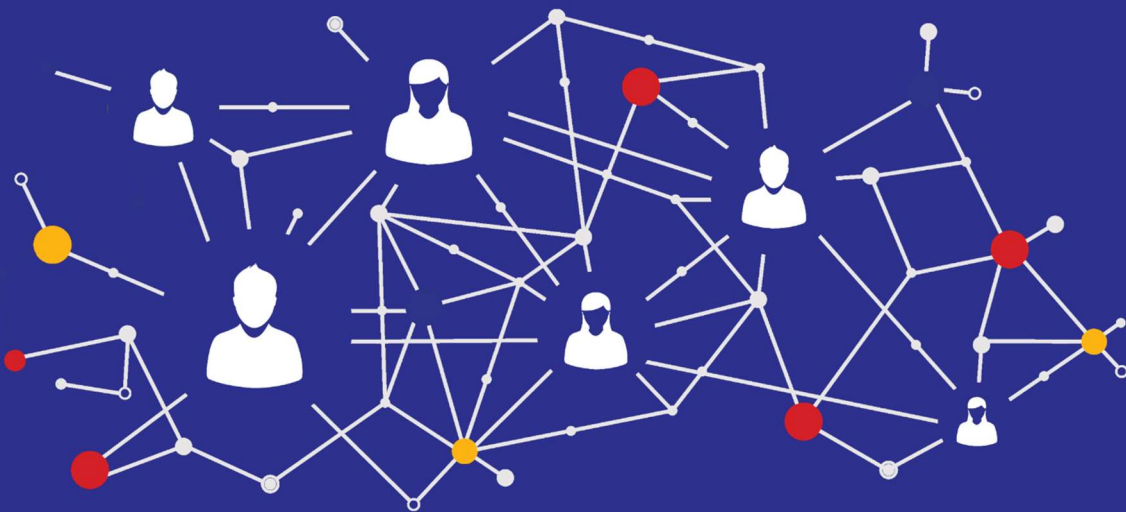


Mapping stakeholders in North Macedonia: Addressing violent extremism at central and local levels



Prepared by Pleiades Organization

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List of Acronyms

- ANS - Agency for National Security
- AP – Action Plan
- ATRC - Advocacy Training and Resource Center
- AYS - Agency of Youth and Sport
- CAT - Community Action Teams
- CCG - Centre for Common Ground
- CID - Center for Intercultural Dialogue
- CLWG - Counselling Line for Women and Girls
- CPJD - Council for Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency
- CRPM - Center for Research and Policy Making
- CSW - Social Work
- GCERF – Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund
- IA - Intelligence Agency
- IEP - Citizens’ Association Initiative for European Perspective
- IOM - International Organization for Migration
- IRC - Islamic Religious Community
- LYC - Local Youth Council
- LYPYP - Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy
- MCIC – Macedonian Center for International Cooperation
- MoE - Ministry of Education
- MoI - Ministry of Internal Affairs
- MoSWP - Ministry of Social Work and Policy
- NCCVECT - National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism
- NSPVEC - National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism and Combating Terrorism
- NSY - National Strategy for Youth
- NYCM - National Youth Council of Macedonia
- OSCE - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
- RCC - Regional Cooperation Council
- SPVECT - Strategies for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism
- YC - Youth Centers
- YWU - Youth Work Union

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, radicalization to violent extremism has emerged as an increasingly pressing issue in North Macedonia. This report seeks to map and assess the diverse range of governmental and non-governmental actors engaged in efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) in the country, with a particular emphasis on youth. It highlights the contributions of key stakeholders including civil society organizations, religious communities, and youth-focused initiatives, as well as the implementation of country-specific P/CVE strategies. Special attention is given to the role of municipalities, with case studies of Tetovo, Gostivar, and Çair.

The methodology for this report includes a comprehensive review of state documents and reports from both national and international organizations, a desktop analysis, a mapping of national legislation and current practices, consultations with individual experts, and semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders. These interviews gathered insights from 10 representatives, including youth unions, youth centers, youth councils, and public servants working in social services, social security, and youth engagement.

