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Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania

Redion Qirjazi & Romario Shehu

Country Case Study 4

About this report

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

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List of Abbreviations

BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
CONTEST	United Kingdom Counter Terrorism Strategy
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FFs	Foreign Fighters / FTFs – Foreign Terrorist Fighters
FGs	Focus Groups
IDM	Institute for Democracy and Mediation
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MCA	Muslim Community of Albania
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGOs	Non-governmental Organizations
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
UN CTITF	United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VE	Violent Extremism

Executive Summary*

Albania gained much international attention in recent years as an exporter of foreign fighters (FFs) and other supporters of various terrorist organizations involved in fighting throughout the war in Syria. When mapping the places of origin of violent extremists and FFs there is no even distribution throughout the country; instead they are concentrated in certain small communities. The most prominent case was that of the Yzberisht mosque, located in a neighbourhood of Tirana, where over 70 individuals became radicalized and left the country to support various militant groups in Syria. Therefore, this research focuses on the *community* as the primary unit of analysis and its main purpose is first to help reveal what factors and actors make communities resilient or vulnerable towards violent extremism (VE) and how they interact to produce certain effects and second to identify potential actions for the future prevention of VE.

This research examined the differences between affected and unaffected communities in three municipalities –Tirana, Korça and Kavaja – in an attempt to identify the underlying structural, social and ideological causes that account for such perceived difference between the communities (factors and actors). Through field research, it became clear that factors and actors of community resilience to VE fell into three major categories: *ideological, socio-economic* and *structural*. Ideological factors consist of a sense of purpose, belonging, acceptance, awareness, and education and are chiefly linked to individual perceptions of grievances, which can later contribute to acts of violence. Socio-economic factors include alienation, marginalization, economic deprivation and social networks. Structural factors and actors relate to the relationship of individuals to the state or other institutions such as religious communities.

This study finds that factors of resilience and vulnerability are likely to be present in both affected and unaffected communities, but at different levels. Factors conducive to and preventing VE are observable in both resilient and vulnerable communities, but there are additional intervening factors that may 'trigger' vulnerability in some at-risk communities. Hence, affectedness is not so much determined by the mere presence of factors and actors conducive of vulnerability towards VE, but rather by the level, dynamics and compounding of factors and actors within a given community. Therefore, resilience is a *spectrum* and *systemic* (holistic), and radicalization towards VE is a *process*, the scale of which depends largely (but not exclusively) on the level of resilience.

Furthermore, this research also confirms that VE surfaces at the meeting point of ideology, grievance, and opportunity, which stem from the interplay between ideological, structural and socio-economic factors of vulnerability. All major actors and factors affect a community by shaping one of these three enablers of VE. However, the negative impact of ideology, grievances and the opportunity to become a violent extremist can mostly be avoided through (1) social cohesion (2) strengthened civic values, (3) increased cooperation among community actors and (4) improved institutional performance.

As observed at different levels throughout the three communities, *proactive engagement* and *action* on the part of community actors are essential in strengthening resilience, more so than the mere absence of vulnerability factors. Actors can have a significant impact on the resilience or vulnerability of a community, as they can either help reduce vulnerability or fuel grievances and enforce vulnerability. Furthermore, actors can serve as mobilizing forces around a common ideology by shaping perceptions and addressing grievances.

Of the selected case studies, Kavaja showed greater resilience towards VE, followed by Korça and then Tirana. This conclusion is also supported by the observable levels of affectedness by VE in each of these communities.

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1 Introduction

1.1 General Context

Following the 'Arab Spring', which saw the spread of revolutions across North Africa and the Middle East, armed conflict and civil war broke out in Syria in March 2015 (Romero, 2018). In the immediate aftermath, opposition forces commenced an armed resistance to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. However, by the end of 2012 and throughout 2013, many guerrilla factions converged in the terrorist organization known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Contributing to the rapid rise of ISIS in 2013 and 2014, a jihadist movement brought thousands of FFs into war-torn Syria and Iraq under the promise of re-establishing the Islamic caliphate (Bunzel, 2015, 25-36).

Western Balkan countries were not immune to ISIS-inspired ideology that instilled grievances in local Muslim populations by propagating a worldview in which Islam was under attack. ISIS propaganda had a significant impact on the mobilization of FF from the Western Balkans, as until the start of the war in Syria, "fewer than a dozen known individuals from the Western Balkans had engaged in foreign fighter activity" (Holman, 2014, 2). Although reports vary, the overall number of Western Balkan FFs to Syria from the end of 2012 until the end of 2015, is believed to be around 950 people, with the bulk of the fighters coming from Kosovo (316), Bosnia and Herzegovina (240), Macedonia (140-150), and Albania (140) (Azinović 2017, 1-2).[1] In comparison to the massive influx of FFs from Western European countries, Western Balkan countries still maintained below- average numbers of fighters per capita among the Muslim population within each country (Azinović, 2017, 2-3).

It is worth noting that within each of the aforementioned countries, the predominant number of FFs has originated from uniquely identifiable small communities. For example, in the case of Albania, two small areas in Pogradec and one particular mosque in Tirana have contributed to over two thirds of all Albanian FFs. Parallels can be drawn with the small towns of Ovse and Gornje Maoče in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Beslin & Ignjatijevic, 2017, 2). In Kosovo two small municipalities close to the border with Macedonia – Hani i Elezit and Kaçanik – have respectively five and two times higher rates of mobilization than residents of the Belgian municipality of Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, which is commonly referred to as the hotbed of VE in Western Europe (Shtuni, 2016). The pattern seems to be reflected in Macedonia, where the communities of Gazi Baba, Čair, and the municipality of Kumanovo have produced the majority of FFs who left to fight in Syria and Iraq (Selimi & Stojkovski, 2016, 49-53).

Radicalization, VE and the FF phenomenon have affected Albania throughout its territory and impacted socio-political life; however, mapping of the places of origin of VE indicates that some communities appear to be more susceptible to the ISIS-inspired extremist ideology than others. In addition, given the fact that these communities are relatively small, both in population size and geography, it is apparent that this phenomenon cannot be attributed to chance or individual motives alone, but rather to factors that affect the community as a whole. Hence, if VE can be conditioned by community-level factors, it is critical to explore and analyse the phenomenon by using 'communities' as the unit of analysis. Understanding the fundamental factors and actors which make a community more vulnerable (or resilient) to VE can offer new perspectives on this problem and help develop more holistic solutions to tackling it.

1 See also, the European Commission's Country Progress Reports for comparative data, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package_en.

1.2 Country Background

After more than 25 years of democratic governance, Albania remains a country in transition along many socio-political lines. Although a NATO member and an aspiring candidate for EU membership, Albania still faces many challenges regarding development, good governance and the rule of law, corruption and political accountability and the promotion of regional cooperation in line with EU principles. According to the latest census, Albania has a population of over 2.8 million people, and its four largest religious communities are Muslims (57 percent), Catholics (10 percent), Orthodox (seven percent) and the Bektashi (two percent) (Albanian Institute of Statistics, 2011).[2]

While religion does not play a very significant role for most Albanians, societal, cultural, and national identity are prominent. In fact, the recent report on *Religious Tolerance in Albania* has found that a strong national identity positively affects religious tolerance, with over 80 percent of Albanians believing that "national identity nourishes religious tolerance" (Vurmo et al., 2018, 25). One reason why religious identity is not predominant in Albania is that the country is infused with a traditional culture of mutual exchanges in religious practices and a culture of acceptance and inclusiveness. According to the same report on *Religious Tolerance in Albania*, Albanians have a "strong religious understanding and cross cultural solidarity", which is evident in the communal celebrations of religious holidays and inter-faith marriages (ibid., 10). Although most religions in Albania seem to coexist in harmony -- in part because "the majority of Albanians lead a secular life: they have little information on or knowledge of religion and reject religious considerations to shape or condition their way of life," (ibid., 4) – religious communities in fact constantly promote tolerance rather than simply taking religious harmony for granted. Here tolerance is understood as respect for others' beliefs, regardless of disagreement, and it is typically motivated by respect for human rights and solidarity; or as Scanlon attests, it is the "attitude that is intermediate between wholehearted acceptance and unrestrained opposition (Scanlon, 1996, 226)."

However, it is important not to equate tolerance with indifference or lack of prejudice of the other side as these qualities are important to allow for tolerance to exist in the first place (Eisenstein, 2008, 18-19). Harmony, on the other hand, implies mutual affection among all religions and is a philosophical doctrine that is unsuitable for the Albanian context, despite the fact that many would prefer it; religious tolerance is more fitting (Vurmo et al., 2018, 21).

Because religious tolerance has been a long-standing tradition of Albanian society, the participation of Albanian FFs in the Syrian conflict took many people by surprise, sparking massive public outrage and raising question about what contributed to the emergence of the phenomenon. The situation forced authorities to recognize that the country had a problem with VE. Although violent extremists have abused Islam, it was clear that religion played an important role in individuals' decisions to become FFs, and thus the public looked to the Muslim Community for answers and explanations.

Religion in Albania has a historical past that is markedly different from that of many neighbouring countries. In 1967, Albania officially became the only atheist country in the world, and the communist regime enforced a doctrine of religious denial aiming at stripping away all forms of religious identity amongst the public (Vickers, 2008, 1). In 1991, the newly established constitution allowed for freedom of religion, allowing for a *separation of religion from the state* (ShtetiWeb, 2013). Thanks to the newly-found freedom of religion, the influence of religious communities in Albania grew over time and in the following years of the Albanian transitional period; mosques and churches were built across the country at a rapid rate (Dyrmishi, 2017, 26-27). Furthermore, it appeared that Islam in Albania was experiencing a slight change in form from favouring national identity to emphasizing religious identity. A simple example of this shift in the institutional culture can be observed in the statute of the Muslim Community of Albania (MCA) which in 1993, stated that its main objective was to "inculcate love for the homeland" but in 2005

2 However, other estimates differ. The Pew Research Center in Mapping the Global Muslim Population (2012) identifies Albanian Muslims as making up 80% of the country, while the US Central Intelligence The World Factbook identifies only 60% of the population as being Muslim.

was to "awaken and strengthen the Islamic faith among Muslim believers and to inculcate love for the homeland."[3] Although this is not necessary problematic, it indicated a progressive disconnect between the MCA and the Albanian government, and thus posed a potential challenge to the level of engagement between the state and the Muslim Community, which would prove detrimental in the years to come (2012-2015).

The lack of coordination between the Albanian government, local communities, and the MCA reduced state-level monitoring over religious activity and expanded opportunities for radical religious ideologies to enter the country. In 1992, in an attempt to attract foreign investment, the Albanian government joined the Organization of Islamic Conference; however, soon afterwards this decision brought investments from specific Wahhabi and Salafi groups which imported a form of radical ideology into the country (BIRN, 2014). Simultaneously, weak and less competent leadership within the MCA created the first rifts within the community, as many imams who had practiced Islam in the Middle East began to challenge the traditional views of the older generation of imams who often lacked some qualifications after years of religious deprivation under the communist regime (Zoto, 2013, 50-51). As a result, six major NGOs linked to terrorism set up camp in Albania between 1991 and 2005 without much notice from the government (Kullolli, 2009, 42-47). Subsequently, successful counter-terrorism operations by the Albanian government (with Western support) put an end to their activities (ibid., 45-47). VE ideology was thus stopped in its track—along with the prospects of Albanian FFs in the Balkan wars. Meanwhile, it is important to note the context of the country at that time: what might have contributed to Albanians' disinterest in participating in the Balkan wars was not only the fact that radical ideology was in its early stages, but also the general lack of religious identity and the pervasive socio-economic challenges of a nation in transition.

Albania experienced the FF phenomenon in Syria for the first time in 2011, but the bulk of Albanian FFs travelled to Syria during 2012 and 2013, and in smaller numbers during 2014. Given the period when they departed for Syria (before the main terrorist factions were established), it would appear that Albanian citizens left the country in order to fight for the Syrian opposition forces against the Syrian regime. As the conflict escalated and the opposition split into different groups, Albanian citizens then fought on behalf of terrorist organizations such as ISIS, the al-Nusra Front, and Jaysh al-Islam in Syria and Iraq.

Some of the first Albanian fighters to go to Syria came from poor, isolated, and underprivileged areas. These areas were constantly visited by outside imams or had unofficial imams engaged in preaching. As evident later, this was not exclusive to small or isolated areas given that a group of nine self-proclaimed imams was arrested in Tirana under the charge of supporting terrorism through recruitment of FFs for ISIS (Albania: Extremism and Counter Terrorism, 2017). Most Albanian FFs left for Iraq and Syria in the early stages of the conflict and the majority of those who returned did so within two months of their departure. According to two studies conducted in 2015, the motivations that led to this phenomenon can be grouped into three major categories: socio-economic isolation, uncontrolled religious practices outside of mainstream Islam, and institutional inactivity (lack of ability to influence people's lives) (Vurmo et al., 2015, 110-113).[4] Radicalization occurred mostly in isolated communities, with the majority of individuals between the ages of 19 and 29 (Spahiu, 2017, 37). Socio-economic factors influencing radicalization include dysfunctional institutions, corruption and lack of transparency in government, unemployment, and economic challenges (Azinović, 2017, 13). FFs also experience ideological isolation during which their previous identity is stripped away as they embrace radical ideologies. This process takes time and individuals tend to withdraw from social and public life (MAPO, 2014).

