

Exploring the development of a strategic communication on P/CVE in Albania



A Research Based
Approach



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LIST OF ACRONYMS

BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
CETS	Council of Europe Treaty Series
CSDG	Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance
CT	Counter Terrorism
CTED	Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate
CTITF	Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
EC	European Commission
FF	Foreign Fighter
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighters
IDM	Institute for Democracy and Mediation
IOM	International Organization on Migration
INSTAT	Institute of Statistics
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MCA	Muslim Community of Albania
MEFA	Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs
MESY	Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth
MHSP	Ministry of Health and Social Protection
MoI	Ministry of Interior
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSCVE	National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
VE	Violent Extremism
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WB	Western Balkan

FORWARD

The spread of extremist propaganda is one of the main drivers of radicalism and violent extremism. Aware of this challenge, the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE Center), as the main public policy-making institution at the national level, has as its mission to preserve the values of coexistence and religious harmony, protecting Albanian society from violent extremist phenomena and developing the capacities of various actors against the extremism of violent that could lead to terrorism.

Our institution leads and guides the efforts of state institutions to implement the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism and its Action Plan, as the most important document to implement in this regard.

One of the objectives of the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism and its Action Plan is the development of Strategic Communication, which aims to counter extremist propaganda and promote democratic values in our society. In response to the growing phenomenon of the spread of radicalism and violent extremism, using the Internet in Albania, our institution, in cooperation with line institutions, is improving its response capacity on the Internet, thus increasing the efforts of the Albanian Government to combat the various influences that can lead to further radicalism.

This study, the realization of which would not have been possible without the support of the CVE Center and the national and international partners involved, remains a first step in this direction, which can be considered as a strong cornerstone in terms of defense mechanisms that the Albanian state and society is creating to protect its democratic values, the rule of law and the fundamental freedoms and rights of individuals, in order to prevent and oppose violent radicalism and extremism.



Lejdi DERVISHI

Director

Chapter I: Executive Summary and Key Recommendations



This study analyses the latest trends with regard to the role of the Islamist propaganda in driving radicalization and violent extremism (VE) in Albania. It first examines VE in Albania and the policy action and measures undertaken to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE), followed by a closer look on the role and influence of propaganda, as one of the key radicalization drivers. The aim of the study is to generate data-driven research to support the Albanian CVE Center efforts to develop and deploy effective strategic communications to P/CVE (P/CVE stratcomms).

VE has become an important part of policy discussions in Albania over the past years. The issue gained particular prominence when in 2012-2014, a number of Albanian citizens travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and other extremist organisations. Many of them did so together with their families.

A number of studies, spurred mainly in response to the emergence of the foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) phenomenon, have focused on the analysis of the radicalization factors and the drivers in the Albanian context. The findings in these reports point to a combination of factors that, among others, include educational background, economic conditions, religious literacy and foreign religious influence, radical propaganda and inadequacy of governmental response, that account for the radicalization of Albanian citizens.

In response to the FTF problem, the Albanian government has undertaken a series of steps to strengthen its policy and institutional frameworks, by establishing the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE Center) and adopting the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (NSCVE), which includes three priorities and ten measures. Recognising that the spread of VE propaganda is one of the key radicalization drivers, one of the three NSCVE priorities is aimed at *countering extremist propaganda and promoting democratic values*, which entails the use of communication actions to influence peoples' attitudes and behaviours towards VE.

While there has been progress in the implementation of two of the NSCVE priorities, namely *Community outreach and engagement* and *Developing long-term comprehensive CVE policies*, a series of challenges have been faced with the implementation of the priority on countering extremist propaganda.

Preliminary analysis made by the CVE Center and international stakeholders indicated that for the development of a communications strategy to tackle VE propaganda, an in-depth analysis is needed to understand, among others, the factors that make such propaganda effective, the factors that promote VE propaganda and the factors that make it resonate to the different audiences, the attitude of those audiences *vis a vis* various issues related to religion and the state, as well as the information and communication channels employed to convey the messages. In addition, the development and deployment of effective P/CVE stratcomms requires adequate capacities and well-established cooperative practices of the governmental institutions and stakeholders involved.

Against this context, this study was designed to support the CVE Center in improving its knowledge and expertise to develop and deploy messaging and narratives to prevent and counter VE propaganda, and thus ensure the implementation of the related NSCVE priority. The study was conducted in the framework of a project supported by Hedayah, the Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, under the STRIVE Global Program, funded by EU. The research was designed to enhance research capacities and develop collaborative action related to P/CVE stratcomms of the CVE Center and the relevant ministries and agencies involved in the NSCVE implementation processes.

The methods used to collect primary data for this study included a survey with 800 inhabitants of the Tirana Municipality, interviews with 26 government officials, and focus groups with 95 individuals that included teachers, students, representatives from religious communities and government institutions officials.

The study shows that despite the measures undertaken to counter VE, particularly since the adoption of the NSCVE five years ago, VE remains present in Albania. VE appears to be a problem throughout the country, but it is more widespread and concerning in Tirana Municipality. However, due to the lack of previous similar studies, it is impossible to ascertain the trends on whether VE has declined or increased.

The main findings from this study include the following:

- A total of 68.8% citizens are of the opinion that radicalization is an ongoing process and groups continue to recruit people. As regards those most exposed to the risk of radicalization, the majority of respondents, respectively 71.1% believe adults of age 16-25 are more at risk for radicalization, whereas 18.5 % also believe that adults at age 26-45 are also at risk of radicalizing.
- The overwhelming majority of respondents, 71.4%, believe that recruiters are more likely to turn an individual into a violent extremist in the areas that live in poverty, and 35.1% think that radicalization can take place in unauthorized religious sites. Other less at-risk environments are considered the family and friendship networks (5.7%), internet and social media environments (5.4%) and educational facilities (4.5%).
- The vast majority of respondents believe that the main influencing factors on people to embrace violent extremism include the difficult economic conditions and lack of opportunities (84%), poor education (80%), corruption and bad governance (72%), and distortion and misuse of beliefs (58%).
- Respondents from the penitentiary system emphasize that prison environment is conducive for the spread of radicalization, not only because of the presence of persons convicted of violent extremism, but also because of prisoners' reaction to certain aspects,

which are related to the perceived lack of justice, mismanagement, or inappropriate treatment. Penitentiary system respondents believe that while the prison staff is well-trained and informed on the issues of radicalization and violent extremism, the prisoners have either no information at all, or little information received by the TV.

- Respondents believe that the most credible actors to deliver messages against radicalization are: (1) people who can reach large audiences (65%), (2) cultural personalities (63%) and official religious representatives (57%). Noteworthy is the fact that political personalities or state representatives received the lowest number of responses (23% agree).
- A total of 62.3% of respondents think that a more careful monitoring of extremist groups by police and intelligence will significantly reduce the threat of violent extremism.
- Amongst the most adequate ways for delivering positive messages are: awareness raising campaigns (82% agree or strongly agree), religious lectures (80% agree or strongly agree), social media (58% agree or strongly agree) and mainstream mass media (50% agree or strongly agree).
- The majority of respondents believe that members of extremist groups approach people to convey their ideology and persuade new people to support them. Furthermore, respondents are of the opinion that those who try to reach out people for recruitment purposes are Albanians living in Albania.
- In terms of personal experiences, only 2.1% confirm they have been approached to consume propaganda materials that promote extremism, while 12.7% say that this has happened to their friends or relatives. The percentage of female respondents that have been approached to consume such materials is slightly higher compared to males.
- Drawing on the “linkage-based” framework¹, the study has examined the narratives that are used to promote radicalism in the Albanian context. The findings suggest that the radicalization messages focus on conveying the perception of a religious crisis, in which Muslims are threatened by secularism and the lack of adequate institutionalised representation in the Albanian society, as well as the propagation of the idea that the West is hostile to Islam. The solution that the violent extremist propaganda proposes through its narrative is to change the existing political order of Albania and establish an Islamist model of government ruled by sharia.
- From the collected and analysed messages, it can be concluded that Islamic extremist groups in Albania use similar narrative as ISIS and Al Qaeda, although the messages that

¹ Haroro J. Ingram, “A ‘Linkage-Based’ Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (2016)

are spread in Albania are tailored to the unique circumstances in the Albanian context. The key violent extremist messages include anti-democracy/secularism messages; religious incentives (extreme interpretation of Islam - pro ISIS; “us vs them”); solidarity with fellow Muslims (as well as perceived discrimination); and financial incentives.

- A total of 6.2% of respondents believe Albania should not have a western political orientation. 20% agree that the West is hostile to Muslim countries and culture, another 8% agree that the ISIS was the true representative state of Islam, and 7.6% agree that the nine Muslims arrested by Albanian authorities on violent extremism charges were unjustly arrested due to their religion.
- Given that P/CVE stratcomms should take into consideration the different audiences when designing and delivering messages, the study has also focused on identifying the different audiences in Tirana Municipality. The findings show that the majority of the citizens are opposed to VE. However, non-negligible proportions are distributed along the measurement axis used as analytical framework in this research, which includes people who are curious about radical ideas or express various degrees of support, those who disseminate such ideas by expressing support for violent extremist groups or by engaging in violent extremist actions. Those falling in the range from curious to active supporters are estimated to be 15-20%. However, given that these estimates are based on the data yielded from the survey, additional research is needed to enhance the knowledge on these audiences.
- The study shows that there is a general consensus by those opposing VE, which is detrimental to the country’s social cohesion, security and democracy, and that it should be effectively prevented and countered. The institutional governmental stakeholders, including religious actors and students, agree that actions need to be taken through a structured strategic approach.
- The interviews and focus group discussions reveal that there is a lack of formalized or structured communication among the ministries and other respective institutions involved in the implementation of the NSCVE and its Action Plan. Participants emphasized the need for improvement in understanding the importance of strategic communication in the preparation and dissemination of messages against violent extremism as well as the leading role of CVE Center in this regard.
- In alignment with any good communications approach, several elements were identified with a significant impact on a better implementation of Measure 5 of the strategy, including the engagement and coordination of all stakeholders (establishing a working group); strengthening human capacity (specifically conducting staff training); increase of financial capacities, including the allocation of a dedicated budget; defining specific procedures in

cases where the community does not cooperate; raising awareness and meetings with the community; and the reformulation of the strategic document.

