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The EU and other stakeholders' prevention strategies towards VE in Albania

The Institute for Democracy and Mediation

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Author: Leonie Vrugtman



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List of abbreviations

CoE	-	Council of Europe
CVE Centre	-	The Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism – Albania
CSO	-	Civil Society Organisation
DCAF	-	Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance
EIJ	-	Egyptian Islamic Jihad
EU	-	European Union
FTF	-	Foreign terrorist fighter
GCERF	-	The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund
IDM	-	The Institute for Democracy and Mediation
IOM	-	International Organization for Migration
KMSH	-	Albanian Muslim Community
LPSC	-	Local Public Safety Council
OSCE	-	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
P/CVE	-	Preventing / countering violent extremism
PREVEX	-	The project ‘Preventing Violent Extremism in the Balkans and the MENA: Strengthening Resilience in Enabling Environments’
RAN	-	Radicalisation Awareness Network
RCC	-	Regional Cooperation Council
RFTF	-	Returning foreign terrorist fighter
R&R	-	Rehabilitation and reintegration
SCC	-	School as Community Center
UN	-	United Nations
UNDP	-	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	-	United States Agency for International Development
VE	-	Violent extremism
VERLT	-	Violent extremism and radicalisation that leads to terrorism



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Introduction

More than five years have passed since 1353¹ men, women, and children travelled from the Western Balkans to Syria and Iraq. Since then, western Balkan governments have taken substantial measures to prosecute those that travelled to join a foreign (para)military group and to discourage others from doing so. In 2014 and 2015, the governments in the region amended their penal codes, making it illegal to join military operations in a foreign state, or support a military operation in a foreign state through other means (e.g. calling for others to join, helping others to join, or by offering financial support)². Most countries followed swiftly with the drafting and subsequent adopting of a National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism, outlining a series of measures and actions to be taken by a wide range of government and public sector stakeholders working in education, law enforcement, and social welfare. Civil society organisations – with the support of the international community and other foreign donors – stepped in to increase the understanding of the phenomenon and implement projects that would prevent radicalisation and violent extremism in the future. Besides the US State Department and UNDP, the European Union (EU) and its Member states are significant donors to projects that aim to counter and prevent violent extremism in the Western Balkans. The proximity of the region, the high number of foreign fighters per capita, as well as the recent history of instability, caused concern with the EU and its Member States. Moreover, foreign fighters from the EU and its direct neighbourhood were linked to several large-scale terrorist attacks, including the attacks in Paris in 2015; in Brussels, Berlin and Nice in 2016; and in Manchester, London and Barcelona in 2017.

Since 2001, the EU has developed and refined its counter-terrorism approaches and policies a number of times. Yet, with new challenges such as the returning foreign fighter phenomenon arising, while structural and socio-economic issues are not resolved, it is imperative that more fine-tuned and effective approaches to preventing violent extremism are put forward – both inside the EU and in its neighbourhood. Therefore, the project ‘Preventing Violent Extremism in the Balkans and the MENA: Strengthening Resilience in Enabling Environments’ (PREVEX) carries out context-sensitive, in-depth case studies of the occurrence and non-occurrence of violent extremism. These in-depth case studies, which will be brought together in regional

¹ Joana Cook and Gina Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate,” CTC Sentinel, Vol. 12, No. 6 (July 2019), pp. 30-45. Retrieved via:

<https://ctc.usma.edu/daeshdiaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>

² After the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 2178 (2014), Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia changed their penal code that same year, while Kosovo and Montenegro followed in 2015.



comparisons, help improve the understanding of how different drivers of violent extremism operate and how resilience can be strengthened in ‘enabling environments’. These findings contribute to more effective policies that prevent violent extremism through strengthening societal resilience. PREVEX employs a bottom-up approach to local–global dynamics, meaning that this paper is the first of several country-specific policy documents that feed into the analysis of Albanian-speaking countries and subsequent regional analysis of the Balkans. This policy paper focuses on the aptness of the EU and other stakeholders’ prevention strategies towards violent extremism in Albania. First, the paper will set out the current status of violent extremism and radicalisation that leads to terrorism (VERLT) in Albania. Then, it will describe the myriad of domestic and external preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) strategies and actions implemented in the country. This is followed by an analysis of the adequacy of these initiatives based on their rationale and the identified ‘root causes’ of VERLT in Albania. Lastly, this paper will set out recommendations that help improve the externally funded P/CVE initiatives carried out in Albania.



Country background

From 1944 to 1991, Albania was ruled by a communist regime, in which from 1967 onwards religious leaders were prosecuted and the display of religious symbols was forbidden. Although it has been almost 30 years since the ban on religion was lifted, most Albanians still lead a secular life. According to a study on religious tolerance conducted in 2018, ‘Albanians welcome the religious diversity that is present in the country and strongly reject the idea of the supremacy of a given religion, irrelevant of the size of the religious community’³. Religious coexistence and tolerance are considered a fundamental value and Albanian citizens rarely condition their everyday lives due to religious norms. According to the latest official census in 2011⁴, Sunni Muslims constitute 56.7% of the population; Roman Catholics 10%, Eastern Orthodox 6.8%; members of the Bektashi Order (a sect of Shia Sufism) 2.1%; and the Protestant Evangelical community 0.14%. Approximately 2.5% of Albanians identify as atheist, and there are a small number of Jehovah’s Witnesses, followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), in addition to around 40 to 50 Jews living in Albania.⁵

Due to the decades-long ban on religion, religious institutions in the country were in an abominable state when communism fell. In order to revitalise religious faiths, educate a new generation of clerics, and re-construct religious sites, foreign religious foundations rushed in. In the mid-1990s, an abundance of religious missions from various branches of both Islamic and Christian faiths had reached Albania. Thousands of young Sunni Muslims travelled to Turkey, the Middle East and Asia, returning to Albania embracing, among others also different Wahhabist or Salafist schools than Albania’s traditional Hanafi school of Islam⁶. Many of the organisations specifically trained aspiring clerics, who found themselves preaching in one of the country’s new (unregistered) mosques upon their return⁷. The aim of these religious foundations – which were often connected to foreign governments – was not just to re-build

³ Vurmo, G., Sulstarova, E. & Papa, A. (2017). Religious tolerance in Albania. Institute of Democracy and Meditation. p. 5, available at: <http://idmalbania.org/religious-tolerance-albania/>

⁴ Representatives of all religious communities have stated that the 2011 census presents an inaccurate picture of religious demographics, not least because it was an optional question. The census is available in Albanian and English at: http://www.instat.gov.al/media/3058/main_results_population_and_housing_census_2011.pdf

⁵ World Jewish Congress. (n.d.). Albania (Report). Retrieved via: <http://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/about/communities/AL>

⁶ Vickers, M. (2008). Islam in Albania. Advanced Research and Assessment Group. Balkan Series 08/09. Defence Academy of the United Kingdom.

⁷ Interview with KMSH Official, 11 November 2020.



Albania's Islamic community, but also to exert influence on religious and political affairs⁸. According to an official of the Albanian Muslim Community (in Albanian abbreviated as 'KMSH'), some people even received financial compensation for attempting to spread the religious interpretation acquired during studies abroad, once they get back to Albania⁹.

In itself the revitalisation of faith in Albania was a noble and necessary undertaking, but due to the weak state institutions, lax borders, and high crime rates, terrorist groups were able to get a foothold in Albania. It is argued that Osama Bin Laden himself ordered the creation of several religious charities in Albania to cover for terrorist activities taking place¹⁰. Allegedly, he visited Albania in 1994 and in 1998, disguised as a wealthy businessman who wanted to help a fellow Muslim nation through "humanitarian support"¹¹. In 1998, CIA operatives together with Albanian authorities launched a campaign to disrupt and arrest affiliates of an Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) cell operating in Tirana^{12,13,14}. Among its members – during their trial in Egypt dubbed the 'Returnees from Albania' – was Mohammad al-Zawahiri, the younger brother of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri^{15,16}.

Following this arrest and the 9/11 attacks two and a half years later, the Albanian government took measures to expel suspected terrorists and tackle the issue of foreign-backed religious groups. A national action plan against terrorism was adopted in 2002, leading to sweeping enforcement measures, including the blocking of financial and other assets of people and groups with suspected links to terrorists¹⁷. Also, to facilitate the re-establishment of religious communities, the government promised compensation for religious buildings, land and other property that was confiscated by the communist regime. However, the problem of uncontrolled mosques operating outside of the control of the KMSH, Imams preaching imported versions of

⁸ Deliso, C. (2007). *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*. Pp. 31-32. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International

⁹ Interview with KMSH Official, 11 November 2020.

¹⁰ Deliso, C. (2007). *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*. Pp. 31-32. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² U. S. Department of State (1998). *Patterns of global terrorism 1998: Europe Overview*. Retrieved from <https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/terrorism/1998Report/europe.html#albania>

¹³ Higgins, A., & Cooper, C. (2001, November 19). CIA-backed team used brutal means to break up terrorist cell in Albania. *Free Republic*. Retrieved from <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/574520/posts>

¹⁴ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States. (2004). *The 9/11 Commission report*. p. 127. Retrieved from: <https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>

¹⁵ Deliso, C. (2007). *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*. Pp. 31-32. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International

¹⁶ There are unconfirmed rumors that al-Zawahiri has died in the fall of 2020 due to natural causes.

