HANDBOOK FOR JOURNALISTS
reporting on Violent Extremism

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Foreword

This e-handbook will provide a better understanding of key definitions and terminology on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), an overview of the Violent Extremism phenomenon in the Western Balkans and North Macedonia, explore the techniques and strategies used by Violent Extremist groups to spread their propaganda and provide recommendations for reporting on P/CVE related topics.

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1 Understanding key definitions and terminology

Radicalization, extremism, violent extremism and terrorism are some of the key words that we have been hearing, using and misusing in the mass communication channels, be it on traditional media outlets or on social media platforms. Their frequent use does not mean that we fully understand their definitions, nor that the public is able to make the difference between them and clearly identify behaviors related to them. Furthermore, the experts, researchers, academics, government agencies, international organizations and think-tanks have been and are using different definitions, mostly driven by the local context where they operate.

The lack of proper understanding of these terminologies and definitions can lead to misinformation. Further demonization and stigmatization of certain communities or people may affect the quality of one's work if she or he is covering topics that are related to security issues. Moreover, sensitive topics such as terrorism, radicalization and violent extremism are intricately linked to the destinies of the people and communities involved or affected by this phenomenon. In addition to this, ideologies represent a set of values and beliefs that can lead to heated discussions and biased views, which makes reporting or working on these topics even more complex, especially if one's knowledge on the phenomenon is limited.

In this section we will present some of the key definitions used frequently by experts, researchers, academics, government agencies, international organizations and think-tanks to help readers more clearly understand the phenomenon of violent extremism.

1.1. EXTREMISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Extremism

There are a wide variety of definitions of extremism provided by different groups, and which can all serve as valid explanations of what is a complex phenomenon with many

layers and vectors. The following enumeration of definitions is not exhaustive, but does represent a good sample of the different attempts to define the phenomenon across English-language sources. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a U.S.-based international NGO focused on combatting anti-semitism, defines extremism as "A concept used to describe religious, social or political belief systems that exist substantially outside of belief systems more broadly accepted in society (i.e., "mainstream" beliefs). Extreme ideologies often seek radical changes in the nature of government, religion or society."[1] In contrast with the ADL's definition, the British government holds that extremism can be defined as "vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs."[2] These two definitions are very different from each other yet equally significant: one holds that extremism merely means having beliefs outside of mainstream beliefs, while the other states that extremist beliefs are in active opposition to what could be called "enlightened" values. In general, **extremist groups usually rally around common grievances, including political, economic, and social conditions, such as demographic change and economic hardship, as well as the sense of being left behind by the 21st century world.** In the wake of the January 6th, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol by various domestic right-wing extremist groups and individuals, which included many active or former military service members, the U.S. Department of Defense has convened a domestic extremism working group, whose first task is to create a definition of extremism. The Defense Department will use the definition to attempt to counter white supremacist and other extremist ideology within its ranks[3]. This example shows why it is so necessary to provide definitions for these types of concepts: because definitions help policymakers know how to categorize someone's behavior as extremist or not and at what level, and decide appropriate measures to respond. Having a shared agreed-upon definition also helps policymakers collect data on the phenomenon and determine quantitatively whether their measures

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[1] Anti-Defamation League. "Extremism." Extremism, Terrorism and Bigotry. Accessed 15.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3axha3b

[2] Von Behr, Ines; Reding, Anais; Edwards, Charlie; Gribbon, Luke. Radicalisation in the Digital Era. Rand Europe. 2013. Accessed 17.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3enFyoY

[3] Myers, Meghann. "A DoD Definition of Domestic Terrorism Is On Its Way." Military Times. April 9th, 2021. Accessed April 20th, 2021. Available at https://bit.ly/3v6uGm6

are working or not. While extremist ideology has certainly been a topic of discussion at the Pentagon in years past, and particularly since the September 11th, 2001 attacks, the country has only recently begun to grapple with home-grown extremist ideologies, as opposed to combatting foreign groups. Extremism has also been used to describe the more radical versions of larger movements, such as the environmental movement. That said, the ADL notes that not every extremist movement is "bad," but extreme and detrimental tactics are often used by groups. To expand this notion a bit more, **not all extremist groups use violent tactics, though they may share extreme beliefs. This leads us to make a distinction between extremism and violent extremism.**

Violent Extremism

The FBI defines violent extremism as "encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals."[4] The White House has defined violent extremists as "individuals who support or commit ideologically-motivated violence to further political goals." Looking beyond the U.S., Public Safety Canada, the agency of the Canadian government responsible for public safety and emergency preparedness, has defined it as "the process of taking radical views and putting them into violent action...[when persons] promote or engage in violence as a means of furthering their radical political, ideological, or religious views."[5] Interestingly, the U.S. government lacks a universal definition for extremism or violent extremism, unlike the term "terrorism," which is defined in U.S. law. Rather, the American government has allowed individual agencies to make their own definitions. Similarly, neither the United Nations nor the European Union have an official definition for extremism or violent extremism. This is likely a symptom of the concept being notoriously difficult to define, but current political trends may force these governing bodies to create an official definition for the concept in order to create programming around it. The government of North Macedonia has defined violent extremism in its national CVE Strategy and Action Plan as **"the beliefs and actions of people who support or use ideologically motivated violence to realize radical**