- Residents of rural areas appear to attach higher importance to religion, have the highest frequency of weekly attendance to religious services, and are considerably less familiar with the term “violent extremism.”
- The survey shows that the region of Tirana, Shkodër, Elbasan, Gjirokastër, Fier and Kukës, are regarded as having a higher violent extremism presence. Tirana ranks higher, as nearly one in two respondents believe violent extremism is more concerning in this region.
- Respondents believe that extremists target social tensions to radicalize people, while respondents living in the rural areas regard financial and material incentives as more influential for spreading violent extremism.
- Religious tolerance has been hailed as one of the fundamental features of Albanians in the public discourse, and the survey data show that the large majority of respondents, especially younger generations, share this belief.
- A total of 7% of citizens strongly agree or tend to agree that it is the obligation of everyone to fight for their religion, including engagement in violent acts if necessary, to protect their religious convictions.
- The majority of respondents agree (25.7%) or strongly agree (47.6%) that the Albanian authorities should repatriate the Albanian citizens, who have remained in the camps in Iraq and Syria. However, 41% of respondents believe or strongly believe that returnees from Syria will be a security threat to their communities.
- A total of 73% of respondents, especially women, believe the possibility that members of violent extremist groups may commit violent terrorist acts in Albania.

This is the first empirical study conducted in Albania that is primarily aimed at countering violent extremist propaganda for use by practitioners of relevant governmental institutions. It is principally aimed at practitioners of governmental institutions and societal stakeholders involved in P/CVE action but also to scholars and academia in general. The study is an important contribution as it lays a cornerstone in the empirical research of this field in Albania and provides a solid basis for additional research.

Chapter II: Introduction



This study explores the issue of violent extremist propaganda in Albania and audiences subject to this propaganda in the Tirana Municipality, with the aim to identify the narratives and messages to be developed and deployed in the framework of the P/CVE action conducted by the Albanian CVE Center.

Albania has been initially faced with the radicalization issue in the first decade after the fall of communist regime in 1990s, when terrorist networks penetrated the numerous foreign religious organisations that arrived in Albania to support the country's efforts to restore religious institutions. Following the dismantling of al-Qaida cells operating in the country, the Albanian government undertook a more consistent policy approach against terrorism and terrorism financing.²

Recently, as was the case in many other countries, Albania faced a wave of radicalization triggered by ISIS propaganda. Attracted by this propaganda, many became sympathetic to ISIS, and 144 Albanian citizens are estimated to have joined ISIS and other groups fighting in Syria and Iraq. Of those, 27 have been confirmed dead, 50 have returned and 75 remain on the battlefield or imprisoned by Syrian Democratic Forces.³

In response to the latest trends, the Albanian government has stepped up its efforts to tackle the problem, by strengthening its policy and institutional frameworks. Albania's response has included a policy shift from the counter terrorism centred approach towards a more comprehensive, whole of society approach that includes measures for P/CVE in the very early stages.

The overall P/CVE action is coordinated by the CVE Center established in 2017.⁴ The National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (NSCVE), adopted in 2015, is the key policy document that drives the overall P/CVE action. It sets out four strategic objectives, clustered into three priorities and ten measures.⁵

Over a three years period of its existence, the CVE Center has established a good track record in terms of implementation the NSCVE priorities 1 and 3, namely *Community outreach and engagement* and *Developing long-term comprehensive CVE policies*. As a result, it has fostered collaboration and synergies that involve a range of governmental institutions at the central and local levels, as well as non-governmental actors, donors and international organisations. The CVE

² Intersectoral Strategy against organized crime and terrorism 2008-2013 and Intersectoral Strategy against organized crime and terrorism 2013-2020.

³ European Commission, Albania 2019 Report: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-albania-report.pdf>. Clarification: The authors of this study have updated the numbers reported in the EC 2019 report, after the first group of (five) people who were repatriated by Albania on late October 2020 and a woman (MD) was reported dead.

⁴ Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism <https://cve.gov.al/?lang=sq>

⁵ National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (2015) https://mb.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/strategjia_kombetare_per_luften_kunder_ekstrmizmit.pdf

Centre database of contacts counts over 2,400 contacts and through numerous projects implemented over this period, more than 12,000 front-line employees have been involved in training, information and awareness, and capacity building activities.

However, the implementation of the NSCVE priority 2, *Countering extremist propaganda while promoting democratic values* has lagged behind and similarly the capacities and expertise to deploy strategic communications have remained underdeveloped.

The main causes identified include the lack of adequate understanding on the importance of P/CVE Stratcomms by the institutions involved in the process of implementation of the NSCVE. This has negatively impacted the cohesiveness of action to generate evidence and partnerships geared towards affecting attitudinal and behavioural change and the development of a comprehensive strategic approach to communication.⁶

Given the importance of communications in the combined efforts to P/CVE, the implementation of an effective and prompt communication strategy is needed to address the shortcomings related to the implementation of the NSCVE priority 2.

This necessity has become more important with the growing public pressure to return to Albania the remaining foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) of Albanian nationality and their family members detained in different camps in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, dealing with returnees will require a defined approach and intensified efforts. Case studies in other countries have shown that some returnees, once back in their country, have continued to engage online with terrorist networks.⁷

In this context, and in line with the recommendation of the European Strategic Communication Network,⁸ the Center for Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG)⁹ was engaged in a project supported by Hedayah,¹⁰ aimed at supporting the CVE Center to implement the priority 2 of the NSCVE.

The project involved conducting a research with a focus on understanding audiences in Tirana Municipality to be used as a basis for identifying appropriate P/CVE messages and narratives, as well as the credible actors and adequate channels to deploy these messages and narratives. The research also explores areas of intervention to strengthening the coordinating capacities and practices between the CVE Center and the relevant governmental institutions engaged in the implementation of the priority 2 of the NSCVE.

⁶ European Strategic Communication Network, Albania Post Visit Report, Consultancy. July 2019

⁷ New Battlegrounds: Extremist groups' activity on social networks in Kosovo, Albania and FYROM (2017) http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/New_Battlegrounds_Extremist_Groups_in_Social_Media_738865.pdf; Arsla Jawaid (2017) From Foreign Fighters to Returnees: The Challenges of Rehabilitation and Reintegration Policies, *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 12:2, 102-107, DOI: 10.1080/15423166.2017.1323660; Stevan Weine et al. *Rapid Review to Inform the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Child Returnees from the Islamic State*. (2020).

⁸ <https://www.escn.be/>

⁹ <http://csdgalbania.org/>

¹⁰ <https://www.hedayahcenter.org/>

In addition, the project was designed in a learning-by-doing technique in order to enhance research capacities and develop collaborative action related to P/CVE stratcomms of the CVE Center and the relevant ministries and agencies involved in the implementation of the NSCVE.

The study will inform the design and delivery of a pilot project on P/CVE messaging to respond to the specific VE in the context of Tirana Municipality and to support the overall efforts to implement the priority 2 of the NSCVE.

The research draws on the Ingram's "linkage based" approach that suggests that an effective P/CVE communication strategy should address the full spectrum of target audiences vulnerable to VE propaganda and tackle the so-called "competitive system of meaning" that focuses on "in-group" and "out-group" dynamics.¹¹ The "system of meaning" highlights the importance of a crisis of identity for an in-group, a crisis that is caused by an identified out-group and can only be solved by the in-group. The in-group is portrayed as morally superior, and a zero-sum game is propagated by three important types of violent extremist narratives: value, dichotomy, and crisis-reinforcing (detailed description of the conceptual framework is provided in the methodology section below).

This is the first empirical study conducted in Albania that builds on already tested research framework, and that is designed with the purpose of guiding the development and deployment of P/CVE messages and narratives in the specific Albanian context. As such, it provides a good foundation for the CVE Centre and the line ministries and agencies involved in the implementation of the NSCVE in their efforts to enhance their knowledge to guide their P/CVE action. In addition, it provides a basis for further research and can be used by civil society organisations to tailor specific projects related to counter VE propaganda as well as the media, the business sector and other stakeholders involved in conducting P/CVE actions.

The report is structured as follows. The next section (Section III "Key terms and concepts used in this study") provides a review of the international literature and practice on the phenomena of radicalization and VE. Section IV "Methodology" explains the conceptual framework of this study and provides a description of the methodology used to collect and analyse the data. Section V "Radicalization in Albania: drivers, scale and countering efforts" explores the radicalization trends in Albania. Section VI "Target Audience Analysis" provides an analysis of the data from the public survey conducted with citizens of the Tirana Municipality. It is followed by a section on the current state of affairs regarding the institutional capabilities and capacities to develop and deploy strategic communications with P/CVE purposes. The two last sections provide the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

¹¹ Haroro J. Ingram, "A 'Linkage-Based' Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (2016)

Chapter III: Key terms and concepts used in this study



This section explores radicalization and VE in a broader international context. The first subsection focuses on the definition of radicalization and the drivers that lead toward radicalization. The following subsection elaborates the definitions of VE, while the last subsection “Countering VE and its propaganda” explores the counter narratives against VE and the strategic communication used in this regard.