¹⁷ S. Woehrel, 'Islamic terrorism in the Balkans', Congressional Research Service, 26 July 2005, p. 7



Islam, and funds pouring in from Turkey and the Gulf to exert religious and political influence, remained largely unresolved.

Albanians traveling to Iraq and Syria

Yet, it came as a huge surprise that between 2012 and 2015 around 144 Albanian citizens left the country to join insurgent groups in Iraq and Syria¹⁸. Most of the Albanians that returned, did so within a few months after their departure. This was before the so-called Islamic State proclaimed its caliphate across the Syria and the Levant and before the changes in the Albanian penal code entered into force making it illegal to take part in foreign conflict. 28 Albanian nationals are believed to have died and an estimated 81 remain in Syria¹⁹. Although the number of departures per capita in Albania was not as high as that for other Western Balkan countries, the context in which these people left indicated that Albania was dealing with a significant security challenge. Different than for other (European) states, a large part of this group consisted of entire families, where women and children travelled together with their husband or father²⁰. 27 women, 38 minors, and 79 men joined the struggle against Bashar al-Assad²¹ and according to news reports at least 13 children were born in the war theatre²². The families left in clusters from so-called hot-spot areas that are more affected by religious radicalisation²³. These communities include the outskirts of Tirana (Mëzëz, Unaza e Re), several areas south of Elbasan (Cërrik, Peqin), and the municipalities of Librazhd, Bulqizë, Kukës, and Pogradec²⁴. Many of these people visited the so-called “uncontrolled” mosques in Mëzëz and Unaza e Re, which were administered by self-proclaimed imams or had contacts with them. This group, and its recruiting ring consisting of a total of nine individuals, are responsible for successfully recruiting 70 Albanian nationals that travelled to Iraq and Syria²⁵. According to the head of the

¹⁸ European Commission. (2018). Albania Progress Report 2018. p. 36. Retrieved via:

<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-albania-report.pdf>

¹⁹ European Commission. (2020). Albania 2020 Report. Retrieved via: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_report_2020.pdf

²⁰ Joana Cook and Gina Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate,” CTC Sentinel, Vol. 12, No. 6 (July 2019), pp. 30-45. Available at:

<https://ctc.usma.edu/daeshdiaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>, accessed 12 October 2020

²¹ GCERF. (2020). GCERF Regional Strategy for Investment in the Western Balkans. Retrieved via:

<https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-Strategy-for-Investment-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>

²² Mejdini, F. (2019). Families of Albanian ISIS Fighters Face Long Road Home. Balkan Insight. Retrieved via:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/18/families-of-albanian-isis-fighters-face-long-road-home/>

²³ For more information about the areas that were most-affected by VE, see the report ‘Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania’ (Vurmo, 2015)

²⁴ Most of the names (incl. place of residence) of the FTFs have been registered by IDM researchers.

²⁵ Çobo, S. (26 February 2016). Imams Recruited even Mothers with Children, 70 people were sent to Syria. From Gazeta Shqip: <http://gazeta-shqip.com/lajme/2015/02/26/imamet-rekrutuan-edhe-nena-mefemije-derguan-ne-siri-70-luftetare/> Last accessed on 14 October 2020.



State Committee on Cults Ilir Dizdari, around 200 of the 727 mosques in Albania did not fulfil “at least one of the required legal standards or Muslim Community [KMSH] regulations” in 2015²⁶. Since then, the KMSH has made it a priority to legally acquire all mosques in Albania, train Imams, and ensure that the next generation of Imams receives accredited religious education in Albania²⁷.

Involvement of KMSH in P/CVE

Aware that Albania was lacking a higher education institution for Islamic Sciences, the KMSH founded religious university “Bedër” in 2011²⁸. Among other programmes such as law and foreign languages, Bedër University offers bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Islamic Studies²⁹, effectively completing the education cycle after re-opening the madrassahs in 1991. In order to unify the message that is preached by Imams in Albania and to help adjust the preaching to better fit the needs of Albanian audiences, the KMSH organised several training courses for Imams³⁰. Those Imams preaching at previously “uncontrolled” mosques received this training, as well as aspiring Imams looking to complete their education. Since the KMSH implemented its first activity related to P/CVE in 2014, it has been more open to cooperating with authorities and civil society. Moreover, directives for imams were issued and internal discussions organised to foster dialogue among Imams working within KMSH structures, civil society, local governments, and schools, particularly in projects related to preventing and countering religiously motivated violent extremism³¹. Together with the US Embassy in Tirana, the KMSH has implemented the project ‘Engaging Youth for Building Resilience in Communities’ for five consecutive years, which is aimed at promoting democratic values, coexistence, and harmony among young Albanians³². The KMSH has also cooperated with the EU and OSCE, primarily on capacity-building initiatives³³. This included the training of KMSH officials on the topic of VERLT, providing the necessary training modules or other materials to engage in P/CVE and community-based activities, and engaging the KMSH in P/CVE-related coordination meetings

²⁶ Mejdini, F. (17 December 2015). Uncontrolled Mosques Proliferate in Albania. BIRN. Retrieved via: <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/12/17/state-slams-albanian-muslim-over-uncontrolled-mosques-12-17-2015/>

²⁷ Interview with KMSH Official, 11 November 2020.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Bedër University. (2020). General information. Retrieved via: <https://www.beder.edu.al/en/content/default/general-information-9-10/4/135>

³⁰ Interview with KMSH official, 11 November 2020.

³¹ IDM has worked closely together with the KMSH in several research studies, awareness raising campaigns, training sessions, and the currently in the SCC initiative.

³² For more information on the project, see: <https://kmsch.al/2019/11/angazhimi-i-te-rinjve-per-ndertimin-e-nje-komuniteti-te-qendrueshem/>

³³ Interview with KMSH official, 11 November 2020.



and workshops³⁴. According to then Myfti of Tirana Ylli Gurra, external funds are better monitored to avoid a similar issue as was the case with the uncontrolled mosques³⁵. Today, all but one mosque operates within KMSH's jurisdiction and although some of the Imams in the "controlled" mosques are still at odds with the KMSH, there is more communication and oversight regarding what takes place in these mosques. However, it remains difficult to control religious gatherings that take place outside of the mosques, in un-official 'musallas' or private houses³⁶.

Root causes of (Islamic) VE

The common understanding among scholars working on violent extremism in Albania, is that the sudden departure of Albanians to Syria and Iraq was caused by a combination of factors. These factors are usually divided between socio-economic factors, structural or political factors, and ideological or cultural factors^{37,38,39,40}. Socio-economic factors are the grievances people experience include perceptions of social exclusion, marginalisation, unmet social economic needs, relative deprivation, enabling social networks and group dynamics. Political or structural factors are about the relation between the individual and the state. They include perceptions of poor governance, endemic corruption and impunity for elites, ineffective institutions, poorly governed areas, and the denial of political rights and liberties. Cultural and Albania-specific drivers (in: Vurmo & Sulstarova) or ideological factors (in: Qirjazi & Shehu) focus specifically on the religious aspects of violent extremism in Albania. These factors include a lack of religious education by believers and clerics; disputed religious authorities; disengagement and lack of civic values; proactive religious agendas; religious disinformation by potentially malicious groups; broader cultural threats; and online radicalisation.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Qirjazi, R. & Shehu, R. (2018). Community Perspectives On Violent Extremism. p. 20. Institute for Democracy and Mediation. Tirana: Albania

³⁶ Vurmo, G. (2018). Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum: Albania report. British Council. Retrieved via: <https://www.britishcouncil.al/sites/default/files/erf20albania20report202018.pdf>

³⁷ Vurmo, G., Lamallari, B., Aleka, P. & Dhëmbo, E. (2015). Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism In Albania. Retrieved via: <https://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf>

³⁸ Bogdani, A. (2016). Albania Faces 'Jihadi Fighters in the Shadows' Threat in: Balkan Jihadists, The Radicalisation and Recruitment of Fighters in Syria and Iraq. Balkan Investigative Reporting Network. Retrieved via: <https://balkaninsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/balkan-jihadists.pdf>

³⁹ Vurmo, G. & Sulstarova, E. (2018). Violent Extremism in Albania: A National Assessment of Drivers, Forms, and Threats. Institute for Democracy and Mediation. Tirana: Albania

⁴⁰ Qirjazi, R. & Shehu, R. (2018). Community Perspectives On Violent Extremism. p. 20. Institute for Democracy and Mediation. Tirana: Albania



Other types of VE

Though Islamic extremism has been the main manifestation of VE in Albania over the past three decades, it is not the only type of VE that requires the attention of P/CVE and CT practitioners. Researchers warn that considering the toxic political climate and many of the drivers to violent extremism still in place, there is a heightened chance for non-religious violence in Albania⁴¹. Continued issues such as high unemployment, widespread corruption, impunity, and unfair treatment by the government and courts could be a breeding ground for anti-establishment, populist or other political extremist narratives to succeed⁴², which may only get worse due to the consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Albanian economy and (un)democratic governance⁴³.

