements within the community inherently act as safeguards against the emergence of religious

[264] E2, F1, A3, Focus Group, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.

[265] Interviewee 1, 18 October 2023.

[266] F2, Focus Group, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.

[267] E 23, Focus Group, Gjakova, 18 October 2023.

[268] Interviewee 1, 2, 3, aGjakova, 11 October 2023.

radicalism and VE. These protective factors are not externally imposed but rather emerge organically from the community itself. The dimensions of demography, geographical characteristics, and economic conditions play a pivotal role in shaping these inherent safeguards. This perspective acknowledges the interconnectedness of community dynamics and the factors contributing to resilience against radicalisation.

Examining the specific case of the Municipality of Gjakova in Kosovo, two prominent protective factors come to light. Firstly, the secular foundation of Kosovo Albanian Society, influenced by the non-religious principles of the customary law (Code of Lek Dukagjini) dating back to the 15th century. This legal code, embraced by the Albanian population irrespective of religious affiliations, has been a longstanding influence, spanning historical periods from the Ottoman era to the early 1990s.[269] It reflects a shared cultural and legal framework that has contributed to a sense of common identity and values within the community.

The second protective factor in Gjakova is associated with the secular essence of Albanian nationalism, which evolved during the late 19th century. This development, occurring in the context of national renewal, was driven by the diverse religious landscape among Albanians. The need for fostering national unity beyond religious differences led to the cultivation of a secular identity, contributing to the resilience of the community against the forces of religious radicalism and VE (Demjaha and Peci, 2016).



### Resilience factors

According to CONNEKT's working definition, resilience factors are the tools developed either by the community or institutionally (such as practices, habits, rituals, laws, policies, etc.) that assist a community in adapting to change and resisting negative impulses that pose a threat to the safety or integrity of the community.

In this vein, similarly with the other parts of Kosovo, a few factors contribute to the resilience of the community in Gjakova. Foremost among these is the constitutional principle of secularism (laïcité) in Kosovo, which underscores the separation of religion from the state and guarantees the freedom of belief, conscience and religion.[270] The state maintains a neutral stance on religious affairs, ensuring equality for all under the law and safeguarding freedom of belief, conscience and religion. This constitutional framework serves as an added layer of protection against religious radicalism and VE, a notable aspect even amid identity shifts, especially among the youth in Gjakova.

Another contributing factor is the functional democracy and political pluralism at both local and national levels, fostering a resilient society by offering a democratic space for expression, and creating an atmosphere of inclusion and representation. Following the resolution of the armed conflict in 1999, a total of seven local elections and eight national elections have been carried out, all acknowledged for

[269] Gani Bobi Centre for Humanistic Studies, Interesi publik dhe religjioni [Public Interest and Religion], Forumi 2015, Prishtina, 2011.

[270] For further details, see: Art. 8 and Art. 38, Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, 15 June 2008, https://mapl.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/1.CONSTITUTION_OF_THE_REPUBLIC_OF_KOSOVO.pdf

their fairness. Since 2000, Gjakova has established municipal democratic institutions, featuring mayors, diverse municipal assemblies, administration and services,[271] alongside rule-of-law institutions such as the Regional Police Directorate founded in 2015,[272] and the Basic Court. [273]

Against this backdrop, participants in this research assert that municipal authorities do not address their grievances and concerns,[274] and they fear to express their concerns leading them to disengagement.[275] On the contrary, some participants believe that the municipal government and directorates are the most responsive institutions concerning community issues. They perceive the national government as being detached from local realities.[276] On the other hand, a participant asserts that youth are socially and politically inactive because they do not perceive any hope in political participation.[277] In this vein, another participant contends that political nepotism is leading youth towards either non-participation or political militancy, rather than fostering civic engagement.[278]

The third factor is media and social media, which address community concerns. Among others, Gjakova has a local TV Syri,[279] Radio Gjakova,[280] Top Radio,[281] and local online magazine Gjakova Press.[282] An alternative avenue for youth engagement in social and political processes within this municipality is the media initiative by youth on the Facebook page "Gjakova Sot", which aims to portray the realities of Gjakova and address community concerns.[283]



The fourth and last factor is the vibrant civil society in this municipality, which, according to a research participant, offers venues for the engagement of youth in social activities.[284] Moreover, another participant contends that NGOs should hold the local government accountable by monitoring its activities and the implementation of local policies.[285] However, participants perceive the involvement of NGOs in PVE activities as very limited.[286]

### Resistance factors

In the context of CONNEKT's working definitions, resistance factors entail purposeful non-violent

[271] For further details, see: Komuna e Gjakovës, Minicipality of Gjakova], https://kk.rks-gov.net/gjakove/
[272] For further details, see: Regional Directorate of Gjakova, Kosovo Police, https://www.kosovopolice.com/en/regional-directorates/rdp-gjakova/
[273] For further details, see: Basic Court of Gjakova, https://gjakove.gjyqesori-rks.org/
[274] E23, A12, A19, Focus Group, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.
[275] Interviewee 2, 11 October 2023.
[276] F1, A3, Focus Group, Gjakova, 11 October 2023
[277] Interviewee 1, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.
[278] Interviewee 2, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.
[279] TV Syri, https://www.syri-vision.tv/
[280] Radio Gjakova, https://radiogjakova.info/
[281] Top Radio, Gjakova, https://topradiolive.com/onair/index/
[282] http://www.agjakovapress.info/
[283] Facebook Portal, Gjakova Sot, https://www.facebook.com/Gjksot?locale=sq_AL
[284] Interviewee 2. Gjakova, 11 October 2023, F2, Focus Group, 11 October 2023.
[285] Interviewee 1, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.
[286] Interviewees, 1, 2, 3, 11 October 2023.

actions directed against the root causes, push and pull factors, narratives, and acts. They are particularly relevant when engaging with youth, civil society organizations (CSOs), and activists.

In this regard, one of the key resistance factors against VE identified is the enhancement and reform of education in the Municipality of Gjakova. In this context, participants suggest that formal education should be enriched with extracurricular activities, offering youth opportunities to engage in school- and community-related activities.[287] Furthermore, participants believe that the reform of curricula should involve the participation of youth in decision-making processes, and this should be complemented by putting it into practice with local authorities.[288] According to one participant, this should be accompanied by the training of teachers who still adhere to old-fashioned, ex-cathedra teaching methods that do not encourage critical thinking and innovation.[289] Another participant believes that it is necessary for teachers to receive training on the prevention of radicalism and VE and how to handle cases among pupils and students if they are detected among them.[290]

The second resilience factor identified involves integrating subjects on religions and religious studies, including agnosticism and atheism, into the curricula of secondary schools. While not explicitly mentioned by participants, it is deemed necessary given the strong religious differences observed among youth and their lack of knowledge about laïcité and secularism – concepts often taken for granted.[291]

The third identified resistance factor involves the development of employment policies coupled with voluntarism. A participant in this research suggests that these policies should foster collaboration with businesses, enabling young individuals to partake in paid practical work or receive stipends for volunteering with public institutions or the NGO sector.[292] Furthermore, a participant observed that municipal authorities have supported volunteering as well.[293]



The fourth identified resistance factor revolves around augmenting voluntarism among youth to elevate their social participation, tolerance and community service. Participants in this research have recognised sporadic involvement in voluntary activities from an early age, but they observe a generally low level of participation among youth.[294] Participants attribute this to a lack of information about volunteering opportunities, and they believe that these opportunities should be presented in informational sessions at schools and advertised.[295]

The fifth identified resistance factor entails the augmentation of youth socio-political participation, affording them a platform to contribute to civic initiatives and articulate their concerns within

[287] Ibid.

[288] Interviewee 3, 11 October 2023, E23, A19, Focus Group, 18 October, 2023

[289] Interviewee 1. 11 October 2023.

[290] Interviewee 2, 11 October 2023.

[291] Interviewee 1, 11 October 2023.

[292] Interviewee 1, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.

[293] E23, Focus Group, 18 October 2023.

[294] F1, A3, F2, E5, Focus Group, Gjakova, 11 October, 2023, E23, A19, A12, Focus Group, Gjakova 18 October 2023.

[295] E23, A19, Focus Group, 18 October 2023, Interviewees 2 and 3, 11 October 2023.

democratic institutions. According to a participant, this participation reduces potentials for religious and political militantism,[296] whereas another one claims that this will also increase the level of trust in institutions and patriotism among youth.[297]

### EXISTING OR POTENTIAL VULNERABILITY INDICATORS (BOTH INTRA AND EXTRA COMMUNITY)

The examining of the above analyses unveils a notable vulnerability within the research context. This vulnerability is characterised by the absence of municipal policies specifically targeting youth unemployment and the improvement of education levels. This absence points to a gap in the institutional framework that hinders formulation of comprehensive strategies to address these critical aspects of youth development.

A second vulnerability becomes apparent, stemming from a deficiency in both policy formulation and institutional frameworks, to effectively tackle the potential for radicalism and VE. This deficiency is particularly rooted in the pronounced religious differences among the youth and their firmly entrenched convictions. This inadequacy highlights the need for a more nuanced and tailored approach within policies and institutions to address the multifaceted dimensions of radicalisation and extremism in the studied context.



[296] A12, E23, Focus Group, 18 October 2023.

[297] Interviewee 2, 11 October 2023.

# Filling the gaps

## MISSING OR NEGLECTED PROTECTIVE, RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE FACTORS

The research findings have not emphasised political discourse as a resistance factor in addressing radicalisation and VE. It is noteworthy that political parties have predominantly avoided engaging with the issues of radicalism and VE, as well as the societal and identity trends influenced by global Islamic proponents in Kosovo (Demjaha and Peci, 2016).

## ADDRESSING RISK FACTORS: ENGAGING OTHER STAKEHOLDERS, AND NEW TARGETS

The prevention of radicalism and VE in the examined context confronts substantial challenges. Derived from the aforementioned research findings, it can be deduced that a crucial risk factor lies in the absence of proactive policies and initiatives from municipal authorities, creating a vulnerability that fundamentalist religious leaders may exploit for their agendas.

Another peril involves the socio-political non-participation of youth who have lost hope in their homeland, leaning towards either migration or disengagement and apathy. This susceptibility can be easily manipulated by religious fundamentalist elements. In this vein, as uncovered by a 2016 survey commissioned by KIPRED, in the Gjakova region, within the category of non-practising Albanian Muslims, 42.6% identified solely as Albanian, 42.6% identified solely as Muslim, 5.6% identified as Muslim first and Albanian second, and 9.3% identified as Albanian first and Muslim second. Among practising Albanian Muslims, 73.9% identified as Albanian first and Muslim second, 13% identified as Muslim first and Albanian second, and 13% identified solely as Muslim. For non-practising Albanian Christians in the same region, 73.3% identified as Albanian first and Christian second, 20% identified solely as Albanian, 3.3% identified solely as Christian, and 3.3% identified as Christian first and Albanian second. Among practising Christian Albanians, 52.9% identified as Albanian first and Christian second, 20.6% identified solely as Christian, 17.6% identified as Christian first and Albanian second, and 8.8% identified solely as Albanian (ibid). However, a worrisome discovery was the inclination of both Albanian Muslims (9.3% non-practising and 13% practising) and Albanian Christians (non-practising 3.3% and practising 20.6%) to disavow national affiliation. This refusal could prompt Albanian Muslims to identify more strongly with the Muslim Ummah, and Albanian Christians with the Global Catholic community. Such tendencies may undermine the secular-based national identity of Albanians and potentially serve as a breeding ground for religious extremism, which also suggests the gradual erosion of this protective factor. These findings are backed by participants in this research, who claim that among youth there are evident rejections of ethnic Albanian identity in favour of religion.[298]

Political silence in the public discourse presents another significant risk. The lack of involvement by local authorities and political parties in discussions on radicalism and VE has created a vacuum



[298] Interviewee 1 and 3, Gjakova, 11 October 2023

exploited by certain religious leaders and activists openly challenging the secular nature and constitutional order of Kosovo, including its liberal democratic foundations. This political indifference has the potential to undermine the efforts of rule of law institutions significantly in preventing radicalism and VE. Furthermore, among the 13 directorates within the municipal government, only one is presently headed by a director who was below 30 years old at the time of her appointment.[299]Additionally, within the Municipal Assembly consisting of 36 members, seven fall within this age range,[300] serving as an indicator of relatively low youth political participation in Gjakova.

In this vein, an interviewee believes that the prevailing patriarchal culture in this community discourages participation and free expression of youth.[301] Moreover, a participant thinks that municipal and national authorities should organise information campaigns for increasing socio-political participation of youth and provide them with incentives.[302]

Another identified risk is the inadequacy of the education system and teachers in actively preventing identity shifts among the younger generations of youth, wherein religious differences take precedence over a secular national identity.

These recognised risk factors underscore the imperative for engagement from diverse stakeholders beyond municipal authorities, rule of law institutions, and CSOs. Political parties and their youth organisations, along with moderate religious leaders, primary and secondary schools, including teachers and pupil organisations, should assume a pivotal role in tackling these challenges. This collaborative approach is essential for developing a comprehensive and effective strategy to counteract the multifaceted risks of radicalism and VE within the Municipality of Gjakova.



## GENDER SPECIFICITIES: ROLES, SOCIAL STRUCTURES, DRIVERS, NARRATIVES, INEQUALITIES…

The balance of women's representation in the local government of Gjakova is moderate. Significantly, a woman occupies the position of the Speaker in the Municipal Assembly, and among the 36 members in the assembly, 13 are female.[303] Examining the administrative structure reveals that three out of the 13 directorates are led by women, responsible for areas including education, health and social welfare, budget, culture, youth, and sports.[304] This distribution illustrates a nuanced landscape of gender representation within the local governance framework.

Certainly, this research has drawn attention to the prevalence of patriarchal social norms in this municipality,[305] manifesting a noticeable gender dimension. These norms often dictate specific roles,

[299] Municipality of Gjakova, Directorates, https://kk.rks-gov.net/gjakove/

[300] Municipal Assembly of Gjakova, https://kk.rks-gov.net/gjakove/asambleistet-keshilltaret/

[301] Ibid.

[302] Interviewee 1, 11 October 2023.

[303] Members of the Municipal Assembly of Gjakova, https://kk.rks-gov.net/gjakove/asambleistet-keshilltaret/

[304] Municipality of Gjakova, Directorates, kk.rks-gov.net/gjakove/

[305] Interviewee 1, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.

behaviours, and expectations for individuals based on their gender, reinforcing the idea that men hold primary authority and decision-making power within families and communities. In this context, there were instances where women in Gjakova, mobilised by CSOs, protested against domestic violence.[306]

The research findings have also illuminated a nuanced perspective on the practice of wearing hijabs, exposing instances of discrimination faced by women who choose to wear them. One participant asserted that women who wear hijabs experience discrimination, particularly in terms of employment opportunities, leading to the erosion of trust in institutions.[307]

## CAPACITY-BUILDING POTENTIALITIES AND AREAS FOR INTERVENTION

This research has highlighted a notable deficit in the understanding of radicalism and VE among participating youth.[308] This includes a lack of insight into the ideological foundations driving these phenomena. Moreover, the research identified deficiencies in comprehending differences between state concepts based on laïcité, secularism, and atheism, on the one hand, and the differences between state-church relationships, multiculturalism and theocracy, on the other. Similarly, there were identified knowledge gaps concerning the concepts of nation and national identities.[309] Addressing these gaps becomes imperative for fostering informed discussions and devising strategies to counter radicalism while promoting a nuanced understanding of diverse socio-political concepts.

This research has brought to light a significant deficiency in the understanding of radicalism and VE among the participating youth and teachers.[310] This encompasses a lack of insight into the ideological foundations driving these phenomena. Furthermore, the research has identified shortcomings in comprehending distinctions between state concepts such as laïcité, secularism, and religion on the other.[311] Similarly, knowledge gaps were identified concerning the concepts of nation and national identities.[312] Closing these gaps becomes crucial for encouraging informed discussions and formulating strategies to combat radicalism, all while fostering a nuanced understanding of various socio-political concepts.



In this context, it is crucial to strengthen the capacities of diverse stakeholders, including municipal authorities, NGOs, media, political parties (including their youth organisations), and primary and secondary school teachers. Moreover, there is an urgent requirement to implement extracurricular activities that address these topics for pupils and secondary school students in both urban and rural areas of this municipality. This comprehensive approach aims to cultivate a more informed and resilient community against radicalism and VE.

[306] See for example: Telegrafi, Protestë në Gjakovë: Mjaft më me vrasjen e vajzave dhe të grave [Enough with killing of girls and women], 8 August 2023, https://telegrafi.com/proteste-ne-gjakove-mjaft-vrasjen-e-vajzave-dhe-grave/

[307] F1, Focus Group, Gjakova, October 11, 2023.

[308] Interviewee 1 and 2, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.

[309] Interviewee 1, 11 October 2023.

[310] Interviewee 1 and 2, Gjakova, 11 October 2023.

[311] Interviewee 1 and 2, A12, Focus Group, Gjakova, 18 October 2023.

[312] Interviewee 1, 11 October 2023.

An essential intervention area identified in this research is the necessity to formulate a comprehensive strategy for youth employment through voluntarism. This strategy should engage key local stakeholders in the drafting process, including pertinent municipal authorities, NGOs, the business sector, and education institutions.[313] This collaborative approach aims for NGOs to tackle the multifaceted challenges faced by youth in the community.

In conclusion, a crucial intervention area involves enhancing youth participation in volunteering activities and socio-political activism, including involvement in decision-making processes.[314] This multifaceted approach aims to elevate social participation among the youth, transitioning them from a state of socio-political apathy to responsible citizenship.

## SETTING INDICATORS FOR A FUTURE ASSESSMENT TOOL (WHAT WOULD BE APPROPRIATE TO SELECT AS A MEASURE INDICATOR FOR IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ENGAGED PROGRAMMES/STRATEGIES/ACTIVITIES)

The following specific indicators have been formulated to measure the impact of the interventions identified in the research conducted within the Municipality of Gjakova:

### Youth understanding of radicalism and extremism

Knowledge assessment: Evaluation of the extent of youth understanding of radicalism, VE, and their ideological foundations through pre-and post-intervention quizzes or surveys.



### Youth understanding of socio-political concepts

Conceptual framework analysis: Employing content analysis to assess youth understanding of socio-political concepts, focusing on laïcité, secularism, atheism, state-church relationships, multiculturalism, theocracy, nation, and national identities.

Comparative Knowledge Mapping: Utilising comparative knowledge mapping techniques to visually represent the distinctions and overlaps in understanding these concepts among youth participants.

### Educational initiatives

Extracurricular participation: Measuring the level of involvement of pupils and secondary school students in extracurricular activities addressing topics related to radicalism and socio-political concepts.

Teacher training: Assessing the impact of training programmes on the capacities of primary and secondary school teachers in addressing radicalism-related knowledge gaps.

### Local youth employment through voluntarism strategy

Stakeholder involvement: Gauging the extent of involvement and collaboration among key stakeholders in the drafting and implementation of the strategy.

[313] Interviewee 1, Focus Group, Mitrovica South, 6 October 2023.

[314] Interviewee, 1, October 2023.

Awareness and implementation: Evaluating the awareness and implementation of the strategy among relevant local entities, including municipal authorities, NGOs, businesses, and education institutions.

Youth volunteering and civic engagement

Participation rates: Measuring the level of youth engagement in volunteering activities.

Civic Education and Promoting Voluntarism Impact: Evaluate the impact of civic education initiatives on fostering civic responsibility and activism among the youth.

These indicators aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of interventions in mitigating radicalism and VE while promoting informed discussions and community resilience.

# Conclusions

## CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS ON THE MESO-LEVEL PREVENTION INDICATORS

In summary, the identified prevention indicators outline a comprehensive strategy to tackle the complex challenges of radicalism and VE in the Municipality of Gjakova. The emphasis on enriching the understanding of ideological foundations and socio-political concepts associated with these issues among both youth and teachers is foundational for fostering informed discussions and nuanced perspectives. The proposed interventions also encompass capacity-building initiatives for a diverse array of stakeholders, ranging from municipal authorities and NGOs to media, political parties, and educators. Furthermore, the encouragement of youth participation in volunteering activities reflects a holistic approach to early prevention and community resilience. These indicators, by promoting understanding, empowerment and inclusivity, aim to establish the groundwork for a more resilient and socially conscious society in Gjakova.

## IDENTIFICATION OF TRANSFERABLE EXPERIENCES OR BEST PRACTICES

Identifying transferable experiences or best practices entails acknowledging successful strategies or approaches in comparable contexts that can be utilised to overcome challenges or attain favourable outcomes. Within the specific context of Gjakova, potential realms for identifying transferable experiences or best practices comprise:



- Models of community engagement: Investigate successful community engagement models from regions grappling with similar challenges related to radicalism and VE. Understanding how communities elsewhere have mobilised against such threats can provide valuable insights.

- Education strategies: Examine regions or municipalities that have implemented successful education initiatives to enhance understanding of diverse socio-political concepts and prevent radicalisation among youth. Transferable practices may include innovative curriculum designs, extracurricular programmes, or teacher training models.

- Interfaith dialogue programmes: Identify regions where interfaith dialogue programmes have successfully promoted tolerance and understanding among different religious communities. Lessons from these experiences can guide strategies for engaging religious leaders in Mitrovica South.

- Youth involvement and empowerment: Explore initiatives from other areas that have effectively involved and empowered youth in civic activities, volunteering, and decision-making processes. Successful youth engagement models can be adapted to cultivate a sense of responsibility and resilience.

- Media and communication strategies: Investigate regions that have implemented successful media and communication strategies to counter radical narratives and promote inclusivity.

Transferable practices may include community-led media campaigns or partnerships between media outlets and local authorities.

- Collaborative governance approaches: Examine municipalities or regions where collaborative governance approaches involving various stakeholders, such as government bodies, NGOs, businesses, and education institutions, have resulted in positive outcomes in preventing radicalisation.

- Women's Empowerment Initiatives: Explore regions with successful initiatives promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Identifying practices that have effectively addressed patriarchal norms and empowered women can inform strategies for the Municipality of Gjakova.

By recognising and incorporating transferable experiences or best practices from various contexts, the Municipality of Gjakova can harness successful strategies to enhance its preventive measures against radicalism and VE.

## POTENTIAL AREAS FOR SOCIAL INTERVENTION IN THE PREVENTION OF VE

Social interventions assume a vital role in PVE by tackling underlying factors and fostering resilience within communities. These potential areas for social intervention should be tailored to the specific context of Gjakova, taking into account the community's needs, dynamics, and cultural sensitivities. Effective social interventions require collaboration, community involvement, and a comprehensive understanding of local conditions. In the specific context of Gjakova, areas for potential social interventions encompass:



- Community engagement and empowerment
  Objective: Cultivate a sense of community belonging and empowerment.
  Activities: Facilitate community forums, workshops, and events to stimulate dialogue, collaboration and shared decision-making. Support initiatives aimed at enhancing the skills and capacities of community members.
- Youth education and awareness
  Objective: Enhance understanding of diverse socio-political concepts and prevent radicalisation among youth.
  Activities: Implement education programmes, extracurricular activities, and awareness campaigns in schools. Provide training for teachers to address knowledge gaps related to concepts such as laïcité, secularism, atheism, state-church relationships, multiculturalism, and nation identities.
- Interfaith dialogue and religious literacy
  Objective: Foster tolerance and understanding among different religious communities.
  Activities: Facilitate interfaith dialogue sessions and promote religious literacy programmes. Engage moderate clerics to lead discussions on non-violence, tolerance and cooperation.
- Youth engagement and voluntarism
  Objective: Encourage active involvement in civic activities and decision-making processes.

Activities: Establish youth councils or forums for constructive dialogue. Promote volunteering opportunities, civic education programmes, and initiatives that empower youth to contribute positively to their communities.

- Media and communication strategies
  Objective: Counter radical narratives and promote inclusivity through effective communication.
  Activities: Develop community-led media campaigns highlighting positive stories, diversity and shared values. Provide media literacy programmes to help community members critically evaluate information.
- Women's empowerment and gender equality
  Objective: Address patriarchal norms and empower women as agents of change.
  Activities: Support initiatives promoting gender equality, women's leadership, and participation in decision-making. Organise awareness campaigns against gender-based discrimination and violence.
- Networking and collaboration
  Objective: Build collaborative networks among various stakeholders.
  Activities: Facilitate partnerships between municipal authorities, NGOs, businesses, education institutions, and religious leaders. Encourage joint efforts in designing and implementing preventive measures.
- Promoting social inclusion and diversity
  Objective: Create an inclusive environment that values diversity.
  Activities: Organise cultural events, festivals and activities celebrating diversity. Promote inclusivity in schools, workplaces and public spaces.
- Capacity-building for stakeholders
  Objective: Enhance the capacities of key stakeholders involved in preventing radicalisation.
  Activities: Provide training programmes for municipal authorities, educators, community leaders, and NGOs. Focus on building their knowledge, skills and resources to effectively address challenges.