The report is structured into five sections. The first section introduces the report and outlines its structure. The second section offers an overview of the current situation in North Macedonia concerning violent extremism and radicalization, identifying the specific push and pull factors influencing these phenomena and referencing key published documents. The third section maps out the involvement of state and non-state stakeholders in addressing violent extremism and preventing youth crime, highlighting the role—or absence—of youth.. The fourth section delves into local stakeholders, examining the role of municipalities in collaboration with state bodies in PVE efforts and assessing the contributions of civil society organizations. It evaluates the current state of municipal operations, supported by interview findings, with a specific focus on the municipalities of Tetovo, Gostivar, and Çair. This section also compares documented reports with the realities observed on the ground.

This stakeholder mapping and baseline assessment is part of the project “Strengthening the Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Prevent Youth Violence and Build Resilience,” implemented by the Advocacy Training and Resource Center (ATRC) in Kosovo, Counselling Line for Women and Girls (CLWG) in Albania, and the Association for Active and Healthy Development of Women and Children Pleiades in North Macedonia. The report was developed with the support of the “SMART Balkans – Civil Society for a Shared Society in the Western Balkans” regional project, carried out by the Centar za promociju civilnog društva (CPCD), Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM), and Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM), and financially supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA). The content of the report is the sole responsibility of the project implementers and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA) or the SMART Balkans consortium.

2. Brief Context of North Macedonia

Violent extremism in North Macedonia manifests through various forms, with religious extremism being the most prominent but including also cases of ethnic and nationalist extremism. Key actors

include foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) who have traveled to conflict zones like Syria and Iraq, radicalized individuals within the country, and various extremist groups that spread violent ideologies (Stefanovski, 2019). The phenomenon of radicalized foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs) is a significant concern. According to reports (Bakowski, 2022), several individuals from North Macedonia have joined militant groups in conflict areas abroad, posing a potential threat to national security upon their return. The “National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism 2023-2027” has underlined the following push and pull factor that can lead to violent extremism in North Macedonia:

Push Factors:

- **Socioeconomic Marginalization:** High unemployment rates, especially among youth, and lack of economic opportunities contribute to feelings of disenfranchisement.
- **Political Grievances:** Perceived injustice, corruption, and lack of political representation can drive individuals toward extremist ideologies as a form of protest or empowerment.
- **Identity Crisis:** Ethnic and religious identity issues, particularly in a diverse society like North Macedonia, can create tensions that extremist groups exploit (Bakowski, 2022; NCTS, 2023).

Pull Factors:

- **Propaganda and Recruitment:** Extremist groups use sophisticated propaganda, both online and offline, to attract and recruit vulnerable individuals.
- **Sense of Belonging:** Joining an extremist group can provide a sense of community and purpose, particularly for those who feel isolated or alienated from society.
- **Financial Incentives:** Some individuals are lured by financial rewards promised by extremist groups (NCTS, 2023; Bakowski, 2022).

Perception studies (Bakowski, 2022) indicate a growing awareness of the threat posed by violent extremism in North Macedonia. Surveys conducted by local and international organizations reveal that the public perceives religious extremism, particularly radical Islamist groups, as a significant threat (Feta, Armakolas, & Krstinovska, 2023). The OSCE and the Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM) have conducted studies highlighting the need for community-based interventions to counter these perceptions and mitigate the risk of radicalization. These studies emphasize the importance of education, social cohesion, and economic development as key factors in reducing the appeal of violent extremism in North Macedonia (RCC, 2023; OSCE, 2018)

3. National landscape of PCVE stakeholders

In North Macedonia, the government plays a central role in efforts to counter violent extremism, primarily through the work of the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counterterrorism (NCCVECT), established in 2017. This committee, comprising of 22 state institutions¹, aims to monitor and analyze the situation regarding the prevention of violent extremism and terrorism. On May 16th 2023, the government of North Macedonia adopted the National Strategies for the

¹ Refer to ANNEX 1

Prevention of Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism (2023-2027) (2023), accompanied by Action Plans (AP) led by the NCCVECT (2024). The following mapping of stakeholders is aligned with the new strategy and action plan.