Additionally, there is a rise in far-right extremism in Europe and in the region, which, depending on the society it manifests itself in, can have either nationalist, ethnic, religious, or simply anti-Muslim tendencies. Albania is considered as one of the least affected countries to far-right extremism⁴⁴, but there have been some incidents in Albania over the past few years. For example, the attacks carried out by ethnic Greek Albanian Kostandinos Kacifa in 2018, an alleged Greek paramilitary and Golden Dawn member who sought to annex the southern-most region of Albania to Greece⁴⁵. Or the videos posted by two Catholic Albanians inciting people to assault ethnic Albanian Muslims from Kosovo and North Macedonia visiting the Albanian coast in 2019⁴⁶. These incidents have different motives, narratives, and are conducted by people from different backgrounds, which amplifies the idea that there is no widespread support for far-right ideologies, nor a centralised organisation behind the far-right in Albania. However, the CVE Centre does note that based on information it has received from several sources, including research reports on VERLT and experts in the field, that there are signs of non-religious violent extremism present in Albania, which would include ethnically-motivated extremism⁴⁷.

⁴¹ Vrugtman, L. (2019). Future challenges of violent extremism in the Western Balkans. Retrieved via: <https://idmalbania.org/future-challenges-of-violent-extremism-in-the-western-balkans-february-2019/>

⁴² Vurmo, G. & Sulstarova, E. (2018). Violent Extremism in Albania: A National Assessment of Drivers, Forms, and Threats. Institute for Democracy and Mediation. Tirana: Albania

⁴³ Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020.

⁴⁴ Rrustemi, A. (2020). Far-Right Trends in South Eastern Europe: The Influences of Russia, Croatia, Serbia and Albania. Retrieved via: <https://hcss.nl/sites/default/files/files/reports/Far-Right%20Trends%20Report%20Final.pdf>

⁴⁵ Associated Press. (2018). Hundreds attend funeral of man killed in Albania shootout. Retrieved via: <https://apnews.com/article/54b272ee335148d7bc6ef70e1415cc79>

⁴⁶ Lapsi.al. (2019). "You will carry the cross on your forehead" / Videos whitewashed, religious radicals offend Muslim believers. Retrieved via: <https://lapsi.al/2019/08/14/kryqin-ne-balle-do-mbani-zbardhen-videot-radikalet-fetare-fyejne-besimtaret-myslimane/>

⁴⁷ Interview with expert for Education and Research CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.



Domestic CT and P/CVE strategies in Albania

To understand the domestic CT and P/CVE priorities, it is important to recognise that Albanians not only left to Syria and Iraq due to push factors such as structural, socio-economic and ideological drivers, but also because they had an opportunity to do so, without facing any repercussions⁴⁸. Before August 2014, Albanian law did not forbid people to join a foreign conflict. When the first people left for Syria in 2012, they were not really worried about the consequences⁴⁹. Hence, the initial CT and P/CVE actions focused on securitisation, referring mostly to local and regional security.

CT in Albania after 2011

To curb the flow of foreign terrorist fighters, the Albanian government made several amendments to the Penal Code in 2014. Albania was among the first countries to respond to the international effort to counter ISIS by taking concrete, legislative, administrative and security measures⁵⁰. For example, three articles were added to the Criminal Code, Articles 265/a-c on involvement, organising the involvement, and calling for involvement in violent military operations in a foreign state⁵¹ and Albania co-sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 2178.

With regards to terrorist financing and other counter-terrorism strategies, the Penal Code already included several provisions covering money laundering and terrorist financing due to the Islamic NGOs connected to terrorist groups operating in Albania in the 1990s⁵². However, although the EU already noted that countering terrorism (financing) in Albania was seen as a priority in the 2009 Stabilisation and Association Agreement and subsequent progress reports, Albania did not have a counter-terrorism strategy in place until 2011⁵³. That year, the Council of Ministers had adopted an Inter-Sectorial Strategy against Terrorism and Action Plan (2011-

⁴⁸ Interview with expert for Education and Research CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.

⁴⁹ Qirjazi, R. & Shehu, R. (2018). Community Perspectives On Violent Extremism. p. 21. Institute for Democracy and Mediation. Tirana: Albania

⁵⁰ Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania. (2015). Decision no. 930, Albanian National Strategy Countering Violent Extremism. Retrieved via: <https://cve.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/strategjia-2018-mendryshime.pdf>

⁵¹ Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania Nr. 132, Date. 19/08/2014

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Albania. (2016). REPORT: Albania's Anti-Terrorism Steps. Retrieved via: <https://www.rcc.int/swp/docs/3/report-albanias-anti-terrorism-steps>

⁵³ Kamolli, M. & Dyrmishi, A. (2018). Albania's Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Implementation, Outcomes and Alignment with the EU Approaches and Framework. Retrieved via: <http://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Albanias-Approach-to-Countering-Violent-Extremism.pdf>



2015) and two years later an Inter-Sectorial Strategy for Fighting Organised Crime, Illegal Trafficking and Terrorism (2013-2020) was adopted. Today, Albania is party to all Council of Europe conventions on counter-terrorism, including seizure and confiscation of the proceeds from crime and financing of terrorism⁵⁴. Additionally, a Counter-Terrorism Directorate was created by the Ministry of Interior in November 2014, which operates within the Albanian State Police⁵⁵. This new structure replaced the Counter Terrorism Sector within the Directorate for Serious Crimes of the Department of Criminal Investigations⁵⁶ and allows the State Police's community policing personnel to get involved in preventing radicalisation and in the fight against violent extremism⁵⁷.

P/CVE in Albania

Following the legal amendments and the government putting into place the institutional framework to counter the terrorism threat, the attention shifted more towards P/CVE. In 2015, the Albanian Government adopted a National Strategy Countering Violent Extremism based on different initiatives funded by the US, such as an IDM study on religious radicalism in Albania and the 2015 White House Summit⁵⁸. It's accompanying Action Plan includes a series of measures and actions to be taken by a wide range of government and public sector stakeholders working in education, law enforcement and social welfare⁵⁹. Its whole-of-society-approach focuses on improving social cohesion, countering cognitive radicalisation and improving governance. The associated National Action Plan provides examples of effective CVE engagement, aiming to strengthen coordination, collaboration, and partnership among all stakeholders. It calls for local research to increase the understanding of VERLT and existing levels of community resilience. The action plan aims to build community resilience and shrink the enabling space through tailored preventive community-based education, creating employment opportunities, and (community) policing programs. Lastly, it aims to reduce the

⁵⁴ European Commission. (2018). Albania Progress Report 2018. p. 36. Retrieved via:

<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-albania-report.pdf>

⁵⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Albania. (2016). REPORT: Albania's Anti-Terrorism Steps. Retrieved via:

<https://www.rcc.int/swp/docs/3/report-albanias-anti-terrorism-steps>

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ European Commission. (2016). Albania 2016 Report. Retrieved via: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_albania.pdf

⁵⁸ The study 'Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania' by Vurmo et al. (2015) was conducted by IDM in 2014-15 and funded by the US. Interview with CVE Centre on 5 November 2020 confirmed drafting inspired by US strategy.

⁵⁹ Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania. (2015). Decision no. 930, Albanian National Strategy Countering Violent Extremism. Retrieved via: <https://cve.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/strategjia-2018-me-ndryshime.pdf>



impact of VE propaganda and recruitment online by using social media to develop and disseminate alternative positive messages⁶⁰.

The drafting of the strategy was an important first step, but in order to coordinate and engage all stakeholders involved in P/CVE, a “National CVE Coordinator” was appointed in July 2016. A year later, in 2017, the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism – Albania (CVE Centre) was set up as a hub for the coordination and capacity development of local stakeholders and frontline practitioners involved in efforts to counter violent extremism in Albania⁶¹. Different than in other countries, the Coordinator and later the Centre were set up not under a ministry, but directly under the Prime Minister’s Office. This approach gave the Centre a lot of leverage during its establishment and the launch of the Strategy and Action Plan⁶². However, an EU official voices some concern about the empowerment of the Centre. This person notes that the CVE Centre might not have the authority to drive the implementation of the action plan within other institutions. Also, there is a lack of state budget to effectively coordinate the implementation of the action plan and not sufficient will to share information with the Centre⁶³. According to the CVE Centre, implementation has indeed moved slower due to a lack of funding. This has been one of the main reasons that out of the six institutions that had an obligation to implement a part of the CVE Strategy and Action Plan, at least three are lagging behind⁶⁴.