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# Mitrovica South Case Study

## Introduction

The choice of the Municipality of Mitrovica South as a case study is grounded in its status as part of the divided city of Mitrovica and its historical significance as a symbol of industrialism and a traditional, multi-ethnic urban centre in the previous century. After the 1999 war, Mitrovica City underwent a partition, giving rise to Mitrovica South, primarily inhabited by Albanians of Muslim faith, and Mitrovica North, predominantly populated by Serbs. This division, delineated along ethnic lines, engendered economic impoverishment and subsequently evolved into a focal point for ethno-political tensions within the broader national context (Peci and Demjaha, 2022).

The second phase of research at the meso level in this municipality was undertaken after the completion of research at the micro level involving youth at the Kosovo level. In this context, the previous analyses at the meso level have identified three prevention indicators: education and knowledge, employment and access to social welfare, and secular ethnic identity (ibid). On the other hand, findings from the micro-level research indicate that youth engaged in volunteer work are significantly less prone to physical violence compared to those who do not participate. This suggests that voluntarism plays a pivotal role as a preventive factor in Kosovo. Moreover, the micro-level research has pinpointed political and social participation as the most significant factor in Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) in Kosovo. This factor nurtures a sense of civic responsibility, empowerment, and active involvement in decision-making processes, effectively mitigating apathy and disillusionment that may otherwise contribute to radicalisation and violent extremism (VE).



Drawing from the findings of previous research conducted at the meso level within this municipality, coupled with micro-level results at the national level, and informed by a comprehensive understanding of the drivers of VE, it becomes feasible to discern intersections among the factors influencing PVE. In this context, PVE Factor_1 is delineated as the increasing trust in state institutions and secularism. Conversely, PVE Factor_2 is related to the decreasing of religious, political, and social militant tendencies. The impact of these factors has been tested in this research endeavour.

Considering this context, the objective of this research is to identify the corresponding protective, resilience, and resistance factors. Simultaneously, the goal is to recognise existing or potential vulnerability indicators and to address any potential gaps in their understanding and mitigation.

# Research methodology

## RECAP FROM RESULTS FROM THE FIRST PHASE OF THE MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

Mitrovica South is considered a focal point for ethno-political tensions in the country, where political grievances intersect inevitably with economic deprivation and ethnic radicalisation. Moreover, the ethnic tensions existing between the Albanian and Serbian communities have not evolved into a conflict characterised by inter-religious dynamics. On the contrary, the manifestations of radicalism and VE in Mitrovica South, as observed throughout Kosovo, are embedded within the broader context of global extremist political Islam. This phenomenon does not emanate from local conditions; rather, these local circumstances have been exploited by various organisations from Gulf countries and specific local radical imams to introduce and reinforce these ideological tendencies (ibid).

On the other hand, research findings indicate a discernible shift among younger demographics from the secular tenets of Albanian nationalism and ethnic identity towards a more pronounced religious affiliation. In this regard, participants in the research have perceived religion as a pivotal driver of VE, intricately connected with the dynamics of digital socialisation and transnational influences. Additionally, drivers such as economic deprivation and factors related to education, leisure and cultural opportunities are perceived by participants as exerting a certain impact on radicalisation and VE. Conversely, the driver of political grievances is considered peripheral, while the driver of territorial inequalities is largely deemed insignificant in the context of VE (ibid).



Against this backdrop, the research results have indicated that no singular driver can establish a direct causal relationship between radicalisation and VE. Motivational factors operating at various levels of analysis collectively contribute to determining whether an individual becomes radicalised. In this context, a significant portion of the youth participants in the research have expressed dissatisfaction with the political leadership of the country and the previous local governments of Mitrovica South. Despite political grievances not being identified as a prominent push factor toward religious radicalisation, the research has indicated that individuals persistently disappointed and dissatisfied with political parties and governments may, in certain cases, turn towards radicalism and extremism. In addition, the analysis has revealed that specific unemployed individuals with limited access to a decent level of social welfare in Mitrovica South may be inclined towards radicalism and extremism. Additionally, research findings have highlighted that young participants allocate a considerable amount of their free time to digital social media, where they have encountered instances of extremist elements utilising digital technologies to disseminate their ideologies and recruit individuals for their causes. However, the research has highlighted that not every young individual, even if dissatisfied with political entities, unemployed or exposed to extremist ideologies via digital social media, is bound to undergo radicalisation or engage in VE (ibid).

In conclusion, the research inputs reveal that the prevailing narratives in the Municipality of Mitrovica South centre around feelings of insecurity and poverty, stemming from the absence of clear prospects for peace and a stable future in this divided city (ibid).

## DESCRIPTION OF THE CRITERIA FOR THE CASE STUDY SELECTION AND CRITERIA FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

The key criteria for selecting this case study are based on the presence of resilience factors. Despite the existence of conditions that could potentially drive people towards VE in the Municipality of Mitrovica South, such as ethnopolitical tensions, economic deprivation and high levels of religiosity, including the presence of radical clerics, violence on the ground has not occurred. However, it is noteworthy that, despite these factors, eight individuals from this community did join the ranks of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Peci et al., 2019a).

This project aims to discern the key protective, resilience and resistance factors within the youth demographic in the Municipality of Mitrovica South. Concurrently, findings from the Kosovo Country Report highlight that a significant proportion of foreign terrorist fighters originating from Kosovo were between the ages of 20 and 30 (Peci and Demjaha, 2020).

Against this backdrop and considering the local context in the Municipality of Mitrovica South, the criteria employed for sample selection were grounded in gender and urban-rural representation. Additionally, the focus group aimed to encompass young participants aged 18 to 30. Furthermore, three interviews were conducted with experienced local civil society activists possessing in-depth knowledge of the evolving social context in the Municipality of Mitrovica South over the last two decades. This approach was taken to obtain a comprehensive understanding of this research.



All participants in this research belonged to the Albanian ethnicity. When it comes to gender, urban-rural representation and religious affiliation, out of the 12 individuals who participated in this research, four were male and eight females, all of them were Muslims, nine were from urban areas and three from rural areas.

The focus group of young participants of age 18 to 30 years consisted of nine individuals, aged from 19 to 24 years, seven of whom were female and two male, all of whom belonged to Islam; three originated from rural areas and the other six from urban areas, whereas two interviewees were male and one female and all of them were from urban areas.

## CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

Initially, the scope of the research at meso level was intended to encompass the entire district of Mitrovica South, which includes three additional municipalities. However, the distinctive feature of Mitrovica South being part of the ethnically divided city of Mitrovica led to significantly higher political grievances compared to the other municipalities in the district, which are not confronted with similar issues affecting people's daily lives. Hence, for the scope of this study, both focus group discussions and interviews were confined solely to the Municipality of Mitrovica South. This selection was based on the recognition of this locality as the primary locus for the most substantial political grievances, constituting a notable catalyst for ethno-political radicalisation rather than a significant driver of religious radicalisation.

# Meso-level dynamics of prevention

## CONTEXT SPECIFICITIES

**Description, type of social interaction context, target population, actors and stakeholders mapping, relevant data and research available. Existing P/CVE measures.**

The Municipality of Mitrovica South has a pronounced mono-ethnic composition, with 96.7% of its residents identifying with Albanian ethnicity and 99.3% affiliating with the Muslim faith (Peci and Demjaha, 2022). The age group of 15-29 years makes up 26.5% of the total population of the Municipality of Mitrovica South, in comparison to the age groups of 0-14 years (28.3%) and 30-80 years (45.2%). According to the population census, the majority of youth in the Municipality of Mitrovica South (63.3%) reside in the city, while the remaining portion (36.7%) resides in 46 villages across the municipality. The Municipality of Mitrovica South hosts a total of 33 pre-school, elementary, and secondary education institutions. In the realm of higher education, the International Business College Mitrovica (IBC–M) was established in March 2010, followed by the establishment of the public university "Isa Boletini" in March 2013. The statistical data indicates that out of 21,000 people aged above 15 years, only 41.85% are economically active, and among them, only 48.5% are employed. A majority, accounting for 58.15% of the population above 15 years, is classified as economically inactive (Peci et al., 2019a).



Regarding participation in elections, the voter turnout in the Municipality of Mitrovica South is relatively low, with a notably higher interest observed in national elections compared to local ones. In the last general elections of 2021, the voter turnout was 48.87%,[315] while for municipal assemblies in the same year, it was 40.3%.[316]

Within the territory of the Municipality of Mitrovica South, there are 25 functional mosques, with nine located in the city and 16 in the villages. Additionally, there are three associations operating under the authority of the Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK) in this municipality – one for humanitarian efforts, another for youth, and a third for women. Catholic believers have at their service one Catholic church, protestant believers have one Protestant church and Orthodox believers have one Orthodox church (Peci et al., 2019a).

On the flip side, Mitrovica South boasts a vibrant civil society sector[317] that addresses a wide array of concerns impacting the municipality's citizens, serving as a primary PVE actor alongside the Kosovo

[315] Elections for the Assembly of Kosovo 2021, Statistics of Municipalities, Central Election Commission of Kosovo, 2021, https://kqz-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/6.Statistikat-sipas-komunave-2.pdf

[316] Local Elections 2021, Statistics of Municipalities, Central Election Committee of Kosovo, 2021, https://kqz-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/02.-Statistikat-sipas-komunave.pdf

[317] See: List of Kosovo NGOs, Electronic System of Non-Governmental Organizations, Department for NGOs, Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kosovo, https://ojq.rks-gov.net/RaportiExcel.aspx

Police.[318] Nevertheless, one interviewee observes that despite substantial efforts by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), their impact on individuals with the potential for radicalisation and engagement in VE may not be immediately apparent, as de-radicalisation is a gradual process that takes time.[319]

In this context, it has to be noted that in December 2021, after several years of inactivity, the Municipality of Mitrovica South re-established the Municipal Council for Community Safety (MCCS). Its members include representatives not only from municipal and security institutions but also from religious and ethnic communities, NGOs, local businesses, and the media.[320] Yet, according to an interviewee, performance of the MCCS remains subpar, and the Municipal Strategy for the Prevention of Violent Acts 2020-2022, adopted in 2020,[321] has largely languished in implementation. [322]

Finally, the research conducted on radicalism and VE in Mitrovica South is exceptionally limited. Aside from the paper on the meso-level drivers in this municipality conducted by KIPRED,[323] no other research resource has specifically focused on this locality.

### Identified drivers, structural elements, and specific variables

Participants in this research have identified three drivers of radicalism and VE: extremist ideologies (whether religious, political, or other), lack of economic opportunities, insufficient education, and ethno-national extremism.



In this context, a participant from the focus group asserts that ideas serve as a driving force behind violence, and this is not necessarily linked to the employment status or welfare background of individuals. Additionally, he argues that the absence of a culture that respects the ideas and opinions of others creates fertile ground for exclusive ideologies (Peci and Demjaha, 2022). In a similar vein, another participant believes that, for some individuals, their ideas hold paramount importance, and they staunchly defend their ideologies with fanaticism, leading to animosity towards individuals from other communities.[324] Conversely, an interviewee contends that many youths, lacking alternative options, join congregations led by certain imams, leading to socialisation within those circles and being exposed to religiosity.[325]

On the flip side, another focus group participant posits that the primary driver of VE lies in the lack of economic opportunities. In his view, countries with higher levels of economic development have fewer individuals joining conflicts in the Middle East. Moreover, he contends that in situations where

[318] Interviewee 2, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023

[319] Interviewee 1, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.

[320] Assembly of the Municipality of Mitrovica south, Decision on establishing of the Municipal Council for Safety in Community, 22 December 2021, https://kk.rks-gov.net/mitroviceejugut/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2022/01/15-Vendim-per-formimin-e-KSSB.pdf

[321] Assembly of the Municipality of Mitrovica south, Municipal Strategy for Prevention of Violent Acts 2020 - 2022, 27 February 2020, https://kk.rks-gov.net/mitroviceejugut/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2020/06/Strategjia-komunale-per-parandalimin-e-veprimeve-te-dhunshme.pdf

[322] Interviewee 2, 6 October 2023.

[323] Lulzim Peci and Agon Demjaha, Kosovo: Meso-Level Drivers of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism, European Institute of Mediterranean, Barcelona, December 2022.

[324] Participant D13, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.

[325] Interviewee 1, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.

economic opportunities and employment levels are low, and, subsequently, the education system is weak, it becomes considerably easier to manipulate society.[326] Another participant suggests that generally in underdeveloped states, racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination is more pronounced, leading to a deprivation of basic freedoms, which can serve as a source of violence.[327] In contrast, yet another participant asserts that many individuals have adopted certain religious ideas purely for economic benefits, turning themselves into representatives of those ideas, which have had a profoundly negative impact on society.[328]

Conversely, a participant in the focus group underscores weak education as the most critical factor contributing to VE. He argues that the ideas and way of thinking individuals develop from early childhood are significantly shaped by the education system. According to him, among the younger generations, there are individuals who dismiss the gravity of violence – a trend he attributes to the declining standards of education in Kosovo. Furthermore, he contends that some individuals who joined the conflict in the Middle East had no direct contact with ISIS but were victims of their own ignorance. Albanian-speaking imams manipulated them, enticing them with promises of financial benefits and an improved life upon joining ISIS.[329] The argument that a lack of education is a significant driver of VE is also endorsed by the interviewees who took part in this research.[330]

Finally, according to one interviewee, ethno-national extremism (Albanian and Serbian) is more prevalent than other forms of extremism in this municipality, posing the potential for intra-community violence. In this context, NGOs play a significant role in engaging youth from all communities in the South and North of Mitrovica in joint activities that promote inter-ethnic tolerance and cohabitation.[331]



Against this background, one of the most crucial identified structural elements is the lack of perspective for youth, which represents their primary concern. The unemployment rate among youth is very high, the post-industrial economic situation is challenging, there is a lack of investments due to the unsecured environment caused by ethno-national political tensions, and the education level is low. These circumstances are intensifying the desire of youth to emigrate to Western countries. [332]

Another crucially identified structural element revolves around the absence of a shared vision among both the youth and political elites regarding the future of their society. This manifests in the dearth of active citizenship, heightened religiosity with potential implications for social transformation, a deficiency in the spirit of cooperation and engagement in social life among the youth, all of which resonate in the lack of emotional attachment to their country and a prevailing inclination towards emigration.[333]

[326] A1, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[327] F7, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[328] G12, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[329] F7, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[330] Interviewees, 1, 2, and 3, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[331] Interviewee 3, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[332] Interviewee 2, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[333] Interviewee 1, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.

Against this backdrop, the exploration of Mitrovica south has unveiled critical variables integral to preventing radicalism. These include educational levels, the well-being of the youth, engagement in social and political spheres, the prevalence of secular ethnic identity, and the dynamics of ethno-nationalism. The intertwining of these factors paints a nuanced picture of the municipality's social fabric, shedding light on potential avenues for protection, resilience and resistance against radicalism and VE. Educational disparities, coupled with challenges in youth welfare, illuminate structural elements that demand attention. Concurrently, the role of identity, namely the secular nature of Albanian nationalism, emerges as a significant factor shaping the community's resilience against radical influences. Further analysis of these variables provides a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political landscape, offering valuable insights for crafting targeted interventions and policies aimed at fostering social cohesion and countering radicalisation.

## LOCAL DYNAMICS PREVENTING VE

### Protective factors

Protective factors, as outlined in CONNEKT's working definitions, indicate that specific elements within the community naturally serve as safeguards to prevent the rise of religious radicalism and VE. These protective factors are not imposed from external sources; instead, they organically arise from within the community. The dimensions of demography, geographical characteristics, and economic conditions significantly influence the formation of these inherent safeguards. This perspective recognises the interdependence of community dynamics and the factors that contribute to resilience against radicalisation.



In the Municipality of Mitrovica South, as well as in other parts of Kosovo, two protective factors naturally shield the community from religious radicalism and VE. The first factor is the secular foundation of Kosovo Albanian Society, influenced by the non-religious nature of the customary law (Code of Lek Dukagjini) codified in the 15th century. This legal code was widely practised among the Albanian population, irrespective of their religion, throughout the Ottoman period until the early 1990s.[334]

The second factor is the secular essence of Albanian nationalism developed by the end of the 19th century during the period of national renewal, which resulted from multi-religiosity among Albanians and the need to build national cohesion over religious differences (Peci and Demjaha, 2016).

Nonetheless, as revealed by a 2016 survey conducted by KIPRED, among non-practising Albanian Muslims in the North Mitrovica region, 55.2% identified as Albanian first and Muslim second, whereas 44.8% identified as Muslim first and Albanian second. However, among practising Albanian Muslims, 63% identified as Muslim first and Albanian second (ibid). Moreover, the research findings from the first phase at the meso level in this municipality have indicated that these identity shifts are more prominent among the younger generations of youth.[335] These trends signal a notable shift in identity terms favouring religion, rather than the association with Albanian national identity that traditionally aligns with its secular nature, which also indicates the gradual erosion of this protective factor.

[334] Gani Bobi Centre for Humanistic Studies, Interesi publik dhe religjioni [Public Interest and Religion], Forumi 2015, Prishtina, 2011

[335] Lulzim Peci and Agon Demjaha, KIPRED, 2002.

### Resilience factors

As per CONNEKT's working definition, resilience factors encompass tools crafted by either the community or institutions (such as practices, habits, rituals, laws, policies, etc.) that assist a community in adapting to change and resisting negative impulses that pose a threat to the safety or integrity of the community.

There are a number of factors that shape the resilience of the community in Mitrovica South. The first factor lies in the secular (laïcité) constitutional principle of Kosovo, championing the separation of religion from the state, and the guaranteed freedom of belief, conscience and religion.[336] The state remains neutral in religious matters, upholding equality for all before the law and ensuring freedom of belief, conscience and religion. This constitutional framework provides an additional layer of protection against religious radicalism and VE, a noteworthy aspect even amid observable identity shifts, particularly among the youth in the Municipality of Mitrovica South (Peci and Demjaha, 2022).

The second factor contributing to resilience against radicalism and VE in Kosovo is the constitutional character of the country as a multi-ethnic state.[337] This designation serves as a protective measure by promoting inclusivity and safeguarding the rights of non-majority communities, especially in the context of enduring inter-ethnic tensions within the divided city of Mitrovica, which have not erupted into an inter-ethnic conflict since the beginning of 2000.[338]



The third factor is functional democracy and political pluralism at the local and national level contribute to a resilient society by addressing grievances, providing peaceful avenues for expression, and fostering an environment of inclusion and representation. Following the conclusion of the armed conflict in 1999, seven local elections and eight national elections were held that were free and fair.[339] Since 2000 in Mitrovica South, municipal democratic institutions have been in place, including mayors, pluralist municipal assemblies, administration and services[340], as well as the rule of law institutions, including the Police[341] and Basic Court.[342] Moreover, the Deputy Mayor,[343] four out of the 14 directorates within the municipal government are currently led by directors below 30 years old at the time of their appointment.[344] Additionally, 11 out of the 36 members of the Municipal Assembly, including the Speaker, fall within this age range,[345] which is an important indicator of political participation among youth in the Municipality of Mitrovica.

[336] For further details see: Art. 8 and Art. 38, Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, 15 June 2008, https://mapl.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/1.CONSTITUTION_OF_THE_REPUBLIC_OF_KOSOVO.pdf

[337] For further details see: Art. 3, Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, 15 June 2008, https://mapl.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/1.CONSTITUTION_OF_THE_REPUBLIC_OF_KOSOVO.pdf

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[339] Central Election Commission of Kosovo, Results, https://kqz-ks.org/an/

[340] For further details see: Komuna e Mitrovicës së Jugut [Municipality of Mitrovica south] https://kk.rks-gov.net/mitroviceejugut/

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[344] Municipality of Mitrovica south, Directorates, https://kk.rks-gov.net/mitroviceejugut/

[345] Municipal Assembly of Mitrovica south, https://kk.rks-gov.net/mitroviceejugut/asambleistetkeshilltaret/

Against this backdrop, one participant believes that the awareness of the power of an individual vote among many youth does not commence at the voting age but develops later.[346] Others argue that the political engagement of youth in this municipality is initiated through their involvement in youth organisations affiliated with political parties, providing a well-informed platform on political and community issues.[347] However, a participant notes that addressing community problems with municipal authorities can sometimes be inefficient due to time-consuming administrative procedures, deterring many from seeking resolutions.[348] Moreover, another participant asserts that, in certain cases, individuals hesitate to involve rule of law institutions in handling communal or private issues, fearing potential stigmatisation or bullying from society and representatives of these institutions that could adversely impact their lives.[349] This hesitation underscores a discernible level of patriarchalism among members of these institutions. On the contrary, the three interviewees underscored the crucial role played by the Kosovo Police in PVE, while pointing out a notable lack of initiative from the municipal authorities in recent years.[350]

The fourth factor is free media outlets and social media, considered by participants in this research as the most efficient channels for addressing their community concerns. In this municipality, there are a few well-established local media outlets like TV Mitrovica and two powerful entities, Mitropol[351] and Mitrovica Sot.[352] Research respondents assert that community concerns expressed via social media and depicted by local media prompt municipal authorities to address them more efficiently. They emphasise the significant influence of media on local governance, enabling different segments of society to voice their concerns and problems and integrate them into local debates.[353]



The fifth, and last factor, is the vibrant civil society in this municipality, which, according to research participants, offers venues for engagement of youth in social activities and working for solving community concerns from an early age.[354] Moreover, another participant asserts that NGOs play a pivotal role in holding local and national authorities accountable, aiding local communities in staying informed about developments in their localities. Additionally, according to her, they contribute to the promotion of gender equality and diversity.[355] On the other, the three interviewees have emphasised that local NGOs have played a pivotal role in working with local communities in PVE through different informative meetings, workshops, and training programmes.

### Resistance factors

Within CONNEKT's working definitions, resistance factors involve intentional non-violent actions targeted at addressing the root causes, push and pull factors, narratives, and acts. These factors hold significant relevance, especially in interactions with youth, civil society organizations (CSOs), and activists.

[346] G12, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[347] A1, G12, F7, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[348] D13, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[349] F7, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[350] Interviewee 1, 2 and 3, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[351] https://mitropol.net/
[352] https://mitrovicasot.net/
[353] A1, G12, F7, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[354] D13, A1, G12, F7, E8 Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[355] G 12, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.

One of the key identified resistance factors against VE is enhancing and reforming education in the Municipality of Mitrovica South. According to interviewee 2, there has been minimal investment in terms of infrastructure, curricula lacking critical thinking, and insufficient extracurricular activities in this field.[356] Interviewee 1 contends that youth in schools receive little to no education regarding their involvement in addressing social issues, engaging in field group projects, and advocating for their rights. Additionally, he notes a deficiency in communication skills among a significant number of youth, hindering their openness and tolerance in discussing ideas related to various social and political issues, including those pertaining to religions.[357] Furthermore, interviewees assert that these circumstances have created a permissive environment for youth to join congregations in the mosques of Mitrovica South and socialise with like-minded peers.[358]

The second resistance factor identified is the incorporation of subjects on religions and religious studies, encompassing agnosticism and atheism, into the curricula of secondary schools. Participants in this research held diverse opinions, with some favouring learning about their own religion based on personal beliefs,[359] while others advocated for a comprehensive approach covering all religions practised in Kosovo, including agnosticism and atheism.[360] However, the predominant argument supports education that encompasses all religions, emphasising that a broad understanding can foster tolerance, mitigate fanaticism, and ultimately serve as a preventative measure against radicalism and VE.[361]

The third resistance factor identified is the development and implementation of comprehensive welfare policies for youth. One interviewee emphasises that these policies should encompass key governmental sectors such as education, economic development, technology, culture and sports, tailored to meet the needs and interests of the youth. According to him, this approach could foster trust in governmental institutions, cultivate a sense of love for the state, and diminish religious and political militantism. This, according to him, should be coupled with strict penalties against those propagating religious or ethnic hatred.[362] Another interviewee highlights the necessity of youth participation and financial support in the design of these policies to ensure sustainable impact. She contends that cultural events organised by local or national authorities, especially given the current very low levels of education, would have a limited impact on empowering youth and reducing the potential for radicalism and VE.[363]



The fourth identified resistance factor involves increasing voluntarism among youth to enhance their social participation, tolerance and community service. Participants in this research have acknowledged occasional engagement in voluntary activities from an early age;[364] however, they note a low level of overall participation among youth.[365] While some participants attribute this to a lack of information about

[356] Interviewee 2, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[357] Interviewee 1, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[358] Interviewee 1, 2, and 3, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[359] D13, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[360] G12, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[361] Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[362] Interviewee 1, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[363] Interviewee 2, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[364] Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.

volunteering opportunities,[366] others highlight the presence of numerous NGOs in Mitrovica South offering such opportunities.[367] Challenges such as time constraints due to lectures and studies,[368] a lack of financial incentives,[369] and apprehension about socialising with individuals holding different ideas are identified as barriers to youth participation.[370]

The fifth identified resistance factor involves increasing youth socio-political participation, providing them a platform to contribute to civic initiatives and voice their concerns within democratic institutions, making them active stakeholders in shaping their future. A participant emphasises the importance of persistent youth involvement in political processes, influencing policies that are youth-centric. Additionally, she highlights the role of youth branches in political parties for engaging youngsters.[371] Another participant suggests that political participation should extend beyond voting to include support for candidates representing their interests.[372] However, interviewee 1 notes the low levels of youth civic and political activism, attributing it to a lack of emotional connection to their homeland and insufficient self-confidence for instigating change. He advocates for encouraging youth participation in decision-making processes at local and national levels.[373] On a concerning note, Interviewee 1 points out the practical cessation of the Local Council for Youth Action, diminishing opportunities for youth engagement in local decision-making.[374]

### EXISTING OR POTENTIAL VULNERABILITY INDICATORS (BOTH INTRA AND EXTRA COMMUNITY)

The research reveals a notable vulnerability indicated by the absence of municipal policies and initiatives addressing the prevention of radicalism and VE. This is coupled by the lack of comprehensive national measures to enhance youth welfare and provide them with viable prospects within their own country.[375]



A second vulnerability emerges in the form of a policy and institutional vacuum, exploited by charismatic local religious leaders advancing global Islamic agendas. These leaders, some of them financed from sources in the Middle East (Peci et al., 2019b), leverage social media and congregational settings for socialisation and influence over the youth.[376] This is reflected in the recent phenomenon among youth with fundamentalist inclinations who abstain from participating in local and national elections. They show loyalty solely to Sharia Law, rejecting the legal and constitutional order of Kosovo. This dynamic significantly influences the socio-political participation of youth in this municipality (Peci et al., 2019b).