Defining Radicalization and its drivers

This subsection elaborates on the definitions of radicalization according to the international literature, as well as the history and paths of radicalization.

The roots of radicalization can be found in the early years of eighteenth century with extensive and wide-ranging theories that attempt to explain it.¹² In general, research has shown that there is no single path to radicalization. It is argued that radicalization and terrorism are made possible by bringing individuals into small groups.¹³ In a small group, personal morality and group norms can be difficult to separate, because individual morality is usually anchored in some kind of group consensus. And, in a small face-to-face group where each member and each member’s behaviour are known to others, social rewards for participation and social punishments for free riding can make behavioural commitment rational after all. When groups can be linked through common members or common leaders into a larger multi-group organization, social action becomes possible on a larger scale.¹⁴ The European Commission (EC) understands radicalization as a phased and complex process in which an individual or group embraces a radical ideology or belief that accepts, uses or condones violence, including acts of terrorism.¹⁵ Though it is not a new phenomenon, the trends, means and patterns of radicalization have gradually evolved over time. The EC states that the home-grown lone actors and returning foreign terrorist fighters raise security issues and specific challenges for P/CVE work, at a time when the internet and social media give extremist and terrorist groups and their sympathizers new opportunities for mobilization and communication.¹⁶ All academic models conceive radicalization as a progression which plays out over a period of time and involves different factors and dynamics.¹⁷

¹² See further: Peter R. Neumann, “The trouble with radicalization” *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013) 73-893; Alex P. Schmid, “Radicalization, De-Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review” *International Center for Counter Terrorism* (March 2013); Craig Calhoun, *The Roots of Radicalism Tradition, the Public Sphere, and Early Nineteenth-Century Social Movements* (The University of Chicago Press Book, 2002)

¹³ Clark McCauley, Sophia Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): 415-433

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ See: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/crisis-and-terrorism/radicalization_en

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ See further: James Khalil, John Horgan and Martine Zeuthen, “The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2019), Peter Neumann, “The Trouble”, *International Affairs*, op. cit., p. 874.

While there is not a single pathway to radicalization, and there is no single driver of radicalization or a single profile of terrorist – experts have identified a number of recurring factors and dynamics. Peter Neumann has grouped the following factors and dynamics: (a) grievances – all forms of radicalization are based on societal tensions, which may cause thwarted expectations, conflicts of identity, feelings of injustice, marginalization, isolation or exclusion; (b) needs – being part of an extremist group satisfies followers’ emotional needs such as the need to belong, feeling part of a community, glory, adventure, power, significance, and in some cases it involves taking advantage of psychological vulnerabilities; (c) ideas – it requires ideas that make sense to turn discontent into a political project, therefore, they identify a scapegoat and offer solutions – when those ideas amount to a coherent worldview they are called ideology; (d) people – in most cases radicalization is a social process in which charismatic leaders, authority figures or closed peer groups are key to generating trust, loyalty, pressure and commitment; and (e) violence – being exposed to violence results in becoming involved in violence – in this way individuals seek revenge or become brutalized.¹⁸

On the other hand, radicalization can occur at different levels. McCauley and Moskalenko have identified three levels of radicalization: a) individual radicalization - individuals radicalized by personal or political grievances, victimization, or by joining a radical group; b) group radicalization; and c) mass radicalization – individuals in different forms of conflict with an outgroup.¹⁹

Robert Wintrobe uses a more holistic definition of radicalization, stating that radicalization is a normal part of human life, is a property of individuals, groups, states and societies, and is not always bad.²⁰ Firstly, the author sketches out the issues of boundary making, arguing that the concepts of radicalism, extremism and terrorism are contingent on historical and social norms, therefore, no timeless definition can be found. Secondly, it suggests that sidestepping this issue allows us to think about radicalization or movement towards conflict as including a whole host of social processes, small and large and including politics as normal, under the concept of micro-radicalization. Thirdly, it demonstrates how reciprocal radicalization, in which individuals or groups move towards conflict in response to the movement of others,²¹ can occur at all levels and not just within those conflicts characterized by extremist groups. The author concludes by re-considering the politics of counter-radicalization, by calling for a deeper political conversation about the good society, the limits of freedom and the ethics of intervention, with a call for fairness, transparency, and proportionality as core principles.

¹⁸ Peter Neumann, “Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: Ideas, Recommendations, and Good Practices from the OSCE Region,” Report, London: OSCE (2017)

¹⁹ Clark McCauley, Sophia Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): 415-433

²⁰ Ronald Wintrobe, *Rational Extremism: The Political Economy of Radicalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2006)

²¹ See also the phenomenon widely known as “Pygmalion Effect” which refers to the extremism of one side breeds the extremism of the other side.

As regards to paths that lead to radicalization, they may differ from person to person as the radicalization process is highly complex. Different factors on the individual, group and macro-levels push and pull a person to or from a violent extremist group. Factors can include examples such as social exclusion, disenfranchisement, poverty, xenophobia and human rights abuses, etc. The United Nation (UN) Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism distinguishes between two categories of drivers: conditions and structural context conducive to VE (push factors) and individual experiences and motivations that strengthen radicalization processes, ultimately leading to violent extremist actions (pull factors).²²

Push factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lack of economic opportunity: poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption · Marginalization and discrimination: restricted political, social and economic mobility · Poor governance, violation of human rights, and rule of law issues: repressive policies, surveillance · Prolonged and unresolved conflicts: security vacuum, instability, deep-rooted grievances · Radicalization in prisons: harsh treatment, prison conditions, gang activity, lack of security, drug use
Pull factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Individual background and motivation: negative experiences with state institutions · Collective grievances and victimization: oppression, subjugation, foreign intervention · Distortion and misuse of beliefs, political ideologies, and ethnic and cultural differences · Leadership and social networks: charismatic leaders, informal family and social networks

*Table 1. Radicalization’s pull and push factors.*²³

However, it is argued that radicalized people are not *per se* violent and while they might share certain characteristics with (violent) extremists, there are also important differences.²⁴

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) argues that radicalization in itself is not necessarily a threat to society if it is not connected to violence or other unlawful acts, such as incitement to hatred.²⁵

²² UNGA, Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (2015) A/70/674; See also: Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, “Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon” Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2015)https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf

²³ Source: UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism

²⁴ See: Alex P. Schmid, “Radicalization, De-Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review” *International Center for Counter Terrorism* (March 2013); Ronald Wintrobe, *Rational Extremism: The Political Economy of Radicalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2006)

²⁵ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Preventing terrorism and countering violent

The OSCE argues that radicalization becomes a threat to society if an individual comes to “accept terrorist violence as a possible, perhaps even legitimate, course of action.”²⁶ Radicalization nowadays is closely connected with ideology and religious views or religious fundamentalism.²⁷ European Commission has defined radicalization as ‘the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to terrorism’.²⁸

VE may describe ideas that are diametrically opposed to society’s core values, which in the OSCE contexts could mean various forms of religious or racial superiority or any ideology that systematically denies basic human rights.²⁹ It can also refer to ruthless methods of pursuing political ideas, by showing disregard for the life, liberty, and human rights of others. The following subsection elaborates on the discussion of VE.

Defining and Understanding Violent Extremism

While the previous subsection explored the radicalization phenomenon, the current subsection explores the definition, history and elements of VE. There is no international consensus on a definition of VE or terrorism, nor is there consensus on the differences between terrorism and VE. It has been argued that violent extremism is rarely simple, is not the province of any single race, religion, or political school and it can be profoundly consequential in societies.³⁰ Despite their diversity, violent extremist movements have common elements that provide a path to understanding. J.M. Berger explains that the most useful frames for discussing extremism is known as social identity theory, an approach to understanding intergroup dynamics. Social identity theory stipulates that people categorize themselves and others as members of competing social groups. The in-group is a group of people who share an identity, such as religious, racial or national. It is the group to which one belongs—the “us” in “us versus them.” The out-group is a group of people who are excluded from a specific in-group. They are part of “them.”

Haroro Ingram explains that violent extremist propaganda is designed to provide its audiences with a “competitive system of meaning”, which serves as a framework through which supporters perceive and judge the world.³¹ Typically, at the heart of this “system of meaning” there is a single overarching statement or “pitch”: “we are the champions and protectors of (appropriately-

extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism: a community-policing approach (2014) 35

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Peter Neumann, “Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: Ideas, Recommendations, and Good Practices from the OSCE Region,” Report, London: OSCE (2017)

²⁸ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, Terrorist recruitment: addressing the factors contributing to violent radicalization, COM (2005)

²⁹ Peter Neumann, “Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: Ideas, Recommendations, and Good Practices from the OSCE Region,” Report, London: OSCE (2017)

³⁰ J.M. Berger, *Extremism* (Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2018) 26

³¹ Haroro J. Ingram, “Deciphering Siren Call of Militant Islamic Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioral Change” *International Center for Counter-Terrorism* (2016)

aligned) Muslims (the in-group identity), everyone outside of this narrow in-group identity are enemies (i.e. out-group identities or Others) who are responsible for the *ummah's* (Muslim community's) crises, so support us and our solutions (i.e. the militant Islamist politico-military agenda)."³²

Alex P. Schmid provides some useful insights that help understand VE.³³ Schmid explains that (violent) extremist groups, movements and parties tend to have many of the following elements:³⁴

- Anti-constitutional, anti-democratic, anti-pluralist, authoritarian;
- Fanatical, intolerant, non-compromising, single-minded black-or-white thinkers;
- Rejecting the rule of law while adhering to an ends-justify-means philosophy;
- Aiming to realize their goals by any means, including, when the opportunity offers itself, the use of massive political violence against opponents.