State bodies actively engaged in preventing violent extremism and radicalization include the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Mol), the Intelligence Agency (IA), and the Agency for National Security (ANS). Under the Action Plan, the Mol focuses on training police officers and cadets, strengthening private security agencies, and promoting initiatives like the "Red Button"² for reporting hate crimes. The Ministry also works on establishing local prevention councils, units for international cooperation, and online monitoring to counter radicalization, while enhancing inter-agency collaboration to prevent radicalization in public and correctional facilities. As a separate state administration entity, the IA is responsible for collecting, processing, analyzing, and safeguarding data pertinent to the security, defense, foreign policy, and economic interests of North Macedonia, including issues related to terrorism and violent extremism from political, ethnic, and religious perspectives (IA, 2024). According to the Action Plan, the IA and ANS are engaged only under one task, continuous specialized training for its personnel to strengthen their capacity to respond to violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) plays a direct role in the prevention process through the education system. Their activities are highlighted in the Action Plan of 2023-2027 with the following task: Developing a programme, training of trainers and trainings for teaching staff in preschool, primary and secondary education for early recognition of signs of radicalization to violence and violent extremism, Implementation of a programme for the legal socialization of Youth at the local and national level, active parenting workshops, implementation of a programme for (non-)formal education and vocational training of convicted persons (2023 – 2027).

Another state-level institution is the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy through The Center for Social Work (CSW), whose responsibilities comprise a vast number of tasks of the 2023-2027 Action Plan (AP), which include: organizing workshops on active parenting, developing informal parent networks to recognize radical behavior, establishing referral mechanisms, enhancing local multidisciplinary teams, collaborating with religious communities to facilitate the rehabilitation and resocialization of convicted individuals, preparing rehabilitation programs for returnees from foreign armies and their families, and formulating strategies to support convicted persons and their families post-release. According to the AP the Ministry also sets up systems for monitoring and coordination to support radicalized individuals involved in reintegration programs and designs mentorship models for professionals working with repatriated children and families from conflict zones. From all of the activities listed in AP for CSW, R&R is the activity that they are realizing actively with support from civil society. According to the coordinator of the NCCVECT (2024) Zlatko Apsotolovski, starting from July 2021 the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCIC) started implementing the program "Path to resilience and reintegration of vulnerable families in the community" implemented in partnership with several civic organizations: NEXUS – civil concept, Initiative for European Perspective (IEP), Pleiades Organization and Horizon Civitas. Financial support is provided by the

² "Red Button" is an app which is intended for reporting any knowledge or information in the field of child abuse
https://www.mvr.gov.mk/Upload/Editor_Upload/Godisen%20MVR%20javna%20verzija1.pdf

Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF). The program includes work with returnees and their families, work with communities, work with frontline workers (psychologists, sociologists, pedagogues, teachers, etc.) and institutions. Apostolovski noted that the work with returnees and their families implies psychosocial support that is implemented by teams of psychologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists in cooperation and led by social work centers (Павловска, 2024).

Religious communities in North Macedonia, particularly the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) and the Orthodox Church, hold an important role in countering violent extremism. Their spiritual influence makes them key players in fostering resilience within local communities. The IRC, in particular, has taken steps to raise awareness about the risks of radicalization, working with national institutions and NGOs to challenge extremist interpretations of Islam. Educational efforts, such as the training of imams, are part of the strategy to promote moderate views and strengthen community defenses against extremism (Feta, Armakolas, & Krstinovska, 2023). The GCERF funded report "Religious Counselling in deradicalization programs" (Kadri & Shabani, 2024) prepared by the NGOs Horizon Civitas and MCIC, highlights the need and benefits of religious counseling of FTF in prison as a measure of R&R. However, when it comes to youth, in the report of Analytica "Working towards Resilient Communities" (Shabani & Kadri, 2018) as part of the same project, youth participants expressed a low level of trust in public institutions, including the Islamic Religious Community (IRC), which is supposed to represent the Muslim community. Many believe that extremist groups have connections with state intelligence agencies, further diminishing trust. This lack of faith in public institutions makes it harder for youth to rely on official sources for guidance and creates a space for extremist groups to exploit.