[365] Ibid.
[366] G12, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[367] D13, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[368] F7, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[369] G12, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[370] M3, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[371] G12, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[372] F7, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[373] Interviewee 1, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[374] Interviewee 2, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[375] Interviewee 1 and 2, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.
[376] F7 Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023, Interviewee 1 and 2, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.

# Filling the gaps

## MISSING OR NEGLECTED PROTECTIVE, RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE FACTORS

The research findings have not highlighted political discourse on the issues of radicalisation and VE as a resistance factor. It is noteworthy that political parties have largely refrained from addressing radicalism and VE, as well as the societal and identity trends influenced by global Islam exponents in Kosovo (Demjaha and Peci, 2016).

## ADDRESSING RISK FACTORS: ENGAGING OTHER STAKEHOLDERS, AND NEW TARGETS

The prevention of radicalism and VE in the examined context encounters substantial challenges. Drawing from the above-presented research findings, it can be inferred that a pivotal risk factor is the lack of proactive policies and initiatives from municipal authorities, resulting in a vulnerability that charismatic religious leaders with global Islamic agendas exploit.

Another peril involves the socio-political non-participation of youth who have lost their hopes in their homeland, and especially of those with fundamentalist inclinations, who reject conventional legal and constitutional orders in favour of adherence to Sharia Law. This issue remains unaddressed by both local authorities and CSOs.



Political silence in the public discourse poses another substantial risk, as the lack of engagement by local authorities and political parties in the public discourse on radicalism and VE has created a vacuum exploited by certain religious leaders and activists openly challenging the secular nature and constitutional order of Kosovo, including its liberal democratic foundations. This political indifference has the potential to significantly undermine the efforts of civil society and the rule of law institutions in preventing radicalism and VE.

Another identified risk is the inadequacy of the education system and teachers in actively preventing identity shifts among the youth of younger generations, wherein a religious identity takes precedence over a secular national identity. This phenomenon poses long-term consequences for the future social fabric in Mitrovica South.

Finally, the inter-ethnic political tensions in the divided city of Mitrovica pose one of the imminent risks that could escalate into inter-communal conflict. Given the ethnic and religious composition of this area, such conflicts may take on an inter-religious character, influenced by the prevalent religiosity trends among the local populations.

These identified risk factors necessitate the engagement of multiple stakeholders beyond municipal authorities, rule of law institutions, and CSOs. Political parties and their youth organisations, alongside moderate religious leaders, primary and secondary schools, including teachers, and pupil organisations, should play an integral role in addressing these challenges. This collaborative approach is crucial for a comprehensive and effective strategy to counteract the various dimensions of radicalism and VE within the Municipality of Mitrovica South.

## GENDER SPECIFICITIES: ROLES, SOCIAL STRUCTURES, DRIVERS, NARRATIVES, INEQUALITIES…

The level of women's representation in the local government of Mitrovica South is moderately balanced. Notably, the position of the Speaker in the Municipal Assembly is held by a woman, and out of the 36 members in the assembly, 13 are female.[377] Delving into the administrative structure, four out of the 14 directorates are headed by women, overseeing crucial areas such as education, social welfare, budget and finances, and culture, youth, and sports.[378] This distribution reflects a nuanced landscape of gender representation within the local governance framework.

However, previous meso-level research has highlighted the prevalence of patriarchal social norms in this municipality. In certain instances, these norms are intensifying, attributed to heightened religiosity and the impact of conservative rhetoric from local religious leaders (Peci and Demjaha, 2022). There were also instances where women in Mitrovica South protested the injustices they faced, receiving support from female members of the Municipal Assembly (Sinjali, 2020).

The research findings have also highlighted a nuanced perspective on the practice of wearing hijabs, revealing both instances of stigmatisation faced by women who choose to wear them and a disagreement among participants regarding the imposition of hijabs on children below the age of 18 by their families.[379] This reflects a complex interplay of cultural, family and individual dynamics surrounding the choice of wearing hijabs in Mitrovica South, underscoring the need for a comprehensive understanding of these factors in the context of religious identity and societal norms.



## CAPACITY-BUILDING POTENTIALITIES AND AREAS FOR INTERVENTION

The two rounds of meso-level research in Mitrovica South have brought to light a notable deficit in the understanding of radicalism and VE among participating youth. This includes a lack of insight into the ideological foundations driving these phenomena. Moreover, the research identified deficiencies in comprehending differences between state concepts based on laïcité, secularism, and atheism, on the one hand, and the differences between state-church relationships, multiculturalism and theocracy. Similarly, there were identified knowledge gaps concerning the concepts of nation and national identities.[380] Addressing these gaps becomes imperative for fostering informed discussions and devising strategies to counter radicalism while promoting a nuanced understanding of diverse socio-political concepts.

In this context, it is essential to enhance the capacities of various stakeholders, such as municipal authorities, NGOs, media, political parties (including their youth organisations), and primary and secondary school teachers. Additionally, there is a pressing need to introduce extracurricular activities addressing these topics for pupils and secondary school students in both urban and rural areas of this municipality. This holistic approach aims to build a more informed and resilient community against radicalism and VE.

[377] Municipality of Mitrovica south, Members of the Municipal Assembly, https://kk.rks-gov.net/mitroviceejugut/asambleistetkeshilltaret/

[378] Municipality of Mitrovica south, Directorates, https://kk.rks-gov.net/mitroviceejugut/

[379] Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.

[380] The lack of knowledge related to these concepts have been identified during the conversations conducted with the youth participants aged between 15 to 30 years after the completion of the focus groups sessions held in April and May 2022, and during the seminar conducted by KIPREd held in July 2019 with NGOs and youth of political parties of Mitrovica south.

A substantial area of intervention identified in this research is the need to design a comprehensive and holistic strategy to empower and enhance the welfare of youth at the local level.[381] This strategy should involve key local stakeholders in the drafting process, including relevant municipal authorities, NGOs, the business sector, educational institutions, as well as cultural and sports organisations. This collaborative approach aims to address the multifaceted challenges faced by youth in the community.

Another crucial intervention area identified in this research involves engaging moderate clerics in conversations with their youth congregations designed to dissuade violence and encourage tolerance towards those with differing opinions and beliefs. By harnessing the influence of religious leaders this intervention focuses on the early prevention of radicalisation and potential de-radicalisation. Recognising the pivotal role these clerics play in shaping community perspectives among youth the approach seeks to foster inclusivity and harmony at the grassroots level.[382]

In conclusion, an identified important area of intervention entails boosting youth engagement in volunteering activities, concurrently emphasising civic education and activism.[383] This multifaceted approach aims to enhance social participation among the youth. By fostering a sense of civic responsibility and encouraging active involvement in community initiatives, this intervention seeks to fortify the foundations of a resilient and socially conscious generation.

## SETTING INDICATORS FOR A FUTURE ASSESSMENT TOOL (WHAT WOULD BE APPROPRIATE TO SELECT AS A MEASURE INDICATOR FOR IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ENGAGED PROGRAMMES/STRATEGIES/ACTIVITIES)



The following specific indicators have been devised to measure the impact of the interventions identified in the research conducted within the Municipality of Mitrovica South

6. Youth understanding of radicalism and extremism
   Knowledge assessment: Evaluation of the extent of youth understanding of radicalism, VE, and their ideological foundations through pre-and post-intervention quizzes or surveys.

7. Youth understanding of sociopolitical concepts
   Conceptual framework analysis: Employing content analysis to assess youth understading of socio-political concepts, focusing on laïcité, secularism, atheism, state-church relationships, multiculturalism, theocracy, nation, and national identities.
   Comparative Knowledge Mapping: Utilising comparative knowledge mapping techniques to visually represent the distinctions and overlaps in understanding these concepts among youth participants.

8. Educational initiatives
   Extracurricular participation: Measuring the level of involvement of pupils and secondary school

[381] Interviewee 1 and 2, Mitrovica south, 2023.

[382] F7, Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023.

[383] Focus Group, Mitrovica south, 6 October 2023, Interviewee 2 and 3, Mitrovica south, 2023.

students in extracurricular activities addressing topics related to radicalism and socio-political concepts.
Teacher training: Assessing the impact of training programmes on the capacities of primary and secondary school teachers in addressing radicalism-related knowledge gaps.

9. Local youth empowerment strateg:
   Stakeholder involvement: Gauging the extent of involvement and collaboration among key stakeholders in the drafting and implementation of the comprehensive local empowerment strategy.
   Awareness and implementation: Evaluating the awareness and implementation of the strategy among relevant local entities, including municipal authorities, NGOs, businesses, and educational institutions.

10. Engaging moderate clerics
    Congregation engagement: Assessing the participation and response of youth congregations in discussions led by moderate clerics on violence prevention and tolerance promotion.
    Behavioural changes: Monitoring any observable behavioural changes among youth influenced by the engagement with moderate clerics in discouraging violence and promoting tolerance.

11. Youth volunteering and civic engagement
    Participation rates: Measuring the level of youth engagement in volunteering activities.
    Civic education impact: Evaluating the impact of civic education initiatives on fostering civic responsibility and activism among the youth.



These indicators aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of interventions in mitigating radicalism and VE while promoting informed discussions and community resilience.

# Conclusions

## CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS ON THE MESO-LEVEL PREVENTION INDICATORS

In conclusion, the identified prevention indicators encapsulate a comprehensive strategy to address the multifaceted challenges posed by radicalism and VE in the Municipality of Mitrovica South. The focus on enhancing knowledge among youth regarding the ideological foundations and socio-political concepts associated with these phenomena sets the stage for informed discussions and nuanced perspectives. The interventions further extend to capacity-building initiatives for various stakeholders, including municipal authorities, NGOs, the media, political parties, and educators. Additionally, the emphasis on engaging moderate clerics and promoting youth involvement in volunteering activities reflects a holistic approach to early prevention and community resilience. By fostering understanding, empowerment, and inclusivity, these indicators aim to lay the groundwork for a more resilient and socially conscious society in Mitrovica South.

## IDENTIFICATION OF TRANSFERABLE EXPERIENCES OR BEST PRACTICES

Identification of transferable experiences or best practices involves recognising successful strategies or approaches in similar contexts that can be applied to address challenges or achieve positive outcomes. In the context of Mitrovica South, potential areas for identifying transferable experiences or best practices include:



- Community engagement models: Explore successful community engagement models from other regions facing similar challenges in terms of radicalism and VE. Understanding how communities elsewhere have effectively mobilised against such threats can offer valuable insights.
- Educational initiatives: Looking into regions or municipalities that have implemented successful educational initiatives to enhance understanding of diverse socio-political concepts and prevent radicalisation among youth. Transferable practices might include innovative curriculum designs, extracurricular programmes, or teacher training models.
- Interfaith dialogue programmes: Identify regions where interfaith dialogue programmes have been successful in promoting tolerance and understanding among different religious communities. Learning from these experiences can inform strategies for engaging religious leaders in Mitrovica South.
- Youth involvement and empowerment: Explore initiatives from other areas that have effectively involved and empowered youth in civic activities, volunteering, and decision-making processes. Successful youth engagement models can be adapted to foster a sense of responsibility and resilience.
- Media and communication strategies: Investigate regions that have implemented successful media and communication strategies to counter radical narratives and promote inclusivity. Transferable practices may include community-led media campaigns or partnerships between media outlets and local authorities.

- Collaborative governance approaches: Examine municipalities or regions where collaborative governance approaches involving various stakeholders, such as government bodies, NGOs, businesses, and educational institutions, have led to positive outcomes in preventing radicalisation.
- Women's empowerment initiatives: Explore regions with successful initiatives promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Identifying practices that have effectively addressed patriarchal norms and empowered women can inform strategies for Mitrovica South.
- Local peace-building initiatives: Investigate areas with successful local peace-building initiatives that have managed to reduce tensions and foster intercommunity cooperation. Transferable experiences may include conflict resolution models or programmes promoting social cohesion.

By identifying and adapting transferable experiences or best practices from diverse contexts, Mitrovica South can leverage successful strategies to strengthen its preventive measures against radicalism and VE.

## POTENTIAL AREAS FOR SOCIAL INTERVENTION IN THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Social interventions play a crucial role in PVE by addressing underlying factors and promoting resilience within communities. In the context of Mitrovica South, potential areas for social intervention include:

- Community engagement and empowerment
  Objective: Foster a sense of community belonging and empowerment.
  Activities: Organise community forums, workshops, and events to encourage dialogue, collaboration, and shared decision-making. Support initiatives that enhance community members' skills and capacities.



- Youth education and awareness:

Objective: Increase understanding of diverse socio-political concepts and prevent radicalisation among youth.
Activities: Implement educational programmes, extracurricular activities, and awareness campaigns in schools. Train teachers to address knowledge gaps related to concepts like laïcité, secularism, atheism, state-church relationships, multiculturalism, and nation identities.

- Interfaith dialogue and religious literacy

Objective: Promote tolerance and understanding among different religious communities.
Activities: Facilitate interfaith dialogue sessions and promote religious literacy programmes. Engage moderate clerics to lead discussions on non-violence, tolerance, and cooperation.

- Youth engagement and civic participation

Objective: Encourage active involvement in civic activities and decision-making processes.
Activities: Establish youth councils or forums for constructive dialogue. Promote volunteering opportunities, civic education programmes, and initiatives that empower youth to contribute positively to their communities.

- Media and communication strategies
  Objective: Counter radical narratives and promote inclusivity through effective communication.
  Activities: Develop community-led media campaigns that highlight positive stories, diversity, and shared values. Provide media literacy programmes to help community members critically evaluate information.

- Women's empowerment and gender equality
  Objective: Address patriarchal norms and empower women as agents of change.
  Activities: Support initiatives promoting gender equality, women's leadership, and participation in decision-making. Organise awareness campaigns against gender-based discrimination and violence.

- Conflict resolution and peace-building
  Objective: Mitigate tensions and promote inter-community cooperation.
  Activities: Implement local peace-building initiatives, conflict resolution training, and programmes that encourage collaboration between different ethnic and religious groups.

- Networking and collaboration
  Objective: Build collaborative networks among various stakeholders.
  Activities: Facilitate partnerships between municipal authorities, NGOs, businesses, educational institutions, and religious leaders. Encourage joint efforts in designing and implementing preventive measures.



- Promoting social inclusion and diversity
  Objective: Create an inclusive environment that values diversity.
  Activities: Organise cultural events, festivals, and activities that celebrate diversity. Promote inclusivity in schools, workplaces, and public spaces.

- Capacity-building for stakeholders
  Objective: Enhance the capacities of key stakeholders involved in preventing radicalisation.
  Activities: Provide training programmes for municipal authorities, educators, community leaders, and NGOs. Focus on building their knowledge, skills, and resources to effectively address the challenges.

These potential areas for social intervention should be tailored to the specific context of Mitrovica South, taking into account the community's needs, dynamics and cultural sensitivities. Effective social interventions require collaboration, community involvement, and a comprehensive understanding of local conditions.

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# NORTH MACEDONIA

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# Prison/Education

## Introduction

The second phase of WP5 research focuses on investigating the viewpoints of young individuals from the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) regarding researching and analysing prevention factors within the social contexts of education. The purpose of the report is to present the view of Macedonian youth aged 18 to 30 regarding education, punitive justice system, ethnicism, and political/social participation on radicalisation leading to violent extremism (VE) in relation to some of the previously identified drivers: religion, economic deprivation, politics, and territorial inequality. According to certain national statistical indicators (National Development Strategy, n.d), the 15- to 29-year-old demographic in the RNM reveals concerning findings, with a significant proportion unemployed and not enrolled in higher education or training. The fact that the RNM has one of the highest rates in this regard is indicative of the education and employment challenges that young people may encounter.

Given the circumstances and statistical data regarding the education background and employment prospects of young individuals, a question arises regarding the most effective course of action for prevention: establishing trust with local law enforcement, creating online counter-narratives, educating young people about the detrimental consequences of joining VE organisation, and offering non-violent alternatives to those exhibiting indications of violent tendencies.



In previous phase of the research (Georgieva, Mujoska-Trpevska and Trajanovski, 2022) we conducted a study of the radicalisation potentials in the Macedonian prison system, with a focus on the correctional-educational facility (CEF) for juveniles in Volkovija, Tetovo. One of the main findings suggests that children do not know how to literally define the terms VE and radicalism, but they do know how to describe and recognise the phenomena in their own unique way. The situation is reversed with professionals. Not all professionals can detect radicalisation. They have heard the definitions, but not everyone is ready to recognise them in real life actions and events. One of the concluding remarks was that the law and the professionals working in this field should be better informed about the children at risk.

Also, another important finding from previous phase is that the Macedonian government should conduct an immediate review of education programmes and devote significant resources to raising awareness of the importance of radicalism and VE, as well as the consequences of these trends in our country. It is tragic that a sizable proportion of the population believes radicalism is “something that happens on the other side of the world” and does not see the RNM as a suitable breeding ground for these phenomena. This is due primarily to a lack of knowledge and information. Practitioners, police officers, security service personnel, and other state actors involved in VE and terrorism prevention should be educated. Furthermore, all educators should be educated on the issue of radicalisation, which leads to VE and terrorism. To combat radicalisation, stakeholders can also use relevant handbooks and guidelines.

# Research methodology

## RECAP FROM RESULTS FROM THE FIRST PHASE OF THE MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

In the first phase of the meso-level analyses, two focus group discussions were conducted: with members of the State Council for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (eight participants) and children sent to CEF Volkovija Tetovo to serve the "referral to a correctional facility" measure, i.e., children-protégés (15 children) and three in-depth interviews with relevant experts, to assess perceptions of radicalisation in CEF Volkovija.[384]

For the case study purposes, we conducted two focus groups with members of two completely different fields, but fundamentally similar and intertwined. These two groups were not chosen at random for analysis. We believe it is critical to assess the level of familiarity with the phenomenon of radicalisation among the eight members of the State Council because their primary task and goal is to launch initiatives for greater public awareness of children's rights and discussions in various areas related to the child's best interests. On the other hand, we chose the second group, i.e., the children-protégés from CEF Volkovija, to find out their opinions and thoughts on specific questions. The two activities were conducted in Skopje (the State Council) and in Tetovo (the children-protégés), both in February 2022. The first focus group had eight participants, while 15 children were interviewed. All the informants were of different ethnic backgrounds. The three in-depth interviews, on the other hand, present qualitative additions to the argument as they all refer to particular and important aspects which were hinted at during the two focus groups. Therefore, after the focus groups, we conducted an interview with a law professor and president of the State Council (no. 1), a legal practitioner and head of the Treatment Department at the CEF (no. 2), and a representative from the programme Office of the Council of Europe (no. 3). All of them have extensive experience working with children at risk and children in conflict with the law, as well as various radicalism-related phenomena. We believe that this research design is to provide a better understanding of the meso-level dynamics of radicalisation and VE in the given spatial context of social interactions (prison system) in North Macedonia (Georgieva, Mujoska Trpevska and Trajanovski, 2022).



These are the most important findings from the first phase research:

- The professionals are unsure how to identify risk indicators for radicalisation within the prison system, which is a difficult task. The specialised risk assessment tools of VE for the work of prison and probation services must be developed since it is crucial in supporting decisions pertaining to classification, placement, interventions, and re-classification of inmates, when required.
- There are no (or very limited) programmes or activities aimed at rehabilitating violent extremists, which is a major problem. We studied the existence and efficacy of programmes aimed at preventing violent extremism (PVE) in this report, which typically include two main interventions: disengagement and deradicalisation.

[384] Given that the institutional P/CVE setting has changed dramatically in recent years, we presented these changes in detail, with a particular emphasis on those related to the prison system (which were not the focus of the country study on macro-level drivers of radicalisation and VE) (Georgieva, Trajanovski, Mujoska Trpevska, 2022).

- Post-penal treatment for successful reintegration of extremist offenders back into society should be seen as a concern not only for correctional institutions but also for social agencies and civil organisations that can help significantly. Currently, there are no post-penal programmes or any kind of treatment for reintegration of adult or juvenile extremist offenders back into society.
- It is necessary to increase the number of professionals in prisons who will receive appropriate training to work with foreign fighters. It is very important to deepen the cooperation with the Islamic religious community and to ensure the sustainability of the programmes and project activities that are conducted in the prisons.
- The importance of civil society organizations (CSOs) in countering/preventing violent extremism (P/CVE) matters. Our government encourages the involvement of civil society stakeholders in every segment of P/CVE processes. Namely, during the drafting of the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) National Strategy and Action Plan, the National Committee invited civil society groups to contribute with their expertise through public consultations. The representatives included were from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think-thanks, religious and local communities, youth organisations, schools, and women's organisations, among others (Georgieva, Mujoska Trpevska and Trajanovski, 2022).

In previous analyses, we stated that radicalisation as a phenomenon in the RNM occurs in prisons, particularly among young men aged 18 to 24. When they are imprisoned, they may be radicalised by a variety of groups, individuals and ideologies already present in the prisons, such as nationalist or religious ideology, among others. The State Directorate for Sanctions Execution (DES) has joined the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism (NCCVECT) to continue working with legal prosecutors and other ministries to design and implement measures to address identified signs of radicalisation in prisons. Training of prison staff to prevent and protect convicts from the effects of radicalisation, as well as direct outreach to prisoners who may be radicalised and pose a risk to themselves and other inmates, are among the activities undertaken thus far.



## DESCRIPTION OF THE CRITERIA FOR THE CASE STUDY SELECTION AND CRITERIA FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

The second phase of WP5 focuses on preventing radicalisation of people who have never been radicalised or have no prior involvement in VE, as well as interventional factors for dealing with previously radicalised people or current radicals and extremists. In the first phase, we involved practitioners and young people that are serving sentences in educational and correctional facilities, i.e., they already had problems with the law. This case study focuses on practitioners and young people that had never been in conflict with the law, and education as one of the key concepts in the prevention of radicalisation that leads to VE. To obtain additional results for analysis and adequate explanation of the phenomenon, we will also include religion and economic deprivation as drivers of VE in an education, ethnic, social and political context.

For the purposes of the research, we held one focus group with 10 high school and college students, eight of whom were female and two male. The selection criteria were age (to be aged between 18 and 29), education (to be actively involved in the RNM education process), gender balance and territorial inequalities (to be from various cities in the country with current residence in Skopje). The questionnaire

prepared for the focus group contained 15 research questions divided into four modules of questions: (i) enabling preventive factor, (ii) prominent PVE factor(s); (iii) and interactions between VE Driver Combos and PVE factor(s).

Further, three semi-structured interviews were held with one faculty professor of law, public prosecutor employee and former director of the Intermunicipal Center for Social Affairs - Skopje. The interviews were conducted to gather in-depth information on the practices of dealing with violence and the roots of radical ideologies among youth; current policies and institutional frameworks for responding to VE; and the need to upgrade existing practices to establish an effective response to radicalisation trends. For that purpose, we used the questionnaire prepared for the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), which contained 33 research questions divided into seven modules of questions: (i) setting the scene, (ii) enabling factors, (iii) prominent PVE factor(s); (iv) actors on specific PVE factor(s); (v) relation between VE Driver Combo and PE factor(s); (vi) local environment; and (vii) trusted and capable actors.