Although the data on Albanian FFs is not consistent in all sources of information, most show little variation. The most recent report, which was based on official government data, was the European Commission's (EC) 2018 Albania Report, which indicated that between 2012 and 2015, 144 Albanians left for Syria; of these 45 have returned, 26 have been killed, and 73 remain on the battlefield (18 fighters and

3 Article 2, Statute of the Albanian Muslim Community, in 1993 and 2005 respectively, declaring the mission and vision of the MCA: links: http://licodu.cois.it/?p=220 (1993) and http://licodu.cois.it/?p=226 (2005).

4 See also Hide, 2015, 27-36.

55 family members) (European Commission, 2018, 36). The report also confirms that no Albanian citizen have left for Syria since 2015.

Overall, the Albanian government took immediate action to counter the threat of VE and deter individuals from taking part in foreign conflict; nonetheless, there are certain areas in which Albanian government efforts to prevent and counter VE are lacking or in need of improvement. At present, although about 45 citizens have supposedly returned from conflict zones, the Albanian government has not convicted or arrested a single one. Part of the reason is that most of them returned before the changes in legislation and the adoption of the National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism. Therefore, the need to target these individuals through specific programmes is hampered by the fact that they did not break the law at that time (Telegrafi, 2014). Lacking identifiable returnees (both FFs and civilians) makes it impossible to implement concrete efforts for de-radicalization in the country (at least officially), and these efforts could otherwise could help both civil society and the government develop effective countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies for the future.

Apart from missing the opportunity to engage in transformative approaches to VE – which start with de-radicalization – one area in which the Albanian government lags behind is tackling online propaganda of VE and radicalization. According to the latest report of the EC, "online radicalization content in Albanian is on the rise." (European Commission, 2018, 37) This claim is also supported by independent research studies conducted in 2017. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) concluded that "Albania is threatened not only for being a part of the coalitions [against ISIS], Albania is also threatened by the boom in online supporters [of violent extremism] who tomorrow might act as lone wolves" (Bogdani, A. 2016, 7-8) while a report from the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies confirmed high levels of VE propaganda on Albanian language websites that, even when taken down re-appear with different names (Kelmendi & Balaj, 2017). Although online radicalization might not pose a direct threat, it can certainly put at risk the future stability and security of the country.

A second and even more important area requiring attention is developing preventive mechanisms to counter VE rather than focusing on protection and counter-measures. Much of the discussion above indicates that most of the efforts of the Albanian government have been focusing on *reacting* to VE threats rather than attempting to shape the future of the security (and socio-political) environment. This paradigm shift is important, as it focuses on problem solving. In addition, no level of protection can fully account for all vulnerabilities. For example, threats such as attacks by so-called "lone wolves" will always remain a possibility as by definition these individuals exploit 'the cracks' in the system and for that reason fall outside the realm of predictability (Michael, 2014, 46-47).

Unfortunately, this *gap* in the application of strategy and policies is also reflected in research. A review of the current literature on VE in Albania indicates that not much work has been conducted to understand the factors and actors that contribute to community resilience or vulnerability towards VE. The lack of research creates a knowledge vacuum and limits the capacity to generate informed decisions.

The first reports on the topic, which were published in 2015, discussed the drivers of VE and radicalization and helped set up a strategic, historical and regional context for the VE phenomenon. The first seminal work, *Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania*, laid the foundations for future work, has helped shape the work of many institutions dealing with VE, and informed further academic research (Vurmo et al., 2015). A second report, *Violent Extremism and Religious Radicalization in Albania*, helped present the issues at a greater scale by providing additional context to the phenomenon, although it mainly focused on a generic description of the problem, an introduction to the facts and a brief analysis of the drivers (Hide, 2015).

Other studies have also discussed the phenomenon of FFs from Albania. For example, *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans* briefly discusses future implications of the Albanian contingent of FFs (Azinović, 2017). The report dedicates two chapters to Albanian religious influences on radicalization leading to VE. It concludes that that disinformation coupled with unchecked the practices of religion have increased the likelihood of Albanians

being radicalized. Other reports have sought to provide a breakdown of statistics about the ethnic Albanian FF contingent from Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania and discuss the *individual* characteristics that make certain people more likely recruit (Shtuni, 2015a, 460-477).[5] Most recently, the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies published a report on the use of online media as a platform for radicalization and the spreading VE propaganda in the Albanian-speaking community (Kelmendi & Balaj, 2017). The report focused on Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia and provided a description of the level of risks generated by online media and the impact that it could have on self-radicalization and radicalization in general. The report is useful given that it emphasizes the importance of channels of communication, which serve as enabling factors of VE.

Thus far, research on VE in Albania has focused on two primary aspects: first, understanding and raising awareness about the broad issue of radicalization and VE in Albania, and second, explaining the drivers and enabling mechanisms of radicalization and VE. On the other hand, little research has been conducted on the factors affecting *community* resilience or vulnerability towards VE, and even less on the strategies that can enable *community* resilience for the future prevention of this threat.

1.3 Purpose and Justification of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to first help understand the factors and actors that make communities resilient or vulnerable towards VE, and how they interact to produce certain effects, and second, to identify potential actions for the future prevention of VE. It will also offer recommendations on how to improve the ability of communities to take preventative measures.

The research focused on three municipalities in Albania. Unlike most literature on the region and the topic, which focuses mostly on the general push and pull factors or general drivers of VE, this research examines the differences between affected and unaffected communities and attempts to identify the underlying structural, social and ideological causes that account for such difference (factors and actors).

Acknowledging the uneven distribution of VE from one community to another, this research emphasizes the importance of analysing factors of vulnerability and resilience at the community-level.[6] A community-based approach is beneficial for several reasons. First, it expands the understanding of the causes of VE and provides a broader knowledge base on which to centre future policy actions. Second, the analysis of associated factors and actors is neither too broad nor too specific, as is the case when focusing on a national- or individual-level analysis, and thus it can be more actionable. On the one hand, a 'one size fits all' national-level policy to prevent VE has been shown to be too generic and not tailored to the unique characteristics of each community (Vurmo et al., 2015, 15). On the other hand, many projects, which target very specific issues related to VE in Albania, are more difficult to implement due to difficulties in identifying specific cases and engaging appropriately with them.[7] Third, by focusing on local communities, future projects have a better opportunity of being *actionable*. This is because community structures are closer to the every-day cares of its citizens; they are more aware of the challenges people face; and because each community is unique, they can better identify the factors that can promote VE within their specific community. Furthermore, communities serve as an intersection of social, political, economic and personal life, which means they are a focal point around which people engage in their day-to-day activities. Thus, focusing on communities can have a more direct impact on citizens' lives. Fourth, by better understanding the community milieu, policymakers will be more engaged with local actors

5 See also Shtuni, 2015b.

6 The term 'community' will be explained further in the study.

7 For example, there is much talk of de-radicalization and dealing with returning foreign fighters in Albania, however, although over 40 of them are believed to have returned, there is no information on who they might be and no action has been taken in support or against them.

to deliver effective policies for targeting VE. Finally, a community-centred approach recognizes agency and structure of local actors, which allows greater action and accountability. Agency here is understood as an entity's (individual or group) "ability to act on, control and transform social surrounding," (Block, 2013, 134) while structure is understood as a pattern of social arrangements, which "once created, shapes and conditions agency" (ibid.). Therefore, due to the direct social and institutional links that community structures have with individuals and *vice versa*, putting emphasis on community-centred approaches can strengthen both individuals' participation and the actions of community structures.

The report will also delineate the specific roles that relevant stakeholders can play to make communities more resilient and reduce future risks by implementing preventive mechanisms. It will also help shed light on vulnerabilities and dormant threats, which can exist in both affected and unaffected communities, and identify the potential trigger mechanisms that can transform an unaffected community into one where VE arises. This is important for two reasons. First, it recognizes that vulnerabilities are inherent within each community, thus 'localizing' the problem and affirming that 'local problems require local solutions'. Second, the outcome of the research will help develop community and local governance oriented approaches to building resilience; not just towards religiously motivated VE, but towards the phenomenon in general.

In order to understand what makes communities 'resilient' to VE and how communities can strengthen their capacities to counter and prevent VE in the future, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1) What are the key factors of community resilience or vulnerability to individuals and groups developing violent extremist beliefs and joining violent extremist foreign groups (and what role do these factors play)?
2) What actors influence community vulnerability or resilience to VE, and how do they shape such dynamics?
3) What is the relevance of existing prevention of violent extremism (PVE) programmes in the Western Balkans in addressing the current factors of community vulnerability or resilience to VE?
4) What linkages can be identified between PVE activities and peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in the Western Balkans?
5) What are key entry points for improved PVE programming and responses in the Western Balkans?

The report is structured as follows. Chapter two discusses the methodology used in this research. Chapter three presents the data and provides an analysis of the factors of resilience and vulnerability towards affectedness by VE as well as discuss the effectiveness of the current programmes on preventing VE and possible entry points to peacebuilding and PVE programmes. Chapter four provides conclusions and recommendations for future policy actions.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Rationale

The main purpose of this study is to understand what makes communities resilient to VE; thus it focuses on analysing a community's characteristics under the given socio-economic, ideological, and political context. The research included three stages: a desk review of previous literature and relevant information about the topic, fieldwork in the chosen communities to contextualize the phenomenon, and an analysis of the collected data.

The research identified municipalities as the most effective level of community to analyse. Municipalities are useful units of analysis because they can ensure a holistic representation of a "community" by serving as a meeting point between local communities and state institutions. Municipalities provide a good frame for a community not only as a cultural community (city) but also as an administrative one with relevant state and local institutions operating within it. When municipalities are too large to fit the criteria of a 'local' community, the study stretches across specifically chosen neighbourhoods. Lastly, municipalities are under-researched units of analysis with regard to VE, and it is worth studying them in order to determine alternative mechanisms of preventing VE. The three municipalities selected were Tirana (three neighbourhoods), Korça, and Kavaja.

These municipalities were chosen for their unique characteristics both as communities but also in regards to their potential to harbour future VE ideology and actions. The three criteria that were used to select the municipalities for case studies were *number of FFs, communities that have not been studied before* and *religious composition*. Municipalities were chosen to represent a diverse range in the level of affectedness by VE which is estimated by the number of foreign fighters (FFs) from each community. Although the data on their exact numbers is inconclusive as there have been no specific reports issued by authorities, previous research has identified the community produced the largest number of FFs is Tirana (Çobo, 2016). The other two municipalities have had no recorded FF. The purpose of using religious composition as a criterion is to assess whether the overarching religious tolerance (Vurmo et al., 2018) and religious diversity have an effect on radicalization within the communities. To account for this, interviewees and focus group (FG) attendees were asked to describe how much religious communities interact with each other and how religious diversity is perceived within those communities.

2.1 Instrumentation

Fieldwork was conducted in two main forms: interviews with key informants and FGs. Key sources are divided into three categories: security services, local government, and religious community leaders. A total of 19 interviews were conducted, of which ten were with religious leaders, five with representatives of the security forces (mainly police), and four with local government officials. A total of seven FGs were organized throughout the three communities, with a total of over 80 people attending discussions and presenting their opinions. FGs were formed with three major considerations: (1) emphasis on views shaped by the personal experiences of each participant, (2) diversity among participants to avoid 'group think' and similar perceptions, and (3) awareness of the topics of radicalization, VE, and general security issues. Apart from these major characteristics, other specificities were also considered, including religious diversity, gender (apart from one group, which was exclusively with practicing Muslim women), engagement in the socio-political life of the community, work with local or state institutions within that community and age. The selection of interviewees was completed based on the formal positions that the interviewees held (for

example ‘head of the community police’ or ‘imam in Kavaja’) whereas the selection of FG participants was done with the help of local organizations after having specified the selection criteria.

Both interview and FG activities were administered through a previously agreed-upon semi-structured questionnaire. Discussions were recorded and later transcribed in most cases; however, notes were taken on several interviews for which the participant refused to be recorded. As part of the ethics of this research, participants were always made aware of the purpose of the study and their role in it and were told the nature of their cooperation, including the issuing of a confidentiality agreement.

2.3 Limitations

There are several limitations to this research and its attempts to shed light on what makes communities resilient to VE. These include the breadth of communities analysed, difficulties in determining which communities are at greatest risk, the inability to focus on more institutions within a given community and the inclusion of more individuals in the research. Furthermore, the research only focuses on particular geographical areas of Albania, and thus it cannot conclusively answer the same question for other regions. Also, the research focuses primarily on the “community” as a unit of analysis and tries to identify some of the factors and actors that make a community resilient; however, these answers are not exhaustive and other factors, external to a local community might also have great effect on the level of resilience/vulnerability of a given community. Finally, while focusing on communities as the location of factors of resilience, the research may underplay the importance of individuals and their decisions to engage in extremist activity.