Schmid argues that these elements together with a strong emphasis on ideology are the main characteristics of extremists. He furthermore considers that extremists on the political left and right, those of a religious-fundamentalist orientation as well as those of ethno-nationalist political nature show a propensity to prefer, on their paths to realize their political programs:³⁵

- Use of force/violence over persuasion;
- Uniformity over diversity;
- Collective goals over individual freedom;
- Giving orders over dialogue.

The working definition of the VE used in this study has been adopted from the UNESCO, which "refers to the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals."³⁶ This definition was chosen because UN has a more universal approach, and it is also used by the Albanian institutions responsible for implementing the National Strategy for Countering VE.

³² Haroro J. Ingram, "A 'Linkage-Based' Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2016) <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ICCT-Ingram-A-Linkage-Based-Approach-Nov2016.pdf>

³³ Alex P. Schmid, "Radicalization, De-Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review," *International Center for Counter Terrorism* (March 2013) <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalization-De-Radicalization-Counter-Radicalization-March-2013.pdf>

³⁴ Ibid, 9

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ UNESCO. "Preventing Violent Extremism Through Education. A Guide for Policy-makers." (2017).

Countering Violent Extremism and its propaganda (P/CVE)

Following the previous discussion of VE definitions, history and elements, this subsection elaborates on the international literature and practices of countering VE and its propaganda.

A framework for global cooperation against terrorism is established in numerous international treaties. The UN has highlighted the need to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism in its revised global counter-terrorism strategy³⁷. In 2013, the UN General Assembly Resolution 68/127 urged the international community 'to unite against VE in all its forms and manifestations'.³⁸ UN Security Council Resolution 2178 laid the foundations for CVE cooperation at UN level.³⁹ The Resolution underlined that 'countering VE, which could be conducive to terrorism is an essential element in addressing the threat to international peace and security posed by foreign terrorist fighters'. The resolution lists a number of specific measures to be taken by states, including: preventing individual suspects from entering or transiting their territories; disrupting financial support for Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs); developing strategies to counter violent extremist narratives; adopting tailored approaches to countering recruitment; and promoting social inclusion and cohesion.

Building on this resolution as well as prevention strategies and legislation from several European countries, the term Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) has been used to describe these approaches that aim to create resilience among populations that are seen vulnerable (preventing) or assist individuals who are conducive to turning away from extremism (de-radicalization).⁴⁰

The focus of P/CVE is closely linked to discrediting and delegitimizing 'the ideology that drives VE and mobilizes a steady stream of recruits to extremist causes'.⁴¹ P/CVE policies aim to address the root causes of radicalization, such as feelings of estrangement from society, economic deprivation, perceived injustices, disenfranchisement, xenophobia and human rights abuses.

³⁷ UNGA, The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review (2018) A/RES/72/284

³⁸ UNGA, A world against violence and violent extremism (2013) A/RES/68/127

³⁹ UNSC, Resolution 2178 (2014)

⁴⁰ See further: Minerva Nasser-Eddine, Bridget Garnham, Katerina Agostino and Gilbert Caluya, "Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Literature Review" Counter Terrorism and Security Technology Centre (2011)

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA543686.pdf>; Georgia Holmer, "Countering Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Perspective", United States Institute of Peace (2013) https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Transnational_CVEUSIP.pdf ; Gielen, Amy-Jane, "Countering Violent Extremism: A Realist Review for Assessing What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances, and How?" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 6 (2019) 1149-1167; Haroro J. Ingram, "A 'Linkage-Based' Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2016) <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ICCT-Ingram-A-Linkage-Based-Approach-Nov2016.pdf>

⁴¹ Shannon N. Green, "Changing the Narrative: Countering Violent Extremist Propaganda" (September 2015)

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/changing-narrative-countering-violent-extremist-propaganda>

The rise of ISIS and their prolific use of online propaganda have increased awareness of terrorist propaganda in the public consciousness. It is now recognized that violent extremists have made effective use of the internet and social media to advance their aims, whether through engagement, propaganda, radicalization or recruitment.⁴² UN Security Council has recognised that central to the concept of CVE is the importance of addressing the “conditions conducive” to the spread of terrorism, which are defined by the General Assembly in its United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.⁴³

On the other hand, many stakeholders and states believe that winning the communication war is a vital part of P/CVE.⁴⁴ Although this has received renewed attention given the contemporary global threat of terrorism, particularly after the rise of ISIS, it does not represent a new phenomenon. Rather, persuasive communications have been linked to war for millennia.⁴⁵ Today, much of the emphasis has been placed on restrictive measures content removal on the internet, or proscription of illegal speech through takedowns and filtering.

However, there are severe limitations on the effectiveness of this response, given the speed with which new data is uploaded and the limited capacity of law enforcement agencies.⁴⁶ Recently, there has been a growing interest in alternative approaches to such an issue. As a result, there has been a renewed interest in countering the narratives of terrorist organizations, rather than purely restricting them. One such potential solution is provided by ‘counter-narratives’; attempts to challenge extremist and violent extremist messages, whether directly or indirectly, through a range of online and offline means.⁴⁷

⁴² United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorist Narratives https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ctc_cted_fact_sheet_designed_cve_counter_narratives_december_2018.pdf; UN System Focal Point on PCVE <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/preventing-violent-extremism>

⁴³ UNGA, The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review (2018) A/RES/72/284

⁴⁴ UN Security Council has requested the Counter-Terrorism Committee to “identify and compile existing good practices in countering terrorist narratives, in coordination with the CTITF [Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force] Office, the CTITF Working Group on Communications, and where appropriate in consultation with other relevant non-United Nations entities. The Counter-Terrorism Committee and CTED will continue to facilitate international cooperation to “implement the comprehensive international framework to counter terrorist narratives, identify and compile existing good practice,” and provide guidelines and technical support.

⁴⁵ Haroro J. Ingram and Alastair Reed, “Lessons from History for Counter Terrorism Strategic Communications.” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2016) <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICCT-Ingram-CTSC-June-2016-3.pdf>

⁴⁶ Rachel Briggs and Sebastian Feve, “Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism: What Works and What are the Implications for Government?” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (2013) <https://www.dmeforpeace.org/peaceexchange/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Review-of-Programs-to-Counter-Narratives-of-Violent-Extremism.pdf>

⁴⁷ Rachel Briggs and Sebastian Feve, “Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism: What Works and What are the Implications for Government?” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (2013) <https://www.dmeforpeace.org/peaceexchange/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Review-of-Programs-to-Counter-Narratives-of-Violent-Extremism.pdf>

The term ‘counter-narrative’ has become a catch-all term for a wide range of activities.⁴⁸ It can refer to government-led initiatives, de-radicalization strategies, or grassroots and civil society movements and can be speaking to a number of different audiences – such as extremists, those vulnerable to extremism, members of communities that include extremists, or the general population at large.⁴⁹ It can also include a number of different messages, such as those trying to discredit or make fun of extremists, or those trying to empower communities by promoting different stories.

However, it has been argued that developing an integrated P/CVE communication strategy is imperative to deconstruct first the VE propaganda and understand the targeted audiences. As previously mentioned, drawing on social identity theory, Ingram argues that violent extremist propaganda is designed to provide its audiences with a “competitive system of meaning, which acts as the lens through which supporters are compelled to perceive and judge the world.”⁵⁰

Ingram argues that the correct way to challenge extremist “systems of meaning” is to attack the linkages that promulgate their self-reinforcing cycle using a two-tiered strategy.⁵¹ The first tier is primarily targeted at those who have yet to adopt a violent extremist “system of meaning” by using a combination of negative messages which attack the linkages between violent extremists and their proposed solutions, as well as positive messages which emphasise possible solutions to crises beyond violent extremists. The second tier is aimed at those already within the cycle and uses negative messaging as a disengagement strategy as well as network disruption strategies. The target audience spectrum is illustrated graphically below. The “linkage-based” approach uses tailored messaging to target those crucial linkages that violent extremist propaganda forges between themselves and solutions and their enemies and crisis.

Ingram argues that tier 1 has dual purposes. The first is to dismantle the “system of meaning” advocated by violent extremists. It achieves this by deploying messages that variously attack the linkages violent extremists attach between themselves and solutions *and* their enemies and crises. This is known as *negative messaging* because it emphasizes the harm of target audiences making certain choices and seeks to diminish the appeal of violent extremists. The second purpose is to use *positive messaging* that emphasizes the benefits of certain choices and seeks to boost the appeal of oneself (e.g., government) and/or allies (e.g., community groups). Tier 1 efforts address a broad target audience spectrum from “antis” to “engaged”. This messaging should, as much as possible, be synchronized with supportive actions in the field (e.g., CVE initiatives). Without messaging being coordinated with actions and vice versa (i.e., reducing the say-do gap), the

⁴⁸ Radicalization Awareness Network, Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives (2015) https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalization_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_cn_oct2015_en.pdf

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Haroro J. Ingram, “A ‘Linkage-Based’ Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2016) <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ICCT-Ingram-A-Linkage-Based-Approach-Nov2016.pdf>

⁵¹ Ibid

credibility of both can be significantly undermined.