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[4] United States of America Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). "What Is Extremism?" Accessed 19.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/32F7qiV

[5] Program on Extremism at George Washington University Futures Without Violence. "What is Violent Extremism?" Accessed on 18.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3erndre

ideological, religious, or political views" [6] Crucially, the action plan also states that the concept of violent extremism should address the "conditions conducive" to the spread of terrorism. It also focuses on addressing grievances that can be exploited by extremist groups.

1.2. RADICALIZATION

The phenomena of extremism and violent extremism have given rise to the concept of Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), as well as its expanded concept P/CVERLT (Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Leads to Terrorism). This latter concept adds to our list the concepts of radicalization and terrorism, where radicalization is defined by the British government as **"the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism."**[7] The process of radicalization has been in recent years supported and allowed to flourish through the proliferation of social media and news websites (as well as news accounts on social media sites) and online communities of people with shared interests. Online, due to algorithms on websites including Facebook, Youtube, and others, it has become very easy for a person to fall down a rabbit hole of disinformation that serves as an echo chamber for their previously existing views. For example, Facebook uses the "like" feature to predict what type of content a person would enjoy seeing, and then provides that content, where a click from the person results in a payout to Facebook from the content provider. Similarly, Youtube provides suggested videos based on videos one has already viewed, with a similar pay-per-view model. Both of these features, which were initially designed to provide a viewer with exactly what they wanted to see in an increasingly customized user experience, have drastic implications for people with extremist viewpoints, and, even more critically, for people who are at the beginning of the radicalization process. Because of this, social media websites, most notably Facebook and Twitter, have found themselves at the center of the debate over the dangers of misinformation/extremist content and the freedom of speech. The companies have argued that it is not their role to police

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[6] National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism, Government of the Republic of Macedonia. National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism (2018-2022), 10. Accessed 22.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3sLl3rv

[7] The RAND Corporation. "Radicalisation in the digital era". Accessed 2013. Available at https://bit.ly/32MHvWt

information and doing so could amount to a great deal of liability for the companies, but governments in many countries have argued that it is their responsibility to mark disinformation as such and to remove extremist content. This is particularly the case because many people get news from social media, or with social media as the medium; 53% of Americans get their news from social media[8], and people are increasingly turning to social media for their news.[9] In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and the 2020 U.S. presidential election, social media companies have bowed to pressure more than they did previously to mark Facebook posts or Tweets as possibly misleading or unfactual.

1.3. TERRORISM

The UK government defines terrorism as "an action that endangers or causes serious violence to a person/people...causes serious damage...or seriously interferes or disrupts an electronic system."[10] The U.S. government, on the other hand, defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population...in furtherance of political or social objectives."[11] It is critical here to draw a distinction between violent extremism and terrorism, where violent extremism would refer to the mindset of a person who has experienced radicalization and is capable of committing violent acts, and terrorism would refer to the acts themselves. However, not all violent extremist groups commit acts of terrorism. The German government defines terrorism as **"acts committed for political, religious, ethnic, or ideological purposes suitable to create fear in the population or any section of the population and thus to influence a government or public body."**[12] This definition provides a crucial addition to the definition of terrorism: that it is purposed to instill terror in a population (hence its name) in order to achieve

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[8] Shearer, Elisa. "More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices". Paw Research Center. Accessed 12.01.202. Available at https://pewrsr.ch/32Hd2cs

[9] Vorhaus, Mike. "People Increasingly Turn To Social Media For News". Forbs. Accessed 24.06.2020 Available at https://bit.ly/2Qhpg9j

[10] Rand, 2013.

[11] U.S. Department of Justice; Federal Bureau of Investigation. "Terrorism 2002-2005." Accessed 16.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/2PfzwOP