The questionnaires were designed as a tool for analysis of education needs of both students and practitioners through assessment of their pre-existing perceptions and attitudes towards radicalisation that leads to VE. The MASA team adapted the questions to the local context. Certain questions were appropriate and applicable in the local context, while others were not. In terms of structure, the questionnaire covers three topics: (1) what students and practitioners need to know and be able to do to recognise and prevent radicalisation; (2) what they need to know and be able to do to report VE behaviour in school, in the community, and on the internet; and (3) preferred approaches for gaining such skills.



## CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

Research of this kind faces a few challenges and limitations that need to be taken into consideration. Apart from the time limit to implement field research activities of this scope, the topic is sensitive. Both students and practitioners are lacking significant knowledge on the definitions of and conceptual approach to VE; extremism; radicalisation and deradicalisation; VE and radicalisation that lead to terrorism (VERLT); CVE, and so on. Another issue is the widespread disagreement about what constitutes certain phenomena. For example, the absence of a definition or list of specific groups labelled "terrorist" or "violent extremist" frequently leads to seemingly endless debates about the distinction between terrorists and "freedom fighters". That is why the FGD started with a short explanation of the phenomenon and definitions.

On the other hand, the questions, especially the questionnaire for the KIIs, were extensive and there were cases when respondents did not answer fully all the questions or did not understand the formulated questions. We dealt with this issue by adapting the questions to the local context and responding to at least one question from each module for WP5-2.

Finally, the lack of interest among young scholars and students in participating in this type of activity made the task of selecting 10 participants more difficult than initially anticipated.

# Meso-level dynamics of prevention

## CONTEXT SPECIFICITIES

We began our research by introducing the concept of education as a factor in a social context. The role of primary and secondary schools, as well as faculties and higher education schools, is critical in developing knowledge and mechanisms of resistance in young people to radicalisation that leads to VE. CVE by engaging frontline school workers (teachers, principals, and administrative officials) is a particularly effective method of addressing VE among youth, because education, or lack thereof, is a critical component in determining whether someone will develop extremist views in their lifetime (Stefanovski, 2022; Risteska, 2019).

Primary education is organised and implemented in primary schools. According to the Law on Primary Education,[385] political and religious organisation and action, as well as the highlighting of party and religious symbols, are prohibited in primary school. Secondary education takes place in secondary schools which are organised as public secondary schools (municipal secondary school, i.e., secondary school of the City of Skopje, and state secondary school) and private secondary school. Secondary education is implemented through plans and programmes for: high school education, vocational education, secondary art education, and secondary education for students with special education needs. According to the Law on Secondary Education,[386] any political and religious organisation and action is prohibited in secondary school. The organisation of religious education is not allowed in secondary school. The display of political and religious symbols is prohibited in high school,[387] but the high level of partisanship among education staff is very concerning.[388]



Our education programmes fail to align with the latest developments in global education. In general, schools do not engage in continuous activities to prevent the emergence of social problems, such as radicalisation and VE. This is due in part to the lack of provisions in primary and secondary education laws regarding preventive activities in schools. Despite the fact that collaboration among education, social and health institutions is mandated by law to facilitate preventive activities, no specialised preventive programmes are established, no financial resources are allocated, and there are no protocols governing such collaboration.

In the initial phase of the research, we examined the involvement of youth in the education process and their role in the process and introduced the economic and territorial drivers by asking whether they think the drivers play a major role in the quality of education that is acquired in the RNM. For example,

[385] Law on Primary Education, Official Gazette No. 161/2019 and 229/2020

[386] Law on Secondary education, Official Gazette No. 44/1995; 16/1996; 24/1996; 34/1996; 35/1997; 82/1999; 41/2001; 29/2002; 40/2003; 42/2003; 78/2003; 67/2004; 51/2005; 55/2005; 113/2005; 3/2006; 35/2006;71/2006; 30/2007; 49/2007; 81/2008; 92/2008; 98/2008; 142/2008; 88/2009; 33/2010; 116/2010; 156/2010; 18/2011; 42/2011; 51/2011; 6/2012; 100/2012; 24/2013; 41/2014; 116/2014; 135/2014; 10/2015; 98/2015; 145/2015; 30/2016; 127/2016; 67/2014/2018; 161/2019; 229/2020

[387] Article 7, Law on Secondary Education.

[388] KIIs response, 30 October 2023.

do the youth from rural backgrounds get the same quality of education as the young people living in the capital? The same goes for the young people who come from poor families in comparison to the ones who are not financially challenged. All respondents were actively involved in the education process; they visit schools and faculties as students daily, primarily as listeners to lectures, with older and more ambitious students also serving as lecturers at various workshops, summer or online schools, and other non-formal education activities. What is encouraging is that the youngest respondents are involved in extracurricular activities within their schools or the non-governmental sector (youth organisations, debate clubs, etc.) and have been involved in or already attended events discussing extreme radicalisation and violence. In that matter, we can expect generations to come who are more familiar with the concept, and they will be able to take specific measures to suppress these phenomena.

In the last 10 years there has been significant change considering the VE challenges. In 2018, 150 Macedonians fled the country to join paramilitary formations in Iraq and Syria (Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, 2018), which represents the Western Balkan country with the highest per capita number of foreign fighters from the Muslim population. According to GCERF data from August 2023 (GCERF, 2023), almost 100 people returned to North Macedonia from foreign conflicts, particularly from Syria and Iraq. These significant numbers also raise concerns about the level of non-VE among North Macedonia's Muslim population (Stojkovski and Kalajdziovski, 2018), because, while relatively few terrorist attacks have occurred within the country, it is possible that individuals are still becoming radicalised within Macedonian borders without necessarily carrying out violent attacks.



In February 2018, the RNM adopted its first P/CVE strategy as a part of a wider policy of countering terrorism. This strategic document states in its preface that "experience shows that different strategies frequently diverge in specific segments, fail to communicate clearly and coherently their intents across institutions and to citizens, and do not provide for effective implementation of the planned strategic goals." Although the imperatives of countering terrorism (CT) are distinct from CVE in numerous and significant points, both have to be designed and implemented in a coherent, correlated and strategic manner, since the risks and threats of VE and terrorism are intertwined and inextricably related. Thus, the National CT and CVE Strategies of the RNM are substantively aligned, while the relevant action plans (despite being two separate documents) are characterised by harmonised principles and respond to a common set of drivers and factors. The three factors of this important strategic document are: National Common Guiding Principles for CVE and CT, Core Guiding Principles for CVE and CT, and Common Drivers and Factors of CVE and CT (Georgieva, Mujoska-Trpevska and Trajanovski, 2022). However, there is a significant lack of awareness and understanding of the national P/CVE strategies in North Macedonia and their action plans among the professionals who are working in this field.

The National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism (NCCVECT) is the national coordinative body responsible for monitoring and analysing the situation in the country in regard to CVE and counterterrorism. The Committee is also responsible for coordinating the activities of institutions engaged in actions aimed towards PVE and acts of terrorism (Stefanovski, 2021). It was established with a governmental decision in early August 2017 (Risteska, 2019).

## Description, type of social interaction context, target population, actors and stakeholders mapping, relevant data and research available

### Identified drivers, structural elements, specific variables

The research on the socioeconomic context of radicalisation and VE in local communities provides a comprehensive and complex picture of the situation in at-risk communities with limited resources. Radicalisation and VE as a form of threat to national security includes a wide range of critical fields but, most of all, a lack of social integration and inclusion that leads to negative social development and the spread of mistrust on a religious and ethnic basis (Taneski, 2023).

As a result, in the second phase of the research, we discovered that religion and territorial and economic inequality are also present as important drivers in a education/socialisation social context. For example, many young students, particularly those who wish to further their education, must relocate from their hometowns to Skopje, as it is the only city that provides all opportunities for education, employment or training. From an early age (16-17 years old), young people are forced to leave their homes and families to continue their education in the capital. The impact and danger of negative influence is twofold: on the one hand, young people are separated from their parents and families, which represents a fundamental corrective measure for their behaviours; on the other, they begin a new life without adequate parental/family supervision and are easily the target of unwanted influences, including radical ones.



Other available research (Stojvoski, Stefanovski & Aleksoski, 2018) shows similar findings. According to CRPM (2022), the perception of students becoming radicalised was much higher among respondents in Skopje than in other places. While perceptions do not signify fact, this important finding demonstrates that Skopje should be an area of focus when it comes to working with perceptions of causes of and education about radicalisation. Regarding the profile of persons who would be more susceptible to becoming radicalised, the general perception among frontline school workers was that adolescents coming from poorer families and lower social status in general are more susceptible to accepting radical ideologies, but also prone to different kinds of violence inside and outside school. Dysfunctional, larger and less educated families are also seen as environments where this behaviour can be developed. Regarding violent incidents in the schools where they worked, there were differences in the perceptions of ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. Among ethnic Macedonians, 22.75% of the respondents believe that there had been violent incidents during the last year and a half (Stojkovski, Stefanovski and Aleksovski, 2022).

This is worsened by the fact that children from low-income families have a lower chance of completing the education process in general and in the RNM capital in particular. The economic status of the parents influences the children's development as well as their social and emotional activity. As a result, the main causes of violent behaviour are identified as a lack of education, economic difficulties, a lack of love and care, domestic violence, and a lack of free activities. Social cohesion can be achieved by providing appropriate education. The government and municipalities should continue to support the process and ensure that all young people, regardless of religious, territorial, or economic origin, have equal access to education.

Additionally, religion and politics play a major role in this context. The Ohrid Framework Agreement put an end to the nearly 10-month conflict and put in place rights for the ethnic Albanian minority in the RNM while establishing power-sharing rules between Albanian and Macedonian political parties (Stojkovski, Stefanovski and Aleksovski, 2019). The agreement was forced after a violent conflict between the Macedonian security forces and the Albanian radicals that broke out in 2001. Just five years after the conflict, there was a rightist political shift, followed by a decade-long amplification of the ethno-centred, exclusivist discourses in the public sphere within both dominant ethnic-political camps in the state: Macedonian and Albanian (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2021). The peace agreement was signed by the leaders and the international brokers, which paved the way for a major institutional restructuring of the Macedonian state (Georgieva, Mujoska Trpevska and Trajanovski, 2021). The social and political developments in the RNM in the aftermath of the 2001 armed conflict are closely related to their occurrences as meso-level interaction platforms, as well as their radicalisation potentials, as was previously concluded in WP5-1.

Politics must not interfere with education, which is critical for developing sound policy. Professional staff is required in conditions where political parties are involved in the majority of employment, even if education reforms are being implemented. This is especially true when dealing with the influence of radicalisation, which can lead to VE. The RNM must provide education without political influence or pressure, reactivate local communities, and establish a council of parents in schools, which should play a proper role in relation to educational institution developments. It is also critical to have full professional teams (psychologist, pedagogue, social worker, special education teacher) in all local educational institutions.



The community is one of the key actors that should support the reintegration process of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families. Of course, the inclusion of civil society led by NGOs, religious leaders, local communities, youth, women, the media, and so on, is of particular importance. The involvement of the local self-government in the process of reintegration of these persons is of no less importance. Besides upgrading formal education programmes with preventive programmes and measures against VE and radicalisation that leads to VE, it is crucial to develop and implement projects aimed at de-radicalising already radicalised individuals as well as rehabilitating and reintegrating former FTFs. Taking steps to prevent radicalisation in prisons is also critical, followed by raising public awareness, promoting tolerance, and assisting these individuals' reintegration into the community.

A great example is the current Manual on the Prevention of Radicalisation that Leads to Violent Extremism[389] that has been prepared for teaching staff from secondary schools in the RNM (recognise, prevent, act). This Manual follows international and regional practices in countering radicalisation that leads to VE and terrorism, as priority security challenges of today and in the direction of the preventive process. The Manual emphasises how crucial education ideals and principles are in preventing radicalisation and resolving VE. In the education system, a comprehensive and practical strategy can help foster tolerance and build early detection systems for ideas and behaviours that encourage VE.

[389] Available in Macedonian and Albanian language at: https://nexus.org.mk/manual-high-school-teachers-tools-early-detection-intervention-preventing-countering-radicalization-may-lead-violent-extremism/?lang=mk

The Manual is in line with the fundamental priorities of the Republic of North Macedonia's strategy for PVE for the years 2018-2022, as well as the strategic goals of (1) strengthening institutional and individual capacities for identifying and mapping people, groups, and other environmental factors that have the potential to radicalise people; and (2) strengthening institutional and individual capacities for lessening the effects of the radicalisation drivers that eventually lead to terrorist activities and VE. The Ministry of Education and Science's Bureau for Education Development has approved and completely coordinated the Manual's preparation. Its layout perfectly aligns with the objectives and subject matter of secondary school teaching. The primary methodological tool used in the creation of the Manual is the analysis of effective global strategies for combating VE and radicalisation that have been implemented in other nations and modified to fit the RNM's education environment.

Another good example of preventive programme is Council of Europe HELP programme course on Radicalisation Prevention started in North Macedonia and Kosovo.[390] A group of 50 prison and probation officers from North Macedonia and Kosovo familiarised themselves with the online Council of Europe HELP course, which will help them increase their knowledge on dealing with radicalisation in prisons and turning away from violence. In North Macedonia, the online event to launch the course was opened by the National Coordinator for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Combating Terrorism, who emphasised the importance of the course and its benefits for the participants, encouraging them to take an active part in order to increase their knowledge and put into practice the newly acquired skills in preventing radicalisation and rehabilitating VE offenders.



### Existing P/CVE measures

The most common measures taken to deal with youth violence in general or in school are parent/guardian counselling, student counselling, written reprimand, and verbal reprimand. Counselling with groups of parents is performed less frequently.

In terms of the criminal justice system, special precautions and actions should be taken when radicalised prisoners are released. Therefore, external agencies need to know in advance what the risks and needs of the convicts are to make plans to manage these risks and needs. There is a need to establish an effective, legal mechanism for the exchange of data on persons convicted of VE between law enforcement authorities, social work centres and prison authorities.

Experiences show that the establishment of an appropriate mechanism for data exchange and inter-institutional cooperation is a prerequisite for a successful and adequate assessment of the risks and needs of convicted persons, as well as for an efficient release process. The release preparation processes are initiated by staff in the Resocialisation Department , and this is the first step in providing pre-release and post-penal assistance needs from one place, with effective coordination within the prison and with external organisations. The Resocialisation Department should coordinate individual exit plans for convicted persons, pre-release programmes, preparation for release, preparation of release notices, and arranging meetings with external agencies and organisations, as well as ensuring

[390] https://www.coe.int/en/web/help/help-radicalisation-prevention1

efficient exchange of information at all levels. The Resocialisation Department should have several people responsible for cases to which convicted persons will be assigned in the 6-12 months before release.

The operational, functional and efficient work of the person responsible for the subject includes:

- Chairing meetings of multidisciplinary teams, which will include security services and a representative from the local police service.
- Establishing a mechanism for collecting, processing and exchanging information.
- Determination of contact points in the institutions for the purpose of information exchange.
- Provision of mutual and reciprocal exchange of data in accordance with the standards related to the protection of secrets and personal data.
- Preparation of a joint plan regarding the needs of convicted persons in the period before release.
- Establishing cooperation with the non-governmental sector, religious communities and other civil society representatives regarding monitoring of cases after discharge.

## LOCAL DYNAMICS PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

There are no established specialised preventive programmes, no financial resources are allocated, and no protocols govern such collaboration among educational, social, and health institutions, despite the fact that such collaboration is mandated by law to facilitate preventive activities.



However, religion and religious education can play a big role. Religious education is increasingly recognised as an instrument for the prevention of VE. Religious education should enable students to gain knowledge and understanding of the influence of religions on people's and societies' lives, contribute to students' spiritual and moral development, raise students' awareness of life's fundamental issues, and encourage them to explore, reflect on, and provide answers to such questions considering the world's great religious teachings and ethical traditions. Through knowledge of various systems of values and beliefs, the student should be able to accept those who are different from him and coexist with them in a multicultural society, take responsibility for the future and influence societal decisions, and be prepared to live an ethically responsible life.

In this regard, the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups is a local actor with the greatest potential to increase the positive impact of PVE while limiting its negative impact. The Commission is an independent administration body in charge of religious issues in the state. There are 18 registered churches, nine registered religious communities, and 10 registered religious groups in Macedonia.

In its work, the Commission is faced with certain weaknesses and obstacles. The Commission's legal competences do not define its action to prevent religious extremism and radicalisation. At the same time, there is a lack of employees, as well as financial resources for regular work and implementation of its activities. On the other hand, the centralised structure and work of the Commission prevents insight into local situations and more significant participation in preventive activities related to VE and radicalisation at the local level. The role of the Commission on the reintegration plan of FTFs is to

advance and promote religious coexistence, and to ensure the realisation of freedom of religion and the performance of religious rites.

IVZ is the official Islamic religious community in Macedonia. They issued a ban on the use of violence in the name of any religion. IVZ is active in speaking out against joining violent groups and has developed a proposed project to prevent radicalisation and terrorism. According to IVZ, the high rate of unemployment and the overall bad economic situation of young people in Macedonia is one of the reasons when it comes to radicalisation. In a situation where young people see no hope for a better tomorrow, they become an easier target for manipulation.

The Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archdiocese, Justiniana Prima (MPC-OAJ) or simply Macedonian Orthodox Church (MPC) is the national Church of Macedonians of the Orthodox faith and the largest Church in Macedonia. From the perspective of preventive action against VE, religious communities have the responsibility for raising interfaith dialogue and tolerance in the state, through the promotion of positive values (common coexistence, respect for diversity, developing mutual communication and trust) and raising the community's resistance to VE and terrorism. In that context, religious officials need to lead an active campaign to prevent the emergence of VE, take care of religious education, and prevent the abuse of religious teachings contrary to traditional values, as well as placing "counter-narratives" in order to minimise the effects and mitigate the consequences of the harmful influence of extreme-radical teachings.



### Protective factors

- Rule of law and establishing solid institutional framework for the rule of law.
- Multiculturalism, mutual respect for ethnic, religious, and other communities.
- The curricula in schools and faculties should address subjects that promote coexistence, tolerance, compromise, supranational determination, and the observance of all moral and ethical values in society.
- Social adaptation, resocialisation and reintegration of ex-convicts.
- Youth clubs, counselling centres for young people, and sports activities that function without the financial support of their families could encourage creativity among young people, all under the supervision of professional and educated staff.

### Resilience factors

- Official religious communities play an important role in promoting community resilience.
- CSOs and their influence are crucial factors in building resilience.
- The importance of support, financial donations and guidance by international organisations, embassies and representative offices.

### Resistance factors

- Within the process of reintegration, resocialisation and rehabilitation, the position of the children remains of great importance as seen in international human rights and humanitarian law.
- Returnee children should be provided with adequate support to assist their recovery and reintegration.

- Institutional and non-institutional psychosocial treatment for rehabilitation and resocialisation for FTFs and their families.
- Reduction of security risks.
- Full reintegration into communities and society in accordance with human rights as stipulated in the national legislation.
- Relevant institutions are responsible for the process of resocialisation and reintegration of the FTFs in the communities and society upon serving their respective prison sentences.
- The civil society sector is actively involved in the whole process.
- During the process of repatriation of the returnees and their families, the Ombudsman is informed and involved in the process.

## EXISTING OR POTENTIAL VULNERABILITY INDICATORS (BOTH INTRA AND EXTRA COMMUNITY)

Some of the potential vulnerability indicators can include availability of violent content on TV, the internet, and other kinds of media, as well as a certain type of marginalisation (of the family, the person or in the class), family violence, socioeconomic status, and school success. Therefore, teachers, parents and professional services in schools are the first to encounter the problem of recognising and ascertaining a change in the behaviour of young people, as well as to apply certain measures to deal with the case.

- Suggested actions for the teacher, parent or responsible person when detecting vulnerability or problematic behaviour.
- Talk openly with children about violence, radicalisation, extremism and terrorism as well as their consequences.
- Teach children about their rights, as well as the rights of their peers, teachers, family members and community members.
- Apply disciplinary measures that are educational, not punitive.
- Openly discuss with children topics that can incite violence.
- Talk openly about differences in religions and beliefs.
- Suggest ways to raise awareness of human rights in the school and promote respect for differences, for example through debates, nature teaching, games, role-playing and storytelling.
- Suggest that the children form an anti-violence club.
- Help them organise activities to promote a peaceful campaign and a safe school environment for all, etc.

# Filling the gaps

In line with established practice in the RNM, P/CVE requires a holistic approach with the engagement of diverse institutions and civil society together with local communities. In particular, a public health approach to prevention programming offers opportunities for practitioners to use lessons learned from the field of disease prevention through multi-stakeholder initiatives to identify the RNM's National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism using information gathered in 2016. In order to promote a multi-stakeholder, community-based approach to the implementation of the National Strategy and Action Plan, one of the best examples is the involvement of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mission in Skopje, which in its comprehensive process of promoting a multi-stakeholder approach to P/CVE and radicalisation that leads to terrorism (Doda and Mclellan, 2020) included the participation of representatives from the municipal administration, civil society, local institutions, educators, psychosocial care providers, youth, religious leaders, and other influential members of the local community.

## GENDER SPECIFICITIES

The gender perspective is low among youth, but there is certain amount of awareness and consideration of differential needs, experiences and status of women and men based on socio-cultural context. Gender considerations must be incorporated into the design of P/CVERLT initiatives, as well as meaningful empowerment of women in shaping efforts to prevent violence by creating genuine opportunities to play a transformative role in society. Society and authorities must avoid instrumentalising women's participation in order to advance a specific security agenda while displacing other concerns, such as advancing women's rights. The RNM must ensure that efforts to involve women in P/CVE do not reinforce traditional gender roles, stereotypes, and inequalities, and that they do not put them at risk (Doda and Mclellan, 2020).



## CAPACITY-BUILDING POTENTIALITIES AND AREAS FOR INTERVENTION

Teachers and other school personnel should receive regular training on recognising, dealing with, and developing new measures to combat peer violence and violent behaviour.

Students should receive regular training on what VE and radicalisation that can lead to violence mean, how to recognise it, and where to report it.

For dealing with such cases of violence, the school should form a parent support group within the parent council.

# Conclusions

The goal of raising healthy and prosperous youth is a cornerstone of the RNM's development agenda. North Macedonia can equip its young population with the tools they need to thrive in a rapidly changing world by investing in education, skill development, and youth empowerment. This is especially true when it comes to specific issues like VE and radicalism. This entails not only providing high-quality education opportunities, but also creating an environment in which young people can recognise a problem and learn about its prevention and mitigation. Youth who are healthy and prosperous have the potential to become the driving force behind the country's progress and innovation, ensuring North Macedonia's prosperous future.

Threats from VE are everchanging, taking various forms and manifestations, so continuous education on the topic is essential in countering this phenomenon. Moreover, ethnic and religious factors as drivers of VE will give a full picture and provide additional results for analysis and adequate explanation of the radicalisation that leads to VE.

Resocialisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of radicalised individuals and members of extremist groups continue to be a major challenge in North Macedonia, given the poor conditions in prisons and the lack of effective resocialisation programmes. Radicalisation in prisons remains a major issue in North Macedonia. As a result, it is critical that the prison distinguishes between recruiters and recruits and develops separate resocialisation policies for each. Training for staff who work with resocialisation of this segment of the prison population is critical to the success of deradicalisation programmes. Persons convicted of VE-related crimes have the right to practise their faith while incarcerated. Spaces for worship within prisons should be opened in consultation with the IRC to avoid such spaces being used to further radicalise inmates or to serve radical groups outside of the prison (Arifi, 2019).



It is imperative that specialised preventive programmes, financial resources, and protocols be established at the state level to oversee the collaboration between health, social, and educational institutions.

Religious communities bear the responsibility for increasing interfaith dialogue and tolerance in the state through the promotion of positive values (common coexistence, respect for diversity, developing mutual communication and trust), as well as increasing community resistance to VE and terrorism. In this context, religious officials must lead an active campaign to prevent the emergence of VE, care for religious education, and prevent the abuse of religious teachings contrary to traditional values, as well as placing "counter-narratives" in order to minimise the effects and mitigate the consequences of extreme-radical teachings' harmful influence.

### Potential areas for social intervention in prevention of VE

- Raising awareness and education (workshops, lectures, seminars) of: students, parents and teachers about non-violent behaviour, tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

- Prohibited/limited access to content that promotes violence and hatred.
- Greater involvement of parents, both in school/education, and in the education process and family life.
- Reduction of the number of students in one class.
- More extracurricular (sports, humanitarian) activities for children.