Tier 2 also has two purposes. The first is to use disruption strategies against online and offline violent extremist networks. In an online context this involves the targeted shutting down of violent extremist accounts. Offline, this requires officials to target violent extremist networks and their supporters using appropriate arms of the state. The second is to use disengagement narratives via *negative messaging* targeting tacit and active supporters of VE to trigger behavioural changes away from support. The conceptual framework and the methodology of this study is explained in the following section.

Chapter IV: Methodology



This report is a product delivered in the framework of the project “*Conduct research to guiding P/CVE messaging in the Tirana municipality and support the Albanian CVE Center to developing research and strategic communication capacities*”, supported by Hedayah and implemented in close collaboration with the CVE Center of Albania, which has been identified as the primary beneficiary of the project. The methodology of the project implementation entailed both research and capacity-building activities.

The research focused on two main aspects: (1) understanding the audiences in the Tirana municipality and radicalization factors with the aim to designing the devising P/CVE strategic communication action, and (2) assessing the capacities of the key actors and stakeholders involved in the implementation of the NSCVE and with a role in developing and deploying strategic communications actions and monitoring results. The rationale for focusing the research on Tirana municipality was based on the prior identification of this municipality as one of the country’s radicalization hotspots.

The institutions included in both research and capacity building activities were the CVE Center, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (MESY), Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MHSP), Ministry of Interior (MoI) and staffs from subordinate agencies of these ministries. In addition, the data collection process included students from high school and university as well as representatives of the religious communities.

The focus in this study has been on VE recruitment and radicalization promoted by radical Islamist movements and groups (as opposed to radical right groups or ethno-nationalist groups).

The first practical step towards developing P/CVE stratcomms targeting Islamist-based violent extremist propaganda is to understand the audiences that will be the recipients of the messages that will be delivered. These audiences are composed of those who are radicalised, those that are likely to be radicalised, and those who are directly or indirectly affected by the radicalised persons.

This requires designing research processes that allow to get an in-depth understanding of both components of the described audiences. On the other hand, it is important to take into consideration that tailoring the messages requires a nuanced understanding of the radicalised, or those likely to be radicalised.

To mediate to this challenge, the data were collected and analysed by drawing largely on Ingram’s “linkage based” approach.⁵² Therefore, the conceptual framework of this study leverages Ingram’s “competitive system of meaning” that is central to violent extremist propaganda and focuses on in-group and out-group dynamics. The development of the “competitive system of meaning”

⁵² Ingram, H., 2016b. A “Linkage- Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners. *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*.

focuses on highlighting the importance of a crisis of identity within the in-group that is caused by an identified out-group and can only be solved by the in-group.

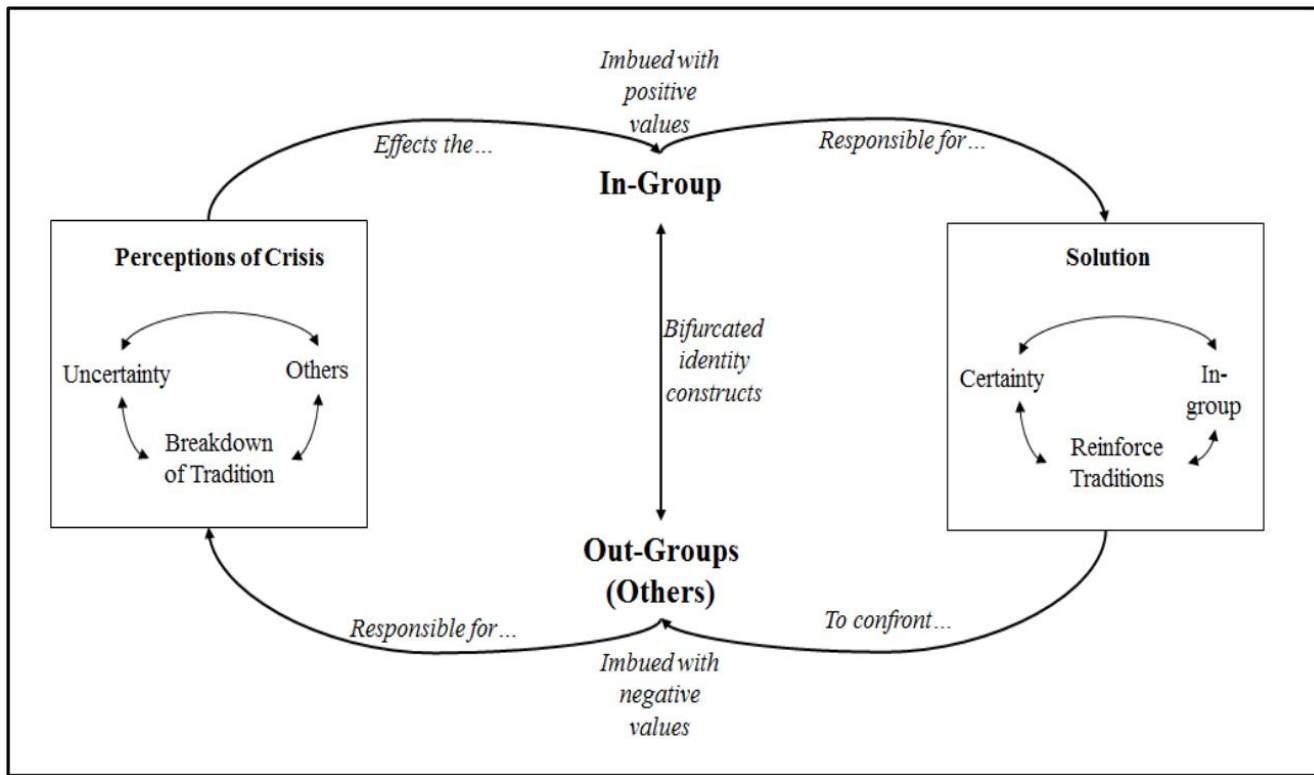


Figure 1: The cyclically reinforcing violent extremist system of meaning⁵³

Extremist propaganda uses a diverse range of messages, narratives and imagery to make connections between extremist groups and their proposed solutions and their enemies, and the crisis they are causing and to shape and solidify a network of “mental models” that constitutes the “system of meaning” for violent extremists and their supporters.⁵⁴ For example, some messages focus on showing how enemies are causing crises (other-crisis linkages) while others show how the group in question is providing solutions to crisis (in-group-solution linkages).

⁵³ Ingram, H., 2016. Op. cit.

⁵⁴ Norman, D, “Some observations on mental models”, in D. Gentner and A. Stevens, eds., *Mental Models* (New York: Psychology Press, 1983), pp. 7-14.

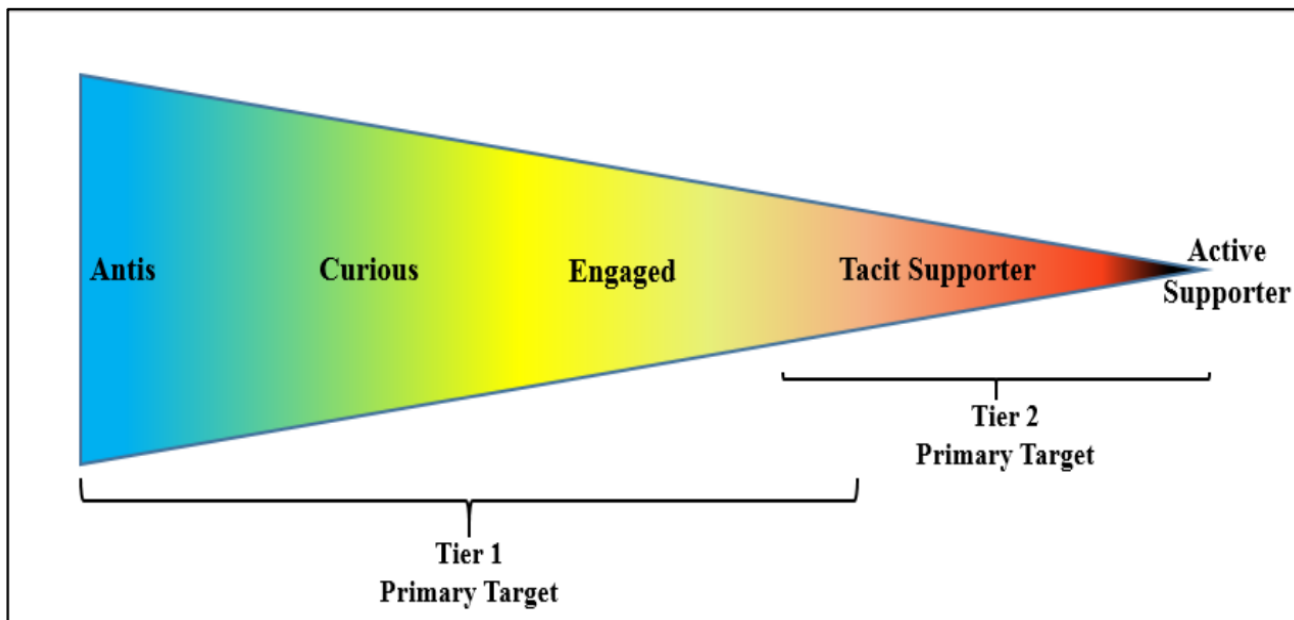


Figure 2. Target audience spectrum and two-tier targeting

Data collection

The research has been designed to tap on data that sheds light into all the above-mentioned categories of knowledge related to the ‘system of meaning’, ranging from the in-group – out-group and crisis – solutions construct, data on the five different categories of audiences that constitute the two tiers, as well as data related to the messaging vehicles.