The scope of this baseline research is prevention of violent extremism and with a specific focus on youth engagement. The national strategy and its action plan include 60 sub-objectives, with 12 specifically targeting youth, focusing on raising awareness, empowering resilient communities, and preventing online radicalization. Key stakeholders in these activities include the Agency of Youth and Sport (AYS) and the Local Council for Prevention LCP. Their responsibilities, based on the action plan, involve developing and implementing media and promotional campaigns to enhance social cohesion and prevent violent extremism. They are also tasked with facilitating confidence-building dialogues aimed at mitigating factors that could lead to radicalization to violent extremism. Additional responsibilities include supporting the establishment and formation of new Community Action Teams (CAT), organizing youth debates on topics related to youth and sports, and conducting dialogues with sports association leadership and fan groups within specific communities. Furthermore, the agency works with youth through various forms of formal and non-formal education and support the development of internet platforms for counter-narratives to prevent radicalization among youth. This strategy also envisions the creation of youth centers led by young individuals, supported by institutions, citizens' associations, and international organizations. This is addressed in more detail in section 1.3.6 of action plan.

The desktop analysis shows that on January 16th 2020, the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia enacted the "Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies." (3MY, 2020). This legislation represents the first legal framework in North Macedonia that guarantees youth participation and acknowledges various forms of youth organization. Additionally, for the first time, the law defines

terms such as young person, youth policy, youth participation, youth work, and youth worker (Kulakov, 2023). Specifically, the law distinguishes among youth organizations, youth associations, and youth umbrella organizations, delegating the responsibility to the Agency for Youth and Sports to maintain a register of these organizational forms. According to the Registration of Youth Organizations (RO, 2024) 119 youth organizations are officially registered. However, no youth councils or youth centers from the municipalities of Tetovo, Cair and Gostivar are listed, despite the official decision in the webpage of municipality of Gostivar (GOST, 2024) for the establishment of these Local Youth Councils.

From a policy perspective, the law encompasses the adoption of both national and local youth strategies as key documents guiding youth activities planned and implemented by institutions and municipalities (Kulakov, 2023). These strategies were officially adopted on September 29th 2023 (HCM, 2023). Notably, the new strategy incorporates eight domains relevant to youth life: youth information, youth work, education, culture, health, entrepreneurship, employment support, and security (violence), with the latter being a newly introduced field. The strategy addresses security and violence through the lenses of youth violence, inter-ethnic violence, and cyber violence.

The Agency for Sport and Youth (AYS), through its own Youth Council (YC, 2024) is another crucial state body that is listed on the AP on PVE. It is responsible for collaborating with local municipalities and NGOs to establish and ensure accountability for local implementers. This includes overseeing legal regulations, youth strategies, youth workers, and the formation of local youth councils and centers. Within this framework, the Agency for Sport and Youth serves as the primary entity responsible for developing the strategy, ranking as the second-highest institution overseeing youth participation within the community. An examination of their website reveals several activities and projects implemented prior to the strategy's adoption; however, none pertain to violent extremism and terrorism.

Sector for youth officers, Administrator, Agency for Youth and Sport:

***“we communicate with centers for youth,
and we help them to establish the centers,
and I think this is how we participate in PVE,***

I am not aware of any activities related to violent extremism that the agency took part directly”.

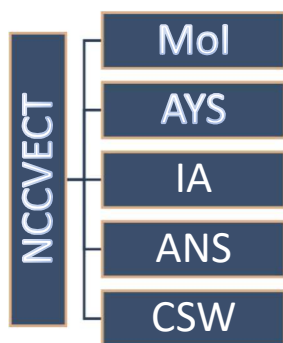
Major youth organizations serve as state stakeholders while operating locally across every region, such as the National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM) (HMM, 2024) and the Youth Work Union (YWW) (CMP, 2024). They play crucial roles in youth engagement but have not yet undertaken significant activities to address issues related to violent extremism and terrorism. Work Union's representative pointed out their focus on educational projects without a specific emphasis on violent extremism or terrorism, and since they offer program training as a Union for young workers, none of the programs include any specific topic on PVE.