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# Youth and Sport in PVE

## Introduction

In this section, we introduce the context and goals of the analysis at the meso level by addressing several aspects of the "youth-sport-local level" relationship. First of all, we will open the issue of the institutional structure that connects youth, sports and local self-government. It can be analysed from two aspects: on the one hand, the lack of youth organisations and inefficiency of local governance structure exposes the local community to the risks of sports violence and violent extremism (VE), while on the other this structure is an entry point for preventing violent extremism (PVE) (National Youth Strategy, 2023). Furthermore, this section explains the context in which the analysis is carried out; that is, the social position, the ethnic and religious characteristics, the political context, and the frequency of sports violence. In the analysis at this level, we included Tetovo and Skopje (as well as the municipalities), bearing in mind that according to the reports of the Ministry of the Interior, the highest level of violence at sports events happens in these cities (MoI, 2021; 2022). This does not exclude the fact that similar events are present in other municipalities.



The purpose of this analysis is (1) to identify entry points for PVE and the role of local youth institutions; (2) to analyse the interviews of actors who are related to sports and PVE; (3) to probe conclusions from the analyses and ascertain recommendations regarding violent and inappropriate behaviour at sports events and outside of them, which are associated with VE; and (4) identify possible role of sports fans in PVE.

The Law on Sports (first adopted in 1996) underwent a series of changes: in 2002, conditions were created for sports associations to be transformed into commercial companies. The changes from 2004 enabled the decentralisation of sports and their financing by local governments according to their financial potential, while sports associations and sports clubs continue to depend on the budgetary support of the state.

The Law on the Prevention of Violence and Indecent Behaviour at Sports Competitions regulates these issues and establishes measures for their prevention. The goal is to protect the safety of spectators, competitors and other participants in sports competitions from acts of violence ("introducing and displaying banners, flags and other objects with text, images, signs or other symbols, as well as singing songs or throwing messages that caused and incited hatred or violence on the basis of racial, national and religious affiliation or on the basis of other characteristics" (Article 3). However, the law is not gender sensitive and lacks provisions on gender-based violence and gender-based hate speech at sporting events.

At the national level, the government supports policies to increase the number of citizens of all ages, social groups and origins who are engaged in sports and sports-recreational activities on a daily basis.

It is responsible for regulating sports and sports activities by enacting and implementing laws, strategies, policies and other relevant documents.[391] The promotion of the position and role of youth and sports is the responsibility of the Agency for Youth and Sports (YSA). The YSA is an independent body of the state administration and the only government institution that is responsible for all aspects of the life of youth in the state, as well as for all aspects concerning sports. The agency is a legal entity that performs the tasks related to the monitoring of sports and sports-recreational activities, the monitoring of the development of sports, as well as performing other tasks established by law.

At the local level, local government units regulate sport and sporting activities, primarily with regard to schools, community sports and local initiatives (Programme of the Government of North Macedonia 2022-2024, 2022).[392]

Key documents according to which local programmes are prepared at the local level are the Law on Sports, the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, and the Law on Local Self-Government. Pursuant to Article 23 of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies and the Conclusion of the 57th session of the government adopted on 23 March 2021, the state administration bodies, municipalities, municipalities in the city of Skopje and the city of Skopje are obliged to appoint a youth officer, a person responsible for the operation of the Youth Office to coordinate, implement and monitor issues of interest to young people within the scope of the institution's competences, including youth and sport. This position is mandatory for all state institutions at all levels, but additional promotion is needed not only for youth officers, but also for the youth offices and youth centres, as well as the local youth councils.



At the beginning of 2023, the mayor of Tetovo reported that the development of a strategy and a work programme, as well as the determination of special premises and the provision of the legally determined budget of 0.1% for the functioning of the local Youth Council, are underway. The non-governmental organization (NGO) Forum for Educational Changes presented the results of the "#PolicyBrief 1.0" research on the involvement of young people in the municipalities of Tetovo, Gostivar and Skopje (FECH, 2023). The research shows that the young people are not satisfied with their position; so, according to the policy brief, it is precisely intensive for collaborations between civil sector and institutions that can help to improve the status.[393] The talks with youth in Skopje, Tetovo and Gostivar among other issues indicate that young people are not consulted by authorities on local and national level, which results in apathetic youth behaviour towards the socio-political processes. The serious impact on the status of youth on the local level resulted from the lack of introducing institutional forms , youth organisations and municipality forms of youth support. Only 10% of municipalities established youth cooperation councils and most of the municipalities are still not completing the obligations

[391] https://sobranie.mk/ns-newsarticle-klubot-za-mladi-vo-poseta-na-novoformiraniot-mladinski-sovet-vo-tetovo.nspx

[392] In the Programme of the Government of North Macedonia 2022-2024, several goals for improving the state of sports in the country are highlighted (the preparation of a new law on sports, in accordance with the European model of sports; a new strategy for the development of sports; equal and transparent support of sports and athlete(s); introduction of the gender perspective in the policies and budgets in the area of sports at the local and central level; and educational activities for the inclusion of the gender perspective in the policies and budgets of sports organisations), https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/programa/2022-2024/programa_na_vladata_2022-2024.pdf

[393] The tradition of unfulfilled infrastructural and cultural promises in Tetovo Municipality, FOKUS, 26 September 2023, https://fokus.mk/traditsijata-na-neostvarenite-infrastrukturni-i-kulturni-vetuvana-vo-opshtina-tetovo/

according to the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies. The main points in terms of changing the unsatisfactory situation go in the direction of greater transparency of institutions, centralised funding of youth programmes, transparent implementation of the National Strategy for Youth, introduction of civic education in secondary schools, and MPs to work on adopting a new law on youth workers to avoid exploitation (FECH, 2023)

The municipality of Tetovo and the city of Skopje appointed youth officers (National Youth Council of Macedonia, 2021).[394] The city of Skopje is the capital of the country, where about half a million people live as a result of rural-urban migration. It is a city in which the largest number of football sports clubs are registered, 46 compared to Tetovo's 11. The findings and conclusions from the previous research convinced us that football fandom and VE are sensitive and at some points correlated (Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2022):

- We noticed that, although the main and official religious institutions in the city have activities aimed at reconciliation, the fan groups – probably, according to the interviews and analysed activities – do not accept these messages for communication with other religious groups. Therefore, a deeper analysis of this aspect is needed, which will allow a better understanding of the driver of religion for these types of social interactions and eventual radicalisation and VE.
- A similar tendency was mapped in relation to political party influences and the influence of cultural norms and ethnic communities in general. In particular, we noticed that among fan groups there is a tendency to self-attribute the meaning of group identity that is not necessarily in accordance with the identity markers of cultures and ethnic communities at the local and national levels.
- Another important aspect is digital literacy among football fans, as we found that, similar to the main state trajectories mapped in the macro-level analysis, young fans may be prone to radicalisation and messages calling for violence and perpetuate such content on various online platforms. This aspect has already been highlighted in the literature, but it certainly needs closer research with a focus on the local context. These gaps, in turn, can allow instrumentalisation and violent behaviour in and out of stadiums (Georgieva, Mujoska and Trajanovski, 2022).



[394] National Youth Council of Macedonia, 2021, https://nms.org.mk/%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%BB%D1%83%D0%B6%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8/

# Research methodology

## RECAP FROM RESULTS FROM THE FIRST PHASE OF THE MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

Drawing on the history of clashes between dominant fan groups in North Macedonia, specifically on football fans, in the first phase of meso-level analysis we approached the fan scene as a vehicle for potential radicalisation and VE. We focused on football fans in Tetovo, i.e., young adults over 18 who are members and supporters of the two dominant fan groups in the city (Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2022).[395] Regarding the relationship to the macro-level findings, the research found that recent approaches on the national level to football-related violence are generally consistent with the state preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) action plan of the late 2010s. They focus on prevention rather than repression following the trends and policy of international sports institutions and the national strategy for PVE.

However, we concluded that this rarely happens in reality due to many reasons: human resources, lack of training, and non-compliance. In turn, the lack of state institutional coordination and the realisation of the latest legal and political solutions hinders the dialogue with the fan groups and contributes to their understanding of the state authorities as alien and hostile.



In particular, we found that young members and sympathisers of Skhendia (Balisti) see state institutions as distant, while those of Teteks (Vojvodi) see local authorities as hostile, mostly due to lack and perceptions of lack of political representation.[396] The space that is left by local and sports institutions is often filled by international actors who perceive sports and fan groups in the country in several ways: as a means of social reconciliation of different groups, but also as platforms for radicalisation.

All of these approaches are consistent with the latest involvement of the international community in the P/CVE state, which we outlined in the macro-level report. As for the meso level, members and sympathisers of football fans have ambivalent attitudes towards radicalisation and VE: the groups allow the violent behaviour of the group itself to be presented as an attitude of defence of the group and, often, its members use heroic tropes and references of ethnic and religious identity markers to support these and similar behaviours. We see these meso-dynamics in line with macro-level findings regarding the drivers of cultural, ethnic and religious salience. However, some differences can be noted about the role given to ethnicity at the macro and meso levels. As for the findings at the macro level, the dominant perspective on football fan groups in North Macedonia – among scholarship, the media and the general public – is that the main axis of contestation is the ethnic one. However, we argue that this approach overlooks intra-ethnic conflicts between fan groups, which are equally dangerous. Interviewed young members and supporters of both dominate.

[396] The municipality of Tetovo listed seven registered football clubs; misunderstandings and divisions about the use of the only football stadium in Tetovo is that only Skhendia FC is permitted to use it while Tetex FC, Ljuboten FC and ZFK Ljuboten are excluded. ZFK Ljuboten is a female football club, https://tetova.gov.mk/getartm.aspx?aid=199&men=9&lan=2&sub=65

Football fan groups in Tetovo predominantly perceive ethnic, cultural and religious identity as a strong mobilising factors often used for ethnic group mobilisation or spreading hate speech. Although issues related to identity are not the only drivers for joining a football fan group, the activities of fan groups in the past, as well as in the present, contribute to the strengthening of symbolic boundaries between the two dominant ethnic and religious communities in North Macedonia. Sociologists say that events of hate speech on sports events, though isolated incidents, can easily lead to disruption of inter-ethnic relations. The police intervention is necessary, but first the violent cheering groups must be removed from party protection (Minovski, K.; TV Kanal 5, 2018).

The rivalry between fan groups does not emerge as only sports-related but includes offensive and hate speech on a religious and nationalistic basis. The latest episodes of failures in reconciliation show this dynamic and the impact on inter-ethnic dialogue at different levels, paving the way for future collisions.[397]

## DESCRIPTION OF THE CRITERIA FOR THE CASE STUDY SELECTION AND CRITERIA FOR SAMPLE SELECTION (OF PARTICIPANTS)

The guidelines from the coordinator of WP-5 already emphasised that WP5-2 will focus on preventive rather than interventional factors in dealing with VE. In that context, the former efforts focus on preventing the radicalisation of persons who have not been radicalised or had no previous involvement in VE, while the latter efforts focus on previously radicalised individuals or current radicals and extremists. In North Macedonia, the selected case study focuses on violence at sporting events and the potential for radicalisation of football fan groups. The previous analysis referred to Tetovo and ethnically divided fan groups, which showed that there is a potential for radicalisation and VE (Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2022). Bearing in mind not only ethnic and religious factors as drivers, we believe that by expanding the sample and including the municipalities of the city of Skopje through the social and political context, we will obtain additional results for analysis and adequate explanation of the phenomenon and identify preventive potentials. In fact, fan violence occurs in team sports at different levels (locally and nationally) given that sports teams participate in both national and international leagues.



Therefore, in the research sample, we included young people (18-30 years old) from Tetovo and Skopje in the focus group, while the interviews were conducted with one representative of an NGO that focuses on the causes of sports violence, one sports worker from a national level institution, and one sports worker involved in an education process for sports activities. The focus group was composed of 10 young people (6 woman and 4 man). The selection criteria were age (18-29), sport fans, gender, and registered fans from both cities.

The proposed research tools include questions for Key Informant Interviews and focus group discussions and take into account the potential structure of the tools to be developed later in the course of CONNEKT.

[397] According to the 2002 census, Skopje has 506,926 inhabitants. The most numerous ethnic groups are Macedonians with 66.75% of the population, followed by Albanians (20.46%), Roma (4.63%), Serbs (2.82%), Turks (1.70%), Bosniaks (1.50%) and the Vlachs (0.50%).

The MASA team adapted the questions to the local context from the set of suggested questions. Certain questions were acceptable and applicable in the local context while others were less relevant. This was shown in relation to the questions for the focus groups but also in the questions for the experts considering that one is from the field of education, the other from the field of sports, and the third from the non-governmental sector. Regarding the participants in the focus groups from Tetovo and Skopje, we had a gender-sensitive group, and the participants were already active as volunteers in sports events. The interest of the fans to participate in the focus group was low, with only one fan participating.

## CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

In this analysis, as for other similar analyses, we faced challenges such as a lack of systematised and relevant data on violence and misconduct at sports events, including gender data. Most of the public institutions either do not have relevant information or the information is not publicly available. On the other hand, the relevant sports institutions (clubs, federations, unions, etc.) also lack relevant information in their respective areas. There is also a lack of publicly available and relevant research about sports and sports violence, as well as official statistics. The high level of fragmentation of the institutions in general also contributes to a lack of trust both within the institutions and towards outsiders, and, consequently, to a lack of interest in cooperation with researchers. The exception is the Ministry of the Interior, which registers the violations of the law and allows a short comparative analysis. Also notable are the analyses of NGOs, which are more recent.



We believe that this research will provide a better understanding of the meso-level dynamics of radicalisation and VE in a given spatial context (Tetovo, North Macedonia) of social interactions (football fan groups). The analysis of the macro-level drivers of radicalisation in North Macedonia suggested that, in terms of the territorial diffusion across the state, there is a certain gap between the general foci of the public and the actual institutional C/PVE work in the field (Kambovski, Georgieva, & Trajanovski, 2021, pp. 9-10). The city of Tetovo is one such case where this gap is being constantly recreated. The major rationale behind this reasoning are the developments related to the 2001 armed conflict in Tetovo and the series of inter-ethnic incidents in the course of the last two decades in the city. The history of the inter-ethnic relations, as well as the cultural, religious and ethnic drivers of radicalisation and the cleavages across political lines, were already pointed out in the report on macro-level drivers (Kambovski, Georgieva, & Trajanovski, 2021, pp. 9-10). This report, in turn, aims to go beyond the straightforward assumption of reflecting the prevailing inter-ethnic tensions to the football fan scene in the city. Therefore, we primarily focused on the Tetovo youth and spoke with several experts in order to better understand the football fandom in the city and its potentials of providing platforms for radicalisation and VE. In the other report from this CONNEKT WP, we discuss, again, the case of Tetovo and the public commemorations of the 2001 conflict in the city.

# Meso-level dynamics of prevention

## CONTEXT SPECIFICITIES[398]

Sports activities held at the local level are often associated with violence between fan groups (FnG). This type of violence is typical of football, handball or basketball matches determined as team sports. The participants in the focus groups (FG) characterise this type of violence on the sports fields as "riots" rather than VE. Some of the participants referred to the label VE as too strong as it mostly applies to foreign fighters and terrorism.

According to KKI 2, the factors influencing sports violence include: (1) fan passion and reaction to defeat or victory; (2) changes in the management and coaching structure if it is under political influence; (3) hate speech towards other fans and the team; (3) corruption in sports, and (4) personal interests in sports. Sports violence is not a problem exclusively on sports fields, it also affects the general safety of citizens when fan groups move uncontrollably through the local environment, act destructively on citizens' property or attack them, regardless of whether they are fans or not.

The insufficient presence of the police at the local level, where the matches are not as high risk as at the national level, still leaves room for sporting rampage. This is indicated by a participant in FG with the example that after the competitions the girls don't feel safe to move around the community. Another example is when rivalry is reflected outside the sports fields and members of fan groups move into the territory of another local community and are intercepted or harassed.



FG participants consider that sports fans are perceived as violent, destructive, and politically or criminally connected. They believe negative perception should not be dominant; on the contrary, with active measures, that perception should be changed in "fans of the sport" or of the club. In addition, sports fans also need a "safe space" in which they can express the positive aspects of fans such as: (1) humanitarian activities for sports fans, (2) organising sports events with interested local actors (students vs. teachers: male vs. female competitions), (3) promotion and support for women's sports, (4) stricter rules for visiting matches, and (5) positive examples of cooperation between leaders of fan groups. The goal should be to change the distorted image of sports as a breeding ground for violence and extremism.

Although in general the FG agreed that volunteering is not represented enough, most participants indicated that they volunteered at races and marathons in which the spirit of sportsmanship is preserved, such as the Skopje Marathon and the European Handball Championship.

Women participating in FG have more inclination towards perception that PVE is more national than local issue. The capacities of the communities are not sufficient or they have no interest in taking

[398] Службен весник на Република Македонија бр.29/02, 66/04, 81/08, 18/11, 51/11, 64/12, 148/13, 187/13, 42/14, 138/14, 177/14, 72/15, 153/15, 6/16, 55/16, 61/16, 106/16, 190/16, 98/19.

actions that will reduce the risks of high-level VE. Systemic weaknesses were also pointed out, primarily for the financing of clubs or the maintenance of sports fields.

Although the Law on Sports regulates the rules for establishing clubs and leagues, sports unions and federations, at the local level the situation is complex, firstly from the aspect of the success of the local community to function and fulfil its obligations in general.

On the other hand, the councils of the municipalities and the Council of the City of Skopje form municipal unions and adopt a regulation for the categorisation of sports facilities that are owned by them. To this end, an important part is the Strategy for Youth adopted by the Agency for Youth and Sports, which also includes activities for PVE. Thus, PVE in sports that are most often represented at the local level should be harmonised and coordinated.

At the local level, it can be said that there is a closed system of action between sports clubs, unions and local institutions. According to most of the participants in the focus group, there is a lack of cooperation with the police to control and secure the matches. Groups of sports fans and local sports unions of local teams usually organise the education of their fans themselves, avoiding cooperation with other actors and dialoguing with sports fans of other teams.

**Description, type of social interaction context, target population, actors and stakeholders mapping, relevant data and research available. Existing P/CVE measures.**



Tetovo is located in the north-western part of North Macedonia. Today, the municipality of Tetovo has a resident population of 84,770, 23,848 households and 30,167 apartments according to SSO data.[399] The city is usually referred to as multiethnic but also multicultural. Although this feature is strongly emphasised, in the interest of our analysis, citizens also face other social problems. As a result, one of the ways to address the problems is the establishment of a forum based on the experiences of the Forum for Social Dialogue and Cooperation inspired by the Schleswig-Holstein model.[400] This forum for social dialogue as a platform for structured dialogue and cooperation between civil society and public authorities in Tetovo started at the end of 2018 and, at the beginning of 2019, the project proposals were approved by the members of the forum, and the City Council supported their implementation. At the beginning of 2019, the needs at the community level were identified and measures for their management proposed.[401]

We believe that this research will provide a better understanding of the meso-level dynamics of radicalisation and VE in a given spatial context (Tetovo, North Macedonia) of social interactions (football fan groups). The analysis of the macro-level drivers of radicalisation in North Macedonia suggested that, in terms of the territorial diffusion across the state, there is a certain gap between the general foci of the public and the actual institutional C/PVE work in the field (Kambovski, Georgieva, & Trajanovski,

[399] State Statistical Office, https://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2022/2.1.22.10-mk-en.pdf

[400] The Tetovo Forum for Social Dialogue and Cooperation – a best practice presented in Minority Monitor, 24 April 2023, https://fuen.org/en/article/The-Tetovo-Forum-for-Social-Dialogue-and-Cooperation-a-best-practice-presented-in-Minority-Monitor

[401] The Tetovo Forum for Social Dialogue and Cooperation – a best practice presented in Minority Monitor, 24 April 2023, https://fuen.org/en/article/The-Tetovo-Forum-for-Social-Dialogue-and-Cooperation-a-best-practice-presented-in-Minority-Monitor

2021, pp. 9-10). The city of Tetovo is one such case where this gap is being constantly recreated. The major rationale behind this reasoning are the developments related to the 2001 armed conflict in Tetovo and the series of inter-ethnic incidents in the course of the last two decades in the city. The history of inter-ethnic relations, as well as the cultural, religious and ethnic drivers of radicalisation and the cleavages across political lines, were already highlighted in the report on macro-level drivers (Kambovski, Georgieva, & Trajanovski, 2021, pp. 9-10). This report, in turn, aims to go beyond the straightforward assumption of reflecting the prevailing inter-ethnic tensions in the football fan scene in the city. Therefore, we primarily focused on the Tetovo youth and spoke with several experts in order to better understand the football fandom in the city and its potential to provide platforms for radicalisation and VE. In the other report from this CONNEKT WP, we discuss again the case of Tetovo and the public commemorations of the 2001 conflict in the city.

According to the Public Safety Bureau's Annual Report of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in 2019, there was a 25% decrease in sports riots, compared to 2018. During this period, 18 cases of disturbed public order and peace on a larger scale of sports matches were registered, of which 11 cases were related to football matches, five to a handball match, and two to a basketball match. Most violations were recorded in the territory of Tetovo and Skopje. Although it is an international football match between the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Poland, within the qualifiers for the European Championship in 2020, in 2019 two fan groups from Poland violated public order and peace, and 223 people were detained. During 2020, as a result of the government's COVID-19 measures, the ban on holding matches and the ban on the presence of spectators, violence at sports matches overall decreased by 66%.



Violence at sports matches in 2022 recorded an increase of 66.6% compared to 2021. Forty-five violations of sports matches were registered, most of them in the area of SVR Tetovo-15, followed by the areas of SVR Bitola with eight cases, while in the area of SVR Skopje violations have decreased by 50%, and this year a total of seven cases were registered. The most prevalent are the disorders during football matches, 33, of which one violation took place during an international match between the representatives of the Republic of North Macedonia and Gibraltar, a further seven violations during handball matches, and the remaining five during basketball games. The disorders are usually carried out individually during the competitions when fireworks are thrown or lit, and in some cases physical violence also involved force, during which 17 people were injured (fans, referees and players), of whom three people suffered serious bodily injuries. Although this data refers to violence on sports fields in general, it shows that young people are exposed to violence, as found in the MASA survey in public spaces, in schools and sports fields (Georgieva, Kambovski, Trajanovski, & Mujoska Trpevska, 2023).

Violators are usually members of fan groups who have previously appeared as violators of public order and peace, and they are mostly adult and male. In relation to the disturbances, criminal prosecution measures have been taken against 12 people for committing a total of six crimes – four are "violence" and two are "serious bodily harm". 41 requests have been submitted to initiate misdemeanour proceedings for 42 offences committed under the Law on Prevention of Violence and Indecent Behaviour at Sports Competitions and one offence of "throwing or breaking bottles, glasses and other objects in a public place" against 53 individuals, 12 legal entities and six officials (Annual Report, MoI,

2022; 2021) The general picture of violence among football fans is that there is a constant risk of violations of the rules of sports behaviour and cheering, and, according to the conclusions of the focus group and interviews, political influence is a significant driver of this violence. There is a connection between VE and sports in the countries of the Western Balkans and this can be seen in two ways: sport as a means of PVE, an idea that is not yet successfully applied in practice in the region, and sport as a means to politicise and recruit young people to join extremist groups (this trend is growing and may become a serious security problem for the region) (Gjorik,2023 ).

Moreover, the NEXUS survey emphasises the number of people who point out that political influence is the cause of violent behaviour. Only 7.5% of respondents answered that political influence is key to the violent behaviour of fans. However, the report concludes that politics seems to be latently present in sports clubs. Its presence may not be obvious at first glance, but politics is involved at least by misusing fan groups for political goals. [402] In North Macedonia, VE at football matches is connected to certain political and criminal structures. According to the NEXUS report, the most influential Macedonian supporter groups are in the capital Skopje, where Macedonians make up the ethnic majority. The recruitment of hooligan groups in the countries of the Western Balkans is carried out with the help of crime, political connections, and manipulation of young people. In North Macedonia, the recruitment of hooligan groups is strictly linked to party preferences. The impact of politics on football clubs is notable, because each municipality has its own representatives in the clubs. Hence, politics affects the clubs. Supporter groups in North Macedonia are often considered the "armies" of the parties, enjoying privileges such as protection from some politicians, indicating a direct link between supporters and political parties. Although the explicit links between major political parties and most violent ultras are usually well concealed, fans often see themselves as frontline soldiers for the nationalist causes that dominate politics) (Musliu, 2022).



Within the framework of the planned preventive activities of SVR Tetovo, which represent coordinated contents of "Safe Summer 2022", a meeting was held in Tetovo with representatives of the "Teteks 1953" Football Club. At the meeting, police officers of the Prevention Department, Police Department and the Tetovo Police Station familiarised the attendees with the provisions of the Law on Prevention of Violence at Sports Competitions and with their obligations arising from this law, primarily on an organisational level. They were informed about what they should and should not do when they are followed by their fan groups on visits in order to prevent possible incidents and other unwanted occurrences.