3 Data Presentation And Analysis

3.1 Case studies: The municipalities of Tirana, Korça, and Kavaja

Tirana, the capital of Albania since 1920, is the biggest and most important city of Albania. According to the latest census, it has a population of 557,422 (though nowadays it is usually referred to as a metropolis with about 1,000,000 citizens) (Albanian Institute of Statistics).[8] Regarding its religious composition, 55.7 percent of its citizens are Muslim, 6.4 percent are Orthodox, 5.4 percent are Catholic and 3.4 percent are Bektashi (Albanian Institute of Statistics). The vast majority of Tirana citizens, 70.9 percent, are between 15-64 years old, 18 percent are children, and the remaining 10.6 percent are over 64. In Tirana, 31.4 percent of citizens have only primary school qualification (8-9 years of education), 65.9 percent of citizens have at least a high school qualification (12 years of education), and only 25.3 percent have university or post-university qualification (15+ years of education). The level of unemployment in Tirana is 24.3 percent, with about half of the youth (48 percent of them) unemployed (Albanian Institute of Statistics).

Korça is the main city in south-eastern Albania. According to the latest census, it has a population of 75,994. Regarding the religious composition of its citizens, 46.9 percent are Muslim, 28.2 percent are Orthodox, 2.2 percent Bektashi and 1.4 percent Catholic (Albanian Institute of Statistics). The vast majority of Korça's citizens, 67.6 percent, are between 15-64 years old, 16.4 percent are children under 15, and the remaining 15.9 percent are over 64. In Korça, 49.2 percent of citizens have only primary school qualification (8-9 years of education), 46.2 percent of citizens have at least a high school qualification (12 years of education), and 13.8 percent have a university or post-university qualification (15+ years of education). Unemployment in Korça is 27.2 percent, with more than half of the youth (55.3 percent of them) unemployed (Albanian Institute of Statistics).

Kavaja is located in the Western Lowlands region of Albania. According to the latest census, it has a population of 40,094 citizens. Regarding the religious composition of its citizens, the overwhelming majority (87.7 percent of them) is Muslim, 3.9 percent Orthodox, 0.6 percent are Catholics and 0.4 percent are Bektashi (Albanian Institute of Statistics). The majority of the population, 66.4 percent, is between 15-64 years old, 20.1 percent are children, and the remaining 13.5 percent are elders. In Kavaja, the majority of the citizens, 58.8 percent, have acquired only a primary school qualification (8-9 years of education), 35.4 percent of citizens have at least a high school qualifications (12 years of education), and only seven percent have a university or post-university qualification (15+ years of education). The level of unemployment in Kavaja is 29.5 percent, with more than half of the youth (55.2 percent of them) unemployed (Albanian Institute of Statistics).

Although official data is lacking, desk research indicated that Kavaja has had no reported cases of FF – something that was later confirmed by both the Mufti and the Chief of the Community Policing Sector in Kavaja.[9] The city of Korça also has had no FF, but the incitement of radical thinking has been present in both urban and rural areas (BalkanWeb, 2015). These desk research results were also supported by fieldwork. The chief of community policing in Korça stated that although "there have been no cases of FF in Korça, neither in city nor in surrounding villages... there are some trends of VE, mainly within

8 The 2011 Census provides the latest demographics data on Albania.

9 These views were shared during interviews with the chief of community policing and mufti of Kavaja.

the city and in some small occasions near suburbs--mainly people from the Muslim community" (Chief of Community Policing Sector in Korça, 2018). On the other hand, the selected suburbs of Tirana are suspected of having had over 70 FFs (Çobo, 2016). However, most projects on countering VE have been focused on other municipalities in Albania due to the higher concentration of FF from those communities.

Tirana is the one municipality where VE ideology has not been sporadic but instead has been focused in particular areas – which indicates that factors may be community related. In general, issues related to PVE have arisen in areas where the local population was relocated from smaller cities or where *social connections* are not strong or deep-rooted. These communities are more isolated and peripheral – as in the case of Tirana's suburbs, which is precisely why they were chosen as case studies.

3.2 Perceived levels of VE

Key sources and participants in FGs were asked to offer their opinion on what they believed was the level of VE in their communities. There were several noticeable trends among the different types of stakeholders as well as among the different communities. However, stakeholders tended to interpret the phenomenon from their own perspectives. For example, police stressed that the threat is real and serious while religious leaders tried to distance themselves from the phenomenon. In the first instance, it seems that police may have developed a 'tunnel vision' towards the problem following a detailed examination of each case scenario; also in addition, they are typically more prone to securitize the situation. On the other hand, distancing by religious leaders might also come as a form of cognitive dissonance in order to avoid association with individuals who use their religion to commit violent acts. Local government leaders were generally not as focused on the phenomenon as on other issues in their daily operations. Determining whether one group is right or wrong is not the aim of this study, but what is worth noting is the difference in the perceptions and the standpoints of each institution.

One of the reasons why there might be alternative interpretations of the perceived level of VE in each community might be related to the limited cooperation between the state and religious institutions. State institutions appear to place little trust in religious communities as potential partners. This was confirmed on two occasions by the heads of the Muslim Communities in Korça and Tirana, who emphasized the need for greater cooperation of state institutions with the Community and an overall need for the empowerment of the MCA.[10] Furthermore, Islamic scholar Abu-Nimer warns that one-sided communication with the Muslim community cannot build sufficient trust for cooperation and that "asking Muslim leaders for a blessing or to issue a fatwa in support of a policy and not including them in policy-making is *not* community engagement" (Abu-Nimer, 2018, 15).

Reactions from *focus groups* varied. On the one hand, almost every practicing individual believed that their community is characterized by religious harmony and respect for diversity. These ideas were prevalent among many of the FGs, which were composed of mixed religions, genders, age, and community leaders. This was particularly true for Korça and Kavaja. However, it is interesting to note that when participants of FGs were probed with questions about discrimination, hate speech and stereotyping, nuances of *concealed radicalism* became more apparent. The term 'concealed radicalism' is to be understood as form of radicalism that is not apparent upon direct observation but becomes obvious upon further analysis of the subtexts of the conversations. Most importantly, this form of radicalism is not obvious to the people who might deliver or be on the receiving end of it. Such phenomenon might exhibit itself in forms of latent discrimination, stereotypes or superiority of one's belief.[11]

Understanding the perceived and real factors of radicalization and extremism helps provide a comparative analysis between what is verbally communicated and what is shown intrinsically, explore

10 These views were shared during interviews with Korça and Tirana muftis.

11 Some of the aspects of concealed radicalism will also be discussed in the analysis on the factors and actors, which contribute to affectedness.

changes and constants, and determine how and why these transformations might have occurred. The following sections will discuss about the most significant factors that were identified throughout the fieldwork.

3.3 Factors and actors of resilience and vulnerability

The following categories of factors were chosen through a bottom up approach by compiling and analysing the opinions and perceptions of the fieldwork subjects. Throughout most of the field research, it was evident that the factors and actors of community resilience to VE fell into three major categories: *ideological, socio-economic* and *structural*. The reasoning behind this grouping is twofold. First, there was a consistent pattern of grouping done by the interviewees and participants themselves in FGs. When asked about what they thought were the main factors that made a community vulnerable to VE, most participants either cited the above categories or listed factors that clearly fall into one of these categories. Second, and perhaps more importantly, much of the academic literature supports this clustering of factors that influence vulnerability and resilience towards VE. For example, Hafez and Mullins identify three major categories of factors "enabling environment and support structures", "extreme ideologies, networks and interpersonal ties" and "collective and personal grievances" (Hafez & Mullins, 2015, 961) – of which two are also identified in the model of this study. A study by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) identifies "structural motivators, individual incentives and enabling factors" as the core factors that drive VE (Khalil & Zeuthen, 2016, 9) – a similar representation of the proposed structure in this report – where 'enabling factors' implies many social and economic factors. Similarly, the USAID Handbook on Conflict Assessment Framework identifies "institutional performance, identity and societal patterns" as the three key motivators that instigate grievances and conflict (USAID, 2011).

Ideological factors cover the belief system of individuals and are the foundations of an individual's identity. These factors provide a sense of purpose, belonging, and acceptance and are linked to individual perceptions of grievances that contribute to later acts of violence. Socio-economic and structural factors are conditions-based and create the specific enabling environment and context in which a community operates. Such factors include alienation, marginalization, economic deprivation and social networks and can foster violence and mobilization towards violence. Finally, structural factors and actors consist of the relationship between individuals and state institutions, local governance and other institutions, such as religious communities.

The following analysis will observe the link between factors of vulnerability and resilience, and the levels of affectedness in each community by VE. While it is impossible to predict a direct causation between unaffectedness and factors of resilience and vice versa (affectedness and vulnerability), it is important to observe all of the identified factors and actors of resilience and vulnerability in all selected communities in order to understand correlations, patterns and trends within this nexus (affectedness/unaffectedness – vulnerability/resilience). In other words, resilience is a fluid concept and difficult to quantify, and therefore the analysis can at best seek to understand how these variables are related.

Vulnerability and resilience are not binary (either/or) but exist along a spectrum. Thus, factors of resilience and vulnerability are likely to be present in both affected and unaffected communities, albeit at different levels. It is important therefore that factors and actors of resilience and vulnerability are examined throughout the three communities (Tirana, Korça and Kavaja) to better understand where they are situated along the spectrum of resilience. The exact position of the communities in terms of resilience or vulnerability is a matter of interpretation based on an analysis of the factors and actors, and the observance of the trends, patterns and trajectories that the community exhibits.

Table 1 shows the specific factors and actors of resilience/vulnerability that will be analysed in each community in order to understand how, and at which level they influence affectedness. Each of the factors and actors of both resilience and vulnerability will be analysed separately for each community.

Table 1: Matrix of factors and actors affecting vulnerability and resilience towards VE

	Factors & actors conducive to vulnerability	Factors & actors conducive to resilience
Ideological	Identity and ideology 'Wrong' or lack of (general and religious) education Religious propaganda 'disinformation' Online radicalization	Strong civic values Education on religion to raise awareness Common culture
Socio Economic	Alienation, marginalization, isolation, discrimination Economic deprivation and lack of opportunities Enabling social networks	Social connection/social cohesion Equal opportunities
Structural	Perceptions of poor governance Lack of consolidation of state presence 'Apathetic' security institutions Inefficient institutions Corruption & impunity Intra-religious tensions	Increased cooperation with institutions Community engagement
Applied throughout all three communities: **Korça, Tirana and Kavaja**		

3.3.1 Ideological factors

a) Ideology and identity – Identity is "a broad, encompassing concept reflecting both the nature of the individual and the constitution of groups" (Jones, 2013, 105) and it is defined by "common norms, values, beliefs, attitudes that bind different people together in a single entity" (ibid.). As such, identity shapes the way in which an individual relates to a group. According to James Fearon, identity has a dual sense: social and personal. Personal identity includes "aspects or attributes of a person that form the basis for his or her dignity and self-respect" while social identity is simply a "social category defined by membership rules, characteristic attributes or expected behaviour" (Fearon, 1999, 10). This definition is important for the discussion in two ways. First, it connects personal identity with dignity and self-respect, which, when diminished, can lead to personal grievances. Second, it indicates that social identity is implicitly linked to personal identity because individuals subscribe to social identities that conform to their personal attributes. Therefore, when social identity is threatened, personal identity is also threatened intrinsically – this can again lead to the development of grievances. Thus, if one identifies with a radical ideology or with FF groups, the common values and beliefs may push the individual to behave consistently with his/her identity group. Once the group identity is enforced, it becomes as important as personal identity.

One of the biggest concerns stemming from security institutions was the way in which individuals who were suspected of radical ideology identify themselves. A representative of the community police in Tirana stated: "I think there is a fundamental problem when a person who lives in this country sees himself first as a Muslim and then as an Albanian… this makes him put the religion before the rules and laws

of the society" (Community Policing Officers in Tirana, 2018). A similar view was expressed by another officer in Kavaja who implied that radical forms of identification can lead to uncivilized behaviour, stating "what can you expect of a man who abandons his wife and children because he thinks they are not as important as his duty to God (Chief of Community Policing Sector in Kavaja, 2018)." Although many of these statements carry personal biases, one of the factors that security institutions see as significant is a complete disassociation with civic values and typical societal norms. In that regard, the imam in Kavaja implied that due to religious teachings and dogma, becoming a FF is mainly linked to the beliefs to that person because: "a believer would risk his life only if he fundamentally believes that what he stands for is being threatened; unless you are a mercenary, in that case you can do if for money" (Imam in Kavaja, 2018).

Identity-shaping is integral to group cohesion and this is a major reason why group identity is emphasized in radical settings. Police officials in both peripheral areas of Tirana stated that individuals often identify so much with the *jamaats* that much of their everyday life circles around the activity of the mosque from which they gradually start to attract families, build social circles for their families and ultimately isolate themselves from the larger wider society. The chief of police of Yzberisht (peripheral area of Tirana) views this as the first definite sign of radicalization and community vulnerability, stating "if one isolates himself from the rest of the society, and begins to feel closer to someone 1000 kilometres away, that individual is ready to join that group if the opportunity presents itself – of course they present a risk to society" (Chief of Community Policing Sector in Tirana, 2018). It is important however to keep in mind that security forces have had a tendency to lean more towards the 'securitization' of the problem.