Implementing the CVE Strategy: engaging CSOs in P/CVE

Although Albania’s CVE Strategy is adequate and well-informed, the implementation of its accompanying action plan is costly and requires a strong commitment from the government. Unfortunately, the government’s capacities are insufficient to properly implement the broad range of actions necessary to effectively prevent VERLT. To fill this gap, civil society organisations (CSOs) – with the support of international donors – implement most of the initiatives set out in the action plan. Main donors are the US Embassy, the EU, the British Embassy, the Dutch Embassy, OSCE, as well as the German, Austrian, and Swedish Embassies,

⁶⁰ Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania. (2015). Decision no. 930, Albanian National Strategy Countering Violent Extremism. Retrieved via: <https://cve.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/strategjia-2018-me-ndryshime.pdf>

⁶¹ Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania. (2017). Decision no. 737, On the Establishment of the Coordination Centre Against Violent Extremism. Retrieved via: https://qbz.gov.al/share/3hTBhvXdRmW_KVENDUMZ1Q

⁶² Interview with expert for Education and Research CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.

⁶³ Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020.

⁶⁴ Interview with expert for Education and Research CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.



UNDP, USAID, IOM, OSCE, the Open Society Foundation, Berghof Foundation, and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Quickly following the departure of Albanians to Iraq and Syria, an initial study was conducted by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation, supported by the US Embassy in Tirana, to gain a better understanding of the drivers and root causes of VE in Albania, map the level of support for violent extremist groups, and explore which geographical areas were most affected⁶⁵. Since 2016, funding opportunities for projects related to P/CVE are abundant. This encouraged many Albanian CSOs to engage in the field, even though most had little experience with the phenomenon. In 2018, at the height of the run for P/CVE projects, most Albanian CSOs were implementing at least one project related to the prevention of VERLT, of which some are large Tirana-based organisations, while others are grassroots organisations at the local level. Initially, projects focused primarily on creating awareness for the phenomenon. Later, projects emerged that focus on broader issues such as the promotion of civic education, interreligious dialogue, religious tolerance, and community resilience. These projects would best fit in the ‘social cohesion’, ‘good governance’ and ‘cognitive radicalisation’ categories of VE narratives set out by PREVEX. They include enhancing community-based mechanism to voice concerns; creating employment opportunities; promoting good governance and accountability; enhancing the justice sector; promoting moderate Islamic voices; removing online VE propaganda; and fighting hate speech.

Several organisations such as IDM, USAID, UNDP, UNICEF, and the EU are implementing projects on civic education in elementary and high schools across Albania, aiming to increase youngsters’ political and societal engagement. Other projects, some implemented in schools, others implemented more broadly in the community, focus on stimulating religious dialogue and increasing religious tolerance. Meanwhile, the Albanian Media Institute, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), the Tirana Centre for Journalistic Excellence, and the UET Centre are implementing projects that enhance media capacities at the local and central level, promote reflexive journalism, and increase ethical news reporting. These projects contribute to more balanced reporting of religious communities, they encourage investigative journalism, but also prevent that media contributes to terrorists’ objectives through ‘Propaganda of the Deed’⁶⁶.

⁶⁵ Vurmo, G., Lamallari, B., Aleka, P. & Dhëmbo, E. (2015). Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism In Albania. Retrieved via: <https://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf>

⁶⁶ For more information on propaganda of the deed, see Neville Bolt’s book “The Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries” or Charlie Winter’s article “ISIS Is Using the Media Against Itself”.



At the local level, municipalities, with the help of OSCE, are implementing Local Public Safety Councils (LPSC) that increase cooperation among state actors and non-state actors in order to tackle the root causes of VE⁶⁷. The LPSC is tasked with increasing awareness about radicalisation, improving the safety of the community, and identifying VE risks⁶⁸ and are considered important local referral mechanisms that help prevent VE. However, more efforts are necessary to make them prepared to deal with Albanians that may return from Syria⁶⁹.

⁶⁷ OCSE Presence in Albania. (2017). A Local Public Safety Council was established today in Cërrik. Retrieved via: <https://www.facebook.com/OSCE.Albania/photos/a.420167991670387/425332121153974/>

⁶⁸ Hide, E. & Llubani, M. (2017). The Role of Albania's Civil Society in Countering Violent Extremism. p. 24. Retrieved via: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/14923.pdf>

⁶⁹ European Commission. (2020). Albania 2020 Report. p. 45. Retrieved via: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_report_2020.pdf



The EU's P/CVE Strategy in Albania

Since 2018, the EU's overall strategy for the Western Balkans 'A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans' is leading in all its engagements in the region⁷⁰. This strategy emphasises the need for fundamental reforms in several areas of governance, including rule of law and socio-economic development, as well as security and migration, as well as good neighbourly relations, in order for the Western Balkan countries to move forward in their accession process⁷¹. This strategy, compared to the EU's earlier strategies in the Western Balkans, puts more emphasis on CT and P/CVE. This is because at the time there seemed to be an increased political will to tackle violent extremism in the Western Balkans and in the EU. For Western Balkan countries, fulfilling P/CVE requirements could be an opportunity to score points with the EU and potentially receive less scrutiny on other issues, including organised crime – a topic most government officials do not want to tackle⁷². For the EU, several developments such as the attacks in France and Germany that took place between 2015 and 2017, as well as the prospect of returnees coming back to their home countries channelled the need to put more emphasis on security in the near region⁷³. The EU does recognise that violent extremism is not as pressing of an issue as for some of its neighbours or even for some countries in the EU⁷⁴. Also, compared to other issues the country is dealing with, such as the rule of law, democratisation, or transparency, violent extremism might not be the most important priority⁷⁵. However, security and P/CVE is very important to the bloc, because a stable and secure backyard contributes to the stability and security of European Union and its borders⁷⁶.

To increase cooperation on the fight against violent extremism, the EU and the governments of Western Balkan countries signed a Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western

⁷⁰ European Commission. (2018). A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans. Retrieved via: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

⁷¹ European Commission. (2018). Strategy for the Western Balkans. Retrieved via: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/strategy-western-balkans-2018-feb-06_en

⁷² Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020.

⁷⁵ Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.

⁷⁶ Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020, Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.



Balkans 2018-2020⁷⁷. This joint action plan builds on the outcomes of a series of high-level CT visits (so-called CT Dialogues) conducted in 2017-2018, which for Albania included the Minister of Interior, the Minister of Justice, the Head of the Police, intelligence agencies, CSOs, and the CVE Centre⁷⁸. The Action Plan sets out concrete steps for enhanced cooperation in countering terrorism and preventing radicalisation for the region as a whole, to provide a common focus in tackling the existing security challenge⁷⁹. Its main objectives are to build a robust framework for CT and P/CVE (institutional set-up and legal alignment, implementation and enforcement capacity); effective P/CVE; effective information exchange and operational cooperation; to build capacity to combat money laundering and terrorism financing; and to strengthen the protection of citizens and infrastructure⁸⁰.

Furthermore, the EU is looking to expand the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) to include the WBs, effectively integrating WBs practitioners in the EU-based network of 6000 academics and policymakers working on P/CVE and creating more exchange among WBs practitioners themselves⁸¹. RAN organises thematic Working Groups for frontline practitioners; produces publications on VERLT, status of VE, lessons learned; and contributes to EU policies on CT and P/CVE⁸².

The bilateral CT Arrangement

Besides the more general priorities set out in the regional joint action plan, a country-specific CT Arrangement was drafted as well, setting out tailored priority actions for each of the Western Balkan countries⁸³. The CT Arrangement is based on a second, more technical CT Dialogue and extended consultation with Albania's main P/CVE stakeholders – of which the CVE Centre as the primary focal point for the EU⁸⁴. Other major domestic stakeholders are the Minister of Interior, the Counter-Terrorism Directorate at the Albanian State Police, and the

⁷⁷ European Commission. (2018). Signature of the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans. Retrieved via: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/news/signature-joint-action-plan-counter-terrorism-western-balkans_en

⁷⁸ Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020.

⁷⁹ European Commission. (2018). Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans. Retrieved via: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/news/docs/20181005_joint-action-plan-counter-terrorism-western-balkans.pdf

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020; Interview with EU official, 9 November 2020.

⁸² EU Migration and Home Affairs. (2020). About RAN. Retrieved via: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran_en

⁸³ Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020.

⁸⁴ Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020. Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.



Ministry of Justice⁸⁵. Civil society, according to the EU, is vital for implementing many of the actions, but also helps raise issues that the government fails to address or voices critique on authorities when they do not deliver⁸⁶. For Albania, these three main actions to be implemented in 2018-2020 include⁸⁷:

1. Stepping up efforts to P/CVE, including by training local practitioners and building strategic communication capacities. Plans to better address terrorist content online have already started receiving support from Europol's European Counter-Terrorism Centre.
2. Amending legislation on anti-money laundering and countering terrorism financing in line with the Moneyval recommendations⁸⁸ and provisions in the 4th and 5th Anti-Money Laundering Directives. Financial investigative capacities should also be increased.
3. Addressing illicit firearms trafficking by implementing Albania's National Small Arms and Light Weapons Strategy and making Albania's Firearms Focal point fully operational.