[12] OECD. Definition of Terrorism by County in OECD Countries. OECD International Platform on Terrorism Risk Insurance. Accessed 10.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3tKqfNG

some sort of aim. They also give the population the sense that their government is not able to protect them from violence, giving the terrorist group some leverage over the government. However, many governments have a policy of not negotiating with terrorists, so as to discourage groups from committing terrorist acts to force the government to carry out their will. Terrorism, and violent extremism for that matter, have often been associated with extreme religious groups, and Islamist groups in particular. The terrorist acts of transnational violent Islamist groups including Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabab, and the Islamic State were a major focus of global policy in the late twentieth century through the mid 2010s, and led many to mainly associate violent extremism and terrorism with Islam. Governments and civil society groups in countries with Islamist extremist groups have found it difficult to create response or C/PVE programs among their Muslim populations because of these stereotypes, and their attempts may even perpetuate the stereotypes. This is especially the case since racist assumptions can further alienate a population so they may become even more at risk of radicalization. It is therefore fundamental for governments or civil society groups seeking to mount response to Islamist extremism to proceed with caution when developing their programing among Muslims in their countries. This caution and avoidance of stereotyping should also spread to response to extremism in general, but its stereotyped association with a religious group can be particularly dangerous. The government og North Macedonia in its CVE and Counterterrorism plan and strategy defines terrorism as **"the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims."**[13] This document also notes that terrorism is also often intentioned to destabilize democratically-elected governments, and cannot and should not be associated with any religion or nationality.

1.4. COUNTERING AND PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

When it comes to policy responses to violent extremism and the other concepts defined above, it can be helpful to distinguish between hard and soft measures to combat the phenomenon. Governments have often relied upon hard measures, including law enforcement tactics and brute force, as well as judicial and punitive processes, to prevent and respond to cases of violent extremism. However, gaining traction among

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[13] National Committee on Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism, Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2018-2022.

governments are softer measures, which are mainly aimed at countering or preventing the violent episodes and keeping the mindsets that lead to violence under control. The concept of **Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) relates to the shorter-term process of responding to extremists and attempting to reign in their narratives and prevent them from gaining recruits in the shorter term, while Preventing Violent Extremism relates to the longer-term process of making people and societies more resilient to extremist narratives, through quality education, promoting multiculturalism and understanding, and addressing factors of marginalization.** Finally, the full concept of C/PVERLT relates to the full idea of short and long term response and prevention of violent extremism and the radicalization, or the process of someone being turned into an extremist. These mindsets sometimes lead to acts of terrorism. While each of these parts can and should be distinguished from one another, the concept is often combined into this full form in whole-of-society studies and responses to the phenomenon, given that all the different parts relate so intimately with one another. The government of North Macedonia provides several definitions of countering violent extremism in its CVE strategy and plan, including **"planning, introducing, and applying procedures, methods, and measures for prevention, detection, and countering intolerance, hate, and discrimination against other social groups."** [14] This provides a good, broad definition of all the different shades of the concept.

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[14] Ibid.

2 WESTERN BALKANS AND NORTH MACEDONIA

2.1. VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

In general in the Western Balkans, from the beginning of the civil war in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia showed among the highest incidences in Europe of foreign fighters traveling to join jihadist ranks. Similarly, the Western Balkans has a higher rate of returned foreign fighters than Europe generally. Since 2012, about 1,070 foreign fighters have left the Western Balkans for various wars in the Middle East.[15] While the wars have since 2017 mainly ceased, and thus the numbers of foreign fighters generally has been stemmed, various groups maintain social media presences, particularly on Telegram, where content moderation policies are not as strict as on Facebook, and continue to radicalize people. There have been several terrorist incidents of terrorism in the Western Balkans over the past several years, including several disrupted plots. For example, in 2016 an I.S.-directed plot was foiled with multiple targets including the Israeli national soccer team when visiting Albania, with nine Kosovars implicated. In 2015, two Bosnian soldiers were killed in Sarajevo by a perpetrator who then blew himself up. One of the latest disrupted incidents was in 2019, when in North Macedonia 20 Islamic State supporters were arrested.[16]

Though the Western Balkans has attracted much attention regarding the amount of foreign terrorist fighters that have emerged from the region in the past several years as Islamist extremists, this is not the only type of foreign fighter that has been

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[15] Shtuni, Adrian. "Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications." West Point University. 2019. Volume 12, Issue 7. West Point University Combating Terrorism Center. Accesed 19.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3vcK3cJ

[16] Ibid.

produced. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the foreign fighters who arrived in Ukraine to support both the pro-Russian and pro-Ukranian sides of the conflict, which from the Western Balkans have been mainly Serbs, on the pro-Russian side, and Croatians, on the pro-Ukranian side. Russia's campaign in Crimea also saw Serbian foreign fighter support.[17] The Serbian motivation in supporting Russia's expansion campaigns is thought to be "returning the favor" for Russia's support of Serbia's refusal to recognize an independent Kosovo and its related conflict with NATO dating back to the 1990 wars, as well as a sense of pan-Slavism or pan-Orthodoxy that is felt particularly strongly in Serbia.