Religious identity appeared to be stronger in Kavaja, and less so in Tirana and Korça. In contrast to the perceptions (possibly stereotyping) of the security institutions, religious identity alone is not an indicator of community vulnerability, as in fact Kavaja has the lowest levels of VE. Furthermore, according to the Mufti of Kavaja, many citizens were "conscious and very sensitive of the persecution, human fatalities and total injustice occurring in Syria… and that injustices cannot be solved individually, so we ensured to transmit that message successfully" (Mufti of Kavaja, 2018). (It appears here that the actions of the religious community were essential to building resilience, rather than the existence of an ideology, which at some point becomes a threat.)

In Korça, besides inter-religious identification (Muslim or Orthodox), practitioners of Islam also identify with factions within the Muslim Community; this intra-religious form of identification is attributed to subscription to the different schools of Islam. Identity differences between different religious groups have led the development of stereotypes and even small acts of interreligious violence. In the first instance, in a FG set up with Muslim female practitioners in Korça, participants observed stereotypes from the elderly population who grew up without a religion in the communist period, as well as in their line of work and within institutions. (Female Muslim practitioners in Korça, 2018). One girl claimed that she felt discriminated because she could not practice her religion at work while another believed that her Orthodox teacher had failed her in class because she was a Muslim (ibid.). Participants confirmed that such cases of stereotyping about practices, rituals and clothing are quite sporadic, but nonetheless they do occur. Religious leaders are also of the opinion that "judgmental views are present but there is no visible discrimination" and as a result, there is little impact on the Muslim community (Imam in Korça, 2018).

Intra-religious differences, on the other hand, arise mainly due to matters of representation within the Muftini (administrative body of the Muslim community for a given area). One imam stated, "there have been various claims for power sharing… however, when given the opportunity to conduct their religious activities as per their preferences, the tensions subsided" (ibid.). Once again, in both instances, identity can serve as a motivation for underlying differences; however, the underlying motives for extremism are inter-relational. In that regard, the head of community policing in Korça also believed that the vandalizing of Orthodox symbols, while categorized as a religious incident, was first and foremost a criminal act conducted by individuals who act more like a criminal gang (Chief of Community Policing Sector in Korça, 2018).

In Tirana, the radical group responsible for recruiting over 70 individuals to take part in the Syrian conflict had a very strong sense of group identity. The group was relatively small, and due to their non-traditional religious beliefs, isolated from the rest of the civic community and other practitioners of Islam. According to the Mufti of Tirana, the Wahhabist methods of preaching were "contradictory to the centuries' old tradition of practicing Islam in Albania and as such this group 'self-isolated (Mufti of Tirana, 2018)'". Here it is important to note that although radical ideology is an important factor for building grievances, it is the isolation from the rest of the society that helped boost radicalism and shielded the radical group from societal intervention.

b) 'Wrong', or lack of general and religious education – Imams attribute the past numbers of Albanian FFs among other things to "a lack of proper religious understanding" (Muslim practitioners in Kavaja, 2018). This factor is, in fact, recurring throughout the fieldwork although it may partially be because interviewees felt a need to distance themselves from the actions of someone who compromises their personal belief system. On the other hand, institutional leaders and FG participants shared this belief. At its core, this could be misinformation about the religion and attributed to an honest mistake; however, in most cases there is follow up propaganda and even disinformation leading to further radicalization. Religious leaders claim that "there is no real threat of a religiously motivated extremism in Albania" (Imam in Korça, 2018) and that unfortunately, "many people have been misinformed about the true meaning of the religion which is being used by terrorist groups for their purposes" (Imam in Tirana, 2018). However, the lack of general education about the gravity of the phenomenon is another problem that should be addressed, according to the Mufti of Tirana (Mufti of Tirana, 2018). This education should involve awareness campaigns, targeting the whole religious community in order for society to avoid portraying it entirely as a Muslim problem and to understand the true underlying motives. This view was shared unanimously by all key sources and members of the FGs.

In the case studies, people appear to be less informed about religion in Tirana and Korça (within the religion or outside it). On one occasion a community policing expert from Tirana stated that "most young boys don't know anything about the religion, they are confused with all the information they get… they hear something and they immediately want to believe it is true" (Community Policing Officers in Tirana, 2018). Similar concerns were shared by imams in Tirana, Korça and Kavaja. "Misinterpretation of the mission of Islam" or a "lack of proper understanding" appears to be a common assessment among the religious leaders in all communities. Imams in Tirana and Korça declared that they had all addressed the issue with the practitioners at their mosques; however, the same could not be said for every mosque in the municipality, which is why the phenomenon was concentrated only in particular communities. The Mufti of Tirana stated that some mosques were completely isolated and practicing Islam outside of the reach of the MCA, and therefore it was difficult to ensure that they were preaching the right teaching.

On the other hand, the municipality of Kavaja appeared to have addressed the issue since the beginning of the FF phenomenon both at the central level as well as at the community level. The Mufti of Kavaja stated that as soon as they realized the phenomenon might cause problems in *their community* he "held a meeting with the imams to ensure that we deliver explicit messages" against radical ideologies (Mufti of Kavaja, 2018). This statement was confirmed by practitioners in a FG who cited "the positive work of imams from the beginning" as a contributing factor to the resilience of the city (Muslim practitioners in Kavaja, 2018). What stands out in the case of Kavaja is the proactive nature of the engagement and the coordination between the central leadership and the imams working on the ground.

Actors who contribute most significantly to this misinformation are primarily individuals who themselves do not have a proper understanding of Islam or who subscribe to a radical version of the religion. "Direct contact" is the primary form of indoctrination. In a FG with practitioners in Tirana, one of the participants (who was an acquaintance of the imam who was responsible for recruiting several FFs) stated that most people receive their first indoctrination by direct contact and that most of those who left to fight for Syria had in fact very little understanding of the religion themselves (Muslim practitioners in

Tirana, 2018). This was confirmed by police officers in Tirana and Korça who described it as "association with the wrong people, people who have radical tendencies and don't understand anything about religion in reality" (Chief of Community Policing Sector in Tirana, 2018) and the Mufti of Tirana who emphasized "direct and continuous physical contact" (Mufti of Tirana, 2018).

c) Disinformation – This represents a deliberate attempt to mislead or spread "false information that is intended to mislead" (Kumar & Geethakumari, 2014, 3). In the case of radicalism in Albania, acts of disinformation appear to involve many forms including the distortion of facts, the dismissal of criticism, and distraction and diversion to other issues. Although most of the fieldwork subjects were not aware of the forms of disinformation involved, they were unknowingly describing its characteristics. For example, in relation to distortion of facts, one of the police officers in Tirana explained how young people constantly ask about the wars in the Middle East and have a tendency to believe that they were wars against Muslims; the police representative explained "they say that I will go fight because Muslims are being killed by people who have no God" (Community Policing Officers in Tirana, 2018). In the FGs held in both Korça and Kavaja, practitioners often stated that "[potentially radicalized individuals] don't understand that they are being lied to" again referencing the distortion of facts. Furthermore, the Mufti of Tirana stated that most individuals who do not know the religion very well "don't know what they are getting into, as they tend to see the propaganda behind [terrorist organizations], with promises of things that will never be" (Mufti of Tirana, 2018). In Korça, educators were particularly worried that informal Christian gatherings in small communities were playing a big role in diverting the attention of young, vulnerable children to ideologies that did not necessarily breed civic values – they saw this as a future threat to social cohesion (Representatives from the Civil Society in Korça, 2018).

Imams all agreed that "most of this [implying radical] information is received not from the religious authorities but rather they become convinced themselves" and that online media has a big role to play in this. Religious leaders agreed across the board that there is much disinformation about the religion, which damages the image of Islam. A police officer in Tirana, who identifies as a practitioner, stated "what we have seen is not real Islam; Islam has been 'hijacked' by terrorists to be used for political gains" (Community Policing Officers in Tirana, 2018). On the other hand, local leaders (representatives from the municipality) are aware that disinformation is a problem but they are not deeply involved with the issue of VE. The threat of VE is not a recurring issue and thus the baseline approach seems to be that "it is not a problem until it becomes a problem" (Representative from the Municipality of Korça, 2018).

Comparatively, while disinformation has affected all three municipalities through online media, direct contact with radical preachers varies. Tirana has had more cases of extremist preachers who exploited the *isolation* of the particular communities in which they preached. In Korça on the other hand, the only extremist group identified seems to have exploited the lack of unity within the mainstream Islamic groups of the city, and used it to preach from "a distorted version of Islam" (Mufti of Korça, 2018). For a significant period their actions went uncriticised which allowed for exploitation of the ideology on their part. Nonetheless, as the chief of community policing attests, the formal religious structures began to cooperate with the police to put an end to the activity of this group. Unlike the other two cities, Kavaja appears to lack the most crucial element of radicalization, direct contact with radical individuals. In that regard, the Mufti of the city and the chief of community policing agreed that religious leaders have played a positive role in reporting and addressing issues of radicalism.

d) Online radicalization – Most FGs and interviewed sources believed that social media offers a dangerous opportunity for self-radicalization, particularly for the youth. As such it is important that communities work together to educate and raise awareness about the risks of online platforms. Although online radicalization is difficult to measure, many key informants as well as activists and community leaders partaking in FGs felt certain that online media has a significant impact on the youth. Furthermore, it seems to act both as a catalyst for increasing the pace of radicalization and as a mechanism for contacting VE ideology. "Through

online media" a religious leader stated, "young individuals get very simple and convincing answers to their pre-existing biases, which for the most part go unchallenged" (Imam in Korça, 2018). Concerns were raised in almost all FGs and particularly by participants who work as educators or with vulnerable communities. Their specific concerns were that parents are not monitoring their children's social media exposure and that when coupled with *isolation* and *social alienation,* radicalization can occur undetected.

Online radicalization appeared as a problem in all municipalities, and it is difficult to measure where it might have had the most impact. Unfortunately, none of the communities appeared to have the capability to detect or intercept online radicalization, which is why in almost all communities participants of the field research saw it as threatening, particularly when information on religion is "served without filters" (Mufti of Tirana, 2018). A major concern about social media is the inability to control the narratives as disseminated. According to the chief of community policing in Kavaja, "social media in particular is difficult to control and can contribute to enforcing radical beliefs which, when individuals keep to themselves, can be reflected in the future" (Chief of Community Policing Sector in Kavaja, 2018). However, opinions on the effects of social media vary, which indicates that most actors themselves have very little knowledge of the real impact. For example, while an imam in Korça stated that social media is mainly promoting an Islamophobic narrative, two imams in Tirana had opposing views on how social media impacts practitioners, where one believed it has an insignificant impact whereas the other believed that it could have "serious consequences, if not addressed properly by the imams." Varying opinions were shared by participants in FGs in which some participants cited the Internet as a "major form for disseminating extremist ideology", while others saw it as a "catalyst" to get informed on previously contacted ideology. This shows that due to the difficulties of quantifying the impact of online radicalization, opinions about it are mainly based on perceptions rather than concrete observations. Regarding this particular factor, it is difficult to determine which community is more vulnerable or resilient as almost all communities seem to have little understanding of the scale and impact of online radicalization.

Ideological factors of resilience

Aside from factors of vulnerability, some of the ideological factors and actors that play a positive role in increasing community resilience to VE include:

e) Strong civic values – A strong theme throughout the field research was the idea that nurturing civic values or respect for diversity and religious tolerance can serve as a crucial mechanism for preventing discrimination, alienation and radical ideologies. When asked "How can VE be prevented in the future?" almost all FGs and interviewees identified principles related to civic values such as: "encouraging tolerance and understanding" (Representative from the Municipality of Tirana, 2018), "making people understand that they have responsibility as citizens" (Chief of Community Policing Sector in Tirana, 2018), and "promoting respect for each other and their religion" (Respresentatives from the Civil Society in Tirana, 2018). It is worth noting that almost all participants agreed in principle on promoting strong civic values; however, there does not appear to be any actionable project for implementing such initiatives.

f) Education on religion to raise awareness – To complement these efforts, both the secretary of the municipality of Kavaja and the chief of community policing confirmed that education campaigns have been effective in the past in their small community, that they saw it as important to inform as many actors as possible on the risks and threat of VE. According to a local government administrator in Tirana, "much more attention should be placed on youth education". Many participants in the study shared this view, but what stood out was the effort of school teachers in Korça and Kavaja to address the phenomenon in their classrooms. In both cases, participants who worked as high school teachers reported having raised the issue but added that, a more structured institutional approach is needed. One female practitioner from Korça claimed that "extremism was kept in check due to the right teachings of the imams" (Female

Muslim practitioners in Korça, 2018). Concerning raising awareness, most of the efforts have been concentrated in the religious community as in a few cases when the heads of local government were unaware of important initiatives such as the National Strategy for CVE and the Action Plan (Council of Ministers, 2015). All religious leaders reported that they had addressed the problems associated with VE within their congregation. One other suggestion in the field of education that participants in the field research identified was the introduction of "religious education" in schools by trained religious experts as a mechanism for curbing misinformation and reducing youth's vulnerability to religious extremism. Whether such an option would be viable or effective is difficult to forecast, but most religious leaders spoke in favour of it.

g) Common culture and tradition – In the given context, the term 'culture' is almost synonymous with 'tradition'. One of the differentiating elements between responses from Kavaja, Korça and Tirana was the degree of emphasis they placed on *culture and tradition*, and how it was interpreted in each context. For example, almost every source in Kavaja emphasized the "interpersonal harmony, which has been historically a characteristic of the community" (Representative from the Municipality of Korça, 2018). According to many research participants, part of Kavaja's culture has also been a strong "connection to one another" which is exhibited through joint celebration of religion in a show of solidarity, traditional visits throughout on social occasions, inter-faith marriages, and friendliness. A similar situation can be observed in Korça, but research participants interpreted the situation more as a neutral state of *coexistence* rather than a situation in which the community actively seeks bonds and connection. In Tirana, on the other hand, although traditions of mutual respect are seen as important, many communities have yet to develop a 'common culture' given that they are recently formed and interaction is limited.

