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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN in the Western Balkans - Regional small-scale expert workshop
21-22 October 2021, Skopje, North Macedonia

P/CVE Work with Religious Communities and Faith-based Organisations

Key outcomes

There has been growing recognition of the multiple ways in which faith-based actors and religious communities can support prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts on the local level. While such efforts are most often led and coordinated by local authorities, officials responsible for public security, and social support services for vulnerable individuals and families, collaboration is needed with a wider range of community actors who can reach people and provide support. Promoting resilient and effective cooperation between religious communities, state agencies and civil society actors is crucial for all stages of P/CVE work, from primary prevention to intervention with at-risk individuals/communities and rehabilitation and reintegration.

This is particularly relevant in the Western Balkans (WB) where a vast majority of people identify as religious and where the role of religion has an impact on social cohesion and community resilience against polarisation. Religious identities and communities are an important reference point when we seek to identify and explain divisions between different groups in WB societies and the dynamics between them. Similarly, faith-based organisations and faith leaders can play a reconciliatory role and be a significant source of resilience and healing for both individuals and communities in times of crisis. Over the past years, practitioners in the region have voiced need for strengthening safe partnerships and collaboration with religious communities across faith traditions. "RAN in the Western Balkans" made a first step towards addressing this gap by providing a format for practitioners to exchange knowledge and share good practices and existing models of cooperation. A small-scale expert workshop with representatives of religious communities, inter-religious collaboration centres, local NGOs, and support services for reintegration and rehabilitation of women and children was held in North Macedonia to kick-start this process. Main takeaways include the following:

- **The WBs is a region that is still affected by the consequences of a recent conflict:** Political instabilities and ongoing polarisation are partly a legacy of previous conflicts and insufficient ways of dealing with the past and seeking reconciliation. These structural factors are contributing to further polarisation of societies in the region.

- **There is growing ethno-national extremism and cumulative extremism as a result of polarisation and dynamics between different groups.** Practitioners and policymakers have for many years worked to address the threat of religiously motivated extremism (for example, foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees from Daesh). The landscape of extremism is changing and more focus needs to be placed on monitoring different types of extremist narratives promoting interethnic tensions, hate and violence.

- **Existing P/CVE models need to be tailored to local needs and administered by local actors:** Special local knowledge and ethno-national sensitivity is needed in order to administer P/CVE in the polarised societies of the WB. EU models of P/CVE need to be adjusted to account for local contexts.

- **There is a need for both mechanisms of cooperation and a will to cooperate:** While there are some existing models of cooperation between the state, local government and religious communities in addressing P/CVE challenges, there is a need for further exchanges and trust-building between these actors.

This paper presents the main highlights of the discussion held in Skopje and relevant recommendations to different target groups.

Highlights of the discussion

Interfaith dialogue still mainly offline

Interfaith dialogue and collaboration between religious communities is still largely occurring offline; it has not migrated online. This means that youth who are most vulnerable to ideological extremism as well as political radicalisation is not partaking in these exchanges and is largely absent from the interfaith debate. Consequentially, this target group lacks knowledge about the "other" religious and ethno-national groups in their communities and often has no experience of or encounters with those groups. Since this target group socialises largely in the online sphere, this gap is significant. Additionally, this lack of knowledge and lack of respect for other ethno-religious communities amongst youth is directly related to the increase of hate speech online. This is particularly visible around the time of various religious celebrations.

Lack of female involvement in P/CVE work

While there are some noteworthy exceptions, P/CVE work in the WB is mainly a male-dominated area. There is a lack of knowledge on how to get female faith actors more visible and more engaged in P/CVE work. Religious women leaders who are interested in P/CVE work have been identified in the WB, but there is an ongoing assessment on how they can best contribute to the work. Some concerns were raised by religious female leaders relating to the fear that their words will be misinterpreted and misrepresented. They also worry that they may be accused of being related to terrorist activities. Girls in madrasas are open to becoming involved in P/CVE activities, but caution needs to be taken against situations in which for example pictures are taken for promotional activities of international donors without prior consent. One measure of caution already exists in Kosovo[*] where there is legislation against photographing women and children in this context to prevent stigmatisation.