The data collection process has involved both desk and field research. Through the desk research, data have been collected from previous research on the subject, media articles, social media, as well as from legislation, official websites and reports.

The field research has involved the collection of quantitative data from public survey and qualitative data from interviews and focus groups. Following the completion of the literature review and the PESTL analysis, a questionnaire was drafted to collect the data from public survey (Annex 2).

The survey data were collected through face-to-face interviews through a stratified random sample of 800 adults between 18 to 64 years old (Annex 1). In the first strata, observations were proportionally distributed among 24 administrative units that are part of Tirana Municipality based on their adult population. In the second strata, observations were proportionately distributed among urban and rural areas. Then proportional gender and age quotas were developed for each substratum. The margin of statistical error for the whole sample is calculated at +/-3.3%.

Mock interviews were conducted to test the survey questionnaire and observe the reactions of interviewers in real-like interviewing situations to make possible modifications to reduce bias and increase accuracy. The survey data were automatically uploaded to the server upon the completion of the interview by using a specifically designed mobile app to log the responses. The data were processed and analysed by using the statistical software STATA 11.

Upon the completion of the preliminary analysis of the survey data, a questionnaire was drafted to collect information from officials of the four ministries involved (Annex 4).⁵⁵ The interviews sought to obtain data related to the P/CVE policy framework and legislation, achievements and implementation problems, understanding and importance of the communication in P/CVE, inter-institutional cooperation and programming, information exchange and communication with the public and lastly data on the Albanians returned or to be returned from Syria and Iraq. The interviews were designed to obtain information that was related to the specific field of activity of each ministry.

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions reached a total of 123 people. Due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were sent in written to 40 officials from the four-line ministries, and 26 interviews were returned completed.

26 semi-structured interviews were conducted with officials from the four ministries involved.⁵⁶ They include representatives of state institutions working on several issues, such as security, education and social issues. These ministries and the subordinated agencies are key institutions involved in the implementation of the NSCVE. The interviews aimed to obtain their views and insights on the inter-institutional cooperation on VE and P/CVE, and on the role of governmental structures should play to developing and implementing an effective strategic communication. The last step in the data collection process included six focus groups with a total of 97 individuals. This included 50 teachers who are CVE coordinators in their respective schools, 23 students, 19 officials from the ministries and subordinated agencies, and five representatives from religious communities. The data collected through the interviews and the focus groups were processed, coded and analysed by using the MAXQDA software program. The focus group discussions provided useful insights on the influence of VE propaganda and recommendations on the approach to tackling the problem.

The figure 3 below presents the data collection and analysis stages.

⁵⁵ Ministry of Interior; Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Health and Social Protection; Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. Ministry of Health and Social Protection. Ministry of Interior. Ministry of Justice.

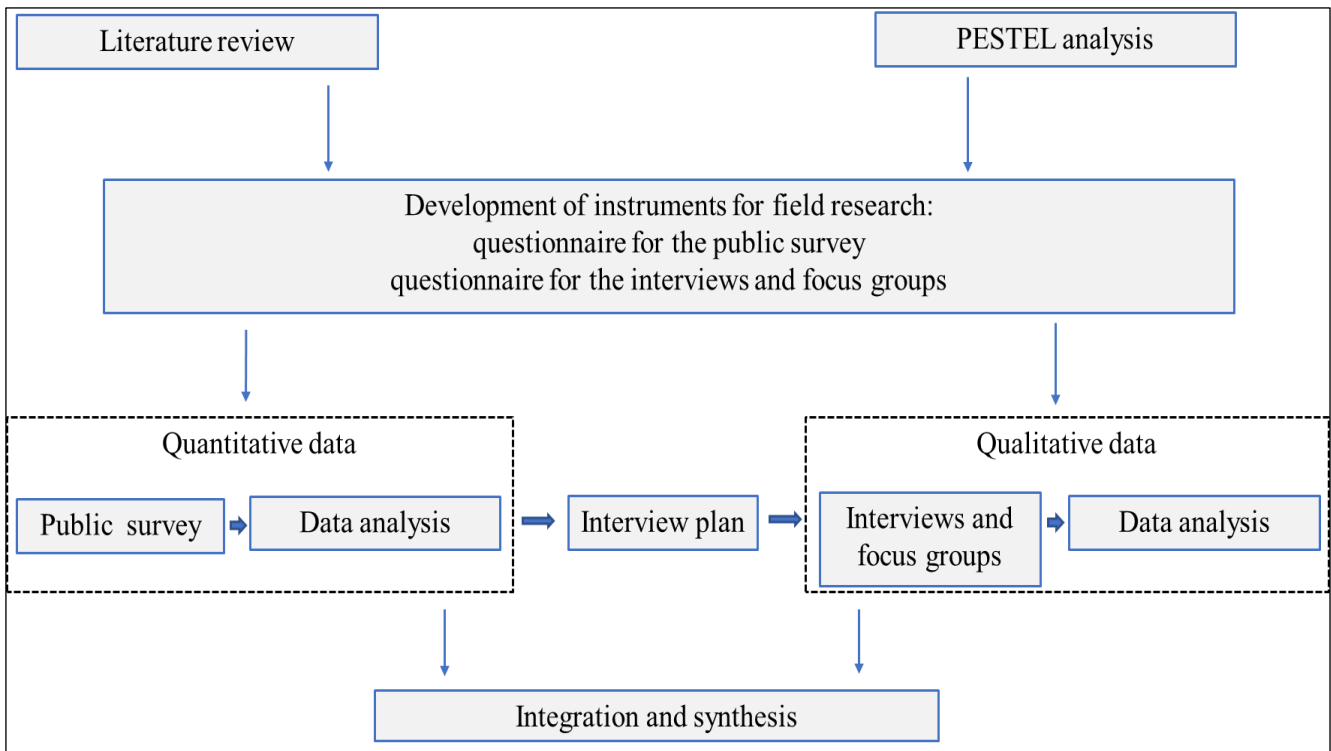


Figure 3. The data collection and analysis process

The research process was conducted in a collaborative manner with the officials of the CVE Center, who, through a learning-by-doing approach, were involved in all the stages of the research. In addition, three workshops on research methods and strategic communications were delivered to CVE Center staffs and the staffs of the four ministries involved.

Chapter V: Radicalization in Albania: drivers, scale and countering efforts



As the section III of this study “Key terms and concepts used in this study” focused on the international literature and practice on the phenomena of radicalization and VE, the current section explores the radicalization trends in Albania. Based on empirical evidence and previous studies on the subject, this section discusses the drivers of violent religious extremism in Albania and Albania’s approaches and efforts to dealing with the matter.

It starts with a subsection of Albania’s religious context, followed by a subsection on the problem of VE and radicalization in Albania. The third subsection is specifically focused on the drivers of radicalization in the country, while the fourth subsection elaborates the countering of VE in the country. The following (fifth) subsection elaborates the repatriation efforts of Albania, the sixth subsection is focused on the “communication war” of VE in Albania, and the seventh subsection elaborates the radicalization trends in the Municipality of Tirana. The last (eighth) subsection is an analysis of political, economic, social, technological and legislative factors (PEST analysis) in order to help understanding the environment in which the phenomenon of VE takes place in the Municipality of Tirana.

Religion in Albania

This first subsection aims to elaborate the demography, history and status quo of religion in Albania. According to the latest census of 2011, Albania has a population of 2.8 million people, and its main religious communities are Muslims (57%), Catholics (10%), Orthodox (7%) and Bektashi (2%).⁵⁷ Other religious groups include Protestant denominations, Baha’is, Jehovah’s Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and a small Jewish community.”⁵⁸ Regardless of the religious composition, Vurmo et al argue in a 2018 study of *Religious Tolerance in Albania* that while the majority of Albanians lead a secular life, they have little information on or knowledge of religion and reject religious considerations to shape or condition their way of life.⁵⁹ The authors of the aforementioned report argue that the foundations of religious tolerance in Albania are deeply rooted in the societal traditions and culture, rather than religious awareness, knowledge or practice. Nevertheless, it can be argued that with respect to the role of religious leaders in the country, the general situation of religious tolerance in Albania has remained solid because religious leaders have called upon believers to abstain from conflict and have called for mutual understanding and dialogue.⁶⁰ Historically, unlike neighbouring countries that have used religion as a basis for developing their national identity, Albanians have not shaped or identified their

⁵⁷The Institute of Statistics. 2011. Instat Albania. Accessed June 24, 2020

<https://instatgis.gov.al/#!/prefectures/population/prefpop1>

⁵⁸ United States Department of State (2020, June 10) 2019. Report on International Religious Freedom Albania.

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/albania/>.

⁵⁹ Gjergji Vurmo, et al, “Religious Tolerance in Albania,” Research, Tirana: UNDP Albania (2018).