The Department of Internal Affairs of Tetovo started the practical implementation of a new preventive and educational project "Prevention of violence in sports", which is carried out by the Prevention Department. The project will cover about 3,000 students from the third year, who are taught in Macedonian, Albanian and Turkish languages in all Tetovo and Gostivar schools. Professionally trained police officers will inform high school students, in special classes, about the legal implications provided for in the Law on the Prevention of Violence and Indecent Behaviour at Sports Competitions, which they

[402] 360 Stepeni, https://360stepeni.mk/istrazhuvane-omraza-kon-protivnichkiot-klub-se-smeta-za-najchestata-prichina-za-nasilstvo-na-sportskite-tereni/

may face if they initiate or are directly involved in incidents in competitions or manifestations of a sporting nature and character.[403]

The Agency for Youth and Sports together with the Ministry of Internal Affairs is implementing a media campaign to raise awareness among young people about hate speech. The goal of the media campaign "Violence begets violence – stop it, don't inflame it" is to wake up young people and send a clear message about increasing responsibility for the consequences of offensive and distasteful content expressed to others. The campaign should send a message across the country's sports arenas, raising the level of awareness among sports participants, starting with players, coaches, referees and managers who manage sports clubs and visitors to sports matches.[404]

The coalition of youth organisations "SEGA" prepared a "Position document with recommendations for the prevention of violent extremism among young people". It is the final product of the structural dialogue process within the project "Youth work in the prevention of violent extremism". The position document contains an overview of all the recommendations that were defined by the youth and the adopters of decisions, and refer to the role of educational institutions, local institutions and civil society in the prevention of VE among young people. The document further aims to serve the relevant stakeholders increasing policies and programmes for preventing and dealing with VE among young people.[405]

According to research completed by NEXUS, the fan groups from North Macedonia remain locked in their "ethnic lands", resistant to any evolution. As a rule, they are nationalists and often right wing, although among the fans sympathisers of left-oriented policies can also be found. It seems that they are trying to ethnicise the sport, showing that xenophobia is more important to them than the support of their team. We can take two moments as a paradigm for the hypocrisy of the average Macedonian fan to whom ethnicity is often more important than the club and the national team which she cheers for.[406]



### Identified drivers, structural elements, specific variables

This part of the analysis is based on the answers from the focus groups and experts interviewed about the conditions that contribute to sports matches, especially football matches, being a source of violence that can turn into VE. The drivers identified by these research tools are systematised into four key drivers with negative impact: (1) ethnic and religious polarisation, (2) social exclusion and poverty, (3) political manipulation and criminal connections, and (4) low educational level.

- Young people may face sociocultural and communication barriers that keep them away from active participation in PVE factors. Processes of radicalisation or peer pressure can drag them into negative activities such as sports violence or hooliganism. Also, the absence of educational

[403] "Prevention of violence in sports" for high school students in Gostivar and Tetovo, Gostivarpress, https://gostivarpress.mk/proekt-prevenczija-od-nasilstvo-vo-sportot-za-srednoshkolczite-vo-gostivar-i-tetovo/

[404] Project "Youth work in the prevention of violent extremism" (2018-3-MK01-KA347-059981), https://www.sega.org.mk/images/E-Library/PositionPapers/NasilenEkstremizam.pdf

[405] "Position document with recommendations for the prevention of violent extremism among young people", SEGA, 2018, https://www.sega.org.mk/images/E-Library/PositionPapers/NasilenEkstremizam.pdf

[406] Identification of influencing factors on violence on sports fields, NEXUS, 2022, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1f7iqJbvbQl8L4ngPO5M8B7IbEkVAI176/view?pli=1

programmes and awareness can prevent young people from understanding the importance of PVE and getting involved in it. On the other hand, unemployment and socioeconomic challenges can distract young people from PVE activities. Lack of opportunities to acquire appropriate skills and employment can make them vulnerable to negative activities.

- Institutional weakness and lack of control/monitoring and evaluation. According to KII, in the last two years, the central government has no concept for the development, financing and control of the funds invested in sports. The manipulations of organised individuals and groups, installed in the administrations of sports clubs and national sports federations, reflect on the sport as a whole. Driven by personal and family interest, they abuse them as an additional and only source of financing. At the same time, they are disguised in the form of associations of citizens, as private clubs or federations.
- Weak local capacity. The local government does not allow real dedicated financing of sports in accordance with the law, while the main principle in financing is the realisation of narrow party goals. Therefore, sports and sports activities can be a source of violence and VE, as well as extreme nationalism, in certain environments, but also for certain daily political goals of individuals, groups and political parties.
- The process of prevention of sports violence is slow and insignificant compared to the level we would like, especially in the long term. The impact of the PVE measures is felt, especially at the institutional level, but in our opinion it is necessary to undertake or develop activities and measures to bridge the gap between the institutions and the local population (KKI 2).
- The non-engagement of young people in activities that contribute to their professional and personal growth and development and the political situation in the country.
- A negative factor is the influence of the interests of political parties, a regular screen behind which unpleasant events and extreme violence are hidden before, during and after the matches. Too often the most extreme violent fans are protected and not held accountable for their actions.
- Undoubtedly, violence in sports, especially on and off football pitches, has a negative impact on the development of sports. However, if the main financiers of fan groups, political parties, interest groups and powerful financial supporters are involved in the promotion of sports and sports culture, all positive energy can be directed towards the development of sports and the education of young people. Such coordination and cooperation, however, is difficult to achieve. In conditions where local elections and parliamentary elections are a priority and nationalist platforms are used to mobilise fans and voters, they will be the basis of violence. KKI 1 indicates that in the coming period, more violence can be expected on the sports fields when teams with a national sign and nationalistic colours will compete.
- The disturbed financing of the best football, basketball and handball clubs that function as joint-stock companies, in which the central and local governments have the largest share, contributed to a strong political influence on athletes, spectators and fan groups.
- The political situation in the country has a significant impact on the exclusion of young people from activities that contribute to their professional and personal growth. During times of political instability or unrest, young individuals may become discouraged or preoccupied with political events, which may lead to reduced participation in activities such as educational programmes, career development opportunities, and community engagement. This disengagement can hinder their personal and professional development, which in turn can create conditions conducive to VE as they seek alternative ways of expression and inclusion.

In order to overcome the identified weaknesses and prevent further escalation of violence and misconduct in sports as well as PVE, certain opportunities by interviewed experts have been identified and summarised:

- These situations can be overcome first of all with improvement of legal solutions that refer to local self-governing units in organising sports, financing them and providing conditions for sports, as well as direct action among young people in fan groups but also in all levels of education.
- Positive change in terms of the frequency and type of sports violence is possible and it can have a positive impact in the community. The result would be an increased involvement of young people in sports in achieving high sports results and a positive attitude of fans towards sports values.
- Cooperation is existing and functional to a certain extent. The existence of developed friendly relations between sports workers from different institutions has been noted, which on the one hand represents an opportunity for facilitating work and dealing with challenges, and on the other represents a challenge in itself for those who are not part of that "friendly" network.
- Inter-institutional cooperation would facilitate implementation of law and procedures.
- Greater involvement in sports and sports events.

Taking into account the characteristics of the local context expressed in its vulnerability or resistance to VE, according to summary of discussion of the focus group other measures can be applied that would work more appropriately.



- Ethnic division in primary and secondary education should be overcome, and positive communication between teaching staff, parents and students enabled.
- Action is also needed among athletes who can be a positive example of respect for sports opponents and realisation of joint actions for the promotion of the so-called family sport.
- Financing of sports, professional or amateur, is one of the burning issues, and enabling fair financing is a solution. On the other hand, political parties should free fans and leaders from political manipulation or bribing fan groups for nationalist purposes.
- Professional development and education of the sports participants themselves, as a model of behaviour; professional development and education of persons involved in the activities of athletes and management of sports activities; and education and promotional material on the importance of sports and the negative effects of violence on sports fans, the local population and the population in general.

Factors that have a negative impact and encourage violence and misbehaviour affect young people in different ways. For example:

- A large number of young people in search of their identity or to be accepted in a certain group identify with the leader of the group and the creator of fan formation, which is usually closed and selective. The leader guides the actions of the group and prescribes the role model of the fan.
- According to FG participants, in many cases for young people exposed to influence and pressure, it is more important to them how they will be perceived by their colleagues, the fans, than by

parents and teachers. FG participants emphasised that the weakened social status of family members and education staff reduces their role as a successful example in the social environment.

- In environments where different ethnic or religious groups have a positive relationship and initiate dialogue, greater support for PVE can be created. Enabling mutual understanding and conflict resolution can prevent extremist influences.
- Activities that raise people's awareness of the challenges of extremism and offer education about PVE can have a positive effect. An educated citizen is suitable to engage in the prevention of extremism.
- If there is segregation and discrimination in the social context, it can increase the likelihood of the growth of extremism. People who are isolated or discriminated against may feel they have no choice but to join extremist groups.
- If the social context enables the presence of extremist propaganda and reaction to those messages, it can increase the likelihood of the influence of extremism.

## LOCAL DYNAMICS PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Prevention is understood as a long-term social investment for building resilience communities. A community-level focus is key to our approach because it follows the academic consensus on the need for context-specific and hand-tailored approaches to preventive programmes. Indeed, attention should be paid to preventing subcultural dynamics, codes and symbols of the collective identity of the extremist social environments (Koehler, 2015). P/CVE approaches developed in recent decades are "intended to preclude individuals from engaging in, or materially supporting, ideologically motivated violence" (Williams, 2017) or simply as "non-coercive attempts to reduce involvement in terrorism" (Harris-Hogan et al., 2015).



However, the main complexity in development of prevention strategies and programmes for us is transferability, as context-specific approaches do not facilitate the creation of comprehensive transferable implementation or evaluation models.

To overcome this major obstacle, during the research CONNEKT identified some common variables and parameters that will facilitate cross-context comparisons at national, regional or international level.
This case study identifies the drivers and operational combinations of drivers on the local level that facilitate positive impact and PVE. Moreover, the taxonomy of contexts of social intervention can also serve as a useful parameter for facilitating cross-contextual comparisons and reaching more general overarching principles of preventive programmes. In this section we refer to preventive factors identified on a local level and in a specific social context.

Prevention factors in our analysis are defined as: protective factors (those factors that somehow "naturally" protect the community, which can be strengthened or promoted, but arise organically from the community (demographics, geographic characteristics, economic conditions...); resilience factors (i.e., tools developed in the community or institutionally, such as practices, habits, rituals, laws and policies) that help the community adapt to change and resist negative impulses that threaten the safety or integrity of the community; and resistance factors (intentional non-violent action against root causes, push and pull factors, narratives and acts).

Factors that have a positive impact at the local level are:

- Active communication of local structures with athletes and encouragement of their positive influence on fans. Elevating the role of athletes as a model of sports and intercultural behaviour through positive examples in the attitude towards family, sports fans from other clubs, mutual respect and friendship with athletes and citizens.
- Provision of modern facilities for sports activities that will provide conditions for the preparation of athletes and communication between fans and citizens in the form of safe spaces.
- Promotion of mutual understanding, education and prevention of segregation and discrimination, as well as prevention of extremist propaganda.

The most capable to increase this positive influence or limit this negative influence at the local level can be the Municipal Council. This council has an influence on the local political atmosphere and measures for young people in the city. To increase the positive impact, the Municipal Council can:

- Offer subsidies and resources for educational and vocational programmes for youth in times of political instability.
- Create safe spaces and platforms for dialogue and participation of young people in decision-making processes at the local level.
- Support educational and informational campaigns that will raise the awareness of young people about the political situation.



To limit the negative impact, the Municipal Council can:

- Implement psychological support programmes and talks with young people to overcome fear and mistrust caused by political instability.
- Cooperate with other local institutions and organisations on PVE and coordinate activities for a substantive and introductory approach.

In addition to the current challenges, pressures and limitations faced by the City Council, inter-institutional cooperation can contribute to reducing violence and preventing extremism.

- The City Council can develop a strategy for inter-institutional cooperation in full cooperation with other local institutions and organisations. This strategy can include coordinated actions for the prevention of violence and extremism and meet the needs of the local community.
- The City Council can invest resources in creating networks and partnerships with local institutions, such as educational institutions, police authorities, and NGOs. This can increase the network of cooperation and lead to more effective actions for prevention.
- The City Council can initiate inter-institutional cooperation to inform community members about the importance of cooperation in the prevention of violence and extremism. This may include educational campaigns and information activities.

With these measures, inter-institutional cooperation can be a powerful instrument in the hands of the City Council for the prevention of violence and the prevention of extremism in the local community.

### Protective factors

Protective factors are those factors that somehow "naturally" protect the community, and might be enhanced or promoted but stem organically from the community (demography, geographical characteristics, economic conditions…).[407] Applying a protective factors lens allows actors to avoid the pitfalls of focusing on deficits, problems and gaps, and acknowledges that, despite facing acute and often extreme pressures, the majority of individuals and communities do not engage in violence or VE. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) study emphasised the relationship between individual, community and institutional protective factors, and the importance of building horizontal networks, relationships and trust (social capital) among/within groups (such as youth from the same area or socioeconomic backgrounds and CSO networks representing similar constituencies or with similar missions); building horizontal networks, relationships and trust (social capital) across different groups (such as youth from different areas or socioeconomic groups or from across conflict divides); and building vertical networks, relationships and trust (social capital) between duty bearers such as local or national authorities, and citizens such as young people. This also includes marginalised, unrepresented, displaced or undocumented groups.[408]

The role of various actors in the field of PVE is vitally important. These actors can include government institutions, public order and security authorities, NGOs, educational institutions, local communities and individuals. Each actor has a unique contribution to make to PVE.

- Government institutions have a critical role in setting policies and strategies for PVE. They allocate resources and coordinate efforts to prevent extremism at the national and local levels. They may also engage in public order and security activities.
- Public order and security authorities are responsible for detecting and controlling extremist actions. They work to investigate and prevent extremist activities.
- NGOs are often involved in various initiatives, social support and deradicalisation programmes. They work against extremism and can offer counselling, mentoring and educational opportunities.
- Educational institutions are critical in forming attitudes and beliefs among young people. They can provide education in tolerance, critical thinking, and global challenges to push back extremist ideologies.
- Local communities are on the frontline in detecting and addressing radicalisation. They have an important role in early identification and intervention, while offering social support.



### Resilience factors

Resilience is the capacity of an individual, community or institution to adapt, respond and recover from shocks in order to reduce its vulnerability to future shocks. Recent PVE programmes are increasingly focusing on enhancing the ability of communities to use their available resources to respond to the drivers of radicalisation (CONNEKT, 2021, p. 9). The focus on the concept of

[407] Measuring protective factors against violent extremism, UNDP Briefing paper, https://www.undp.org/arab-states/publications/measuring-protective-factors-against-violent-extremism

[408] Ibid, p. 6.

resilience appears as an alternative to explicitly security approaches. The basis behind the idea of resilience lies in understanding that in some cases it can be difficult or even inevitable to protect individuals or communities from certain complaints, vulnerabilities, fears, and so on. Hence, PVE efforts at the community level should focus on building or improving resilient communities; that is, communities that have the tools and mechanisms that prevent members of that community from engaging in VE.

- Timely response and adaptation of programmes. PVE actors can monitor the political situation and adapt their educational and professional programmes in order to meet the needs of young people in times of instability. By offering resources and support to young people during these times, their interest and engagement can be maintained.
- Creating safe spaces for discussions and participation. PVE stakeholders can create safe spaces where young people can discuss experiences and challenges related to the political situation. These spaces can be platforms for learning and support, which motivates young people to engage and not lose interest in activities for personal and professional growth.
- Integrating educational content to understand the political situation. Introducing educational content or projects that help young people understand and assimilate information about the political situation in the country can strengthen and motivate them to participate in development activities.



A factor that would improve the attitude or perception that young people have about these actors would be their active engagement in the youth community. When PVE actors are actively involved in youth activities, they give young people the opportunity to experience them as equal partners, understand the needs and challenges of young people, and involve them in decision-making processes. This active engagement can improve relationships and trust between PVE actors and young people and convince them that their voices and opinions are important and influential.

### Resistance factors

Community resistance to VE can be challenging to assess adequately. It involves whether there is awareness in the local community (do people realise that radicalisation could be a problem for them?), attitude (are they ready to act and do something about it?) and action (how do they plan to stand up to the challenge?) (CONNEKT, 2021, p. 9). These three dimensions must be taken into account when identifying resilience factors in communities.

- There is a need for an adequate concept for PVE that will be effective on a local level including principles of prevention as a basic need. Therefore, a future analysis of community needs is necessary to reflect resistance factors on a local level.
- PVE is not in the focus of the interests of the local and central government. In addition, prevention is practised as being operational (ad hoc) and not structural. Short-term and long-term policies should be developed for all actors on a local level.

- The obligation to implement the European Convention on Spectator Violence and Misbehaviour at Sports Events and in particular at Football Matches is currently on non-satisfactory level, with the exception of a few sports federations.[409]
- Positive change in terms of the frequency and type of sports violence is possible through local prevention and it can have a positive impact in the community.
- The result would be increased involvement of young people in sports, achieving high sports results and positive attitude of fans towards sports values.

## EXISTING OR POTENTIAL VULNERABILITY INDICATORS (BOTH INTRA- AND EXTRA-COMMUNITY)

Regarding the vulnerability of local communities, we agreed that we have not developed an adequate concept for PVE that will be effective in the local environment. It should contain the elements that will improve resilience and reduce vulnerability at the local level. At the same time, it should respond to the local needs of the community that will be identified as weaknesses in functioning or lack of capacities. In addition, the problem is that PVE is not in the focus of the interests of the local and central government, and the role of the local police is perceived as preventive, without realising the potential of local NGOs, youth institutions, education, religious institutions or political leaders. Moreover, the obligation to implement the Convention on the Prevention of Violent Behaviour in Sport is currently a forgotten obligation, with the exception of a few sports federations.

Cooperation with local and state institutions in the efforts of PVE is realised at a low level and is insufficient. Very often an example of cooperation between the central and local government in PVE is influenced and determined by the position and opposition relations in the national assembly and in all municipal assemblies.



Clubs and bodies in various sports, including football, act within the regulations of national sports federations. Examples of support for sports clubs depend on who is in the position and the opposition.

Of course, the efforts of the Football, Handball and Basketball Federations to accept the national and international law, which derives from the acts of the international sports associations, are obvious. Cooperation is emphasised when federations and clubs from the Republic of Macedonia host international club and representative competitions. Thus, cooperation can happen if everyone commits to mutual responsibilities.

[409] Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950, ETS No. 5) and its protocols, the European Convention on Spectator Violence and Misbehavior at Sports Events and in particular at Football Matches (1985, ETS No. 120), the Anti-Doping Convention (1989, ETS No. 135), the Criminal Law Convention on Corruption (1999, ETS No. 173) and the Council of Europe Convention on Laundering, Search, Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime and on the Financing of Terrorism (2005, CETS No. 198).

# Filling the gaps

## MISSING OR NEGLECTED PROTECTIVE, RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE FACTORS

The whole society approach including local organisations for civil society, educational institutions, local authorities, youth leaders and activists, local media and cooperation with international organisations should be a priority. They contribute through education, awareness, programmes, and collaboration for development of better protective factors.

In local environments, the occurrence of violence at sports matches is most common in football, basketball and handball matches in the lowest levels of competition. Most often, violence on sports fields is the result of violence between athletes or between athletes and match officials. There are also incidents of fan violence against athletes and officials. Full implementation of the procedures and roles prescribed in the national and international documents should prevent and reduce the level of violence at sports events.

The media coverage of local sports events and avoidance of bias by sports journalists should contribute to the transparency and visibility of the negative and positive effect of sports activities and cooperation.



- Currently, apart from the legal solutions and the action of the national sports federations, the Ministry of the Interior is the only organised body in the cooperation between the concerned local actors. The role of the Ministry of the Interior is particularly important, as it acts in an organised manner and cooperates with the local police and special police forces, making a great contribution to the prevention of violence.

Violence by fan groups can be discouraged through respect for other competitors, stricter legal solutions that distinguish sports fans from hooligans and thugs, as well as better equipment and organisation of competitions and sports facilities, which at the local level often do not meet minimum standards.

The necessary spaces and services that are missing in our local community include an integrated youth centre, PVE educational programmes, youth networks and platforms, information campaigns and PVE mentoring programmes. Identifying these needs can enable the development of new PVE initiatives.

## ADDRESSING RISK FACTORS: ENGAGING OTHER STAKEHOLDERS, NEW TARGETS...

At the current moment, the temporary solutions and action of the national sports federations are more present. KKI 1 states that these activities are ad hoc instead of systematic and well planned. The Ministry of the Interior is the only institution organised in cooperation to deal with violence on the sports fields, although in the FG there was also a critical attitude towards the involvement of the police at the local level in terms of not reacting when the fans behave destructively in the local community.

This can be understood as a bad example of cooperation between the local police and local authorities because in most cases the Ministry of the Interior is considered to act in an organised manner and

cooperate with the local police and special police units, as institutions with the greatest contribution to the prevention of violence.

## GENDER SPECIFICITIES: ROLES, SOCIAL STRUCTURES, DRIVERS, NARRATIVES, INEQUALITIES...

According to Statista 2022, globally 63% of football fans are men and 37% are women. No such data was provided for Macedonia, but the women's football league and fan behaviour cannot be isolated from this analysis. According to Angela Rajcheska, a female football referee, we need to overcome stereotypes in men's and women's football and we need to work on improving the treatment of women's football. For both men and women in football, the rules are the same and therefore the playing field should be level.

The former captain of the Macedonian national football team, Goran Pandev, in a panel discussion called "How to achieve gender equality in football" points out that women's football in North Macedonia deserves and should be raised to a higher level, for which the necessary infrastructure should be built, along essential financial assistance from FIFA and sponsors.

Despite the problem of insufficient infrastructure for the development of women's football in North Macedonia, the main reason for the situation is the mentality and prejudices about certain sports as exclusively "men's".[410] [411]



At sports events in which women's clubs participate, it is evident that there is a smaller crowd, but that does not mean less violence, especially psychological. Not only are gender stereotypes present but they are dominant and affect the further development and career of female athletes. Giving up a football career is usually the result of these stereotypes. Equal treatment, proportionate media coverage and education will help make it possible for players to go out on the football pitch without being stigmatised on any basis.

Although sports activities at the local level are dominated by "men's" sports, it is useful to help the development of the women's league in football, basketball, volleyball and handball. The fans also have women's sections, but they are, as they called them in the FG, more of a "decorative section". In the previous 20 years, the development of women's football has primarily focused on building an elite environment. There is a representative structure which is supported by a small but well-qualified network of coaches. Currently, the involvement in this structure is with a limited participation base, which includes 1,500 girls compared to 35,000 boys.[412] Additionally, there is a fragmented competition structure and an evolving club structure. While the game is with sporadic activity throughout Macedonia, the levels of participation depend on the degree of the choice of clubs available and the competition for leisure, especially in many populated urban areas.

[410] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1134065/share-soccer-fans-gender/

[411] Stereotypes in Sports: You are not feminine if you play football, choose a more "feminine" sport, https://denesen.mk/stereotipi-vo-sportot-ne-si-zenstvena-ako-igrash-fudbal-odberi-nekoj-pozenski-sport/

[412] Macedonian strategy for women's football 2021-2025, https://ffm.mk/media/files/114352-zensk%D0%90-str%D0%90tegij%D0%90-a4.pdf

Culturally speaking, the participation of women in football is constantly questioned based on physical ability and fitness. In addition to this, the lack of a career path in the women's game makes it difficult for many to justify a sustained commitment. While these challenges may seem great, the latent demand for women's football is at an all-time high, and therefore a concerted effort to develop the game will deliver exceptional levels of growth.

Activities to promote women's football are designed with a campaign for female coaches and referees in the third quarter of 2022; a curriculum and programme for female coaches with the support of the education centre of the federation; qualifying a minimum of 10 new female coaches annually between 2022 and 2025; in all coach education courses, there should be at least 10% female candidates; a minimum of 10 new female referees should be qualified annually between 2022 and 2025; in courses for the education of referees, there should be a minimum of 10% female candidates; partnership with other football federations from the third quarter of 2022 to hold seminars for female coaches.[413] The first women's football league has 16 registered clubs while the youth league has 7 clubs.[414]

According to the focus group opinion, individual sports are more attractive for women but there is also interest in football, basketball and handball as team sports. The narrative about men's or women's sports is still dominant, even though young girls are present on football pitches: football is not for women; if you play football you are "masculine"; choose a "feminine" sport; if you play football, you are not feminine; you are a woman and you cannot make decisions. These are just some of the stereotypes that girls who decide to play this sport face every day (**МИА**, 2021).[415]



If we draw a parallel in terms of professionalism, raising the quality level of the women's league in general and investing in women's football, I hardly see a difference. With the exception of a few clubs that pay attention to schools, everything else seems to have stood in place for years. And if we draw a parallel in the attitude of the environment and its thoughts on football as an equal sport, there are certainly positive changes. Today's girls have both support and guidance from home to train in football. Especially in larger cities, that culture for sports is certainly different in contrast to smaller environments, even rural environments, where football is still considered a man's sport.[416]

## CAPACITY-BUILDING POTENTIALITIES AND AREAS FOR INTERVENTION

### Important PVE factors

The factors that have a positive impact on prevention have been identified as (1) educational programmes for sports, sports ethics and humanism, (2) religious/ethical education about universal and shared values, (3) strengthening local youth councils and establishing youth officers, (4) forum

[413] Ibid.