2.2. VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Related to Islamist extremism in North Macedonia, following the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, there were instances of foreign terrrorist fighters from North Macedonia first becoming radicalized in their home country and then joining the Islamic State and other groups (including the rebel forces in the civil war in Syria, who were fighting against a Syrian government apparatus that was committing atrocities against dissenters). Thus, it is crucial to note that when a person is classified as a foreign terrorist fighter (FTF), they are not necessarily fighting on the side of Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, or similar groups. It merely means that they are a participant in a foreign war on the side of a non-state belligerent. According to the U.S. State Department, in 2019 the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism (NCCVECT) of North Macedonia determined there have been 156 FTFs from the country. Of those 156, 36 were killed, 37 remain in the Middle East, and 83 have returned home.[18] These figures speak to the need for governmental programming around the reintegration of foreign fighters, particularly because prisons can serve as breeding grounds for radicalization.

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[17] Murauskaite, Egle. "Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: Assessing Potential Risks." Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis. 2020. Accessed 21.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3eoCzN8.

[18] United States Department of State. "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: North Macedonia." 2019. Accessed 17.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3sJDOf5.

2.3. CHALLENGES FOR CVE EFFORTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The apex of the incidence of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans was several years ago, and conflicts to which foreign fighters can offer their services have dissipated, as in the Islamic State, or stagnated, as in Ukraine and to some extent Syria's civil war. However, the factors that caused the foreign fighters to develop extremist mindsets have remained, and groups continue to radicalize both in person and through various online media. As stated earlier, terrorist plots continue to be perpetrated and discovered within the Western Balkans, and now that the conflicts have lost steam abroad, Western Balkan governments have to contend with foreign fighters who have returned from conflicts abroad, where they often received both training in military or terrorist attack tactics and were radicalized even further than they had been previously by living with and serving beside fellow fighters and unit commanders. It is also the case that, since the conflicts dissipated, these foreign fighters had been encouraged to wage jihad in their home countries, and were trained in methods of doing so. It is also difficult to rehabilitate and reintegrate former fighters back into society without opening up other populations (including prison populations) to risk. Western Balkan governments are already taxed with many demands, low capacity and limited funds, to be able to respond properly both to the problem of returned foreign fighters and preventing violent extremism from propagating in the first place. CVE and rehabilitation of fighters is a complicated phenomenon even for the most advanced countries and largest economies, such as the United States and United Kingdom, let alone for the smaller governments of the Western Balkans who have much less access to resources and capacity to enact such programs as are required. Studies indicate that the factors of vulnerability to violent extremism include lack of quality education and economic disenfranchisement, among many other factors, all of which Western Balkans countries struggle to respond to. The risk is higher, therefore, being that so many intersecting factors which cause instability generally are seen to cause it. Finally, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic must be mentioned as a potentially exacerbating factor. The pandemic has caused and will cause economic hardship, and particularly among developing countries and lower-income groups within countries generally, which has been seen to cause individuals to feel disenfranchised. This hopelessness, resentment, and lack of trust in government can cause individuals to

be more susceptible to extremist narratives. Furthermore, the isolation caused by the pandemic and the suspension of normal in-person social activities leaves people with free time and also can isolate them from others, and thus may leave more space for online radicalization. That said, it is not likely that violent extremism in the region is going away any time soon, and the factors that can cause it to wax and wane remain.

3 VIOLENT EXTREMISM NARRATIVES AND CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

Extremist groups and radicals have always relied on propaganda to disseminate their messages and recruit new supporters to their cause and ideology. **The channels of communication have changed based on the historical context and available technologies, but groups still rely on the same basic principles and techniques to construct their narratives.**

Regardless of having disparate ideologies, most of the time contrary to each other, extremist groups in general follow the same rules and structure. Radical groups, extremists and violent extremists have always sought to use compelling messages and narratives as a means of attracting followers.

According to Digital Around the World[19], today there are 5.22 billion unique mobile phone users, which is 66.6% of the world's population, and 4.66 billion or 59.5% of the world population uses the Internet. Correspondingly, social media use continues to grow as well, with global users reaching 4.20 billion in January 2021, making up more than 53% of the world population.

With the 21st century Digital Revolution, terrorists and violent extremists have utilized all the benefits of the new technologies to deliver their message. **Today, the focus is on a range of multimedia tools and techniques such as pictures, video, music that are produced in high volume and disseminated across several platforms** such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Dailymotion, Whats-app, Telegram, and the like.

Through these new media channels, billions of users are creating their own content and companies don't enforce traditional editorial policies to moderate the content

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[19] Data Reportal. "Digital Around the World." Accessed 10.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/32IsLYV

published, but rather, they rely on Community Standards, Artificial Intelligence and community reporting methods to identify hate speech or violent extremist propaganda. This is seen and exploited as a weakness that terrorist groups such as ISIS took full advantage of when creating and delivering their messages and propaganda.

Today, the CVE actors face several challenges; in addition to the need to recognize extremist narratives and create proper counter-narratives, there is also the need to compete with these groups on their multimedia outreach to social media users and readers.

In this section we will explore how to recognize extremist narratives and how they can become compelling in our local context..