While state bodies are pivotal in preventing violent extremism and radicalization at the state and local levels, civil society and international organizations in North Macedonia, including but not limited to, the OSCE Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, RCC Regional Cooperation Council, IOM International Organization for Migration also play a crucial role. Their role is noted in several activities including Regional Capacity Building Workshops, Cross-Border Intelligence Sharing, Community Engagement Programs, Policy Development and Recommendations, Research and Data

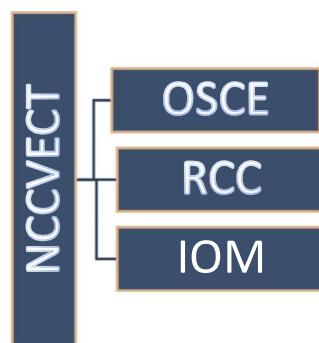
Collection, Public Awareness Campaigns, Support for Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs, Crisis Response Coordination (OSCE, Countering terrorism, 2024; RCC, 2023; IOM, 202; CRPM, 2024).

Chart1: Chart of central mapping aligned with the National Strategies for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism

State bodies



International organizations



4. Local landscape of PCVE stakeholders

Municipalities of Tetovo, Çair and Gostivar and their units

Municipalities play a significant role, as they are entrusted with a wide range of responsibilities that greatly impact the quality of daily life for citizens in North Macedonia. The three targeted municipalities share common socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, reliance on remittances, and the need for stronger local economic development to reduce disparities and improve living conditions. Tetovo, primarily home to an Albanian population, struggles with several economic difficulties. While small businesses and agriculture make up the bulk of the local economy, unemployment and underdeveloped infrastructure are persistent problems. With municipal debt surpassing 14.3 million euros, Tetovo ranks among the most indebted municipalities in North Macedonia ([Либертас, Meta.mk](#)). The outflow of young people, seeking better opportunities abroad, is another pressing issue ([Alsat](#)). Çair, a municipality in Skopje, has a mixed ethnic composition, predominantly Albanian. The area faces problems such as overcrowding, slow economic development, and municipal debts totaling 1.06 million euros by late 2023 ([Либертас](#)). Located in the Polog region, Gostivar is a multicultural municipality reliant on trade and agriculture. Despite generating revenues of 18.3 million euros in 2022, the municipality is burdened with a debt of around 8 million euros ([Meta.mk](#), [State Statistical Office MK](#)). Like Tetovo, emigration is a considerable challenge, particularly for the younger population, due to limited economic opportunities ([Alsat](#)).

Regarding PVE, according to the Action Plan, municipalities have crucial responsibilities which include enhancing the capacities of employees in sectors such as child protection, social welfare, health care, and education. Municipalities are also tasked with promoting the concept of Local Councils for Prevention, which support the development and implementation of local strategies to prevent violent extremism and radicalization. Additionally, municipalities are responsible for

supporting the formation of Community Action Teams (CATs) and implementing programs for the legal socialization of youth at both local and national levels. As local institutions, municipalities are also involved in providing training for primary and secondary school students on critical thinking, peaceful conflict resolution, and tolerance through various educational methods. Municipalities are tasked on establishing Youth Centres and local Youth Councils in accordance with the Law on Youth Participation. Moreover, they ought to develop a referral mechanism in a pilot municipality to address individuals at risk of radicalization and strengthen Local Multidisciplinary Teams to ensure a coordinated approach to community issues. These initiatives collectively aim to enhance public welfare and prevent radicalization, thereby positively influencing the daily lives of citizens.

The desktop research and interviews reveal a difference of what is documented and what has been implemented in the field. Several units within the targeted municipalities—Tetovo, Gostivar, and Çair— have been identified as stakeholders that can directly or indirectly contribute to preventing violent extremism and radicalization. These units were established as part of the first National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism and Combating Terrorism (NSPVEC) for 2018–2022 (HCPMБT, 2018) which, for the first time, highlighted the need for coordinated efforts between national and local governments to prevent violent extremism and terrorism.

Based on the first strategy, one important initiative to promote a community-focused approach related to the prevention of violent extremism in North Macedonia was the establishment of Community Action Teams (CATs). Initiated by NCCVECT, supported by the Centre for Common Ground (CBC), three pilot municipalities (Çair, Kichevo and Gostivar) (MAKFAX, 2018) were selected and CATs were established in early 2019. The purpose of these teams was to support prevention efforts at the local level with a focus on finding local solutions to local problems and maintaining and integrating prevention activities with actions at the local level. None of these teams are listed in the webpage of the municipalities, and according to the interviewer from Çair, the team has had an action plan of work, but as far she is aware, the team never functioned.