3.3.2 Socio-economic factors

a) Alienation, marginalization, isolation and discrimination – These factors are closely related to overall socio-economic problems. Economic deprivation and isolation form a vicious cycle that makes it even more difficult for individuals escape. In this context, even if individuals do not identify with VE, the desire to 'escape' from their reality of marginalization may overcome the fear of the risks related to embracing VE. This was expressed by interviewees in statements such as "when you don't have enough money to feed your family, you can't really keep your head up high" (Representatives from the Civil Society in Kavaja, 2018). However, isolation can also occur due to mild discrimination based on belief. Although such discrimination is not overtly visible as most Albanians remain tolerant of other religious groups, some practitioners have stated that they sense some minor forms of discrimination. Several FGs participants shared this feeling, and one participant of them stated that "it's difficult to not feel isolated when you are being judged for your personal belief you just don't want to be confrontational; on the surface everyone says they respect your choice but in reality there is a bit of a stigma against your belief" (Muslim practitioners in Kavaja, 2018).

Significantly, there are differences in the level of marginalization, discrimination and alienation expressed among the selected communities. In Kavaja, members of the community seem very much engaged with one another. In the words of a local imam, "everyone [there] knows everyone and they go in and out of each other's houses" (Imam in Kavaja, 2018), implying strong interpersonal connections. Similar views were expressed by a female practitioner who had converted in Islam, stating that she felt more accepted in Kavaja than she did in her hometown of Kukës (Muslim practitioners in Kavaja, 2018). Participants in Kavaja admitted that instances of discrimination occur; however, almost all participants stated that they did not *feel* discriminated. A practicing Muslim woman and a teacher stated that at most "we get asked loaded questions about the wearing of the *hijab*, but such thing has stopped bothering us" (Muslim practitioners in Kavaja, 2018).

In Korça, conversely, participants expressed contrasting views. On the one hand, the representative of the local government believed that there is mutual respect among religious communities, but on the other hand, she admitted that there might be some unintended discrimination when it comes to the hiring of municipality employees (the overwhelming majority of whom are Orthodox Christians) (Representative from the Municipality of Korça, 2018). However, practitioners describe a different situation that shows signs of intra- and inter-religious discrimination. Female practitioners stated that many people do not like the way they dress, that there are very few Muslims working in state institutions and that in one case, the supervisor of one participant organized a survey to see whether people agreed on her wearing *hijab* (Female Muslim practitioners in Korça, 2018). Ironically, when asked about the other Muslim community in Korça, the Bektashi, these practitioners stated that "the Bektashi have no connection with Islam" (ibid.). Finally, Tirana is a mix of many religions and local cultures due to in-country migration over the past 25 years. As a result, many newly formed communities, particularly in the periphery, have little in common. The head of community policing for Yzberisht stated that, "social problems, economic problems and sometimes inability to adapt to the new community makes people more isolated… of course this makes for very discontent individuals" (Chief of Community Policing Sector in Tirana, 2018).

b) Economic deprivation and lack of opportunities – Economic outlooks appear to be another factor that increases vulnerability towards VE. Emphasis on this factor was recurred in almost all FGs and interviews. When asked about the reasons why someone might become radicalized, the typical answer was *unemployment* and *financial hardships*. Economic deprivation makes it difficult for individuals to stay connected with their society and even more difficult to provide for their livelihood. Furthermore, the persistent lack of economic opportunities contributes to grievances and a loss of hope (Mufti of Korça, 2018). When this occurs, individuals are more likely to embrace risky activities such as VE, for as long as it pays. It is worth noting, however, that the least affected community (Kavaja) is also the one with the highest rate of unemployment, lowest incomes and limited opportunities due to given geographical constrains; it is closely followed by Korça and then Tirana. This fact is important as it demonstrates that economic hardships might be a contributing factor, but are not necessarily a key, single factor in pushing an individual toward VE. One of the chiefs of community policing in Tirana explained this by dividing the process into two stages, stating that: "drivers towards radicalization are diverse, economic hardship included, but the driving factor behind the decision to bear arms and engage in violent extremism is ideological" (Chief of Community Policing Sector in Tirana, 2018). This highlights that affectedness by VE is relative to the dynamics of interaction and the compounding of factors of vulnerability.

c) Enabling social networks – Social networks contribute to facilitating the path towards radicalization. They can be seen pathways towards radicalization and VE. Social networks appear to have the greatest influence in more isolated communities facing economic hardships, including unemployment, poverty and underdevelopment. According to the chief of the police station in Tirana, social networks can have a powerful influence especially if individuals are unemployed and see little prospect for their future. He elaborated that radicalization toward VE is similar to that which occurs within gangs given that the conditions are almost identical (Community Policing Officers in Tirana, 2018). The police chief further elaborated that in the case of the particular community in Tirana (Yzberisht), where radicalization was the highest in the country, the social network was fundamental in maintaining consistent attachment with the extremist ideology due to a gradually formed dependency, which came from "providing food, clothing, money, and shelter" (ibid.). The chief of community policing of Korça shared the opinion that social networks can be powerful enablers. He mentioned the case of the small group of radicals who vandalized the Christian monuments in Korça and saw their acts primarily as criminal, although religion was used as a justification (Mufti of Korça, 2018). In Kavaja, no field research participants could identify any forms of social connections that presented a high risk regarding potential extremism.

Actors can play a very powerful role in mobilizing people around a specific ideology within social networks. According to the Mufti of Tirana, the imams that recruited over 70 supporters for terrorist organizations in Syria were successful because they sent a consistent message to their followers and were able to do so simultaneously.

Socio-economic factors of resilience

Some of the socio-economic factors and actors that play a positive role in increasing community resilience to VE include:

d) Social connection / social cohesion – Although social networks appear to exert significant influence as they provide a sense of belonging and association to individuals, social cohesion can also help build connections with people who are dissimilar but part of one community. Similar to the concept of 'common culture and tradition', "social connections within and between communities help mitigate the risk factors associated with violent extremism" (Ellis & Abdi, 2017, 290). The concept of *social connections*, as often emphasized throughout the field research, for the purposes of this report is to be understood as the *bonding, bridging* and *linking* relationships *within* and *between* communities and/or state institutions (ibid., 289-300). Social bonding occurs when individuals share the same identity within a community; social bridging is the sharing of "a common sense of community" between members of a community that have diverse identities; and social linking refers to the connections between communities and state institutions (ibid., 290).

The more interconnected a community, the greater the possibility of building cohesion not just among community members but also across vertical structures by strengthening trust in institutions. In that regard, Kavaja had begun implementing a programme on 'community policing' where various institutions cooperated to enhance the security and wellbeing of the community. Furthermore, the head of community policing and the representative of the local government stated that cooperation with the Muslim community has been high in referring cases of high risk of radicalization – a sign of trust across institutions. In Korça, the extent of cooperation between the local government and the municipality went as far as the celebration of religious holidays, but otherwise, the local government seemed less concerned, and the issue of VE was not a policy priority (Representative from the Municipality of Korça, 2018). In Tirana, according to the Mufti, much work was done in recent years to account for every mosque and situate it under the authority of the MCA. Furthermore, the Muftini of Tirana is working on keeping track of foreign investments to various religious organizations or mosques to prevent a scenario similar to that experienced in Yzberisht (Mufti of Tirana, 2018). In the aftermath of the Syrian war, neither foreign donations to mosques nor the religious activity within mosques was regulated.

e) Equal opportunities – Social and economic equal opportunity can limit marginalization and the isolation of a community as well as offer space for fair competition and the opportunity to achieve. Unfortunately, it is difficult to differentiate on the various levels of equal opportunities in the selected cases because many of the factors that foster equal opportunities are connected to state level policies. However, aspects of local employability varied from one community to the other. For example, in Korça there is a disproportionate representation of one religious group in government jobs compared to the others. This was not the case in Kavaja. Regardless of whether the responsibility for providing more equal opportunities lies with the central or local government, the fact remains that citizens across all communities feel they are not getting enough. This view was supported in every interview and FG discussion, and "financial instability, uncertainty about one's future, unemployment and economic hardships" were emphasized as contributing factors to vulnerability toward VE.

3.3.3 Structural factors

a) Perceptions of poor governance – The issue of state inaction was often mentioned as an enabling factor which provided FFs with the opportunity to access conflict zones such as Syria and Iraq. In Korça, participants of FGs were surprised how state institutions have very limited control over organizations that provide religious and economic assistance to their communities (Representatives from the Civil Society in Korça, 2018). One male FG participant stated: "It's like [government institutions] don't even care to know that children are not going to school just to attend singing games in unregistered churches" (ibid.). The disconnect that people feel with the government not only increases their grievances and discontent towards the state but also emboldens them not to fear consequences in case of law infringement. For example, one FG participant in Korça stated: "no one was really worried that anything would happen, it seemed as if the government did not care much, so for some people it was almost like an adventure" (ibid.). Perceptions such as this are worrisome as they imply that governments that do not act pre-emptively to prevent VE, through raising awareness or indicating that they are present, will most likely suffer the consequences by having to react to the aftermath of VE in their communities.

i. Lack of consolidation of state presence – Participants of the fieldwork pointed out that the state's presence is critical to the prevention or protection of individuals from recruitment by radical and violent extremist groups. Participants urged first and foremost, a greater state presence in their communities, and additionally, a consolidation of state presence in their communities (especially in mountainous and rural areas, which compose the lowest figures of state investments). They pointed to a need for *coordination* of state interventions, their timing and location among different actors (state, civil society or religious actors), for *sequencing* and *synchronizing* the order of interventions (security, civic, educational, economic), and for *creating awareness* regarding the challenges that are faced by the community in order to prevent the community from responding to appeals by extremist groups. All these suggestions were in response to the general perceptions of frustrated expectations and relative deprivation, unmet social and economic needs, greed, or proliferation of illegal economic activities.

ii. 'Apathetic' security institutions – According to the police chief in Tirana, one of the most relevant elements in encouraging FF was the "apparent disinterest of state institutions to react to the situation [referring to the time when the FF phenomenon appeared]" (Community Policing Officers in Tirana, 2018), which emboldened the actions of many others to follow suit. The head of community policing in Korça expressed a similar sentiment and elaborated that the *perceived* 'state inaction' resulted from state security institutions "not properly assessing the level of threat and reacting slowly, which led to many people believing they could leave the country to fight in Syria without repercussions" (Chief of Community Policing Sector in Korça, 2018). Another similar perspective came from discussions in a FG in Kavaja where participants agreed that "one is always angry when seeing children get killed, but very few would go to Syria if they knew they could be stopped, and back then no one seemed to be doing that".

Another case in point is the reaction of the police force, which sees its role as an 'after action' intervening agent. Most of their efforts seem to focus on countering and reacting to the threat with little focus on prevention. On the other hand, there is little cooperation with other institutions although they do maintain a monitoring presence in their area of operations. Imams in general believe that more training is required on the topic in order to make more practitioners aware of the risks of VE (Mufti of Tirana, 2018).

iii. Inefficient institutions – Although all municipalities are very open to cooperate with other institutions in PVE programmes, they themselves do not seem to be taking proactive steps to reducing the risk of VE in their communities. Most local leaders are taken aback at the prospect of experiencing VE in their communities, but they do not view themselves as the leading partner in future prevention of this ideology – it seems, the issue is not high up enough on their agenda. The lack of interest in the issue creates opportunities for radicalism and VE to fester within the community. Another major discontentment concerns the failure of institutions to provide intended services. The most commonly identified 'basic' services include security, healthcare, rule of law and education. Failure to meet these basic services can lead to exacerbated grievances and the distancing of individuals from the state.

iv. Corruption and impunity – Corruption and discontent towards government policies were repeatedly underscored during fieldwork. This is a factor of vulnerability that may prompt civic disengagement and political apathy; and, it can further foster a sense of moral outrage. The EC's 2018 Report for Albania notes that although "the number of final convictions involving junior or middle ranking officials has increased, they occurred mostly in the judiciary", and the rate of final convictions of high-ranking officials remains very low. It added that "corruption remains prevalent in many areas and continues to be a serious problem" (European Commission, 2018, 21-22). The more corrupt the state is perceived to be, the easier is for violent extremist groups to portray themselves a legitimate alternative.

b) Intra-religious tensions – Another important point of contention that contributes to the breeding of radicalization within religious institution, are intra-religious tensions. In Albania, the MCA is the only officially recognized authority within Islam. However, various other groups that follow alternative forms of Islam feel that they are not represented by the MCA. This has led to fractioning among religious clerics and practitioners. For example, in Korça, the main non-official Muslim group and the official representatives of the MCA have had various confrontations regarding matters of representation in the city's Muftini. For some time the local mosques held two different prayer gatherings in which groups of practitioners prayed only with the imams whom they support (Female Muslim practitioners in Korça, 2018). Eventually, both factions put aside their differences and resolved their disputes peacefully.