3.1. NARRATIVES OF EXTREMIST PROPAGANDA

Regardless of the extremist group ideology, their narratives, composed of compelling stories and arguments, are usually delivered by charismatic individuals and are designed to influence a wider audience, especially the younger generation. **Their aim is to simplify and provide a unifying ideological structure that is understood and is compelling, most of the time by combining facts with half-truths and misinformation.**

Their narratives usually address mixed ideological, political, moral and social issues driven by either perceived or real grievances of the community, such as injustice and discrimination. The common strategies and messages used by extremist groups are structured around these themes:

➔ **Victimization** - by creating a worldview where everyone around you is against your kind of people and are actively working to harm you, thus you need to stand up and fight against the aggressor.
  • Example: The western states are on a new crusade against the Muslims around the world, as they are afraid that Islam will dominate the world. They kill innocent Muslim men and women.

➔ **Sense of purpose** - if you and your people are under attack, standing up for yourself and them gives your life a meaning.

- Example: If you defend or fight for your people, you are a hero.

➔ **Duty** – feeling the call of duty to protect your people, religion, nation.
- Example: It is your duty to die in the battlefield while you are fighting to protect your brothers and sisters.

➔ **Rewards** – it can either apply to rewards while you are alive or to afterlife.
- Example 1: People will respect and appreciate your struggle to defend them or their religion/ethnicity/values and you will have a respected social status within the community.
- Example 2: If you die as a Shaheed (martyr), God will reward you with paradise and all of his blessings in the afterlife.

➔ **Sense of belonging and adventure** – by creating a feeling that you belong to a larger group with the same values, goals, ideals, and you are serving a higher purpose. This gives you the feeling of adventure and adrenaline.
- Example 1: You are part of an illegal group that works to promote an ideology which will bring justice to the people.
- Example 2: The others will try to convince you that you are not on the right path, but you have been awakened before them – it's only a matter of time until they will be awakened as well.

All these themes are combined with a set of propaganda techniques to disrupt the reality of life and attract new members and supporters. Extremist groups use bandwagon methods to increase their visibility and to make their supporters fit in the crowd. That provides the idea that you are becoming part of a movement, with likeminded people, who have their own style and set of beliefs.

Extremist groups are usually closed, dominated by the leader and without difference in opinions. They become echo chambers that restate and reinforce the same ideas and views. **They usually offer their view as the only rational one and always scapegoat others for their problems.** This environment creates a vicious circle that further radicalizes the members and traps them in the group without a way out.

All these techniques are used to create a master-narrative that further fits personal

and collective grievances in order to justify the movement, and most dangerously the violence as a necessary (self) defense tool or as a means to achieve the greater good. These narratives need to be challenged with counter-narratives to discredit the violent extremist ideologies and the use of violence. On this end, the media and journalists are two of the most important actors that can provide alternative narratives and raise public awareness of the danger and consequences of these groups.

3.2. LOCAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

In North Macedonia over the last five years, studies on the topic of violent extremism have been focused mainly on violent extremism that is related to deviant teachings of Islam, related to the Islamic State and other similar extremist organizations. This creates a gap in understanding of other extremist groups, which base their principles and practices on other ideologies. However, this does not mean that they are not present and that they do not pose a risk to the citizens' security and well-being. Recently, researchers and the international donor community are starting to focus on ethno-nationalism, pan-orthodoxy, right-wing extremism and other forms of violent extremist groups, active in the region, including North Macedonia.

Since the beginning of the war in Syria and Iraq, over 150 citizens have traveled to become foreign terrorist fighters (FTF). Numerous factors played a role in their journey to become terrorists. The recruiters who influenced them often tapped into collective grievances, exploiting victimization. They portray a worldview that Muslims around the world are under attack, always discriminated, marginalized and stigmatized, mainly by the Christians but from other religions as well, both in North Macedoni and around the world generally. Therefore, the narrative states, it was their duty to fight along with their brothers and sisters in Syria and Iraq and create their own Islamic State.

ISIS propaganda machinery was a powerful tool in the FTF recruiting process, but also in increasing their visibility and gaining more supporters. In essence, their multimedia products were of high quality and delivered across many platforms and translated into several local languages, including Albanian and Bosnian. The propaganda was also supported and propagated by unauthorized imams, preaching in illegal praying sites within the communities.

Regarding extremisms other than Islamist extremisms, over 22 organizations were registered in North Macedonia between February and March of 2017, with a prefix of Macedonian Patriotic Organization, propagating ethno-nationalistic ideology. They played an active role in the violent storm of the North Macedonia's parliament on April 27, 2017. Their narrative was also constructed around similar themes such as: Victimization – Macedonian identity is under threat; Duty – Now or never, it is time to act and stop the federalization of North Macedonia etc. Orthodox Brotherhood (Hristijansko Bratsvo) was another prominent violent extremist group, whose leader was arrested after he threatened publicly to kill the Prime Minister of North Macedonia. [20]When analyzing their narratives, one would easily recognize all the above-mentioned propaganda elements.