⁶⁰ Ibid. 21-22

national identity by their religious affiliation. Instead of that, the basis of Albanian national identity has been its language, culture, and tradition. There are four main religions in Albania, and if Albania's national identity were based merely on religion, this would ignite a fierce rivalry between the country's religions.⁶¹

Religion in Albania has gone through immense fluctuations. Albania is a former atheist country, with a Muslim majority, but without an official religion.⁶² Since 1967 there was a complete ban imposed on all forms of religious worship as a result of the so-called "Cultural Revolution" – thus making Albania the only officially declared atheist state in the world. With the end of one-party system, the practice of religion has been gradually reintroduced into Albanian society.⁶³ Being aware of the political changes and the lifting of the ban on religion, missionaries of all faiths flocked to Albania and got involved in the religious "revival" process. This led to a gradual revitalization of religious practice together with the restoration and rebuilding of religious objects. Islamic and Christian schools were set up and children and young people were offered scholarships⁶⁴ to study abroad Islamic or Christian theology.⁶⁵ Since the mid-1990s, thousands of young Albanian Muslims travelled to the Middle East on educational scholarships, with many returning to Albania with different Islamic schools of thought other than the *hanafi*, which is traditionally predominant in Albania and the rest of the Balkans.⁶⁶ The lack of material resources of the local actors and the freedom of action gave the foreign actors an important role, even within the "traditional" religious communities because they were in their early steps of revival. For example, in early 1990s, 90% of the budget of the Islamic Community (now Muslim Community of Albania – MCA) came from foreign sources. The same phenomenon is to be observed for the Orthodox Community, and the Catholic Community, given that in 1995 only 14% of the Catholic clerics working in the country were Albanian citizens.⁶⁷ In addition, during the first years of the transitional period 1992-1998, when the country faced enormous economic problems, the government, hoping for additional foreign investments, applied to become a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1992. While religion is not acknowledged as a driver of radicalization that leads to VE, the

⁶¹ Arben Kullolli, *Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations*. Master's Thesis, Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School (2009)

⁶² Nathalie Clayer, "God in the "Land of the Mercedes" The religious communities in Albania since 1990," Research, Paris: HAL (2007)

⁶³ Miranda Vickers, "Islam in Albania", Research, Shrivenham: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom (2008), pp. 1-2

⁶⁴ For example, in 2006 there were 1, 357 Albanian students studying Islamic theology in Turkey (350), Saudi Arabia (350), Egypt (206), Qatar (120), Yemen (78), Lebanon (70), Malaysia (50), Syria (50), Libya (42), Jordan (20), Oman (17), and United Arab Emirates (14). These, however, are only the numbers of students that went through the organization and not an indication of the real number. According to the State Committee on Cults of that time, the true number of Albanian students studying in those countries was much higher. See: Mentor Nazarko, 'Historical Background to the Muslim Community in Albania', paper presented at the NATO Advanced Research Workshop: Strengthening and Promoting Religious Tolerance and Co-existence in the Balkans and Beyond, Tirana, September – October 2006, p3-4.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 1-2

⁶⁶ Ibid. 3

⁶⁷ Nathalie Clayer, "God in the "Land of the Mercedes", The religious communities in Albania since 1990". Research, Paris: HAL (2007) pp. 14-15

disinformation and/or exploitation of religion for political gains has proven so. In this context, the following subsection elaborates the exploitation of religion, the history and the present status of the VE as well as the scale radicalization in Albania.

Violent Extremism and Radicalization in Albania

Non-traditional forms of Islam were introduced to the country following the end of the one-party system. Albania's membership to the OIC opened the doors to numerous non-governmental organizations (NGO) from many Islamic countries, some of which tried to use this opportunity for promoting non-traditional interpretations of Islam⁶⁸ under a humanitarian disguise. Six major NGOs linked to terrorism set up camp in Albania between 1991 and 2005 without much notice from the government.⁶⁹ Subsequently, successful counter-terrorism operations by the Albanian government with Western support put an end to their activities.⁷⁰ VE ideology was thus stopped in its track—along with the prospects of Albanian FTFs in the Balkan wars. As a result of this historical dynamic, it can be said that the Islamic radicalization does not constitute an indigenous Albanian phenomenon.⁷¹

According to the European Commission's 2019 Albania Report, 144 Albanian citizens joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq; 45 have returned, 28 are believed to have died and 81 remain on the battlefield.⁷² Albania has repatriated in October 2020 a woman and four children from the Kurdish-controlled al-Hol camp in north-eastern Syria. The repatriation process of around 75 remaining nationals is ongoing.⁷³

Online propaganda produced by ISIS propaganda machine has played a central role in inciting Albanians leaving to fight in the Syrian conflict and in some cases aiming to attract an Albanian-

⁶⁸ The non-traditional interpretations of Islam gained terrain in Albania and years later (in 2004) they led to an attempt by young Muslims educated in foreign schools (where the *salafi* school is predominant) to introduce a proposal to change religious rituals within the Muslim community from *hanafi* school of thought to a more radical *salafi*. Article 2 of the Constitution of the Muslim Community clearly stipulates that the *hanafi* line is in the Albanian tradition. For more see (Vickers 2008) pp. 6-7.

⁶⁹ Arben Kullolli, "Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations". Master's Thesis, Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School (2009), pp. 42-47

⁷⁰ Ibid. 45-47

⁷¹ Endri Hide, "Assessment of risks on national security/ the capacity of state and society to react: Violent Extremism and Religious Radicalization in Albania," Assessment, Tirana: Albanian Institute for International Studies (2015), pp. 8-9.

⁷² European Commission, Albania 2019 Report: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-albania-report.pdf>. Clarification: The authors of this study have updated the numbers reported in the EC 2019 report, after the first group of (five) people who were repatriated by Albania on late October 2020 and a woman (MD) was reported dead.

⁷³ Voice of America, "Albanian IS Repatriation From Syria Will Be Long Journey, Experts Say" <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/albanian-repatriation-syria-will-be-long-journey-experts-say>

speaking audience by mixing attractive religious messages with ISIS's propaganda.⁷⁴ The first Albanian FTF (a commando) joined the conflict in Syria in early 2011, but the bulk of FTFs travelled to Syria in 2012 and 2013, concluded with a few cases in 2014. The period of their departure, which is prior to the establishment of main terrorist factions, would suggest that their primary goal was to voluntarily fight against the Syrian regime. Attempts were made to portray the war in Syria as the Civil War in Spain, thus, draw a parallel between Bashar al-Assad and Francisco Franco and therefore convince the people that by going to Syria they would be doing something like the Albanian volunteers did in the 1930s in Spain. Moreover, some of the imprisoned imams argue the Albanian Prime Minister of that time made the first call in 2012 to go and help the Syrian population,⁷⁵ therefore, they argue, they cannot be charged for such a crime.

As the conflict escalated and the opposition split into different groups, Albanians found themselves fighting for terrorist organizations such as ISIS, al-Nusra Front and Jaysh al-Islam,⁷⁶ sometimes also fighting against each other.⁷⁷ About half of the overall number of Albanian citizens joining the war in Syria and Iraq come from a single mosque in Tirana, which is outside the jurisdiction of the MCA - the only official institution representing Islam within the country.⁷⁸ At the first years of the recruitment, Albanian FTFs are believed to have been recruited primarily in person - including in mosques - through a nine-person recruiting ring, who were later all incarcerated. The FTFs that went to fight in Syria and returned revealed that a huge driver for them to take the decision to join the conflict were the videos and footages they saw online.⁷⁹ They were shown videos how Muslim "brothers" and "sisters" were suffering in Syria with calls to help them.

Following the loss of ISIS's capacity to recruit-in-person in Albania, the group continued to recruit online, aiming to attract the audiences by mixing attractive religious messages with ISIS's propaganda.⁸⁰ This trend is reflected also with violent extremists in Europe that are connected mainly through loose networks which are largely home-grown and without organizational links to terrorist groups like al-Qaeda or ISIS. In addition, some individuals or small groups were observed to self-radicalize, principally on the internet, without being part of wider networks.⁸¹

⁷⁴ Counter Extremism Report, "Albania: Extremism and Counter-Extremism," Report, New York: Counter Extremism Project (2017).

⁷⁵ Shqiptarja.com, "Imprisoned imams: We were inspired by the Prime Minister," January 18, 2018. Accessed July 4, 2020. <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/n-euml-burg-p-euml-r-terroriz-euml-m-kuzhinieri-br-u-frym-euml-zuam-nga-berisha-t-euml-vij-euml-n-euml-gjyq-br>.

⁷⁶ Redion Qirjazi and Romario Shehu, "Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania" Research, Berlin: Berghof Foundation (2018).

⁷⁷ Telegrafi.com, "Albanians in Syria are killing each other" October 23, 2014. Accessed June 24, 2020. <https://telegrafi.com/shqiptaret-ne-siri-dhe-ne-irak-vrasin-njeri-tjetrin/>

⁷⁸ Counter Extremism Report, "Albania: Extremism and Counter-Extremism," Report, New York: Counter Extremism Project (2017). See also: Redion Qirjazi and Romario Shehu, "Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania," Research, Berlin: Berghof Foundation (2018), pp. 1-2.

⁷⁹ Ibid.,

⁸⁰ Ibid.,

⁸¹ Europol, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2020" Report, The Hague: Europol (2020), pp. 33-34.