Of the three points, the EU gives priority to the first action, as the second and third are more technical and to be implemented by authorities⁸⁹. Actions under the first, more comprehensive P/CVE point include de-radicalisation initiatives in prisons for currently convicted terrorist offenders and RFTFs, as well as the strengthening PVE efforts on the local level to improve social cohesion⁹⁰. At the local level, the capacities of teachers, local government officials, and community policing officers needs to be increased. This helps shrink the enabling space for violent extremism and ensures the effective rehabilitation and reintegration of RFTFs and their families. Additionally, there is a need to improve referral mechanisms at the local level. The previously mention local public safety councils are seen by the EU as a good start⁹¹, but their capacities are insufficient and there need to be more informal or even online alternatives.

Another important action is the training of public prosecutors and judges at the local level on how to deal with terrorist offenses. Due to the Justice Reform, criminal offenses committed by

⁸⁵ Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.

⁸⁶ Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020.

⁸⁷ European Commission. (2019). Commission and the authorities of Albania and North Macedonia endorse arrangements on counterterrorism cooperation. Retrieved via: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/news/news/20191009_security-union-implementing-counter-terrorism-arrangements-albania-north-macedonia_en

⁸⁸ For more information on the recommendations, see: "Albania should step up its efforts to combat money laundering, says Council of Europe report" via: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/moneyval/-/albania-should-step-up-its-efforts-to-combat-money-laundering-says-council-of-europe-report>

⁸⁹ Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*



terrorist organisations are now referred to the court against corruption and organised crime⁹². However, the Criminal Code defines terrorist organisations “a special form of criminal organisation, composed of two or more persons, who have a stable cooperation in time, with the aim of committing acts with terrorist purposes”⁹³. This does not include the so-called ‘lone wolfs’ that are acting alone, who will now be prosecuted at the district level⁹⁴. Both the EU and OSCE (the latter in cooperation with the CVE Centre) have plans to raise the capacities of prosecutors and judges at the district level and to provide additional expertise⁹⁵. Lastly, the EU indicates that compared to content in other languages, Albanian radical content stays online for much longer and is more widely available⁹⁶. For a large part, this is due to the issue not receiving enough attention with Albanian authorities and a lack of capacities to deal with the issue⁹⁷. The CVE Centre acknowledges that radical online content and addressing online radicalisation has not received enough attention since the adoption of the CVE Strategy⁹⁸. To increase local capacities on identifying, monitoring, and deleting online terrorist content, Europol is cooperating with the Albanian State Police⁹⁹. According to the first interim report on the implementation of the CT Arrangement, good progress has been made in this cooperation¹⁰⁰. According to the CVE Centre, the better monitoring of online radical content, and raising awareness of online radicalisation are main priorities that will be better reflected in a new CVE Strategy once it will be drafted¹⁰¹.

⁹² Official Publications Center. (2017). Article 75/a of the Criminal Procedure Code of the Republic of Albania. Retrieved via: http://www.pp.gov.al/web/kodi_i_procedures_penale_date_30_gusht_2017_1201.pdf

⁹³ Official Publications Center. (2014). Article 4 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania. Retrieved via: https://www.drejtesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Kodi_Penal-1.pdf

⁹⁴ Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020; Interview with CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Interview with CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.

⁹⁹ Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.

¹⁰⁰ European Commission. (2020). Albania 2020 Report. p. 45. Retrieved via: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_report_2020.pdf

¹⁰¹ Interview with CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.



EU-funded CSO initiatives

Albanian CSOs play an instrumental role in the country's governance. Due to the government lacking capacities and sometimes having different priorities, CSOs often take on tasks that are beyond the scope of a traditional civil society actor. CSOs hold the government to account, play a role in public-service delivery, and implement many of the reforms and strategies that the government should have implemented. This is also the case with the CVE strategy. Aware of these dynamics, CSOs play an important role in the implementation of the EU's P/CVE strategy in Albania.

Increasing CSO's capacities

In order to prevent radicalisation effectively and sustainably, there was a need to increase the capacities of local CSOs and other stakeholders involved in P/CVE. As highlighted in the study 'Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism In Albania'¹⁰², there was a near inexistence of civil society in remote and rural areas, allowing for religious radical groups to fill the gap of addressing the lack of religious education, radicalisation, and other social issues. To overcome this issue, many international donors increased their efforts to increase the capacities of the CSOs they funded. Moreover, sizeable sub-granting schemes were initiated to allow grassroots organisations and local CSOs to engage in P/CVE projects, increase their capacities, enhance CSO-CSO cooperation, and better tailored programming. For Albania, the EU is the main donor of capacity-building initiatives targeting civil society, the two biggest initiatives being the Civil Society Countering Violent Extremism action grant and the STRIVE Global programme.

The Civil Society Countering Violent Extremism action grant was a sub-granting scheme implemented in 2017 and 2018, targeting local NGOs and grassroots organisations to implement P/CVE projects¹⁰³. The Action Grant provided two consortiums (one headed by the Albanian Helsinki Committee and the other by Terre des Hommes) with the support, tools, and financial means tools to launch a sub-granting scheme that benefitted a total 40 local CSOs with up to €10.000 per project¹⁰⁴. The majority of the grants funded through this scheme focused on

¹⁰² Vurmo, G., Lamallari, B., Aleka, P. & Dhëmbo, E. (2015). Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism In Albania. p. 119. Retrieved via: <https://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf>

¹⁰³ See the call for proposals 'Civil society countering violent extremism' Ref Nr. EuropeAid/152207/DD/ACT/AL published on 1 July 2017 at <https://ec.europa.eu>

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*



increasing the awareness of radicalisation and community resilience¹⁰⁵. Although the scheme did manage to increase the capacities of local NGOs, the projects themselves were often one-time, small interventions that were not sustainable¹⁰⁶.

At a regional level, the EU has funded several P/CVE-related projects that included capacity-building components for Albanian CSOs. The 3-year regional project Communities First, managed by Forum MNE in Montenegro, aims to create a civil society hub to address VE¹⁰⁷. Besides organising capacity-building and awareness-raising activities focusing on CSOs, media, and other practitioners, the initiative also includes a sub-granting scheme of €20.000 per country for short-term, local P/CVE interventions focused on vulnerable community members such as youth and women¹⁰⁸. The local Albanian partner Centre for Legal Civic Initiatives focuses mostly on capacity-building of aspiring judges and prosecutors through the project associate, the School of Magistrates of the Republic of Albania.

Another, more comprehensive programme is STRIVE Global, funded by the EU and implemented by Hedayah in Central Asia, South Caucasus, Turkey, the Western Balkans, and the MENA region between 2015 and 2020¹⁰⁹. This programme aims to build the capacity of state and non-state actors to prevent radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism, while respecting human rights and international law. STRIVE in Albania assists established domestic CSOs such as IDM, the Albanian Helsinki Committee, Albanian Institute for International Studies, the Albanian Media Institute, the Counselling Line for Women and Girls, Centre for the Study of Democracy and Governance, and the Women Center for Development and Culture Elbasan in the design of research, PVE, and journalism projects¹¹⁰. Moreover, it provides funds for the implementation and helps set up a monitoring and evaluation framework for these projects to increase the capacities of the implementing organisation.

¹⁰⁵ For a list of all winning projects in the Helsinki Committees sub-granting scheme, see: <https://ahc.org.al/civil-society-counteracting-violent-extremism/>. The Terre Des Hommes sub-granting scheme was also focused on the SCC initiative, as highlighted in the recommendations of the baseline study:

https://childhub.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/cve_baseline_situation_analysis.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=34444

¹⁰⁶ Kamolli, M. & Dyrnishi, A. (2018). Albania's Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Implementation, Outcomes and Alignment with the EU Approaches and Framework. Retrieved via: <http://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Albanias-Approach-to-Countering-Violent-Extremism.pdf>

¹⁰⁷ Forum MNE. (n.d.). Communities First. Retrieved via: <http://www.forum-mne.com/en/project/communities-first/#:~:text=This%20three%2Dyear%20long%20project,effective%20and%20responsible%20social%20actors.>

¹⁰⁸ Forum MNE. (2020). Open Call for Project Proposals. <http://www.forum-mne.com/en/open-call-for-project-proposals/>

¹⁰⁹ Hedayah (n.d.). STRIVE Global Program. Retrieved via: <https://www.hedayahcenter.org/programs/eu-strive-global/>

¹¹⁰ Interview with EU official, 2 November 2020.



To increase regional cooperation on P/CVE initiatives in the WBs, DCAF Ljubljana in cooperation with RCC, UNDP, IOM, and OSCE launched an EU-funded 3-year regional programme focused on increasing regional cooperation on CT and P/CVE efforts. It created an e-learning module for P/CVE practitioners in the region¹¹¹ and hosted the Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) Support Group; a platform fostering the sustainability, alignment, coordination and inclusiveness of the P/CVE-related outputs in the Western Balkans¹¹². The coordination meetings organised by IISG can be regional, but there are also country-specific coordination meetings and workshops¹¹³. In Albania, as a part of the Western Balkans Counter Terrorism Initiative action plan¹¹⁴, OSCE hosted a workshop on how strong local government can help in CVE, sharing experiences on LPSCs and local referral platforms¹¹⁵.