[414] Ibid.

[415] What obstacles do women face in football in Macedonia? MIA, 4 July 2021, https://kajgana.com/so-kakvi-prepreki-se-soochuvaat-zhenite-vo-fudbalot-vo-makedonija

[416] Gordana Kocheva, "Football is equal for everyone!", Ednakvi.mk, http://ednakvi.mk/2019/12/21/%D0%93%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%9A%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%A4%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%B5-%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%B7/

theatre (workshops), (5) coordination of local sports unions and plans for the development of sports according to local needs, (6) gender-balanced funding, (7) criteria for awarding funds to sports actors, and (8) culture of volunteering, mentorship of sports fans.

An example of the increased role and well-prepared programme of the high school community in the ethnically-divided high school is the organisation of interclass competitions in various sports. In addition to overcoming the ethnic barrier, the student-teacher barrier is also overcome by organising competitions between them.

In this case, the leadership of the High School Community and the Local Youth Council proved to be important stakeholders.

## SETTING INDICATORS FOR A FUTURE ASSESSMENT TOOL (WHAT WOULD BE APPROPRIATE TO SELECT AS A MEASURE INDICATOR FOR IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ENGAGED PROGRAMMES/STRATEGIES/ACTIVITIES)

The drivers at the local level are complex and connected. The argument for this finding is that local communities/municipalities are responsible for supporting, financing and promoting sports/football at the local level, while respecting the gender perspective. Regarding the identified drivers that contribute to the increase in violence at the local level that leads to VE we distinguish (1) the local context in which social exclusion, volunteering and political factors are involved and (2) transnational dynamics in which ethnic, religious and political factors are involved. The selection of drivers is based on the analyses of RP 5 and RP 6 and additionally by incorporating the results of the research on the perceptions of young people.



Additional indicators that will help to clarify the context at the local level are:

- Creation of local and tailored strategies and AP for PVE.
- Inclusion of education and training courses (formal and informal) for protective actions.
- Youth involvement in local institutions and participation in local policy-making.
- Establishing and support of youth councils, clubs and youth officers on the local level;
- Cooperation of youth institutions with NGOs for PVE.

# Conclusions

The regulation that the Agency for Youth and Sports prepares and is responsible for implementing is insufficiently or incompletely applied at the local level. On the one hand, the local community is limited by its financial capacity to effectively implement the regulations, and on the other, this provides room for additional influence, including political.

At the local level, the sports infrastructure is in a bad state and its maintenance is a major burden for the municipality. It prevents greater involvement of young people in recreational or professional sports activities. It is the educational institutions that, by renting the sports halls, help promote recreational sports, but they also narrow the space for the sports education of the students.

Sports violence, especially on football or other team sports fields, cannot be identified solely through ethnic and religious prisms. Physical violence on sports fields and verbal and non-verbal slogans of hate speech occurs as a result of ethnic as well as political intolerance. However, violence also occurs between fans from the same ethnic community.

The role of the police in securing matches appears to be crucial considering that they prevent fans from clashing and causing disturbances on the field. On the other hand, the police also provide access and control of the sports fields. That gives it the role of a reactive activist to counter violence by force.



## CONCLUSIONS ON THE ANALYSIS ON THE MESO-LEVEL PREVENTION INDICATORS

From the analysis of the answers in the focus groups and interviews, we concluded that there are more factors that will positively influence PVE. Related to social exclusion by ethnic, political or age category, young people aged 18-29 should be effectively included in local institutions. At the same time, given how important strategic and legal solutions are, it is crucial to translate them into local policies with the full involvement of young people in determining needs and priorities and supported by a financial plan.

Youth councils, youth clubs and youth officers are an institutional response for the inclusion of young people and their collaboration on issues that are a priority for them in the local community. Their strengthening and efficiency will increase the visibility and presence of young people in policy-making, including measures for PVE.

NGOs with a focus on PVE that are included in the National Strategy are key actors at the local level for the implementation of education and training activities related to vulnerable groups in the local context. Local strategies and APs for PVE and cooperation with formal and informal educational actors.

Joint activities between local actors beyond the cooperation between the police and the local municipality will increase involvement in dialogue and build a sports culture. A positive perception of the work of the police is also due to education and sharing information about PVE in schools.

## IDENTIFICATION OF TRANSFERABLE EXPERIENCES OR BEST PRACTICES

Cooperation at the national and local level and cooperation between local communities is of crucial importance for preventive strategies. However, there is room for joint action, good coordination and cooperation with companies from the central and local level that appear as owners or donors of the clubs.

Education and support of students for sports activities and sports culture, including parents, should change the image of sports and cheering as an ethnic or political competition.

The organisation of fan groups in a form that is recognised by the law and the formation of fan associations should enable contacts and cooperation on a sports and humanitarian level.

The cooperation of the Ministry of the Interior is recognised as important and effective in dealing with high-risk matches.

## POTENTIAL AREAS FOR SOCIAL INTERVENTION IN PVE.

Local institutions should expand the scope of cooperation with NGOs, and, with personal examples, athletes and local politicians should promote sports culture.

Unlike football and other team sports in which there is violence and hate speech, a positive example is running competitions at the local level in which both recreational and professional runners participate, but also with races for younger children and more inclusivity on multiple levels. This sport is supported by sponsors with advertising material, prizes, social space for company teams and individuals.



Fan groups operate according to scripts developed between fans and their leaders, but well-developed scripts for fans during matches can also enhance the sports atmosphere rather than dominate non-sport cheering.

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Focus group transcript

Interviews

KKI interview 1, education and sports activist in Tetovo
KKI interview 2, sports professional in Skopje
KKI interview 3, NGO representative in Tetovo

# Appendix

## Interview questionnaire

Dear Madam/Sir, this questionnaire is part of a MANU project managed by the European Institute of the Mediterranean in Spain with the participation of nine partners. The questionnaire refers to sports violence at the local level (Tetovo and Skopje) and preventive factors that will positively influence its prevention and development into violent extremism.

The questionnaire is anonymous, your data is exclusively for the needs of the project and in no case will it be available or misused for other users or needs.

Your opinion will help us to perceive the problems and needs at the local level for the prevention of this phenomenon (PVE - prevention of violent extremism).

Thank you for your cooperation. If you have additional questions, you can contact Dr. Lidija Georgieva and Elena Mujovska,
Georgieva.lidija@gmail.com and emujoska@manu.edu.mk



1. In your opinion, what concerns you most in relation to your community and your [sector/field of work or area of expertise/area of engagement with young people]?
2. Do you think that sports in general and sports activities are a possible source of violence and violent extremism?
3. How do you think that concern can be addressed at the local level by local stakeholders?
4. How has your work in PVE developed since the period when the state has been more actively developing measures to prevent violent extremism?
5. How would you characterise the cooperation with local and state institutions in PVE efforts?
6. How do you see the current state of violence at sports matches in your local community?
7. What prevents sports fan-related violence from developing [stronger, wider, etc.] among youth in your community?
8. At the moment, apart from the temporary solutions and the action of the national sports federations, the Ministry of the Interior is the only organised entity in the cooperation?
9. In what forms/ways do you think that violence at sports matches or in public facilities can be further encouraged?
10. If you believe that sports-related violence has negative effects in general and should not be encouraged, how could it be shaped to create positive change in the community?
11. What does this positive change look like in your opinion, and what positive impact can it have in the community?
12. Is there another approach that you think would be better in a local context?
13. What is the engagement/interaction of young people with the factors that you consider to have a negative impact and connection with violent extremism at the local level, or to those that have

a positive impact on the prevention of violent extremism?
14. Can you explain how [PVE Factor_1] has changed [PVE Factor_2] for young people?
15. Which local actor is most capable of increasing this positive impact/limiting this negative impact?
16. In addition to the current challenges, pressures and constraints facing [main institutional stakeholder] in general, how can [PVE Factor] contribute to reducing violence and preventing extremism on and off the sports field?
17. How do you perceive the role of different actors/entities in this field of PVE?
18. Do you think there is room for change in which stakeholders influence the PVE factor? (For example: local institutions more skilled than central ones, or civil society organizations closer to the community than institutions, etc.?
19. How can their skills and impact on local communities be improved?
20. How can their skills and influence on young people be improved?
21. What would be a factor that would improve the attitude or perception that young people have about these stakeholders? In your opinion, what prevents young people from investing more effectively in PVE factors targeting VE drivers? [This question should be adapted to the local context, NOT the combination of drivers 1 and 2 and PVE factors.]
22. How does [social context in Tetovo and Skopje] affect [PVE factor]? What are the positive and negative forms of this influence?
23. How can the local environment encourage greater engagement and involvement of young people in [PVE factor]? What excludes the same?
24. What are the available spaces, activities or services that can encourage creativity and innovation for the [PVE factor] discussed earlier?
25. What are the needed spaces, activities or services that are not available in your local community? In Skopje or Tetovo.
26. Do you think there are spaces and stakeholders that already contribute to safer practices or better services? How do they do so?
27. Who are the most trusted stakeholders contributing to PVE in your local community?
28. Are they the most capable stakeholders to influence change?
29. Which stakeholders are trusted locally and are able to make changes?
30. Do you think there is cooperation between stakeholders?



### Questionnaire for focus groups

1. In your opinion, what concerns you most in relation to your community and your [sector/field of work or area of expertise/area of engagement with young people]?
2. Do you think that sports in general and sports activities are a possible source of violence and violent extremism?
3. How do you think that concern can be addressed at the local level by local stakeholders?
4. How has your work in PVE developed since the period when the state has been more actively developing measures to prevent violent extremism?
5. How would you characterise the cooperation with local and state institutions in PVE efforts?
6. How do you see the current state of violence at sports matches in your local community?

7. What prevents sports fan-related violence from developing [stronger, wider, etc.] among youth in your community?
8. At the moment, apart from the temporary solutions and the action of the national sports federations, the Ministry of the Interior is the only organised body in the cooperation?
9. In what forms/ways do you think that violence at sports matches or in public facilities can be further encouraged?
10. If you believe that sports-related violence has negative effects in general and should not be encouraged, how could it be shaped to create positive change in the community?
11. What does this positive change look like in your opinion; what positive impact can it have in the community?
12. Is there another approach that you think would be better in a local context?

# BULGARIA

Prevention at the Forefront: Understanding and Handling the Meso-Community-Level Radicalisation Dynamics Among Young Football Fans in Bulgaria
*Vladislav Krastev and Stefan Ralchev*

Preventing School Violence in Bulgaria: Insights and Approach Strategies from Students and Experts
*Vladislav Krastev and Stefan Ralchev*





# Prevention at the Forefront: Understanding and Handling the Meso-Community-Level Radicalisation Dynamics Among Young Football Fans in Bulgaria

## Introduction

This report explores the complex dynamics between violent extremism (VE) and radicalisation at the meso-community level, with a focus on young football fans in Bulgaria. This study aims to close the gap between the more immediate, community-based factors influencing young people and the broader societal influences, building on earlier macro-level analyses carried out for the CONNEKT project. Our main goal is to unravel the relationships between the general factors found in the previous study and the dynamics at the meso level.



The study pays particular attention to the community dynamics among Bulgarian football fans. Our methodology encompassed semi-structured interviews with various participants: supporters from different Bulgarian football clubs, law enforcement representatives, and security experts, supplemented by a mini focus group with football fans. The selection of these communities was guided by prior research conducted by the Center for the Study of Democracy, refined through consultations with key stakeholders involved in earlier CONNEKT project activities.

A portion of the motivation for this study came from media reports of violent football fan incidents, especially against marginalised groups and law enforcement. Four major macro-factors influencing the meso-level analysis are territorial disparities, political grievances, social digitalisation, and transnational dynamics (Ralchev & Stoynova, 2022). Notably, there has been a noticeable increase in nationalism among football supporters in Bulgaria, frequently manifested through xenophobia and the spread of divisive discourse (Dzhekova et al., 2021).

Social networks' vital role in amplifying extremist ideologies within football fan communities is a crucial finding of our analysis. Simultaneously, we also discovered cases where people believe that using violence is acceptable to achieve particular goals. These disclosures offer invaluable insight into the personal dynamics and leading causes of radicalisation and violence among Bulgarian football club supporters, which is essential for creating a nuanced preventative strategy.

Building on these findings, the current phase of the CONNEKT project underlines the paramount importance of early intervention in preventing violent extremism (PVE) and radicalisation. Central to this approach is the engagement of young people in structured extracurricular activities such as sports,

which offer opportunities for moral and physical development. The respondents emphasise the role of involving youth in constructive activities like sports, music and painting from an early age as a deterrent to radicalisation, particularly effective for those in their teenage years.

The report suggests that a holistic approach involving multiple community stakeholders is necessary to counter VE and radicalisation among young football fans in Bulgaria. There are clear opportunities for meaningful intervention despite the obstacles. This approach is necessary to successfully navigate the dangerous terrain of radicalisation and implement effective preventative measures.

# Research methodology

## OBJECTIVE SIGNIFICANCE

The methodological framework of our research, which forms the empirical foundation of the CONNEKT project, is outlined in this chapter. The objective was to disentangle the complex relationships that exist locally between radicalisation and VE, with a focus on football fan clubs in Bulgaria. This study was carried out at a critical juncture for Bulgaria, following significant macro-level transformations in the country's social and political landscape. The fallout from the 2015 refugee crisis, the rise of nationalist feelings, the birth of political parties like "Revival" following the COVID-19 crisis, the conflict in Ukraine, and the second migration peak in 2022-2023 are important examples of these shifts. These changes have drastically changed the radicalisation landscape among Bulgaria's youth (Ralchev & Stoynova, 2022).

The recent altercation between police and football fans during the Bulgaria vs. Hungary game at the national stadium on 16 November 2023 is an incident that exemplifies societal division and tensions among young people (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023). International media organisations thoroughly covered the fans' protest against the leadership of the Bulgarian Football Union, drawing comparisons with major incidents in Bulgarian history like the Bulgarian Communist Party House fire in August 1990, the protests in January 1997, and the summer clashes of 2013. These incidents draw attention to the tense national dynamics and political and social unrest that are driving radicalisation among young people.



## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The methodology of this research was designed to capture a wide array of perspectives and understanding of the local dynamics in Bulgaria's football fan culture. Our approach involved: 1) a mini focus group with Levski fans – comprising three individuals, this group provided insight into the attitudes and behaviours specific to Levski club supporters, 2) an interview with a CSKA fan – a one-on-one interview with a fan of CSKA offered a different viewpoint, enriching our understanding of the base's diversity, 3) mini focus group with law enforcement representatives – four police officers from the Sofia District Police and the National Directorate of General Police, responsible for managing football hooliganism, were engaged in a focus group discussion to glean insights from a law enforcement perspective, 4) interview with an expert – an interview with a security expert, who has published extensively in academic and policy domains on the subject, provided a deeper analytical layer to the findings.[417]

This methodology aimed to encompass various viewpoints, including those of fans, law enforcement, and research specialists. Having a participant base as diverse as this is essential to creating a thorough understanding of VE and radicalisation in the context of Bulgarian football fan culture.

[417] For a detailed view of the questions used in our research, please refer to the questionnaire provided in the Appendix of this document.

## CHALLENGES IN RESEARCH

Like the previous study, football club fans' reluctance to participate in focus groups and interviews was a major obstacle. Often football club fans do not want to be associated with concepts like "extremism" and "radicalisation". Furthermore, football hooligans have a noticeable lack of trust towards non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives (Ralchev & Stoynova, 2022). Breaking down these barriers has been a crucial part of our research methodology to ensure a nuanced and authentic representation of the various viewpoints within the Bulgarian football fan community.

# Meso-level dynamics of prevention

## PREVIOUS FINDINGS

Early research conducted under WP5 of the CONNEKT project has shed light on important aspects of PVE and meso-level radicalisation among Bulgarian young football fans. Contextualised within urban and peri-urban settings, these findings highlight the critical role that school environments and neighbourhoods play in influencing the attitudes and behaviours of young people (Ralchev & Stoynova, 2022). These settings significantly impact young football fans, forming their group identities and club allegiances. Peer dynamics in these environments also have a big impact on the decisions and actions of young people, sometimes making them less responsible for their actions and more likely to commit crimes, like violent football games (Dzhekova et al., 2017).

> "The main reason for violence is that it is more pronounced in teenage kids who want to be more aggressive, not only because of the period of growing up but also because they believe that, by being the strong one, you have power and will be higher in the hierarchy."[418]

Fan clubs are known to be closely associated with illegal activities like drug trafficking and violence, especially among specific factions (Dzhekova et al., 2015). These results show how diverse and complex Bulgarian football fan culture is and how it might affect young people's radicalisation (Dzhekova et al., 2021).



> "It appears to be fashionable to be a criminal again, the criminal's years have not vanished as a pattern of behaviour for youngsters."[419]

## CURRENT FINDINGS

Building on these findings, the current WP5 research phase of the CONNEKT project provides fresh viewpoints on averting VE and radicalisation. The crucial significance of early intervention, especially through organised extracurricular activities like sports that provide chances for moral and physical development, is central to these findings. The respondents stated that involving young people in constructive pursuits like sports, music, and painting from an early age can prevent radicalisation, especially for those between the ages of 12 and 18.

"If extracurricular activities are well-organised and follow strict rules they become extremely positive. Sport is a serious educational method in itself. Other activities involving art, such as painting and music, to occupy one's free time mostly help to develop and adopt a system of values. These activities are a fantastic tool that could be used for prevention."[420]

[418] Interview with CSKA football club supporter, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[419] Interview with CSKA football club supporter, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[420] Focus group discussion with Sofia District Police and General Directorate of National Police officers, specialising in football hooliganism, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

Football hooliganism is a major issue, and law enforcement officials actively participate in educational initiatives to draw attention to the detrimental effects of this behaviour. Young people's interest in this strategy is evidence of the success of proactive education initiatives.

> "Me and my colleague are giving lectures in various schools and talking to children. We've had some success in that area, but it should probably be expanded. We are unable to visit all of the schools."[421]

Given that social media can influence youth in both positive and negative ways, its role was also closely examined. The research acknowledges the difficulties that social media presents in disseminating extremist content, especially during the pandemic, and emphasises the necessity of cautious handling and constructive interaction with these channels.

> "For me, the main issue is the social network. It provides you with access to an infinite amount of information, and when you are unable to interpret it, you tend to identify with the opinions of others and those around you. During the pandemic, social networking became a natural place where most of the young communicated. These processes were similar to the real thing but had a far greater impact and influence on people. Conspiracy theories were on the rise, and radicalisation processes were also taking place, albeit in cyberspace."[422]



## RELUCTANCE IN CHARITY PARTICIPATION

A notable observation from the research is the reluctance of young fans to participate extensively in charity work, despite a general consensus on its benefits. This reluctance points towards a gap in connecting young people's interests with charitable initiatives, suggesting the need for more engaging and relatable approaches to encourage their involvement.

> "It's difficult for us to find people. We also have a difficult time finding people to stand and sell Levski Family items during charity campaign."[423]

## COLLABORATIVE PREVENTION EFFORTS

The respondents stated that effective prevention requires collaborative efforts involving various community stakeholders, such as educators, parents and law enforcement officials. The research emphasised the necessity of grassroots approaches like "Policing Close to the Community" and parental involvement for local-level prevention. It was acknowledged that there are financial obstacles and that long-term funding is required, especially for national initiatives such as organising public lectures with students on a national level.

[421] Focus group discussion with Sofia District Police and General Directorate of National Police officers, specialising in football hooliganism, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[422] Focus group discussion with Sofia District Police and General Directorate of National Police officers, specialising in football hooliganism, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[423] Focus group discussion with Levski football club supporters, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

"Prevention at the local level is critical. It exists in the form of collaboration among local committees, authorities, and police based on relationship models that have evolved over time. There was once a programme named 'Police Close to the Community' that was in place for many years. It has not been implemented in recent years."[424]

### CHANGING DYNAMICS OF HOOLIGANISM AND ULTRAS CULTURE

A change in hooliganism and ultras culture was observed, emphasising the value of sports in fostering discipline as well as the impact of coaches and sporting environments. It is acknowledged that contemporary surveillance technology and law enforcement measures at sporting events influence fan behaviour, giving rise to worries about privacy and potential legal implications.

"Things are no longer as they were when there were a lot of drunks. The sportsman dominates the first ranks now. If you get drunk in most fan clubs, you will have a problem. You can't go to a game drunk, the cops are going to stop you."[425]

In conclusion, these results highlight how complex it is to keep young football fans in Bulgaria from becoming radicalised. They emphasise the significance of engaging and productive activities in forming young people's positive social and moral values and the necessity of early intervention and collaborative approaches.



[424] Focus group discussion with Sofia District Police and General Directorate of National Police officers, specialising in football hooliganism, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[425] Focus group discussion with Levski football club supporters, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

# Filling the gaps

## YOUTH PRIORITIES AND ENGAGEMENT

Concerns were raised by the focus group regarding young people's apparent lack of priorities, their susceptibility to manipulation, and a general decline in discipline and respect. Changes in societal structures, including the loss of traditional forms of discipline and stricter teachers, are partly blamed for this state of affairs. Engaging youth in meaningful extracurricular activities is another notable failure. Young people are becoming less interested in politics and more detached from community life due to the decline in student sports schools and the rise of social networking.

> "Teenagers waste their time. They lack clear priorities and are easily manipulated, most are not taught to respect people. The issue is that there are no longer mandatory military service and strict teachers."[426]

## ROLE OF THE FAMILY

Across all respondents, including law enforcement officials, fans of Levski and CSKA football clubs, the role of the family was consistently emphasised as a primary factor in shaping young people's attitudes and behaviours. The family unit is seen as the first line of defence against negative influences, including those leading to radicalisation. Hence, strengthening family bonds and parental involvement in the lives of young people is crucial for their positive development.



> "To act preventively, I believe that action should be taken first at the family level, though institutional intervention may be difficult, and then purely educationally and systematically to show that this pattern of behaviour is punishable. At the moment, I believe it is difficult to see how this pattern of behaviour is punishable in Bulgaria. There is no evidence that this is bad behaviour."[427]

## ROLE OF FOOTBALL FANDOM

Within the context of football fandom, particularly in organised fan groups, there is an increased degree of involvement linked to the innate hierarchy and discipline. Despite this, the focus group concluded that these groups needed more positive values and behaviours instilled in them. While charitable work and volunteering are viewed as viable avenues for positive engagement, they struggle to draw young people's attention in the age of more alluring social media content.

> "You believe you are a part of your community and are willing to defend it at any cost. That is the supporters' fault. Football is a sport that involves a lot of passion and emotion; it's also a good way to release tension. Violence in football is built up as part

[426] Focus group discussion with Levski football club supporters, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[427] Interview with CSKA football club supporter, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

of the ultras culture, which includes both game choreographies and personal involvement."[428]

## VOLUNTEER ACTIONS AND FINANCIAL BARRIERS

The focus group revealed that, although volunteering has many advantages, it has trouble enlisting young people, particularly regarding fundraising efforts. The general consensus is that youth can contribute by volunteering their time and labour, but recruiting trustworthy volunteers is a persistent problem. Young people's inclination to spend on consumer goods often overshadows financial constraints as an excuse.

> "It is difficult for us to find people to walk around the stadium and stands with collection boxes when we are organising an event. These must be trustworthy individuals. They returned two broken collection boxes last year, wasting money. It is not physical labour, but it does necessitate dedication."[429]
> "The problems will disappear if funding is available. We are also not financially sustainable."[430]

## ROLE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND CHARITY TOURNAMENTS

The role of local communities in supporting youth engagement activities, including charity tournaments, emerged as a vital point of intervention. Local communities can play a significant role in organising and supporting events that not only engage young people in positive activities but also promote community cohesion and awareness of social issues.