All these groups are still active, especially on social media, and with the various active disinformation campaigns in North Macedonia they have gained traction, visibility and oftentimes relevance in the public discourse.

3.3. CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

Open platforms like Twitter and Facebook have played significant roles in global out-reach and mass dissemination of propaganda for IS (Berger & Morgan, 2015). Other extremist groups from far right and white supremacists have also utilized these plat-forms. However, as social media giants like Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, and Twitter try to oust extremists, and web-hosting services shut down some of the biggest propaganda purveyors like Parler, the quickly growing Telegram platform is becoming an alternative hub for disinformation.[21] Together with Telegram, Signal is another messaging service platform that has seen massive growth since the beginning of this year. Telegram has reported over 90 million new users only within the month of January, while Signal doubled its users base to 40 million and became the most down-loaded app in 70 countries.

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[20] Sitel North Macedonia. "Christian Brotherhood Leader Arrested." Accessed 15.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3tWqWnj

[21] Velch, Veronika. "Telegram: A Growing Social Media Refue, for Good and Ill." Just Security. 2021. Accessed 10.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3vhIIXN

These trends are an indication that extremist groups are digitally migrating to less government-controlled and censored platforms, with higher privacy policies and stronger encryption. Although Telegram has made it more difficult for ISIS to spread its propaganda under the joint campaign between the app and the Interpol[22], they are still present and continue to use the app.[23] Telegram, in a continuing effort of de-platforming terrorist content and users through their channel "ISIS Watch", reported that this year they have banned over 50,000 terrorist bots and channels as of April 2021. The channel that shares preaching's from the infamous convicted imam and recruiter Rexhep Memishi is present in all platforms, including Telegram, and his supporters continue to share his messages. Other ISIS channels and supporters are still actively sharing propaganda. The Tam Tam messaging app has also started to gain traction with ISIS supporters, but it is not yet very popular, which means it does not have a big impact currently.

The enormous app growth will make it easier for the extremists to share their propaganda or communicate among themselves and harder for the security services and others to track and counter their propaganda. This also applies to under-researched violent groups in North Macedonia, such as ethno-nationalists and far-right groups.

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[22]Europol. "Europol and Telegram Take on Terrorist Propaganda Online." 2019. Accessed 13.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3dNq52F

[23] Memri. "Pro-ISIS Telegram User Calls on Jihad-Seekers to Join ISIS, America's Most Bitter Enemy." 2021. Accessed 17.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3tK9WAq

4 REPORTING ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

When acts of terror or violence occur, all eyes and ears are directed towards the media. Thus, journalists have a professional and social responsibility to report in a balanced manner, including fact-based accuracy, verified information. They are also responsible to remain unbiased and avoid sensationalism.

Similarly, **the media plays a vital role in nurturing the cohesion and the coexistence within the society and its role is indisputably relevant in all efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism**. Although the competition in the media sector is vigorous and there is always a temptation to have exclusivity, to reach higher numbers in views or get more clicks, in tragic events, such as acts of violent extremists or terrorist attacks, the sense of social responsibility should always prevail over such temptations.

4.1. PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

In the age of social media and disinformation, there is no higher duty for a journalist than to strictly stick to the processional standards and the Code of Ethics, which is essential for the credibility of professionals over nonprofessionals, or trustworthy purveyors of information and those who are not reliable for accurate information. This applies when reporting on violent extremism and terrorism as well.

As is clearly stated in the principles of conduct of the Code of Ethics of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM)[24] **The "main duty of the journalist is to respect the truth and right of the public to be informed." This guiding principle should be reflected when reporting violent-extremist-related issues, which are overly sensitive by nature and careless reporting can cause more damage than serving the public interest by giving exposure to the terrorist acts, spreading fear, and**

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[24] Association of Journalists of Macedonia. "Code of Ethics of Journalists." Accessed 16.4.21. Available at https://bit.ly/3dEXWKW

indirectly contributing to public legitimization of terrorist or violent extremist actions. The dilemma of every journalist is how to cover effectively and ethically such horrific events sensitively and in a timely manner.

4.2. WHAT, HOW AND WHEN TO REPORT

In the process of reporting and covering these important stories, the journalist might instill or aggravate fear, and thus the violent extremist or terrorist achieves their goal – attention, publicity and intimidation. **First and foremost, in events of violent extremist or terrorist acts, journalists should rigorously stick to the guiding principles of the Code of Ethics.** It is the safest and the most professional way to avoid any unwanted effects.

In the first reports from the field, journalists will be led by verified facts, while opinions, perspectives and analysis of the event should be conducted at a later stage. This means that field reports should be kept separate from expert analysis.[25]

Double checked credible, trusted and official sources should dominate the reporting and one should avoid the temptation to qualify the crime before the official institutions have established the facts for such qualification. Being accurate and unbiased is crucial.