Monopoly over national strategies in P/CVE work held by the states

Most countries in the WB have over the past decade developed some form of strategy to deal with the increased risk of radicalisation and violent extremism. However, these have largely been developed by state and security actors, within the prevention of terrorism framework, with no involvement of religious actors. The fact that religious actors have not contributed to the drafting of these documents and policies means that they lack religious insights and interfaith sensibilities. In addition, the prevention of terrorism framework creates a context where, within this securitised approach, there is the risk that vulnerable individuals fall straight into the criminal justice system without any other alternatives. Involvement of faith-based organisations in the creation and implementation of P/CVE strategies, as a softer community-led approach, can answer this challenge in the form of safety councils, collaborations with the local governments and other civil society organisations. It has to be taken into account, however, that the current relationship between state and faith-based organisations is not strong in most parts of the WB due to lack of trust created by past political instabilities.

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[*] This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

The importance of education for the creation of resilience

One of the most devastating outcomes of the recent conflicts in the WB is the institutionalisation of ethnic divisions in the education system. Most countries in the WB have some form of segregated education, with Bosnia's 'Two Schools Under One Roof' ([1]) practice being the most extreme example. The ethnically based formal education system where one's own group is valorised at the expense of the "other" has significantly reinforced divisions. The post-conflict generation in the WB has been identified as young, ethnically isolated and potentially radicalised. In order to bring resilience to the region, this challenge needs to be tackled ([2]).

Recommendations

Below are recommendations related to the different strands of the discussion highlights above.

1) The creation of a joint network for P/CVE projects and activities in the WBs

- to share experiences and knowledge about different models and approaches used in different countries and explore which models are most useful/effective in which context (currently, the exchange of information is needed in relation to the rehabilitation and reintegration of FTFs);
- to promote and encourage regional cooperation in relation to bottom-up P/CVE activities;
- to learn about challenges different countries have in relation to interfaith dialogue;
- to gather information on different national strategies and local government set-ups in relation to P/CVE activities, strategies and policy;
- to build a shared understanding of P/CVE in the WBs in order to identify and map risks and create solutions;
- to create a space of interaction between practitioners and academic research;
- to establish a trust-building zone for transnational and regional cooperation between different religious communities;
- to continue cooperation with RAN in the WBs.

2) Transfer and expansion of interfaith dialogue and cooperation into the online sphere to

- explore the ways in which current interfaith dialogue in the region can be present also into the online space;
- further explore online interfaith dialogue;
- there are already existing courses on interfaith dialogue aimed at combating extremism amongst young people ([3]): gather information about these courses for the joint network above.

3) Promote and encourage female faith actors' involvement in P/CVE in the region by

- gathering information about female-led P/CVE activities in the region;
- providing a space for dialogue and peer exchange for faith-based female actors.

4) Critical engagement with education systems in WBs

- reviewing education systems in the WBs and studying the ways in which segregated education contributes towards polarisation of WB societies;
- assessing the relationship between school curricula and political instabilities in the WBs.

([1]) See: https://www.osce.org/mission-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina/404990
([2]) Halilovic Pastuovic, M. (Forthcoming). Ethnopolitics and Textbook Politics: Education in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. In C. Vanner, S. Akseer, & T. Kovinthan Levi (Eds.), *Textbooks for Peace*. Springer.
([3]) See: https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/interfaith-dialogue

Relevant practices

1. The Inter-Religious Collaboration Center in Elbasan (IRCCE), Albania, is a non-profit organisation founded by the spiritual leaders of the four traditional religious communities in the district of Elbasan, respectively from the Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic and Bektashi communities.

2. Pleiades is an NGO founded by women in North Macedonia who want to bring change in their country in relation to tackling violent extremism.

3. Horizon Civitas' mission is to enhance civic engagement, strengthen the level of democracy in society, and help the full implementation of freedom and human rights in North Macedonia.

4. Nansen Dialogue Centre Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, actively and effectively supports dialogue processes amongst different ethnic groups at local, national and cross-border levels, specialising in integrated education activities, community projects and advocacy for education policy reform.

5. One of the most famous symbols in the city of Ferizaj, Kosovo, is the mosque and the Orthodox church. The imam and the priest want the wall between the mosque and the church, which was built a few years ago, to be demolished. https://www.evropaelire.org/a/xhamia-dhe-kisha-ne-ferizaj/29347740.html

Follow-up

In relation to the recommendations above, further meetings should be organised to discuss the creation of the P/CVE joint network for the WB. There is also a need for collecting further information on interfaith dialogue online and female-led P/CVE efforts in the region.

Further reading

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'The Ideology of Takfir and Violent Extremism – An Analysis' was published in 2018 by the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina/Council of Muftis, Editor Muhamed Jusic. The book contains the key concepts and notions most frequently abused by radical groups that ideologise and quote religious teachings outside the context of moderate Islamic interpretations. The primary goal of this research was to identify the most frequently abused fundamental concepts of Islamic teaching.