> "Football fans help to build their community. They organise charity football tournaments and other charitable events. When you enter the stadium, you become a member of a community. The determining factor is what you do as an individual before becoming a member of the community. When you've built yourself up, you don't let it completely consume you. I go, I sing, I jump, but I never insult anyone or become violent. I have a personal boundary, so I don't believe there should be an outside concern for these communities, but I believe there should be a focus on the problem group of them, the teenagers, especially when they're outside the stadium."[431]
> "As a CSKA fan, for example, I can mention the 'For our country, for our children' initiative. It is linked to the club, and auctions are held for charitable causes, particularly assistance for children suffering from serious illnesses. CSKA also organises a charity tournament for football fans once or twice a year, with the proceeds going to a different charity."[432]

[428] Interview with CSKA football club supporter, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.
[429] Focus group discussion with Levski football club supporters, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.
[430] Focus group discussion with Levski football club supporters, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.
[431] Interview with CSKA football club supporter, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.
[432] Interview with CSKA football club supporter, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

## ROLE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

It is acknowledged that one of the most important aspects of preventing violence is education. There is a widespread opinion, though, that it is unable to successfully carry out this function. A lack of respect for teachers and changing dynamics in school settings are major issues.

> "The education model does not allow them to delve into the subject in order to make a comparison. They have opinions and want to express them, they want to be understood by others, but they lack the ability to distinguish between what is good and what is not. Also, I don't blame the education only."[433]
>
> "Instead of criticising the child, the parents now blame the teachers."[434]

## INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networks are identified as having a dual impact: they can be instrumental in prevention efforts, yet they also amplify negative behaviours such as violence. The focus group observed that positive initiatives, like charitable actions, often receive less attention online compared to negative ones.

> "A video in which someone wrote death for CSKA has received thousands of views and shares. We have 50 likes when we share that we donated 2000 BGN to a seriously ill person."[435]
>
> "There, they are threatening to kill each other."[436]

## FOOTBALL CLUBS AND INSTITUTIONS



It has been acknowledged that football clubs and associated organisations have the potential to take a more proactive approach to youth engagement and prevention efforts. However, these organisations' current efforts seem to be lacking in initiative.

> "It would be beneficial to organise tournaments for children. There are projects with the Ministry of Youth and Sports to organise school-based children's tournaments."[437]

## COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Engaging and communicating effectively with young people is considered crucial. Techniques that include prominent football players in events and promote sports-related activities are thought to be successful. One trend that has been observed in the previous round of research is the shift in the fan subculture towards healthier lifestyles and participation in sports like mixed martial arts, and a decrease in alcohol consumption among fans has been reconfirmed.

## SUMMARY OF PREVENTION FACTORS

Based on the focus group discussions, it was found that the inherent discipline of football fan clubs

[433] Focus group discussion with Sofia District Police and General Directorate of National Police officers, specialising in football hooliganism, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[434] Focus group discussion with Levski football club supporters, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[435] Focus group discussion with Levski football club supporters, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[436] Interview with CSKA football club supporter, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[437] Focus group discussion with Sofia District Police and General Directorate of National Police officers, specialising in football hooliganism, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

could be utilised to safeguard young individuals from radicalisation by encouraging positive behaviours. Engaging in volunteerism and charitable activities within these clubs can create a nurturing atmosphere, shielding young individuals from harmful influences.

Building the resilience of young individuals by engaging them in politics and community life through structured extracurricular activities was deemed essential. This entails altering the education system to effectively involve and empower young individuals, thereby enhancing their ability to withstand radicalisation.

Developing resistance against radicalisation can be achieved by harnessing the power of social media for positive messaging and involving football teams in preventive initiatives. These initiatives, combined with adjusting communication strategies to correspond with the preferences of young people, are crucial for countering the appeal of extremist ideologies.

# Conclusion

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION INDICATORS

Our study of the dynamics of football fan culture in Bulgaria yields several crucial recommendations, each closely linked to explicit indicators for implementation.

**To the national government:** The fundamental reform of the education system arises as a central and essential strategy. This involves fostering an atmosphere that encourages self-control and active participation among young people. The efficacy of this reform will be evident in a visible enhancement in student conduct and engagement in scholastic endeavours, serving as pivotal benchmarks of advancement.

**To football clubs and supporters' clubs:** Simultaneously, the strategic utilisation of social media emerges as a crucial instrument. The goal is to utilise its influential power to spread positive messages and counteract narratives that promote radicalisation. The effectiveness of this approach will be evaluated by the noticeable increase in the creation of positive content and its impact on young people, as demonstrated by engagement metrics mentioned by the focus groups.



**To local authorities and football clubs:** Moreover, promoting the involvement of young individuals in sports and extracurricular activities is recognised as a substantial initiative. These activities serve as more than just hobbies, they provide opportunities for cultivating discipline, promoting collaboration, and enhancing social connections within the community. The initiative's success can be measured by the rise in participation rates in these activities.

## ANALYTICAL SYNTHESIS OF KEY FINDINGS

The findings of our study highlight the substantial impact of community environments and social media platforms on the attitudes and behaviours of young people. They emphasise the dual function of football fan clubs, serving as both sources of affiliation and potential hazards if not effectively controlled. We stress the importance of implementing comprehensive prevention strategies that engage multiple stakeholders to promote positive values and counter extremist ideologies. Our research supports the need for comprehensive reforms in the education system and proactive strategies from football teams and institutions. It is essential to implement these comprehensive strategies to ensure the long-term safety and welfare of Bulgarian communities. The goal is to reduce the risk of radicalisation and VE among young football fans.

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# Appendix

### Key informant interview questionnaire: football fans in Bulgaria

1. In your opinion, what is the one most important concern in your field of expertise/area of engagement with young people?
2. How can that concern be addressed by local stakeholders?
3. How would you characterise the cooperation with local and state institutions in PVE efforts?
4. How do you view the current state of youth leisure/extracurricular activities in your local community?
5. In which ways can leisure/extracurricular activities have a broader, more positive impact among youth and football fans?
6. What forms? Volunteerism and charity initiatives?
7. Is there another approach which you think would be more adept in the local context?
8. How do you think the internet and social networks interact with leisure/extracurricular activities vis-à-vis young people and football fans?
9. How can stakeholders acting on prevention utilise leisure/extracurricular activities and internet activity in order to achieve some goals?
10. Which local actor is most capable of increasing this positive impact/limiting this negative impact?
11. In your opinion, what prevents football fans from engaging more effectively in leisure/extracurricular activities to contain urges to engage in violence?
12. How can the local environment encourage greater youth engagement and involvement in leisure/extracurricular activities/charity? What is prohibiting that from happening?
13. Do you think there are spaces and actors that are already contributing to safer practices or better services? How are they doing that?
14. How can cooperation between actors improve?



### Focus group discussion questionnaire: exploring football fan dynamics in Bulgaria

1. Do you engage in volunteerism/charity initiatives? How often?
2. Generally speaking, who are the providers of volunteerism/charity opportunities in the football fans' community?
3. Take a moment to think of barriers that hinder football fans' engagement in volunteerism/charity. What do you recommend so that these barriers can be overcome?
4. In your opinion, how do local community actors engage in volunteerism/charity compared to national institutions? Which actor is more successful and why?
5. What tools, mediums or formats can improve the role of volunteerism/charity to promote understanding and tolerance/prevent VE in your country? What is the role of the internet regarding volunteerism/charity initiatives?

6. Take a moment to think of successful examples of people you know/ have heard about who have engaged in volunteerism/charity, especially on the internet. Why do you think they succeeded?
7. Do you think volunteerism/charity initiatives can help reduce violence among football fans?
8. How can the local government, education institutions, NGOs, the private sector, and other stakeholders support volunteerism/charity and ultimately help reduce violence, including on the internet?

# Preventing School Violence in Bulgaria: Insights and Approach Strategies from Students and Experts

## Introduction

This report focuses on the issue of school violence in Bulgaria, emphasising prevention strategies at the meso-community level. Drawing from a focus group with political science students from Sofia University and insights from a research expert, the study seeks to unravel the complex interplay of factors contributing to school violence and explore effective measures for its prevention.

While school violence is a worldwide issue, this report focuses on the Bulgarian context to bridge the gap between broader societal factors and specific community influences affecting young people. The primary goal is to understand how various elements within the family, school and larger community contribute to or mitigate the risk of school violence.



The perspectives gathered from a focus group of recent high school graduates and an interview with an academic expert form the backbone of this study. These discussions shed light on the current state of school violence in Bulgaria, examining the roles of key stakeholders, including families, teachers and the Ministry of Education, in fostering environments that either propagate or prevent violence.

Central to our research are the themes of education reform, the influence of social media, the importance of family and community involvement, and the accessibility of positive extracurricular activities. The discussion notably highlights the need for holistic and long-term strategies in preventing school violence, emphasising the critical role of individualised support and the potential of structured activities outside the classroom.

The report aims to synthesise these insights, offering a nuanced perspective on preventing school violence. The report seeks to inform policy-makers, educators and community leaders on fostering safer school environments by identifying effective strategies and highlighting gaps in current approaches.

# Research methodology

Building on the methodology established in our previous reports on football hooliganism in Bulgaria, this study employs a similar approach to explore the issue of school violence in Bulgaria. This chapter details the research methods used to gather insights for the current WP5 phase of the CONNEKT project.

The main data source for the study is a focus group of 10 political science students from Sofia University, all of whom have recently graduated from high school. This group comprises a diverse mix of people aged 19 to 21, including male and female participants from various backgrounds. They come from both the countryside and Sofia, the country's capital, and they attended a variety of private and public schools, including prestigious ones. This diversity ensures a wide range of perspectives on school violence, encompassing experiences from various education settings.

In addition to the focus group, a semi-structured interview with a research assistant from the Institute of Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Science was conducted. The expert credentials are impressive, with specialisations at Germany's Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research and Hungary's Central European University. His insights as a Research Fellow in the section "Sociology of Religions and Everyday Life" provide a well-informed, academic perspective on the issue.



## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The expert interview and focus group discussions were designed to elicit detailed, candid responses on the topic of school violence – 1) Focus group methodology: The focus group discussions were designed to encourage participants to engage in open dialogue, allowing them to share their personal experiences and observations about school violence. This setting aimed to elicit the nuances of student perspectives on the problem's causes, manifestations, and potential solutions. 2) Expert interview technique: A semi-structured interview with an expert was conducted to understand better the broader sociological and institutional factors that contribute to school violence in Bulgaria. The questions were designed to draw on the expert's specific knowledge and experience. 3) Data analysis: The focus group and expert interview data was analysed qualitatively. Themes were identified and compared to existing school violence literature to ensure a thorough understanding of the issue in the Bulgarian context.[438] Integration with previous research

As mentioned, the methodology of this study is consistent with the approaches used for the football hooliganism research under the CONNEKT project, particularly in its emphasis on understanding meso-community-level dynamics. The combination of firsthand student experiences and expert academic analysis creates a solid framework for investigating school violence in Bulgaria.

[438] For a detailed view of the questions used in our research, please refer to the questionnaire provided in the Appendix of this document.

Using this methodological approach, the study is assured to include diverse perspectives, ranging from the firsthand accounts of recently graduated high school students to the knowledgeable analysis of an experienced sociologist. A thorough methodology such as this is essential to comprehending the complex problem of school violence and to pinpoint practical solutions for both mitigation and prevention of violence in schools.

# Meso-level dynamics of school violence

The meso-level dynamics of school violence prevention in Bulgaria is a topic that has recently gained national attention. The urgency of addressing this issue was highlighted by a disturbing incident that occurred in a Pernik school and was widely shared on social media at the time this report was written. The video, which showed a girl physically abusing and bullying a boy with special needs, provoked outrage from the public and triggered investigations by a number of institutions, including the prosecutor's office (24 часа, 2023). This incident highlights the need for effective prevention and intervention strategies in the Bulgarian education system.

## INSIGHTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUP

The focus group discussions with Sofia University students provided a range of perspectives on the causes and potential solutions to school violence. The participants, from various education backgrounds, highlighted the significant impact of family upbringing, societal stereotypes, and the prevailing mindset on youth behaviour in Bulgaria. They stressed the need for holistic approaches to education, addressing academic curricula and emotional and social development. The group identified a disconnect between the goals the Ministry of Education set and the real needs of students and teachers, suggesting a re-evaluation of curricular content and teaching methods.



> "The curricula are extremely demanding, and both students and teachers are struggling to keep up. There is a gap between the Ministry of Education's perspectives and students' and teachers' actual possibilities and needs. There isn't enough time to absorb information."[439]

## ROLE OF INDIVIDUALISED SUPPORT AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

A recurring theme was the importance of an individual approach to students, particularly those with special needs. The focus group emphasised the importance of school psychologists providing tailored support. Furthermore, the importance of sports and other extracurricular activities in fostering a positive school environment and preventing violence was discussed.

> "After 20 years in the Ministry of the Interior, my mother became a school psychologist. The children began sharing their problems with my mother the moment she joined the school staff. They had previously only been sanctioned. There was no attempt to solve the problems. My mother attempted to talk to the children to find the source of their issues."[440]

## EXPERT INSIGHTS ON SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

The interview with the Institute of Sociology's research assistant provided an academic perspective on systemic issues in Bulgarian education. According to the expert, the school system is rigid and outdated, failing to foster critical thinking and adaptability in students. They emphasised the

[439] Focus group with first- and second-year political science students, Sofia University, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[440] Focus group with first- and second-year political science students, Sofia University, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

importance of a gradual generational shift in education, advocating for the abolition of antiquated practices and mindsets.

> "School psychologists are, in most cases, insufficient, overworked or inadequate. Education should be more practical. Education is currently theoretical. Children learn facts and theorems but do not understand how to apply them."[441]

## ADDRESSING SOCIAL INEQUALITIES AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACCESS

The expert emphasised the critical state of education in smaller towns, which has become worse because of the concentration of resources in elite schools. He emphasised the need for more inclusive and equitable education opportunities by noting how children from less affluent backgrounds or those living in rural areas cannot participate in extracurricular activities or charitable activities.

> "Bulgaria has significant social inequalities. Extracurricular activities and charitable initiatives are the gibberish of urban middle-class children. There is a huge problem with access to culture and sport in the villages and small towns. The only extracurricular activity available is folk dancing at the community centre. If it exists at all, sport is limited to a football team in the sub-district groups, for example."[442]

## SOCIAL MEDIA MIXED INFLUENCE



The focus group and the expert acknowledged that social media and the internet have varying effects on education. Although it provides an extensive range of resources, there is an increased chance of encountering violent and extremist content (Ralchev & Stoynova, 2022). This confirms what we have already observed (in previous CONNEKT activities), which is that social media can spread extremist ideas and influence young people's behaviour. As such, exercising caution and engaging in constructive online behaviour is important. The group also stated that while social media can be used to spread negativity, it can also be used to spread positive messages and raise awareness.

> "Social media, in particular, can be extremely beneficial. When it comes to violence, however, it becomes a cyberbullying weapon."[443]

[441] Semi-structured interview with Research Assistant, Institute of Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Science, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[442] Semi-structured interview with Research Assistant, Institute of Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Science, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[443] Focus group with first- and second-year political science students, Sofia University, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

# Filling the gaps

## FAMILY'S CENTRAL ROLE IN PREVENTION

A key finding from both the focus group and the expert interview is the significant role of family in shaping attitudes towards violence. Respondents underscored that family upbringing contributes substantially to both the prevalence and prevention of school violence. The discussions highlighted the need for more robust family involvement in education and character development to prevent school violence.

> "Both school and parents must do more to address the issue of violence. At school, I was also a victim of verbal bullying. We spoke with the teacher and had a meeting with the parents once. It wasn't any easier in high school. Schools are hesitant to address this issue. Parents should also take action."[444]

## RELUCTANCE TO ENGAGE IN SCHOOL-LED ACTIVITIES

Students' unwillingness to participate in school-led charitable and community initiatives appears to be a gap. Students appear uninterested in these initiatives, even though they recognise the possible advantages of involvement. This resistance suggests that schools should reconsider how to make these programmes more engaging and pertinent to the interests and experiences of their students.



> "Given that I graduated from a private school where extracurricular activities were included as part of the education programme, I can say that they are not as effective. The students were fighting again. Extracurricular activities are not a viable option for me."[445]
> "Extracurricular activities, in my opinion, are a good way to keep young people's minds occupied while they learn something new. However, given the students' hectic schedules, this is difficult."[446]

## EDUCATION SYSTEM AND CURRICULUM REFORM

The expert and the focus group emphasised that the Bulgarian education system needs significant changes. It is believed that the current curriculum is excessively demanding, disengaged from the actual needs of students and educators, and favours memorisation over the growth of critical thinking and flexibility. Education is recommended to become more applied and practical, reflecting real world applications.

> "Given the problematic environments that are being created, improving teacher qualifications is required. Pedagogical methods, as well as curriculum, must adapt. The

[444] Focus group with first- and second-year political science students, Sofia University, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.
[445] Focus group with first- and second-year political science students, Sofia University, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.
[446] Focus group with first- and second-year political science students, Sofia University, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

> Ministry of Education is very far removed from us as students, believing that with poor graduation examination results, there is a need for more material to learn."[447]
> "Bulgarian education is lagging. Teaching methods and materials from the late nineteenth century are still in use. Our country's education system is highly hierarchical and disciplinary in nature. Students are taught to memorise the right things. There is no room for interpretation or improvisation, and there is no freedom of thought. In terms of free expression, there is no equality between students and teachers. However, the world outside of the school has changed. Children and adolescents have access to a wealth of information."[448]

### INACCESSIBILITY OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

The inaccessibility of extracurricular activities and charitable endeavours is another gap, especially for students attending schools in smaller towns and rural areas. The focus group and the expert noted that access to these benefits is impeded by financial and infrastructural limitations, which exacerbates social inequality.

> "The most important factor is poverty. Everything is expensive, including the equipment, training, and tickets. Even planting trees necessitates the issuance of permits, the purchase of young trees, and so on. Volunteering is easy when you are upper middle class and live in Sofia. For example, it is nearly impossible when you have to travel to the next village to attend high school."[449]



### INTERNET'S AND SOCIAL MEDIA'S DUAL ROLE

It was also observed that social media and the internet have conflicting effects on violence and education. These platforms increase exposure to violent and extremist content, which puts viewers at risk even though they can also be helpful information sources and encourage positive engagement. It's necessary to develop innovative methods to minimise the risks associated with these platforms while maximising their potential.

> "As much as social media can be beneficial, it can also be harmful. It can be used to create fake profiles and photos, and a person can be very insulted, but it can also be used for anti-violence campaigns. However, I am not aware of any."[450]

### NEED FOR SPECIALIST SUPPORT SERVICES

One major gap that was brought up both in the expert interview and the focus group was the absence of specialised social services and psychological support for children and young adults. Improving these services in schools could give students who are at risk of using violence or being impacted by it vital support.

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[447] Focus group with first- and second-year political science students, Sofia University, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[448] Semi-structured interview with Research Assistant, Institute of Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Science, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[449] Semi-structured interview with Research Assistant, Institute of Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Science, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[450] Focus group with first- and second-year political science students, Sofia University, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

> "It is essential that the subject of psychology help not be taboo, that psychologists be present in schools, and that society as a whole utilise the services of psychologists."[451]

## POLITICAL WILL FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

There is an ultimatum for true political will to implement systemic changes in the education system and associated institutions. Without this dedication, reform and improvement initiatives might not have the desired, long-lasting effect.

> "Changes require political will. But it shouldn't be just on principle – let's see which deputy minister gets which sector. A genuine political will to change is required. A shift in the overall work of the Ministry of Culture. A shift in the Ministry of Education's work. Changes in the work of the Ministries of Regional Development, Labour and Social Affairs, the Interior, and so on, and we will change things on the ground. Otherwise, as I previously stated, there are individual small initiatives, but they coincide with the end of a project and given funding or with the withdrawal of a particular enthusiast."[452]



[451] Focus group with first- and second-year political science students, Sofia University, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

[452] Semi-structured interview with Research Assistant, Institute of Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Science, CONNEKT project research, October 2023.

# Conclusion

## ANALYTICAL SUMMARY OF PREVENTION FACTORS

The study of school violence in Bulgaria highlights three crucial factors for prevention: protection, resilience, and resistance. The first element, protection, is firmly established through active family involvement. The research highlights the significance of enhancing family dynamics as a means of protecting young individuals from violence. This entails improving parental involvement in the education process and cultivating efficient communication between schools and families. These combined efforts establish a safeguarding environment for students.

Resilience, which is focused on restructuring the education system, is an additional crucial element. An extensive revision of the curriculum and teaching methods is necessary due to the existing disparity between the objectives set by the Ministry of Education and the practical requirements of students and educators. The objective of this reform is not only to provide knowledge, but also to equip students with practical skills to effectively manage conflict and stress, thereby enhancing their ability to withstand violence. The success of this approach lies in creating a supportive and responsive education environment that caters to the diverse needs of the student body.



The third factor, resistance, involves educating students in the skill of critically navigating the digital realm. Given the widespread impact of social media and the internet, it is imperative to provide young individuals with education on responsible conduct in the online realm. This entails not only emphasising the potential dangers but also showcasing the constructive utilisation of digital platforms. Providing students with the skills to differentiate between detrimental and advantageous online content enables them to resist adverse influences that may result in violence.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND INDICATORS IMPLEMENTATION

**To the national government and local authorities (schools):** Implementation of family-centric and education strategies will improve family engagement in education and overhaul teaching approaches. The efficacy of these strategies can be measured by decreases in school violence incidents and enhancements in student engagement and contentment. This necessitates a concerted endeavour from parents, school staff, and the Ministry of Education.

**To local authorities and schools:** The creation of inclusive and captivating extracurricular activities, along with education efforts promoting secure and accountable use of the internet, is essential. Achievement in these domains will be indicated by a rise in student engagement in extracurricular activities and a reduction in occurrences of cyber-related school aggression. These initiatives involve important participants such as schools, community leaders, and digital platform operators.

**To local authorities and CSOs:** Ensuring comprehensive support and community involvement is crucial by incorporating social services and psychological support within education institutions. Additionally, it is advisable to promote community cohesion by organising local initiatives such as charity events and

tournaments. Successful implementation can be measured by the presence of student support services and an increase in community participation and cohesion. Schools, local health services, municipalities, and community organisations all have crucial roles in these endeavours.

In conclusion, effectively dealing with school violence in Bulgaria requires a comprehensive and cooperative strategy. By prioritising these preventative factors and implementing the recommended strategies and indicators, schools can create a safer, more supportive and engaging environment for students, ultimately decreasing the likelihood and consequences of violence.

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# Appendix

### Key informant interview questionnaire: exploring school violence in Bulgaria

1. In your opinion, what is the one most important concern in your field of expertise/area of engagement with young people?
2. How can that concern be addressed by local stakeholders?
3. How would you characterise the cooperation with local and state institutions in PVE efforts?
4. How do you view the current state of education in your local community?
5. In which ways can education have a broader, more positive impact among youth at schools?
6. What forms? Leisure and extracurricular activities? Volunteerism and charity initiatives?
7. Is there another approach which you think would be more adept in the local context?
8. How do you think internet and social networks interact with education vis-à-vis young people at schools?
9. How can stakeholders acting on prevention utilise education and internet activity in order to achieve some goals?
10. Which local actor is most capable of increasing this positive impact/limiting this negative impact?
11. In your opinion, what prevents school kids from engaging more effectively in leisure/extracurricular activities to contain urges to engage in violence?
12. How can the local environment encourage greater youth engagement and involvement in leisure/extracurricular activities? What about different engagement on the internet?
13. Do you think there are spaces and actors that are already contributing to safer practices or better services? How are they doing that?
14. How can cooperation between actors improve?



### Focus group discussion questionnaire: addressing school violence in Bulgaria

1. Do you engage in extracurricular activities/volunteerism/charity initiatives? How often?
2. Generally speaking, who are the providers of extracurricular activities among the young?
3. Take a moment to think of barriers that hinder school children's engagement in extracurricular activities. What do you recommend so that these barriers can be overcome?
4. In your opinion, how do local community actors organise extracurricular activities compared to national institutions? Which actor is more successful and why?
5. What tools, mediums, or formats can improve the availability of extracurricular activities to promote understanding and tolerance/prevent VE? What is the role of the internet?
6. Take a moment to think of successful examples of people you know/have heard about who have engaged in extracurricular activities, especially on the internet. Why do you think they succeeded?

7. Do you think extracurricular activities/volunteerism/charity initiatives can help reduce violence among school children?
8. How can the local government, education institutions, NGOs, the private sector, and other stakeholders support the availability of extracurricular activities and ultimately help reduce violence, including on the internet?

CONNEKT

What drives youth to violent extremism? How can they turn from being "the problem" into "the key" for a solution? By engaging youth in the research, CONNEKT will raise young voices to become stakeholders in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

CONNEKT is a research and action project which analyses seven potential radicalisation factors among youth aged between 12 and 30: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, socio-political demands, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities and evaluates them on three levels: transnational/state, community and individual.

Its aim is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of extremism among youth in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and to identify the interplay between them. Based on the empirical research findings, the project will end up recommending tools and measures for the prevention of violent extremism from a social and community perspective both for the regions of study and the European Union.

Under the coordination of the European Institute of the Mediterranean, (IEMed), the project gathers a multidisciplinary Consortium involving 14 partners from MENA, the EU and the Balkans.

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