Main CSO projects in Albania

One of the main initiatives implemented in Albania is the ‘School as Community Centre’ (SCC) initiative set out in the national CVE strategy. The SCC encourages partnerships between schools, families and the entire community, transforming schools into catalysts of community cohesion and development¹¹⁶. By December 2020, the Local Education Offices have selected 270 schools (secondary and high school) to be named an SCC¹¹⁷, but unfortunately there are not enough state resources to fully implement the SCC model. Therefore, many CSOs including the Albanian Helsinki Committee, Terre Des Hommes, Unë Gruaja, and The Observatory for Children and Youth’s Rights have implemented the SCC projects with the support of the international community. Especially small grants, such as the previously mentioned Civil Society Countering Violent Extremism action grant resulted in several SCC projects. IDM, however, has taken a more comprehensive approach to the SCC model, where besides creating

¹¹¹ For more information on the e-module, see: <https://www.dcaf-ljubljana.si/news/prevention-and-countering-of-violent-extremism-p-c-674/prevention-and-countering-of-violent-extremism-p-c-674>

¹¹² DCAF Ljubljana. (2017). Support to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) in the Western Balkans (IPAI2016 Multi-Country Action). Retrieved via: <https://www.dcaf-ljubljana.si/projects/2017/support-to-preventing-and-countering-violent-extre-629>

¹¹³ See for example the coordination workshop organised by the CVE Centre, with the support of IISG/the EU: <https://cve.gov.al/the-cve-center-gathers-donors-at-the-second-coordination-workshop-on-violent-extremism/>

¹¹⁴ Western Balkans Counter Terrorism Initiative. (2018). Integrative Plan of Action 2018-2020. Retrieved via: <https://www.rcc.int/swp/docs/180/wbcti--integrative-plan-of-action-2018-2020>

¹¹⁵ Presence in Albania partnered with municipalities in countering violent extremism (CVE)

¹¹⁶ Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania. (2015). Albanian National Strategy Countering Violent Extremism (Decision no. 930). Retrieved via: <https://cve.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/strategjia-2018-me-ndryshime.pdf>

¹¹⁷ As noted by Evis Kushi, Minister of Education, Sports and Youth, during IDM’s event about the School as Community Centre project on 9 December 2020.



community cohesion the projects also aim to increase high school students' capacities with regards to several life skills (e.g. future education, ICT skills, civic education, media literacy, VERLT awareness)¹¹⁸. This comprehensive model is funded by the US Embassy in Tirana and the EU's STRIVE Global Programme.

Following an earlier project on enhancing the protection of human rights of prisoners in Albania¹¹⁹, the Council of Europe (COE) launched a project to reform prisons and fight radicalisation in prisons in Albania. This project, funded by the UK Embassy in Tirana and implemented by COE, supports the authorities in developing a 4-year Action Plan on prisons, provides expertise on four draft laws prepared by the Ministry of Justice in the area of execution of criminal sanctions, and carries out a series of activities to counter radicalisation in prisons¹²⁰. On a similar topic and aiming to foster mediation and de-radicalisation in prisons, OSCE concluded a 4-year project in January 2020. This project, funded by the Austrian, Swedish, German and Italian governments trained prison and probation staff on VERLT, as well as raised awareness and knowledge about VERLT and human rights-based interventions to tackle it¹²¹.

Returnees

Besides tackling the on-going domestic issues, the Albanian government and civil society are also facing the return of Albanian nationals that were associated with the Islamic State. In November 2020, 76 Albanian nationals remain in Syria¹²², of which approximately 23 men, 19 women and at least 26 children¹²³. While the remaining Albanian men are imprisoned in detention centres across the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria, the women and

¹¹⁸ For more information about IDM's approach to the School as Community Centre model, see:

www.shkollaime.org

¹¹⁹ Council of Europe. (n.d.). Enhancing the protection of human rights of prisoners in Albania. Retrieved via:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/criminal-law-coop/hf-albania>

¹²⁰ Council of Europe. (n.d.). Support to the prison reform and fight against radicalisation in prisons in Albania.

Retrieved via: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/criminal-law-coop/-/presentation-of-the-draft-prisons-action-plan-in-albania>

¹²¹ OSCE Presence in Albania. (2020). OSCE Presence in Albania presents achievements in preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism in prisons and probation services. Retrieved via: <https://www.osce.org/presence-in-albania/445102>

¹²² 81 as estimated by the Commission in the 2020 Progress report for Albania, minus 5 Albanian citizens repatriated in October 2020.

¹²³ Based on the information provided in the study 'Albania's Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Implementation, Outcomes and Alignment with the EU Approaches and Framework' by Kamolli & Dyrnishi (2018). Available via: <http://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Albanias-Approach-to-Countering-Violent-Extremism.pdf>



children live in dire conditions in detention camps al Hawl and al Roj¹²⁴. Albanian authorities have sought to return primarily women and children from the camps in Syria since 2019 and adopted an inter-institutional action plan on the rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of returning FTFs (RFTFs) and their families in November 2019¹²⁵. In October 2020, 4 Albanian children and one woman were repatriated from Al Hawl¹²⁶, but the timeframe of the return of the remaining Albanian citizens is unclear. Regardless of the time of their arrival, the proper reintegration of these RFTFs and their families will require a whole-of-society-approach that includes central and local institutions, first-line respondents, the local communities, and the returnees themselves.

Considering that the current state capacities of local and central institutions are insufficient to effectively implement this comprehensive R&R strategy, there is a need to increase the capacities of central and local government actors and improve their cooperation in the process¹²⁷. Moreover, in order to adequately support RFTFs and their families, the capacities for front-line workers (such as psychologists, sociologists, social workers, teachers, prison and probation staff, and staff in local government offices) needs to be increased¹²⁸. Together, these front liners and local government stakeholders can, with the support of CSOs, enhance their expertise to foster social engagement, enhance social cohesion, and empower RFTFs and their families to rehabilitate and reintegrate.

Although the EU does not have a repatriation policy due to the different positions on the topic among Member States, the EU does support R&R of RFTFs and their families in the WBs¹²⁹. In summer 2020, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) announced that it would support CSOs in the coordination and implementation of a R&R strategy in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, with a fund of up to one million USD per country^{130,131}. GCERF is supported by the European Commission (DG DEVCO) and 15 governments around the

¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch. (2019). Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects' Families. Retrieved from:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/23/syria-dire-conditions-isis-suspects-families>

¹²⁵ European Commission. (2020). Albania 2020 Report. Retrieved via: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_report_2020.pdf

¹²⁶ Euronews Albania. (2020). Nis kthimi i fëmijëve shqiptarë nga kampi "Al-Hol" në Siri. Retrieved via: <https://euronews.al/al/aktualitet/2020/10/26/nis-kthimi-i-femijeve-shqiptare-nga-kampi-al-hol-ne-siri>

¹²⁷ GCERF. (2020). GCERF Regional Strategy for Investment in the Western Balkans. Retrieved via:

<https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-Strategy-for-Investment-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Interview with EU Official, 2 November 2020.

¹³⁰ The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund. (2020). Become a GCERF Grant Recipient in the Western Balkans. Retrieved via: <https://www.gcerf.org/call-for-application-westernbalkans/>

¹³¹ GCERF. (2020). GCERF Regional Strategy for Investment in the Western Balkans. Retrieved via:

<https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-Strategy-for-Investment-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>



world, including the Netherlands, the United States, Japan, New Zealand, and Qatar. The winning consortium and project proposal, which will focus on working with CSOs and communities at the local level¹³² will be announced early 2021. Additionally, DG NEAR is funding an IOM programme on returnees from Syria which focuses more on supporting Albanian authorities in the effective rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of RFTFs and their families. This initiative includes the drafting of an R&R Action Plan, working with different ministries and institutions to draft guidelines and policies on who is responsible for what element of the R&R strategy, and it includes some focus on local government structures¹³³.

¹³² Interview with EU Official, 9 November 2020.

¹³³ *Ibid.*



The US' approach to supporting P/CVE in Albania

Due to its strong global military presence and advanced intelligence agencies, the United States is often seen as a geopolitical actor with a great interest in security and CT. Indeed, in Albania the US does offer bilateral support to the Albanian Armed Forces with training, expertise and equipment – often to strengthen NATO's southern flank of which Albania is an integral part¹³⁴. However, CVE is a central pillar of the US' international counterterrorism effort and it devotes considerable financial and human resources to it. With regards to supporting P/CVE initiatives in Albania, the US is particularly known for its community-driven approach: the Embassy specifically calls for proposals “that create, develop and foster P/CVE capacities and means to build alert and cohesive communities”¹³⁵. Priority areas include building safe and resilient communities; promoting youth activism in P/CVE; strengthening media professional capacities on reporting and promoting counter-extremism narratives; and re-integration of individuals and communities at risk of being radicalised by enabling them to redirect their lives and become contributing members of their communities.

Since 2004, IDM implements a US-funded project that promotes and fosters civic knowledge, religious tolerance, and improved faith-based education among students of religious high schools. In 2015, the US funded Albania's first-ever study on religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania, which helped the drafting of Albania's CVE Strategy and Action plan¹³⁶. In 2018 and in 2021, two subsequent studies are conducted again by IDM, this time exploring the status of all types of VE¹³⁷. The US Embassy is also the main donor of Albania's largest CSO-based SCC project; the Shkolla Ime project implemented by IDM, which was mentioned earlier in this report.