Another contributing factor to the intra-religious tensions is the level of uncontrolled foreign donations. In Korça, funding from different donation sources has led to the development of parallel community centres, and support structures, which contributes to the consolidation of divisions between different factions (Chief of Community Policing Sector in Korça, 2018). Such a situation has never arisen in Kavaja for the simple reason that all donations receive the approval of the Mufti. This has helped maintain a balanced distribution of charity funds, has prevented the development of perceptions about favouritism and channelled the funds where the religious community sees it fit (Mufti of Kavaja, 2018).

Alienation of a particular group and an enhanced sense of superiority of one's belief are also evident, although this form of schism is rather covert. Such dormant discrimination was much nuanced and indirect; however it was evident in several occasions among religious practitioners. For example, in a FG in Korça, several participants repeated and confirmed that "the Bektashi [religious community in Albania] are not real Muslims" while another practitioner's statement went unchallenged as she stated, "many years from now, we believe people will come to their senses and come closer to Islam; they will understand the truth" (Female Muslim practitioners in Korça, 2018). Almost the same sentiment was expressed by a female practitioner in Kavaja. Similarly, Christian practitioners implied that their religion was superior as according to them "many Muslims want to go to church and attend Christian holidays because they are easier to follow and are not very strict" (Muslim practitioners in Kavaja, 2018).

Furthermore, differences in the interpretation of religion have led to the distancing of various religious communities from the mainstream ideology endorsed by the MCA. In fact, according to a report by the State Committee on Cults in 2015 estimated that 200 out of 727 mosques were operating outside the legal standards and were allowing preaching without the awareness of the MCA (Mejdini, 2015). Not surprisingly, these isolated communities have also served as a hub for religious radicalism; the MCA claims that it was the religious activities within these remote areas that contributed to a rise in the level of extremist rhetoric and ultimately the radicalization of locals (Mufti of Tirana, 2018). It is worth noting that throughout *all* interviews, religious community leaders emphasized the importance of the MCA having more control and influence as a mechanism for preventing similar 'rogue' operations and further radicalization in the future.

Structural factors of resilience

Some of the structural factors and actors that play a positive role in increasing community resilience to VE are as follows:

c) Increased cooperation with institutions – This is an essential feature in dealing with VE. State responses so far have been limited to law enforcement agencies mostly through retroactive and coercive measures. Key members of the Muslim Community in Tirana, Korça and Kavaja interviewed for this study emphasized the importance of strengthening cooperation between state institutions and the MCA. The representatives from local municipalities of those cities claimed not to have been included in projects related to building community resilience towards VE. They argued that central institutions must realize the potential role that municipalities can play in strengthening religious tolerance and harmony. In dealing with VE, interviewees from the police, local administration and religious communities pointed out the need to build a multi-agency approach at an early stage so that the practitioners have the ability to share information across hierarchies and sectors. In their words "everyone should do his duty" and this approach would indeed help to recognize individuals at risk, assess the nature and extent of vulnerabilities, develop appropriate responses, and ensure that relevant information is shared (Chief of Community Policing Sector in Kavaja, 2018).

d) Community engagement – The ability of state institutions to engage with the various community actors is highly likely to impact the level of resilience in the community. PVE and CVE programmes have shown to be more effective when there is a partnership involving law enforcement, intelligence agencies, religious institutions and community-based NGOs. Religious radicalization and VE are complex and multi-dimensional phenomena; and as a result, require a multi-disciplinary response. According to the local representative of Kavaja, through a similar approach, communities within the city had significantly reduced cases of family violence and school absentees among the youth thanks to an increased cooperation between schools, local police, the municipality and local NGOs (Representative from the Municipality of Kavaja, 2018). It was evident during the fieldwork and desk research process that such partnerships, in the selected case studies were dysfunctional; in particular in Tirana and Korça, where local representatives and community police had very little cooperation in the area of P/CVE. On the other hand, the role of civil society pertaining to CVE is weak in Korça and almost non-existent in Kavaja. While Tirana, regardless of having had more projects with PVE focus, many of them remain at the central-policy level and are hardly implementable on the ground (Respresentatives from the Civil Society in Tirana, 2018).

3.4 P/CVE Programmes and initiatives

Most P/CVE initiatives have been implemented by civil society organizations (CSOs) with the help of foreign donations and sponsoring. However, the Albanian government has also increased its efforts in CVE. Nonetheless, it is important to note that most programmes implemented by the government are at the

national level and typically include drafting strategies for action and coordinating activities but very little implementation. On the other hand, CSOs have only recently begun to implement programmes throughout communities. Below is a list of government and non-governmental initiatives regarding P/CVE efforts:

3.4.1 Government programming and initiatives

General

The Albanian government has recently attempted to undertake both institutional and legal actions in the area of PVE. First, in February 2014 the Albanian government amended the penal code (Articles 265/a, and 265/b) to allow for more flexible interpretation of terrorist acts while imposing harsher penalties on perpetrators (Penal Code of the Republic of Albania, 1995). To this day, Albania has some of the strictest punishments for those accused of terrorism in the region. Second, Albania was one of the first countries in the region to approve a National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism and a corresponding Action Plan (Council of Ministers, 2015). This was complemented with the appointment of a National Coordinator on CVE, who is responsible for implementing the strategy and coordinating directly with the Prime Minister. Although this was seen as a step in the right direction, the document itself seemed to lack "teeth" as the whole strategy and the National Coordinator's office were underfunded, regardless of their functioning for over three years. A third action was to establish in December 2017 the Centre for Countering Violent Extremism, which is in the process of being structured and getting staffed (Council of Ministers, 2017, Dec.). Fourth, the government has also pledged to enact and support a NATO Centre of Excellence for the Study of the FF Phenomenon; however, the Centre is awaiting approval from all NATO member states (Council of Ministers, 2017, Feb.). Finally, the Albanian government has made some institutional reforms such as adopting 'good practices' for CVE, increasing training and logistical capacities for the Counter-Terrorism Directorate, enhancing surveillance capabilities and improving coordination between the intelligence services and the police force (European Commission, 2018, p. 36). These changes are reflected in the improved ability of the corresponding institutions to detect and disrupt several terrorist plots.

For example, in March 2014 Albania arrested the nine self-proclaimed imams of a mosque in the outskirts of Tirana who were responsible for recruiting over 70 ISIS FF (News, 2016). Their arrest occurred on 12 March 2014 and the final court verdict was released on 3 May 2016. The arrest had the immediate effect of discouraging other potential ISIS FFs, making the society more aware of risk of VE, and sending a strong message about Albania's commitment to CVE. Second, through the help of regional allies, in November 2016 the Albanian police thwarted a planned terrorist attack on a football match between Albania and Israel (Telegrafi, 2016). This led to the arrest of 19 individuals, of which two are serving a prison sentence and two are under house arrest. Third, according to data from the EC, in 2017, the Albanian government has conducted five counter-terrorism operations, leading to the arrest of 12 people (European Commission, 2018, p. 37). Finally, the Albanian government has recognized the dangers of prison radicalization, which is a concern shared by its EU partners. In January 2018, the Ministry of Justice, with the support of the OSCE, started a training programme for prison staff "to equip them with the technical and operational capacities for preventing VE which leads to terrorism within prisons (General Dicrectorate of Prisons, 2018)."

For the most part the Albanian government has played a role of monitoring and cooperating. However, the lack of knowledge-sharing with local communities has been striking. For example, although much has been discussed in the literature about factors influencing VE, some of the local Albanian communities and institutions – 3-4 years after the start of the FF phenomenon – still seem to have left the issue near the end of their priority lists.

Community outreach and engagement

The government has taken some actions for encouraging critical thinking, civic participation, and promoting tolerance through education. More specifically, it has introduced the project of School as Community Centre, which encourages partnerships between schools, families and the wider community. The government also started a pilot project to teach children the history and culture of religion, but no document has been released by the Ministry of Education Sports and Youth regarding the programme and religious leaders are sceptical. Some of the interviewed religious representatives (both Muslim and Christian) argued that "if the religious courses are not being taught by the proper institutions, it would be more disinformation than information" (Imam in Korça, 2018) and that it is important for "religious culture to be included in the school curricula" (Muslim practitioners in Kavaja, 2018). Regarding the intent to "empower civil society to build community resilience", no significant action has been taken and no calls for project proposals have been launched from state institutions to support CSOs in targeted hot-spot areas as stated in the strategy (Council of Ministers, 2015, 5). Instead, CSOs have been dependent on foreign grants for the implementation of P/CVE projects.

One other priority area of the Albanian government is to propose a creative and innovative communication strategy to complement the Albanian National Strategy. However, little has been done to engage various actors such as state officials, academics, the media and technology companies, civil society, religious communities, and social workers. Awareness about the strategy and the risks of VE is thus very low.

Developing long-term comprehensive CVE policies

The Strategy suggests the development of information-sharing systems and protocols to achieve the more effective prevention of VE. Yet, state institutions remain reluctant to share information with CSOs or other actors. Such data is often not shared even among different units of the same institution. Reducing red tape and sharing of more information could lead to the improved efficiency of the current mechanisms. On a positive note, the government has improved its institutional capacities through increased training and resources for units that deal directly with the early detection and prevention of VE acts (police force, intelligence services) (European Commission, 2018, 36-37) and has improved the capacities and role of teachers through projects which promote schools as community centres. However, more training is needed for employees in the local public administration. When asked if they were aware of the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism, they responded:

> *"I'm not aware of the National Strategy. I haven't been part of any training in this regard" (Representative from the Municipality of Korça, 2018).*

> *"No, I'm not aware. There has been no training on this topic, neither from state institutions, nor from civil society. It would be better if we were included in such aspects, because then we would better protect our religious harmony" (Representative from the Municipality of Kavaja, 2018).*

> *"No, I am not aware of the strategy; there has been no cooperation in this regard. I believe that the responsibility to deal with these problems lies with security institutions" (Representative from the Municipality of Tirana, 2018).*

3.4.2 Civil Society and religious communities

Numerous initiatives have been and are being implemented by civil society and religious communities in Albania, aiming at PVE and CVE. However, the main focus has been on containing and preventing VE, and no concrete programmes have been elaborated on dealing with individuals and groups whose actions and rhetoric are considered radical. Religious officials noted that radical narratives have been present in specific areas over the past few years but the threat level is not as high as many believe. Nevertheless, they caution that these individuals might continue to maintain radical ideas that they are simply suppressing simply out of fear of prosecution. Thus, the threat of radicalism may be lurking in the background and potentially reveal itself if the situation is perceived as convenient. While conducting the fieldwork, local Muftis and imams have pointed out the existence of radical groups of individuals such as in Yzberisht (Tirana) and Korça. Thus, as the Mufti of Tirana highlights, it is important to engage and work on the de-radicalization of such individuals as quickly as possible. According to the Mufti, engagement and communication can serve as a window of opportunity for many individuals to "escape" from the path of radicalization:

> *"It is very important to communicate with these people, regardless of their opposition. Due to this communication gap, there are many individuals that do not aim to be part of such groups but that are stuck there because there has been silence by official institutions and they do not see an alternative" (Mufti of Tirana, 2018).*

Current PVE initiatives in Albania are implemented in various forms and directed at different groups. The main focus has been women, youth, Roma communities, online radicalization, and media training and awareness regarding VE. Youth is seen as the most at risk age group, and thus, projects are largely focused on them. The region of Elbasan and its surroundings have been in the spotlight of VE issues, reflecting the high number of FFs and radical narratives, and it follows that the largest number of PVE projects is focused on this region. The goal of these initiatives has been mainly to build capacities, empower local partners, establish the role of schools as community centres and promote religious tolerance.

It is hard to assess the effectiveness and impact of these programmes as almost all of them are currently being implemented. In addition, these programmes have been predominantly focused on PVE, which implies that project outcomes are expected in the long-run, and makes it difficult to assess their short-term impact.

3.4.3 Initiatives specific to case studies (Korça, Tirana, Kavaja)

Most of the projects related to CVE have been implemented in Tirana, followed by some in Korça. Kavaja comes last, with zero P/CVE projects being implemented.