Member of CAT, Çair

“We have had only two meetings since the CAT was established, I can send you the action plan that was prepared for us, but we didn’t meet again.”

The second unit that is working indirectly to prevent violence among the youth, is the Council for Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency CPJD established in 2023 in the Municipality of Tetovo (MIA, 2023), comprises 17 members. The council includes representatives from various institutions, including the South East European University (UEJL), the University of Tetova (UT), the social work center, the internal affairs sector, the prosecution, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the state body for delinquency supervision. As a member-only council, representatives from key institutions work collaboratively to address juvenile delinquency in Tetovo. The council's efforts are anchored in a commitment to proactive engagement and intervention within educational environments, particularly high schools, where the need for immediate attention has been identified, however they lack regular budgeting.

The third ones are the Local Youth Council (LYC) and youth centers (YC). According to the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy (3MY, 2020) municipalities are required to establish youth councils, youth offices, and youth centers, and to appoint at least one youth officer within five years

of the law's enactment. Additionally, according to the Monitoring Report on the Implementation of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy for the Polog Region (Kulakov, 2023) the municipality of Tetovo was in the process of establishing a youth council but no youth center has been registered, even though the interviewers stated that their centers are not officially established, they do activities as if they were. While in Gostivar, the Local youth council has been established in January 2023, and in May 2024 after a public call for youth NGO applicants to manage and lead the Local youth council, "I CAN" was selected (GOST, 2024). The local youth council is a body within the local government and comprises of young representatives from various organizations within the municipality. It serves an advisory and representative role on matters of youth interest within the local government. The council has a president and vice-president who represent the council within the municipality and maintain communication with the local government's youth officer. Representatives of the local youth council have the right to: Propose agenda items to the municipal councils, including those in the city of Skopje, that affect young people; initiate discussions on youth-related issues within the municipality's jurisdiction; initiate, participate in, and provide feedback on the development of local youth strategies and other policies; provide information to the municipalities on issues concerning young people; and perform other advisory and advocacy roles in accordance with the law (3MY, 2020). According to interviewers, although the centers are newly established, they have undertaken several activities related to the prevention of bullying, mainly in collaboration with local organizations and units, such as partnerships between Local Youth Councils (LYC) and Youth Centers (YC), or the Center for Peace and Youth Development (CPYD) with Youth Centers (YC). However, their interaction with broader stakeholders, like the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism (NCCVECT) and the Agency for Youth and Sports (AYS), has been limited due to the early stage of their development.

Coordinator of Youth Center, Tetovo

"Our center is open to any organization interested in cooperating or carrying out activities in these spaces, but we have had continuous cooperation with several organizations such as Multiculture, French Alliance, Association of Artists for Artists, Sh.A.F. of the City of Tetova, Psychalb, NEXUS-Civil Concept, ILPP, but mostly with the Council for Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency,"

Furthermore, Youth centers are designed to offer programs that enhance the well-being of young people, support their personal, social, and professional development, provide important information, and address other aspects of their lives (3MY, 2020), According to the Monitoring Report on the Implementation of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy (Кулаков, 2022) the municipality of Çair was initially listed as having an established youth center, although it did not meet the required quality standards. However, in the latest Monitoring Report on the Implementation of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy for Skopje Region (Kulakov, 2023) the municipality of Çair is no longer listed as having a youth center or a youth council. Furthermore, the interviewer from the unregistered YC in Çair emphasized that their activities are primarily focused on cultural and recreational events, such as celebrating international days or showcasing various talents, with no specific initiatives related to violent extremism. They identified bureaucratic hurdles as a significant challenge in establishing youth centers as well as the lack of youth participation.

Coordinator of Youth Center, Çair

"The main challenge the center faces is the lack of young people."