Regarding the phenomenon of radicalization and violent extremist groups, the media should frequently report in an informed, objective, responsible, and constructive way, in order to keep the public aware of the risks. Historical, cultural, political and social contextualization should explain to the public the roots of violent extremist ideologies and their motives, factors, trends, networks, narratives and the efforts to counter them.

Including experts and analysts, who have the expertise, knowledge and relevant understanding to explain such a sensitive subject, is always recommended for complex matters of this kind.

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[25] OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina. "Reporting on Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Guidelines for Journalists." Accessed 19.04.2021. Available at https://bit.ly/3gzak0S

It is equally important to avoid experts or analysts that might tend to relativize, justify or, in the worst case, glorify such occurrences or ideologies.

For instance, if an act of terrorism or violent extremism is being attributed to religion, statements and opinions on the act should be sought in registered, official religious communities. Those official communities must be given an opportunity to make a statement on the matter.

It is certain that people affected by terrorist attacks and the families of victims or people harmed go through terrible traumatic experience. The aim should be not to worsen their situation and cause unnecessary pain by publishing descriptions and images of excessive graphic content or intrude their private space while they are grieving. Showing images of mutilated bodies of their loved ones would certainly add to the pain the grieving relatives must experience and therefore we should be more empathetic. Posing a simple question to yourself: "How would I feel if this was someone I loved?" may help us make more thoughtful decisions.

We don't want to pressure people into talking to us, yet we must bear in mind that talking to journalists who genuinely care can often be therapeutic for people. Many family members of victims appreciate the fact that their loss is publicly recognized and acknowledged. Sometimes, all that makes the difference is the approach.

One of the key factors is ensuring that journalists have an informed consent to publish what have they stated in the interviews. They must be fully aware of the ways interview material may be used and should be able to consider any possible consequences of such an occurrence. We must remember that people in a state of shock may not be thinking rationally and not be in a position of providing informed consent.

The following suggestions about interviewing people affected by conflict we made by a seasoned group of African journalists who have covered many violent situations.

Tips for interviewing people suffering from trauma[26]

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[26] Du Toit, Peter. Reporting Atrocities: A toolbox for journalists covering violent conflicts and atrocities. Internews. Accessed 13.11.2014. Available at: https://bit.ly/3dNjXY2

➔ Do not assume to understand what someone who has experienced an atrocity is going through.

➔ Take the interview slowly and let the person tell his or her own story.

➔ There is no harm in showing that you care, but this does not mean you should show sympathy for a particular group.

➔ Let people open up slowly and respect the fact that people may have experienced and seenthings you may not be able to imagine.

➔ Begin the interview gently and do what you can to make the person feel comfortable before you start asking the more difficult questions.

➔ Let the person know they are in control of the interview. They can decide how much or how little they want to tell you.

➔ Asking probing questions may yield important information, but be sensitive to the interviewee's emotional needs.

➔ Do not feel the need to fill the silences. Sometimes it can help to be quiet and give people the chance to think and to collect themselves if they are feeling emotional.

➔ Asking open-ended questions encourages people to tell their stories in their own words.

➔ Closed-ended questions leading to "Yes" and "No" answers tend to foreground the journalist's thinking instead of the interviewee's explanations.

➔ It is often better to conduct one-on-one interviews with people who have experienced trauma, but there may be times when a source will feel more comfortable if they have others there to support them. We need to make allowances for these requests to make interviewees comfortable.

➔ Be aware that when conducting group interviews, the unexpected might happen. Interviews conducted in group situations can become challenging if people disagree

with each other and begin to argue among themselves.

➔ Be sure that people understand how what they have said is likely to be used and whether or not he or she will be identified in the story.

➔ Be sure you understand what the source is saying. It is often useful to end the interview by highlighting the points that you think you will use in your story, and checking with the source whether your understanding is accurate. Are you missing anything important?

➔ Be emotionally prepared. We tend to get hardened over time, but there will be cases where something about an interview or an interviewee touches us deeply. We need to be alert to that possibility and to think about how we will respond when this happens.

➔ Never make promises you cannot keep. The best we can generally do is to promise to try to tell the person's story accurately and with respect so that others can understand what they have been through. We cannot promise that our stories will bring about change. Most of us cannot even guarantee our media houses will use the stories.

4.3. GETTING IT RIGHT: VERIFICATION

It is a journalist's most basic duty to find, collect and present facts. Verifying those facts is essential to avoid presenting rumors as facts. As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel write in their book, **"journalistic truth" is a process that begins with the professional discipline of assembling and verifying facts. Then journalists try to convey a fair and reliable account of their meaning, subject to further investigation.**

It is expected that members of the media should share relevant and available information in a timely manner, which should be collected in written form or recorded to be specific and avoid any misinterpretations. One should inform the public with the known facts rather than imply that he or she has more knowledge than they actually do.