In Korça, the two main projects, both supported by the European Union are:

- "Education of young people with the culture of tolerance and understanding for building friendly society", implemented by the Albanian Institute of Public Affairs. The project focuses on engaging youth in order to foster greater harmony and understand among the different religious and ethnic communities.
- "Violent Extremism Prevention Network", implemented by Women in Development Korça. The project aims at establishing a cooperative network of institutions and organizations, which promote measures for PVE.

In Tirana, there are currently six projects being implemented, supported by various international donors.

- The Young Men's Christian Association Tirana – implementing a project that aims to contribute to the local application of the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism through increasing the level of information in the suburb communities in Tirana.

- Academy of Political Studies – implementing a project that aims to introduce novel policy mechanisms for preventing youth radicalization and CVE in local communities in Albania by responding to several deficiencies: young people's lack of knowledge on the dangers posed by radicalization and VE, weak interest of local officials and limited local grass roots organizations addressing the problem.
- Albanian Centre for Rehabilitation of Trauma and Torture – implementing a project that aims to address the "missing pieces of the early identification and prevention" in order to achieve long-term de-radicalization and disengagement.
- The International Association for Solidarity – implementing a project that aims to develop capacities and encourage the participation of the local stakeholders in coordinated action to prevent the radicalization and VE among youth.
- Albanian Centre for Public Communication – implementing a project that aims to contribute to countering and preventing the spread of VE and radicalization in Paskuqan, a peripheral area in the city of Tirana, through the implementation of awareness-raising sessions and open public lectures.
- INFINIT+ – implementing a project to build resilience among young people practicing Islam and saying no to any attempt to involve them in radicalization or extreme violence.

It is important to note that Kavaja, the community that exhibits the greatest signs of resilience, is also the one where no external projects on PVE have been implemented. On the one hand, this can be seen as a "cause and effect" relationship, where projects focus only on those communities where there is an identifiable problem; on the other hand, a lack of necessity for external intervention on PVE programmes could be an indicator, by itself, of the resilience of the Kavaja Municipality.

3.5 PVE and peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts

It is important to note that proper programmes on reconciliation have never been implemented in Albania in the context of conflict resolution and/or peacebuilding. Unlike in most neighbouring countries, internal conflicts in Albania can be attributed almost exclusively to political tensions rather than to religious or ethnic divides. This is also the reason why reconciliation, dialogue and mediation have always been treated as part of the political landscape rather than programmes to be implemented at the societal level. As a result, the extent to which current PVE efforts can be linked to peacebuilding is through programmes of interfaith dialogue, awareness raising and the promotion of civic values through education; such programmes were also mentioned in the previous section.

Albania has entered its third year of implementation of the National CVE Strategy with a wide range of civil society initiatives aiming to raise awareness, build capacities and establish PVE practices. Although there is no progress report yet on the implementation of the Strategy, a kind of "C/PVE fatigue" is perceptible especially among religious players who have been very active and vocal on C/PVE measures over the past three years or so. While donor coordination on C/PVE programmes in Albania has improved in the last year (2016/2017), many sources from this study found that there is an overconcentration of C/PVE initiatives in Albania which does not reflect the (relatively low) degree of threat from VE in comparison to neighbouring countries (e.g. Kosovo or Macedonia).

Another feature of the Albanian VE phenomenon is the fact that, so far, it has posed more serious threats externally through the FF rather than internally. In this sense, many sources stated that is highly unlikely that religious extremism from Albanian citizens will result in serious attacks or terrorist incidents inside the country. While such attitudes by no mean suggest that PVE efforts should be abandoned, the recent experience of C/PVE actions in Albania suggest that further contextualization is required.

The situation of VE in Albania does not display the same features that practitioners have noted in other countries, especially in the Western Balkan region where religious and national identities have been often intertwined in past conflicts (e.g. ex-Yugoslav wars in the 1990s). In Albania, the prevalence

of national identity over religious identity isolates the phenomenon and the followers of this extremist ideology in a context where they cannot identify adversary communities. A similar conclusion was drawn by the methodology validation of the IDM 2018 study on *Religious Tolerance in Albania,* which argues that the Albanian context is different from the historical, socio-political and economic context of countries that engage their communities in post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation measures (Vurmo et al., 2018, 10).

Specifically, despite isolated incidents (which have always been forcefully condemned) the VE phenomenon in Albania remains limited to cases of radicalized individuals who are manipulated through extremist ideologies. These cases are far from reaching the level of one or more structured groups (end even less so, communities) which would require complex measures for reconciling (inexistent) adversary groups or peacebuilding efforts among opponent communities in Albania. Therefore, it is essential that PVE efforts in Albania continue to adjust to the local context by streamlining PVE-sensitive measures.

The closest initiatives that combine PVE efforts and social reconciliation in Albania are de-radicalization strategies. However, at present, no significant de-radicalization programme has been implemented on the 'ground'. As a process, de-radicalization is aimed at radicalized individuals, and it is based on the assumption that not everyone who becomes radicalized remains committed to the cause, and that every radical group has followers who are disillusioned, have doubts, or simply want an escape (Neumann, 2017). PVE programming is a long-term process, as is so is its impact; although it has strengthened collaboration among like-minded actors in Albania, it has failed to address challenges in the short-term, because it does not target, deal with, or integrate radical individuals. The lack of programmes targeting radicalized individuals can cause CVE efforts to fail in bridging the gap between radicalized individuals and the rest of society. De-radicalization programmes are important for facing the threat posed by VE and they pave the way for further utilizing former radicalized individuals in future CVE and community resilience initiatives.

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

Terrorist-inspired VE is a relatively new phenomenon in Albania, and as such caught much of government institutions and Albanian society by surprise in the wake of the Syrian conflict, in which over 140 men and women left the country to support various militant groups involved in the conflict. The Albanian government reacted by modifying its penal code, increasing the capacities of the police force, establishing the Office of the National Coordinator for CVE and adopting a National Strategy on the issue. Other initiatives were implemented by CSOs in partnership with international donors to better understand the causes and the impact of the phenomenon, and to raise awareness through projects that engaged religious communities, local government, educational institutions and security forces.

Much of the initial efforts by the government were focused on prosecution as a mechanism for deterring other sympathizers from travelling to conflict zones and supporting fighting factions abroad. Other non-governmental projects aimed at awareness raising and providing initial support for affected communities, by approaching the phenomenon from a specific dimension (i.e. religion, education, economic problems, etc.). However, one drawback of many such projects was their focus on the individual characteristics

(primary drivers, enabling factors, mechanisms for prevention); few targeted communities as a whole to observe the factors and actors that make them more resilient or vulnerable to VE; this research examined exactly such communities.

The municipalities of Kavaja, Korça and Tirana were studied here as case studies due to observed differences in levels of affectedness after initial inquiries and desk research. Further research indicated that the factors affecting both community vulnerability and resilience fall into three major categories: structural, socio-economic and ideological. While analysing the factors of resilience and the actors who impact affectedness by VE within a community, the research yielded several conclusions.

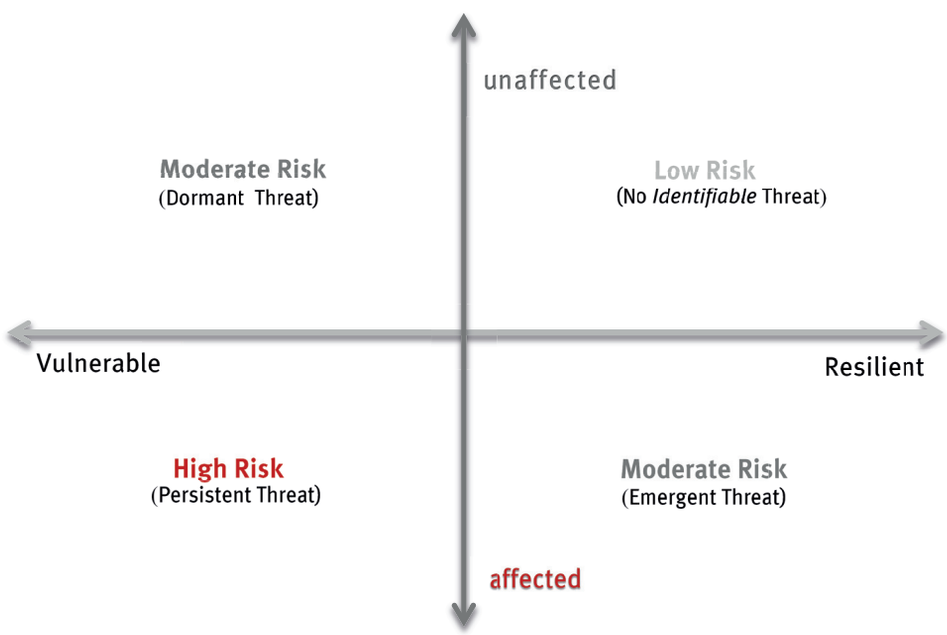
First, resilience is a *spectrum* and is *systemic*, and radicalization towards VE is a *process*, the scale of which depends largely (but not exclusively) on the level of resilience. Resilience should be viewed as a spectrum, as there is no 'perfect' resilience but rather a compounding of factors and actions from actors that limit vulnerability in a community (or enhance resilience). In that regard, a community that has not been affected by VE might still present signs of vulnerability, thus constituting a form of "resilience by chance" (Turčalo, 2018). On the other hand, a community that appears to be resilient by meeting the criteria of resilience might become affected because of external intervening factors; thus experiencing isolated and individually-initiated acts (commonly referred to as 'lone wolf' attacks). Therefore, when inquiring about resilience, the question to be addressed is not "resilient or not?" but rather "*how* and *how much* is a community resilient?" Resilience is systemic because it does not depend on one single factor of resilience but rather on the overall interconnection of factors and the way in which actors play a role in shaping those factors. Furthermore, due to the plethora of ways in which factors and actors might interconnect in a given community, resilience to VE is not necessarily deliberate, but oftentimes, occurs by chance--yet another reason why resilience should be analysed holistically. Nonetheless, resilience to VE can be fostered by enhancing the effectiveness of a certain set of factors and actors. Finally, radicalization towards VE (affectedness) is a process because it occurs over time and through a set of events; although it is correlated to vulnerability it might occur, with less probability, in communities where resilience appears to be high. Overall, of all three communities analysed here, according to the factors and actors identified, Kavaja appears to be the most resilient municipality, followed by Korça and then Tirana.

Second, confirming one of the hypotheses of this research, both factors conducive to and preventing VE are observable in both resilient and vulnerable communities, but there are additional intervening factors that 'trigger' vulnerability in some at risk communities. However, there is a positive connection between factors of resilience and unaffectedness. Hence, as the three case studies demonstrate, *compounded* factors of vulnerability are more likely to lead to affectedness by VE, and no one single factor can help predict affectedness. For example, in Tirana, one can observe the presence of indicators such as FFs, hate speeches towards other religions and state institutions, isolation from the community at large, presence of radical recruiters and the influence of external radical sources of funding (Wahhabi groups). In the municipality of Korça there are no cases of FFs but, incidents of religiously motivated violence have occurred (both inter- and intra-religious), there is a presence of foreign donations and preachers, and there is a lack of cooperation and coordination with other institutions (security, local government, education, etc.). Kavaja conversely, has had foreign donations but the distribution was controlled, religious actors constantly coordinated their activities, hate speech was avoided through preaching that fostered tolerance and although Kavaja is a relatively religious community, there is a greater emphasis on civic values and social cohesion.

Third, it is important to distinguish between un/affectedness and resilience. Although they overlap and are correlated, they do not measure the same thing; affectedness concerns the visible signs of VE, while resilience concerns the ability to prevent, pre-empt and react to threats through collective action. Although these variables do not measure the same thing, the level of risk and the type of threat within a given community can drastically change based on the level of vulnerability and type of affectedness present. Hence, communities that exhibit high levels of vulnerability to VE and that have been affected have a higher risk level and face a greater threat than communities that have not been affected (visibly)

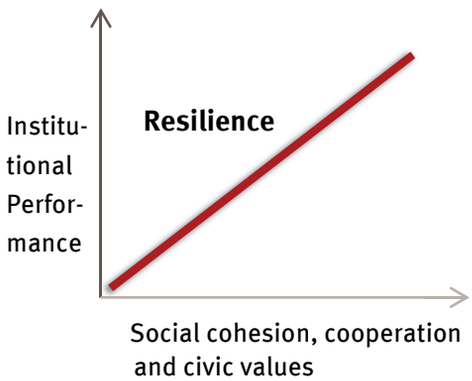
and exhibit signs of resilience to VE. The observed communities showed a positive correlation between affectedness and vulnerability which implies that vulnerable communities are also more likely to become affected by VE. Here affectedness does not only consider the number of FFs but also hate crimes, discrimination and other extremist acts that have an ideological motivation. The diagram below helps explain these various connections:

Fourth, VE surfaces at the meeting point between ideology, grievance and opportunity. All the major actors and factors affect their communities by shaping one of these three enablers of VE. Ideology strengthens the commitment to a particular set of beliefs that one identifies with. Grievances, on the other hand, represent the overall discontent that individuals have about ideological, socio-economic and political aspects of their lives. Finally, 'opportunity' is the ability of individuals to perform acts of VE unhindered. In 2012, when Albanian FFs first started to leave for Syria, some individuals had a strong conviction about their cause. Discontent about the present way of life further strengthened this incentive. Such was the case in Tirana, where many of the FFs adopted a radical ideology of religion (Wahhabism) which dominated all other aspects of socio-political life. Disagreement with social and political realities led to isolation and increased discontent and when the opportunity presented itself, these extremists left the country to become FFs.