In addition to these efforts implemented by IDM, the US embassy has an annual small grants programme on P/CVE open for CSOs. This programme intends to support Albania's national strategic priorities of community outreach and engagement, countering extremist propaganda

¹³⁴ U.S. Embassy in Tirana. (2019). Remarks by Chargé Moses-Ones at the MRAP Donation Ceremony. Retrieved via: <https://al.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-charge-moses-ones-at-the-mrap-donation-ceremony/>

¹³⁵ U.S. Embassy in Albania. (2020). Notice of Funding Opportunities. Retrieved via: <https://al.usembassy.gov/education-culture/grant-programs/one-time-funding-opportunities/>

¹³⁶ Information received from US Embassy, 5 November 2020.

¹³⁷ For the studies on VE funded by the US Embassy and conducted by IDM, see: <https://idmalbania.org/study-violent-extremism-in-albania-november-2018/>



while promoting democratic values, and developing long-term comprehensive CVE policies¹³⁸. Most of these projects focus on building community resilience: there are several SCC initiatives, a project working to build a safer cyber ecosystem to counter online radicalisation, an initiative to strengthen the LPSCs, and capacity-building initiatives focusing on women, youth, teachers, and media – the latter to foster ethical reporting and reflexive journalism¹³⁹. The beneficiaries in the past two years were the Counseling Line for Women and Girls, Tirana Centre for Journalistic Excellence, Une Gruaja, Albanian Media Institute, Qendra "Dritare", Academy of Political Studies, International Association for Solidarity (SHIS), Albanian Center for Public Communication, AIIIS, Albanian Helsinki Committee, Albanian National Training and Technical Assistance resource Center – ANTTARC, "Friends of Korca" Association, Woman to Woman, and Inter-Religious Collaboration Center of Elbasan¹⁴⁰. For the 2020 small grants programme, each project was awarded between \$30.000 and \$60.000¹⁴¹.

Other Embassy CVE efforts over the past years included initiatives that contributed to the improvement of the role and capacities of the local actors, especially youth and education institutions, for community resilience to better respond to the challenges of CVE at local level. This year for the fifth consecutive time, the KMSH is funded by the US Embassy to implement a project focused on community outreach and youth engagement¹⁴². The current cycle is implemented in Tiranë, Kukës, Lezhë-Laç, Gjirokastër, Pogradec, and Korça and focuses on building resilient communities, raising awareness for VERLT and its risks. In 2016 this project targeted communities in Elbasan commune, including Cerrik, Peqin, and Librazhd¹⁴³.

¹³⁸ U.S. Embassy in Albania. (2020). Notice of Funding Opportunities. Retrieved via:

<https://al.usembassy.gov/education-culture/grant-programs/one-time-funding-opportunities/>

¹³⁹ Information received from US Embassy, 5 November 2020.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ U.S. Embassy in Tirana. (2020). Notice of Funding Opportunities: Countering Violent Extremism Projects.

Retrieved via: <https://al.usembassy.gov/education-culture/grant-programs/one-time-funding-opportunities/>

¹⁴² Interview with KMSH Official, 11 November 2020.

¹⁴³ Interview with KMSH Official, 11 November 2020.



Comparing external P/CVE strategies and initiatives

The EU and the US are seen as the most important external actors on CT and P/CVE in Albania¹⁴⁴. Both actors are aware of each other's strong presence in the region and strive for synergy rather than overlap of their actions, particularly as they have common ambitions for the region. The US has always supported European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the Balkan, because a strong Europe is its "indispensable partner, including for tackling global security challenges, promoting prosperity, and upholding international norms"¹⁴⁵. As an EU officially rightfully points out, the US, as a nation-state, has the opportunity to support Albania with military and intelligence assistance. The European Union, as a political entity comprised of Member States, does not have an army or intelligence agency. The different "tools" available to these two external actor largely define the support they are able to provide in Albania¹⁴⁶. However, individual Member States are able and do offer bilateral support on military or intelligence-related affairs. Similarly, as the EU Member States have not reached a consensus on whether or not to repatriate its nationals from Syria, the bloc is unable to support third countries with the repatriation of its nationals¹⁴⁷. Again, should an individual Member State wish to support Albania in the R&R of its citizens, then it could do so.

When it comes to preventing and countering VERLT, the US and the EU both have a strongly community-focused understanding of P/CVE. The projects funded by their P/CVE programmes are mostly community-based and striving for resilience, social cohesion, and cooperation. Especially at the time P/CVE was a novelty for CSOs and when funding opportunities were abundant, this led to some overlapping between funding opportunities among different donor organisations. Over the past four years, nearly all funding opportunities for CSOs are focused on awareness-raising activities, community resilience, training of teachers and other front-liners, and SCC projects – often in the same geographical area. In most cases, CSOs working in the field are informed enough to prevent overlapping of initiatives, but it does sometimes happen that the same community is targeted by a myriad of projects or even that a similar project is implemented with the exact same target group. An example was that in 2019, one school was targeted by two different SCC projects to be implemented in the same timeframe. The two

¹⁴⁴ Interview with expert for Education and Research CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.

¹⁴⁵ President of the United States of America. (2015). 2015 US National Security Strategy. Retrieved via: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf

¹⁴⁶ Interview with EU Official, 2 November 2020.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with EU Official, 26 October 2020



CSOs responsible for the project were able to cooperate and adjust where necessary, successfully implementing both initiatives, but it would have been best if different projects target different school. Moreover, around 2017, there were so many on-going initiatives in the so-called “hotspots” for VE (e.g. Cerrik, Peqin) that local CSOs and community leaders noted that people got tired of all the “P/CVE talk”¹⁴⁸. A KMSH official also warned that by continuously focusing on VE and warning people about radical ideas or content, some might actually get interested to see it for themselves – triggering them to go search for it online¹⁴⁹.

In their engagement in Albania, the US and the EU indicate that they have meetings to discuss potential and upcoming programmes to prevent overlap of initiatives¹⁵⁰. To further improve the coordination, the EU is seeking to include the US in the IISG platform. This platform coordinates security efforts in the Western Balkans focusing on three pillars: CT, organised crime, and border security¹⁵¹ – of which the CT pillar (which includes P/CVE) is the most active¹⁵². Currently the platform coordinates projects of the EU, UNDP, IOM, OSCE, and DCAF Ljubljana¹⁵³. However, under the new mandate the platform is open to anyone who is interested to participate, which creates a potential for the US, and after fully leaving the EU also the UK, to join the platform¹⁵⁴.

¹⁴⁸ This was an often-made comment at the time, later iterated by local institutions and the KMSH as well.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with KMSH, 11 November 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with EU Official, 2 November 2020. Interview with CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.

¹⁵¹ Regional Cooperation Council. (2020). Integrative Internal Security Governance – IISG. Retrieved via: https://www.rcc.int/working_groups/50/integrative-internal-security-governance--iisg

¹⁵² Interview with EU official, 9 November 2020.

¹⁵³ Regional Cooperation Council. (2020). Integrative Internal Security Governance – IISG. Retrieved via: https://www.rcc.int/working_groups/50/integrative-internal-security-governance--iisg

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*



Perspective of domestic actors on external P/CVE strategies

Institutions, including the CVE Centre, are overwhelmingly positive about the involvement of external actors in P/CVE in Albania. Considering that the international community is the primary source of funding for most of the P/CV-related initiatives in the country, this response is hardly surprising. According to the CVE Centre, the contributions of external donors such as the EU, the US, the UK, and the Netherlands are instrumental for the Centre¹⁵⁵. Not only does the CVE Centre benefit from financial support from the international community in order to carry out some of its most important activities, they also benefit from the expertise that foreign donors bring in. Moreover, the Centre indicates that due to the engagement of external actors, the approaches of other countries or international structures have enriched the Centre's strategy¹⁵⁶. One CVE Centre employee admits that sometimes the priorities or strategies that come from external actors do not match Albania's priorities but according to her, the Centre has always been able to reach an agreement with donors ensuring that local priorities are considered, as well as external ones¹⁵⁷.

The KMSH has also been very positive about cooperating with external actors, including their participation in meetings and workshops organised by the EU or OSCE and the projects they have implemented with the support of the US Embassy. However, they do note that it is difficult to establish a long-term, sustainable working relation with the delegation when its staff changes every few years¹⁵⁸. In 2016, when the KMSH initially started their cooperation with western foreign donors, it received a lot of criticism from believers and imams. According to the KMSH, some imams did not want to cooperate with (Western) foreign funded initiatives, particularly the US-funded project¹⁵⁹. Essentially, the critique was that the US or EU are not suitable donors and that the US/EU only support one group, the 'Gülenists' within KMSH. Considering that the KMSH is already fractioned due to the many interpretations Albanian believers follow, it is paramount for foreign funding opportunities to prioritise retaining the KMSH's credibility through local ownership and careful drafting of projects.