***Even though we have a significant number of young people,
still a large number leave for a better life,
and the rest do not like to socialize, which affects us as a center”***

Table 1 Local level mapping, Skopje (Cair), Tetovo, Gostivar

Municipality of Tetova	Municipality of Cair	Municipality of Gostivar
Council for Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency	Community Action Team	Local Youth Council
Local Youth Council	Youth Center (unregistered)	Youth Center

CSOs in PVE in local context

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in North have shown to bridge the gaps of PVE work where governmental institutions lacked the human resources, financial resources, or political commitment to implement them. Several CSOs are actively implementing projects focused on preventing violent extremism (PVE) and supporting rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R), particularly targeting youth. The desktop research, based on the number of projects and activities realized, grouped the following CSOs as key stakeholders that include youth in the process of PVE:

Pleiades is an organization that has been actively involved in preventing violent extremism (PVE) in several municipalities including Cair, Butel, and Saraj. Their main activities focus on building community resilience through programs like "MotherSchools," which empower mothers to play a proactive role in safeguarding their families from radicalization. They have also engaged in training frontline workers, such as teachers, psychologists, and social workers, to strengthen local efforts against extremism. Additionally, Pleiades supports the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign fighters and their families, ensuring they receive psycho-social support to reintegrate into society effectively. Their work also extends to regional and international collaborations, enhancing PVE strategies across North Macedonia (PLEIADES, 2024).

Centre for Common Ground (CCG), affiliated with Search for Common Ground, leads significant PVE initiatives. Their projects include a Baseline Study on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in North Macedonia, which assesses subnational indicators of extremism and community resilience (CCG, 2024). They also implement the "Strengthening the Resilience of Local Communities (2024)" project, which fosters cooperation among local actors and authorities through Community Action Teams (CATs). The "Young Cities" (CCG, Young Cities, 2024) program supports youth-led initiatives to tackle community challenges like hate and extremism.

Citizens' Association Initiative for European Perspective (IEP) focuses on promoting democracy and combating discrimination. Their PVE projects include "The Path to Resilience," (IEP, The Path to Resilience and Community-Based Reintegration of Vulnerable Families: IEP - Projects, 2024) which works on reintegrating vulnerable families, including those with Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs). They also run the "Youth Civic Education Platform for Countering Radicalization" (IEP, 2024) to develop counter-narratives for youth and the "Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism and Terrorism" (IEP, 2024) project to improve media and government collaboration on reporting

extremism. It's important to note that the biggest challenge in implementing the project is obtaining approval from the Ministry of Education, as the activities primarily focus on workshops and training sessions with high school students.

President, IEP

**“We had to wait for five months to receive approval,
while the project was initially planned to last one year.**

As a result, we have already lost five months due to bureaucratic procedures”

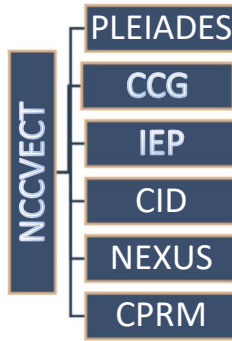
Center for Intercultural Dialogue (CID) has several youth-focused PVE projects, such as "Youth Alternation," (CID, Youth Alternation: Combating Radicalization of Young People in Online Spaces, 2018) which addresses online radicalization through counter-narratives. Their "Training of Trainers in Citizenship Education" (CID, 2017) project enhances the capacity of youth workers, and the "Preventing Extremism and Radicalization in Youth Through Sports (PRECIOUS)" (CID, 2022) project uses sports to promote social cohesion and prevent radicalization.

Nexus Civil Concept also contributes to PVE efforts with projects like "Enhancing the Understanding of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF)," (NEXUS, Enhancing the Understanding of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF): Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2020) which tackles the challenges of rehabilitating returnees. Their "Story2Tell" (NEXUS, 2018) project uses storytelling to build resilience among at-risk youth, and the "Community-Based Intervention Programme" includes training for teachers and the establishment of an early warning system for radicalization. Their "Educate to Prevent" (NEXUS, Educate2Prevent – Baseline Study, 2019) project strengthens front-line workers and parents in detecting early signs of radicalization, while "At the Nexus of Security and Development" (NEXUS, At the Nexus of Security and Development in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2019) supports a comprehensive approach to PVE and improving citizens' security and resilience.

Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM) carried out a project 'Educate to Prevent'. This project aimed to develop a Handbook for secondary school teachers, along with tools for early detection and intervention, and provided training for frontline school staff, demonstrating the ministry's commitment to this issue (CRPM, 2024)

Overall, these NGOs play a crucial role in advancing PVE initiatives and complementing the efforts of state and local bodies by directly engaging with communities, particularly youth, to build resilience and prevent radicalization.

Chart 2 Chart of Civil society organizations aligned with the National Strategies for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism



5. Conclusion

The landscape of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) in North Macedonia demonstrates the importance of both governmental and non-governmental actors in addressing the challenges posed by radicalization. At the national level, institutions such as the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism (NCCVECT) and ministries like the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy have implemented strategic frameworks to monitor, prevent, and counter radicalization. These efforts are supported by the National Strategies for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism (2023-2027), which outlines a comprehensive action plan to tackle the issue across the country. However, despite these national efforts, the local-level implementation, particularly in municipalities such as Tetovo, Gostivar, and Çair, reveals significant socio-economic challenges that continue to fuel vulnerabilities to violent extremism.

The socio-economic issues in these municipalities—ranging from high unemployment rates, inadequate infrastructure, and heavy reliance on remittances—have resulted in high levels of youth emigration. This not only weakens the local economy but also contributes to a sense of disenfranchisement, making young people more susceptible to radical ideologies. Despite the existence of mechanisms like Community Action Teams (CATs) and Local Youth Councils (LYCs) as part of local P/CVE efforts, their operationalization has been limited, and there is often a significant gap between the strategies outlined in national frameworks and their practical application on the ground. The lack of regular funding, resources, and sustained engagement has impeded these local initiatives from reaching their full potential.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have emerged as key players in the P/CVE efforts, often outpacing state institutions in their responsiveness and community engagement. Through various projects, CSOs have actively worked on building community resilience, preventing radicalization, and supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of vulnerable individuals, particularly youth. Organizations such as the Center for Common Ground (CCG), Nexus Civil Concept, and the Initiative for European Perspective (IEP) have implemented numerous programs aimed at fostering social cohesion, educating youth, and countering extremist narratives. However, these initiatives are not

without challenges. Bureaucratic obstacles, particularly delays in securing government approvals, have significantly slowed down the progress of critical interventions, highlighting the need for improved coordination between civil society and state institutions.

The engagement of religious communities, such as the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) and the Orthodox Church, in P/CVE is also crucial, as their influence within local communities can serve as a counterbalance to radical ideologies. However, trust in public institutions, including religious ones, remains low, particularly among youth. This mistrust, compounded by the perception that extremist groups have ties with state agencies, further undermines efforts to counter radicalization at the grassroots level.

Looking ahead, it is clear that preventing violent extremism in North Macedonia will require a more coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach that bridges the gap between national policies and local realities. Strengthening the operational capacity of local municipalities, ensuring consistent funding, and fostering closer collaboration between state institutions and civil society are essential to building more resilient communities. Furthermore, focusing on the empowerment of youth through formal and non-formal educational initiatives, the establishment of youth centers, and the promotion of social and economic development will be key to addressing the underlying causes of extremism. Only through a holistic and inclusive approach can North Macedonia effectively mitigate the threat of violent extremism and create a safer and more cohesive society for future generations

Annex 1

STAKEHOLDERS OF NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND COUNTER TERRORISM BASED ON AP
1. Ministry of Interior/BPS;
2. Agency for National Security (ANS),
3. Intelligence Agency (IA)
4. Ministry of Defence - Military Security and Intelligence Service (MSIS
5. Ministry of Interior
6. Ministry of Education and Science,
7. Bureau for Development of Education
8. Chamber of Private Security
9. Ministry of Labour and Social Policy
10. Centres for Social Work
11. Ministry of Justice
12. Directorate for Execution of Sanctions through Penitentiary institutions and correctional facilities
13. Council for media ethics (CME
14. Agency of Youth and Sport (AYS),
15. Agency for Audio and Audio-visual Media Services (AAAVMS)
16. Center for Crisis Management - E 12
17. Ministry of Culture,
18. Commission for Relations between Religious Communities and Religious Groups
19. Ministry of Local Self-Government
20. Association of Local Self-Government Units

21. Higher Education Institutions
22. Municipalities

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