The entire verification process should follow the basic rule of 5W&H: What, Who, When, Why, Where and How. Primary sources are more important than posts on social media, which, before they are taken into account as part of your reporting, should be vetted and verified properly for their authenticity and relevance.

As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel write:

➔ Don't allow your audience to be deceived by acts of omission – tell them as much as you can about the story they are reading.

➔ Tell the audience what you know and what you don't know. Never imply that you have more knowledge than you actually do.

➔ Tell the audience who your sources are, in what way they are in a position to receive information, and what their potential biases might be.

4.4. THE RIGHT TO BE INFORMED VS SENSATIONALISM

Social media has changed the overall dynamics of today's information and the media environment. If you add that to the race of who breaks the news first, the tension between speed and accuracy becomes greater. The temptation for views, likes and clicks can blur your judgment and distract you from the basic principles of reporting. Overstating and exaggerating might sell best, but it doesn't serve the public. The public has every right to know the facts, but the line between journalism and entertainment is very thin and in cases like those discussed in this handbook, this comes with consequences for the society. **The right of the public to be accurately informed is more important than the eagerness for publicity, views, likes or clicks. Sensationalism always comes back to haunt you. Stick to the Code of Ethics!**

When your report includes the victims, the approach should be incredibly careful, and avoid publishing their names before the authorities have notified their families.

In cases where reporting involves children, any sensationalist approach, abuse and manipulation is unacceptable. Journalists are obliged to treat children with utmost care, respecting good customs and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and taking the best interests of the child into account. It is also important to protect the

identity of children under the age of 18 who are involved in criminal cases as witnesses, victims or defendants.[27]

4.5. WHAT TO AVOID

Inflammatory language should be avoided as it can further generate violence towards a certain group or community. **Although the perpetrator might assume that he represents a certain religious, ethnic, racial or other identity, never use a prefix that may suggest a common identity in front of the qualification of a crime.**

Be incredibly careful how you use the prefixes next to terrorism, violent extremism as it can further stigmatize, alienate and it can backfire to serve the goals of the extremists to further divide the society and impose the mentality "us vs. them."

Remember that only official institutions can qualify the crime after they have established the facts. The interpretation and opinions should be left to a later stage to analysts and experts that can provide with better understanding and denounce certain teaching or ideologies.

4.6. ДА СЕ ОСТАНЕ БЕЗБЕДЕН

Principle II of the Reporters without Borders' Charter for the Safety of Journalists Working in War Zones or Dangerous Areas states that:

Covering wars involves an acceptance by media workers of the risks attached and also a personal commitment, which means they go on a strictly voluntary basis. Because of the risks, they should have the right to refuse such assignments without explanation and without there being any finding of unprofessional conduct. In the field, the assignment can be terminated at the request of the reporter or the editors after each side has consulted the other and taken into account their mutual responsibilities. Editors should beware of exerting any kind of pressure on special correspondents to take additional risks.

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[27] Ibid.

The same principles should apply to journalists who are called on to report on the activities of violent extremists and on terrorist attacks. Remember, more important than everything else is your safety. If you decide to take the risk, make sure that you read the guidelines and other safety recommendations and never put the story above your personal safety. In the section of Further Reading you will find a set of guidelines and recommendations on safety for both online and on the field reporting. Here are some general recommendations for conflict settings:

➜ **Be prepared** – in terms of professional training, first aid and safety equipment;

➜ **Be informed** – know the territory you are travelling to, as well as your companions or fixers. Do your homework thoroughly first;

➜ **Be calm** – ensure that you are in a good physical and mental condition;

➜ **Prioritise your life** – never put the story above personal safety: no story is worth a human life; more crudely, a dead journalist can't file.

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Further reading:

- Democracy Lab. "Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia." 2018. Available at: https://bit.ly/3tLTtvo

- Reporters Without Borders. Safety guide for journalists: a handbook for reporters in high-risk environments. Available at: https://bit.ly/32CCQGI

- Internnews. "Handbook: A Conflict Sensitive Approach to Reporting on Conflict and Violent Extremism." Available at: https://bit.ly/3dGSdEk

- OSCE. "Reporting on Violent extremism and terrorism." Available at: https://bit.ly/3eirsol

- UNESCO. "Terrorism and Media: A handbook for journalists." Available at: https://bit.ly/3axR0Nz

- OSCE. "The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism." Available at: https://bit.ly/2QnTpDG

- Shtuni, Adrian. "Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications." Available at: https://bit.ly/3aym9jU

- International Press Institute. Protocol for newsrooms to support journalists targeted with online harassment. Available at: https://bit.ly/3xkE0VB

- Glaser, April. 13 security tips for journalists covering hate online. Available at: https://bit.ly/2RZtGC7