Civil society, as the main implementer of P/CVE initiatives and actions described in the strategy's action plan, has also been largely positive about the support it receives of the

¹⁵⁵ Interview with CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Interview with KMSH official, 11 November 2020.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*



international community. Most CSOs are fully dependent on the support of foreign embassies and international or supranational structures such as the EU, the UN, and OSCE, which ensures the independence of these organisations from the government and the impartiality in an ever-politicised society. However, with regards to the implementation of P/CVE initiatives, there has been some criticism as per the limitations of external funding schemes. The main critique heard among civil society actors, is that by being fully reliant on grants, rather than raising funds through open donations or by creating revenue itself, is that donors set the agenda of CSOs. This means that CSOs and its employees working in civil society have to ride with the “hot topic” of the time to secure donor funding, rather than having the liberty to become a true expert in a specific field. By giving CSOs more opportunities to implement a long-term programme focused on their niche area, Albanian CSOs would be able to diversify more. Moreover, the implementation timeframe for EU-sponsored projects on P/CVE is too short to address VERLT sustainably^{160,161}, as the average EU-funded projects for Albanian CSOs has been from a few months to approximately one year¹⁶². This does not provide opportunities for organisations to achieve the desired results as described in the CVE Strategy, nor does it allow for a project to have a lasting impact.

Most importantly, due to the high number of organisations involved in community-based P/CVE actions, it sometimes seems as if every organisation is re-inventing the wheel. A myriad of organisations is developing and implementing similar one-time initiatives, for example the School of Community Centre initiative, training first-liners on VERLT, or capacity-building initiatives for media. Every time new project is designed, new materials are developed, new (CSO) staff is trained, and it is all just for a one-time event rather than one organisation rolling out a specific initiative at a larger scale.

Lastly, with regards to assessing the impact of P/CVE initiatives, there is too little emphasis on monitoring and evaluation of the overall strategy of external and domestic actors. Although all EU-funded projects include monitoring and evaluation guidelines and requirements¹⁶³, there is no overarching methodology to assess the impact of the EU’s initiatives on P/CVE in Albania, or its contribution to the CVE Strategy¹⁶⁴. Indeed, the CVE Centre is responsible for assessing the

¹⁶⁰ Hide, E. & Llubani, M. (2018). The role of Albania’s civil society in countering violent extremism. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Retrieved via: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/14923.pdf>

¹⁶¹ Kamolli, M. & Dyrnishi, A. (2018). Albania's Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Implementation, Outcomes and Alignment with the EU Approaches and Framework. Retrieved via: <http://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Albanias-Approach-to-Countering-Violent-Extremism.pdf>

¹⁶² Not taking into account no-cost extensions because of natural disasters.

¹⁶³ Interview with EU official, 9 November 2020.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with EU official, 26 October 2020.



overall implementation of the CVE Strategy and Action Plan¹⁶⁵. However, the current strategy is already five years in place and the CVE Centre has not evaluated the strategy or action plan yet¹⁶⁶. It is true that a stock-taking exercise will be done for EU projects funded in the current 2019/2020 cycle, but in order to timely adjust EU-funded initiatives to what works best in the local context, it would be good for the EU to have a periodic assessment methodology in place.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Interview with CVE Centre, 5 November 2020.



Conclusion

International actors play a pivotal role in putting CT and P/CVE on the agenda of Albanian authorities. From the mid-1990s onwards, the United States Embassy has played a pivotal role in implementing CT measures and later in facilitating the drafting Albania's CVE Strategy and accompanying Action Plan. Similarly, the European Union has, since the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2009, consistently raised the issue of terrorism financing, as well as the need for implementing CT-related legislation. Due to the support of the EU and the US, the Albanian government has made P/CVE a priority and has set up a CVE Coordination Centre directly under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister's Office. In 2018, after the adoption of its new Western Balkans strategy focusing on EU integration, the bloc sought to increase cooperation with Western Balkan countries in the fight against terrorism. Based on several high-level visits, a Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans 2018-2020 was drafted, followed by a country-specific CT Arrangement. The priority actions set out in this arrangement, including increasing local P/CVE efforts, countering online radical content, implementing legislation on money laundering and terrorism financing, and countering the trade of illicit weapons, are implemented in close cooperation between the EU and Albania.

Besides offering expertise and support in the implementation of the CT arrangement, foreign donors including the EU, its Member States, but also the US, the UN and the governments of non-EU Member States have been instrumental to countering violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism in Albania. Without external funding for state and non-state actors working on P/CVE, the status of the implementation of the CVE Strategy and accompanying Action Plan would be limited at best. However, having the P/CVE initiatives led by a foreign entity does have its costs. It limits Albania's abilities to set its own agenda with regards to the implementation of the Action Plan. It also does not allow civil society organisations to develop in niche areas or roll out long-term programmes to effectively counter violent extremism. Additionally, when foreign actors are the main financial donors of P/CVE actions, it harms the local ownership and potentially even fuels extremist narratives claiming that Albanian authorities are incompetent and that the government and KMSH are agents of/controlled by the West. Moreover, there is a possibility that when foreign donors set the parameters of funding opportunities, that not all citizens' priorities are taken into consideration when drafting projects and programmes.



Recommendations

1. **The EU should consider targeting more types of extremism than only Islamic extremism, such as right-wing extremism, ethnic extremism, or even political violence.** This is particularly important as researchers and practitioners highlight that it is not just ideological factors that cause violent extremism in Albania, but also structural and socio-economic factors.
2. **There is a need to enhance local ownership in P/CVE-related projects and programmes implemented in Albania.** An important driver to violent extremism in Albania is the structural issue of perceived poor governance, apathetic security institutions, a lack of consolidated state presence and corruption. By not making these same institutions and integral part of the solution, citizens' perspectives of these institutions will not change.
3. **Continue to follow-up on the effective implementation of policies, strategies, and actions adopted by government institutions.** Too often, governments in the region see adopting a policy as meeting the requirements set by the EU, whether it is because the EU was a donor or partner in the initiative, or because the policy is in line with the requirements for EU accession. However, without making inquiries about the implementation of these policies, strategies, or action plans, they often remain "words on paper"¹⁶⁷.
4. **There is a need to foster diversification and professionalisation of civil society organisations, so that CSOs and employees can create an expertise in a certain field.** This allows for long-term capacity building among staff and associates, leading to better tailored and evidence-based P/CVE interventions.
5. **The EU should look for ways to re-fund well-implemented, effective, and fitting initiatives** by applying the same methodology in a new geographical area, or by extending the funding for an additional period. Too often, capacities are raised, networks are in place, materials prepared, but they are all used for only one project cycle. By extending or expanding the project, materials and expertise can be used again and CSOs do not have to continuously re-invent the wheel.
6. **Support the CVE Centre in developing and implementing an effective monitoring and evaluation framework** for all P/CVE projects implemented by CSOs that operate in Albania. This would help them monitor the projects' impact and better guide the donors' priorities.

¹⁶⁷ Kamolli, M. & Dyrmishi, A. (2018). Albania's Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Implementation, Outcomes and Alignment with the EU Approaches and Framework. p. 21. Retrieved via: <http://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Albanias-Approach-to-Countering-Violent-Extremism.pdf>



- 7. The EU should develop a tool to monitor and evaluate the overall impact of EU-funded P/CVE initiatives.** Indeed, the CVE Centre is responsible for assessing the implementation of the CVE Strategy and Action Plan. However, these strategies run for several years before an assessment takes place. In order to timely adjust the EU's initiatives to the needs of the local context, it would be good for the EU to have an annual or biannual assessment methodology in place.

Limitations

This paper is based on the expertise of the author on VE and P/CVE in Albania, the long-term engagement with P/CVE of the Institute of Democracy and Mediation, desk research, and expert interviews with officials working on the topic. This methodology was adopted due to the difficulty of conducting fieldwork during the on-going COVID-19 Pandemic. Although the paper has been able to effectively demonstrate the status of VE and P/CVE in Albania, as well as the main external P/CVE strategies, this methodology does not have implications on the findings and the picture painted of the implementation of P/CVE initiatives in Albania. When reading this report, it seems as if the EU, the US, and other external actors help the Albanian government implement important strategies and thus offer support in its shortcomings. It also seems as if the CVE strategy is being effectively implemented according to domestic needs and priorities.

Indeed, external donors have contributed immensely to the implementation of Albania's CVE Strategy and Action Plan. Without their support, Albanian authorities would probably not have taken up P/CVE the way they have done. And although it is true that external actors put a lot of effort in tailoring their strategies and action plans to the Albanian context, the context analysis and priorities identified are primarily consulted only with Albanian authorities and other elite. Therefore, some of citizens' priorities, particularly those living in areas that lack CSOs or community leaders, which coincidentally are often the areas that are most susceptible to VE. Lastly, while external actors have set aside sizable funds for P/CVE in Albania, a large part of this funding ends up with authorities or CSOs. Understandably so, as there are large capacity-building components, and both authorities and CSOs have operational costs and human resources that they use for the implementation of actions and the monitoring and evaluation of their impact. However, this does mean that only a small part of the available funds actually benefits the people that need it the most.