Fifth, the negative impact of ideology, grievances and the opportunity to become a violent extremist can largely be avoided through (1) social cohesion, (2) strengthening of civic values, (3) increased cooperation among community actors and (4) improved institutional performance. Research indicated that communities with high social engagement and respect for diversity and civic values were less affected by VE. Such was the case in both Korça and Kavaja (particularly in Kavaja), where there was high interconnectivity between people of different religions and religious actors promoted respect and tolerance of other religions. In Kavaja, cooperation among community actors was also higher, as local government, security forces, educational institutions and religious community had greater cooperation. In Tirana, this cooperation and interconnectivity was the lowest. This fostered the isolation of individuals and the ideological groups they subscribed to. Finally, although institutional performance was criticized equally in all communities, there appears to be a higher level of state presence in Kavaja than in Korça and Tirana. Whereas in Kavaja community actors acknowledged the impact of VE on the community and of government actions for CVE, in Korça and Tirana many of the local institutions considered the problem insignificant and were unaware of mechanisms for referral or prevention.

Finally, the existence of factors conducive to resilience can strengthen communities and prevent them



from becoming affected even when factors of vulnerability are present, particularly in the presence of proactive engagement by actors that promote resilience. Although there is a correlation between the lack of negative actors and greater resilience, most importantly, there is a correlation between the inaction of positive actors and vulnerability. Hence, *proactive engagement* and *action* on the part of community actors is essential to strengthen resilience -- more, so than the mere absence of vulnerability factors. This was observed at different levels throughout the three communities. In Kavaja, where community resilience appeared highest, the community interacted closely at various levels and actors were proactive in PVE. In particular, this coordination and pre-emptive action was noticeable within the religious community which in the early phases of the FFs phenomenon, the reacted by addressing some of the early grievances of their practitioners and thus avoided situations where disinformation could cause individuals to take matters into their own hands. On the other hand, the inability of community actors in Tirana to react in time to the developing radicalism and extremism aggravated the situation to the point where many practitioners were recruited to become FFs. Actors can have a significant impact on the resilience or vulnerability of a community as they can help reduce vulnerability on the one hand while also fuel grievances and increase vulnerability on the other. Furthermore, actors can serve as mobilizing forces around a common ideology by shaping perceptions and addressing grievances.

Recommendations

Countering radicalization can be a complex process, and thus *prevention* should be the primary focus of the Albanian government. In that regard building community resilience can serve as a long-term buffer against radicalization and VE. Understanding the factors and actors that influence community resilience is the first step towards this goal; however, the Albanian government should also focus on the concrete implementation of strategies for the prevention of VE through the proactive engagement of communities.

As many of the above conclusions underscored, there is no 'silver bullet' for resilience to VE; however, it is positively connected with the presence of resilience factors and the proactive engagement of actors that, promote resilience and social cohesion. Moreover, several characteristics regarding the factors and actors that made communities resilient emerged throughout the research and some of the overarching recommendations on building better community resilience to VE are as follows.

- *Strengthening civic values and civic identity*. Common civic values and identity help provide a unitary form of identification for all citizens. Emphasizing and encouraging citizens to subscribe to principles of respect for other people's rights and freedoms, interfaith tolerance, cooperation for common security, acceptance of diversity, non-discrimination, and respect for the rule of law can strengthen community bonds while enabling citizens of a community to live in harmony and with respect for individual freedoms.
- *Social cohesion*. Building a strong civic identity based on civic values is the foundation of responsible citizenship, but social cohesion is much more important in developing social bonds, bridges and links within and between communities. As previously explained, these social connections help build a sense of belonging for all people within a community, reduce isolation and marginalization, and increase the cooperation and partnership between the community and government institutions.
- *Cooperation among community actors*. Interconnectivity is further fostered when community actors cooperate to achieve common goals. Doing so increases the chances to identify and tackle social concerns that might otherwise go unnoticed. The greater the *proactive* engagement of actors in a given

community, the more probable it is to address issues relating to VE. As this research indicated, the action of community actors can help maintain community resilience even in the presence of factors conducive to vulnerability towards affectedness by VE.

- *Improving institutional performance / good governance*. Good governance helps people address their socio-economic and political concerns quickly. This improves citizens' trust in institutions, addresses grievances and reduces the opportunity for radicalized individuals to successfully engage in VE.

As indicated in this research, affectedness by VE is most commonly linked to communities where the before mentioned socio-political and economic characteristics are inadequate to meet societal needs. Thus, proactive initiatives that contribute to improving these long-term outcomes will play a significant role in strengthening community resilience. Mechanisms for delivering these results may vary from education and awareness campaigns, multi-stakeholder community run projects, capacity building, and policy evaluation and advice in order to maintain constant monitoring of policy effectiveness and help generate options for more efficient outcomes.

Glossary

Affected community – for the purposes of this study, this is a community that has been affected by ideological and/or physical forms of VE such as: pervasive radical ideology, ideologically motivated acts of violence, the incidence of foreign fighters originating from the community, and presence of actors that cultivate vulnerability towards VE.

Community – in the context of this research, a community is a group of people and institutions, typically based in the same area, that have certain interests, identities or characteristics in common.

Concealed radicalism – refers to nuances of radicalisation, which exist covertly within a community. This form of radicalism is not apparent upon direct observation but becomes evident after further analysis of the subtexts of social interactions in forms of stereotyping, hate speech, latent discrimination and general superiority of one's belief.

Counter radicalization – policies and programmes aimed at addressing some of the conditions that may propel some individuals down the path to terrorism. It is used broadly to refer to a package of social, political, legal, educational and economic programmes specifically designed to deter disaffected (and possibly already radicalised) individuals from crossing the line and becoming terrorists (United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force – UN CTITF).

Countering Violent-Extremism (CVE) – implies initiatives and strategies, which focus on countering the processes of radicalization and, hindering the recruitment efforts of violent extremists. It is a comprehensive response that seeks to mobilize and empower various actors such as local governments, educators, social workers, religious community and civil society with the aim of promoting civic values and respect for human rights. CVE also address the "conditions conducive" to the spread of VE and terrorism by taking into account and helping mitigate the grievances that may be exploited by extremist and their supporters.

Counter terrorism – refers to all measures taken to prevent and combat terrorism before, during, and after hostile acts are carried out; it is aimed at deterring terrorist acts, disrupting terrorist plots, and dismantling terrorist organisations.

De-radicalization – is a process most often realised through a system of programmes and measures aimed at reducing the extremity of ideological views and reintegrating individuals who have been already radicalised into society. It is based on the assumption that not everyone who becomes radicalized remains committed to their cause. In practice, de-radicalization programmes target radicalized individuals at different stages of the extremist "lifecycle": before joining a group or network, as active members, or following their exit. The objective may be to stop their involvement in violence (behavioural de-radicalization), or change their attitudes and ideological assumptions (cognitive de-radicalization).

Disengagement – is the action or process of withdrawing from involvement in an activity, situation, or group. In this case, it is a process whereby an individual gives up active participation in a radical group or activity. This process of change does not necessarily mean that this person has given up on their political or ideological views.

Extremism – Extremism can be used to refer to political ideologies that oppose a society's core values, principles and social consensus. However, the word extremism cannot be limited to different ideologies, as it is also used to show something beyond the normal or a strong opposition to a certain something. In the context of liberal democracies, this could be applied to any ideology that advocates supremacy and/or opposes the core principles of democracy and universal human rights.

Foreign Fighters – are individuals who travel to a state other than their states of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict.

Hanafi School – one of the four major schools (*madhab*) of Sunni Islamic legal reasoning and repositories of positive law. It was built upon the teachings of Abu Hanifah. It is the most widespread school in Islamic law, followed by roughly one-third of the world's Muslims. Hanafi doctrines have always been considered among the most flexible and liberal in Islamic law, including in the areas of criminal law, treatment of non-Muslims, individual freedoms, marriage and guardianship, and ownership and use of property.

Imam – the person who leads prayers in a mosque or the religious leader of a Muslim community.

Islamophobia – a baseless hostility and fear towards Islam and, resultantly, a fear of and an aversion towards all Muslims or the majority of them. It also refers to the practical consequences of this hostility in terms of discrimination, prejudices, unequal treatment (towards individuals or communities), and exclusion of Muslims from major political and social spheres.

Madrasa – Arabic for "school, college" deriving from *darasa* "to study." For the purposes of this research, it refers to Muslim religious school.

Masjid/ Musallat – are small, non-official congregation or gathering place for Muslims. It is usually frequented by close-knit groups of like-minded individuals. Another term commonly used to refer to these types of gatherings is *parajamaat*".

Mufti – the leader of the Muslim religious community in a specific region of a country. Muftis are the highest religious authority in the interpretation of the Qur'an and religious regulations within a given Muslim community.

Radicalism – process of developing extreme political, ideological and religious beliefs. It concerns advocating sweeping political change, based on the conviction that a continuation of the status quo is unacceptable. In some forms, it may be characterized by the propensity of being intolerant towards basic democratic values such as equality and diversity.

Radicalization – the process by which individuals or groups may become in some forms intolerant with regard to basic democratic values like equality and diversity as well as a rising propensity toward using means of force to reach political goals that negate and/or undermine democracy.

Religious extremism – can be characterized as the pursuit of a programme of societal renewal in the name of a religious doctrine. The use of violence is justified by reference to a divine authority, an absolute truth or a literal interpretation of texts deemed sacred. Specific groups of people such as non-believers, pagans, apostates, or heretics are identified as enemies and as such earmarked for being subjugated, punished, expelled, or killed in the name of one or another sacred cause.

Religious radicalism – concerns returning *to the roots* of the religion, i.e. to an understanding and a practice of religion that complies with the religious sources as interpreted and lived by the early believers. It therefore focuses on orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Tolerance / religious tolerance – is a disposition to endure or bear other people's beliefs and practices with which one disagrees, because he or she deems them to be false or wrong. Tolerance involves an attitude that is intermediate between wholehearted acceptance and unrestrained opposition. Religious tolerance can be defined as the recognition of right of private judgment in religious matters, the liberty to uphold one's religious opinions and forms of worship, or to enjoy all social privileges, etc. without regard to religious differences.

Resilience/ resilient community – *resilience* can be defined as the quality of being able to return quickly to a previous good condition after problems, or as the ability to withstand, respond to and recover from a wide range of harmful and adverse events. *Resilient community* refers to an intervention or active engagement of various stakeholders of the community vested with some authority to either prevent or counter VE. It also includes the community's attitude toward such a phenomenon and its reaction in the wake of the emergence of the VE activity or events perceived as leading up to its appearance.

Salafism – is the idea that the most authentic and true Islam is found in the lived example of the early, righteous generations of Muslims, known as the *salaf*, who were closest in both time and proximity to the Prophet Muhammad. Salafis – often described as "ultraconservatives" – believe not just in the "spirit" but in the "letter" of the law, which is what sets them apart from their mainstream counterparts (Hamid & Dar, 2016).

Sharia – Islamic canonical law based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet (Hadith and Sunnah), prescribing comprehensive legal instructions, that are justifiable and acceptable to Islam, for all areas of life, both religious and secular duties and sometimes retributive penalties for lawbreaking. It has generally been supplemented by legislation adapted to the conditions of the day, though the manner in which it should be applied in modern states is a subject of dispute between Muslim traditionalists and reformists.

Takfir/ takfirism – the action or practice of declaring that a fellow Muslim is guilty of apostasy (i.e. not believing in the essential tenets of Islam) and therefore no longer a Muslim.

Terrorism – criminal offences against persons and property that, given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or international organization when committed with the aim of: seriously intimidating a population; unduly compelling a government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act; or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, economic or social structure of a country or an international organization.

Violence/ Violent extremism – *violence* involves forceful actions that are intended to hurt people or are likely to cause damage; while *violent extremism*, as used in this context, implies extremist or radical worldviews which are accompanied by the support, justification of, and use of ideologically motivated violence against those who do not share the same beliefs or ideology. VE is the process of adopting these radical views and transforming them to violent actions.

Vulnerability – a community's reluctance or lack of mobilization to intervene or engage pro-actively in addressing VE under the given context implies a set of characteristics and elements which may increase the risk for a community to exhibit forms of VE.

Vulnerable Community – is a community that is incapable or unable to anticipate, cope with, resist or recover from extremism. In relation to VE, it can be understood as the potential for violent extremists to recruit individuals to their cause and potentially engage in violence.

Wahhabism – is a conservative religious branch of Sunni Islam, named after 18th century reformist scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who advocated restoration of the earliest Islamic beliefs and practices.

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