According to the European Commission's 2019 report⁸² the online radicalization content in Albanian is on the rise.⁸³ As a result, the EC's report states the authorities need to enhance their online monitoring and response capacities, and enhance their efforts to empower civil society to develop positive and alternative narratives online.⁸⁴ The regional studies conducted in the Western Balkan (WB) also recommend the country's institutions to increase their focus on social networks and create platforms where citizens can address problems or report profiles that are related to violent extremists or propaganda within their communities.⁸⁵ While exploitation of religion is recognized as a driver of radicalization, the entire process of radicalization is complex and involves a combination of factors, which upon applying to a specific context, might lead vulnerable individuals to easy target of VE recruiters. In this context, the following subsection elaborates several acknowledged drivers of radicalization in Albania.

Drivers of Radicalization in Albania

As explained earlier in this review, Albania is ranked as the country with third highest number of FTFs of the general population in the WB countries, and as the lowest exporter of FTFs based on recruitment among Muslim population.

There have been several studies on the drivers of radicalization among Albanian citizens. A 2015 study describes these drivers in four groups:⁸⁶ (a) social-economic drivers – limited access to employment, exclusion and discrimination; (b) political drivers – impossibility to influence decision-making which is perceived as corrupt and unfair, protecting values and religious dignity is considered as a duty, and the violation of human rights and liberties; (c) cultural drivers – a third of respondents in this study state that the dignity of their religious community is under constant threat and being practicing Muslim in Albania is difficult; and last (d) specific drivers for Albania – more than a quarter of respondents appear tolerant towards unauthorized religious objects, which according to research it is mainly those objects where the recruitment takes place, and

⁸² Commission, European, "Commission Staff Working Document," Working Document, Strasbourg: European Commission (2019).

⁸³ The internet may further enhance opportunities to become radicalized, because of being accessible to a large and growing number of people irrespective of gender or ethnicity and enabling them to connect with like-minded individuals from across the world. This access may provide greater opportunity than the offline world to confirm existing beliefs and avoid confrontation with information that would challenge these. The hypothesis that the internet works as an echo chamber (Ines von Behr et al 2013). The internet has to be seen as a mode, rather than a unitary method of radicalization – therefore, internet can play an important role in facilitating the radicalization process – however - it cannot drive it on its own. A recent case from Albania is a 39-year-old from Shijak who was arrested on June 25th 2020 for "inciting hate and calling for terrorist acts" after he shared several posts on his Facebook account with the inscription "Kill the Jews". See more: <https://www.asp.gov.al/drejtoria-e-antiterrorit-vihet-ne-pranga-nje-39-vjecar-i-cili-bente-thirrje-ne-rrjetet-sociale-per-te-vrare-hebrenjte/>

⁸⁴ European Commission. Commission Staff Working Document, Working Document, Strasbourg, (2019).

⁸⁵ Kelmendi, V and Sh. Balaj. *New Battlegrounds: Extremist Groups' Activity on Social Networks in Kosovo, Albania and FYROM*. Prishtina: Kosovar Center for Security Studies, (2017), pp.24.

⁸⁶ Gjergji Vurmo et al, "Religious Radicalism in Albania" Research. Institute for Democracy and Mediation Tirana, (2015).

another driver is the lack of influence and preparedness of local clerics.⁸⁷ This study sheds light on the passive role of most state institutions in preventing religious radicalization. On this regard, the authors of the 2015 study argue it is only in late 2013 and early 2014 that the public debate on this issue intensified and the actions of state (mostly security) authorities further evolved. However, state response has been limited to law enforcement agencies mostly through retroactive and coercive measures. According to this study, other state institutions, should have engaged in preventive measures, such as Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, Ministry of Social Welfare, state inspectorates and services, local governments, regional education directorates and others. The authors conducted several interviews with representatives of these institutions of that time and they suggest that radicalism or VE on religious grounds has not been in the focus of their work.⁸⁸

In 2018, another study reconfirmed the passive role of state institutions.⁸⁹ The issue of state inaction was mentioned as an enabling factor which provided FTFs with the opportunity to access conflict zones such as Syria and Iraq. The study finds several problems in this regard, such as: (a) lack of consolidation of state presence – which is critical to the prevention or protection of individuals from recruitment by radical and violent extremist groups; (b) ‘apathetic’ security institutions – lack of proper assessment of the level of threat and reacting slowly, which led to many people believing they could leave the country to fight in Syria without repercussions; (c) inefficient institutions - municipalities do not seem to be taking proactive steps to reducing the risk of VE in their communities; and (d) corruption and impunity – those are factors of vulnerability that may prompt civic disengagement and political apathy; and, can further foster a sense of moral outrage.⁹⁰ The prevailing narrative on the ‘push’ factor of radicalization has for many years pointed to the lack of economic opportunities or the search for financial gains. However, this is dismissed today as the main driver of recruitment. There is no simple correlation between the socio-economic status and demography of young adults, and their likelihood of becoming radicalised.⁹¹ There are other factors, such as insufficient political inclusion, weak representation and lack of channels for political engagement, combined with institutional anomie (the state’s lack of ability to influence people’s lives) who are considered to be more important factors for turning to VE, especially for young people⁹².

⁸⁷ Ibid. 38-106

⁸⁸ Ibid. 35

⁸⁹ Redion Qirjazi and Romario Shehu, “Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania,” Research, Berlin: Berghof Foundation (2018)

⁹⁰ Ibid. 21-22

⁹¹ Richardson, Berlouis and Cameron, “Radicalization of Young Adults in the Balkan States,” Dundee: JD Journal for Deradicalization, pp. 88-89. See also: <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/61467> and <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0090718>

⁹² Engjellushe Morina, Beatrix Austin, Tim Jan Roetman and Véronique Dudouet, “Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism: Lessons from the Western Balkans,” Research Report, Berlin: Berghof Foundation (2019).

Separately, the authors of a 2015 study urge paying attention to the “machinery” (radicalization) of the phenomenon and not simply the “output” (FTFs).⁹³ Another study reaches the same conclusion, stating the FTFs flow was not the beginning of radicalization, but rather the outcome of a long process. Nevertheless, it served to illustrate how the rise of home-grown radicalization had gone unnoticed and how the overall Albania’s policy approach was ill prepared to face the evolving nature of the terrorist threats.⁹⁴ The first study concludes that various drivers interact with and strengthen one another, and when different drivers are combined, it promotes proactive religious agendas of radical groups.⁹⁵

Another 2018 study⁹⁶ reconfirms the presence of religious extremist ideologies and warns that the country’s state of democracy and socio-economic development, in combination with other factors, may threaten specific groups in society through the power of manipulation of extremist ideologies.⁹⁷ According to this study, radicalization is a truly multi-dimensional phenomenon emerging from interaction of radical ideologies and social dynamics and shaped by larger structural factors.⁹⁸ A survey exploring public opinion around VE was conducted, asking respondents’ opinions on the main factors that enable or encourage individuals’ religious radicalization (See table 2) suggesting the main factors are (a) low education background (b) economic reasons and (c) poor religious knowledge.

Factor	No. of responses	Percentage of cases
Low education background	1,030	67%
Economic reasons	947	62%
Poor religious knowledge	626	41%
Social isolation	557	36%
Influence of foreign religious radical groups	415	27%
Criminal past	365	24%
Incapable state institutions	285	18.5%
Incapable religious clerics	230	15%

*Table 2: Violent Extremism in Albania 2018.*⁹⁹

⁹³ Gjergji Vurmo et al, “Religious Radicalism in Albania,” Research, Tirana: Institute for Democracy and Mediation (2015).

⁹⁴ Mandrit Kamolli and Arjan Dyrmishi, “Albania’s Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Implementation, Outcomes and Alignment with the EU Approaches and Framework. Policy Paper, Tirana: Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (2018), pp. 32-33.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 114

⁹⁶ Gjergji Vurmo and Enis Sulstarova, “Violent Extremism in Albania,” Research, Tirana: Institute for Democracy and Mediation (2018)

⁹⁷ Ibid. 11-12

⁹⁸ Ibid. 113-114

⁹⁹ Note: This is a multiple response question and percentages do not add up to 100%. Number of cases is 4,455, number of responses is 1,538

The study finds that a combination of structural and individual factors and other variables – such as the role of local clerics and their capabilities – generates individual processes of radicalization. The study concludes that the interplay of socio-economic, political, cultural drivers and other context specific issues challenge the Albanian current reality.¹⁰⁰

Another 2018 study¹⁰¹ shed light on the factors and actors that make communities resilient or vulnerable towards VE and their interaction with each other. Unlike most literature which focuses on push and pull factors and general drivers of VE, this research examined the differences between affected and unaffected communities – as well as identify actors and factors in three cities: Tirana, Korça and Kavaja. Each community has different context and applying a “one-size-fits-all” is too generic. Therefore, this study suggests, putting emphasis on community-centred approaches first recognizes that vulnerabilities are coherent within each community and local problems require local solutions, and second, the research helps develop community and local governance-oriented approaches to building resilience towards VE. The authors have grouped the findings into three categories: ideological, socio-economic and structural, and have divided them into factors and actors conducive to vulnerability and factors and actors conducive to resilience (See table 3).

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

Table 3. Factors and actors conducive to vulnerability and factors and actors conducive to resilience.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 117-118

¹⁰¹ Redion Qirjazi and Romario Shehu, “Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania,” Research, Berlin: Berghof Foundation (2018)

¹⁰² Source: Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania, Berghof Foundation, 2018

Analysing the factors and actors of resilience and vulnerability within a community, this study yielded several conclusions: (a) resilience is a spectrum and systemic, while radicalization towards VE is a process which depends largely on the level of resilience; (b) both factors conducive to and preventing VE are observable in both resilient and vulnerable communities, however, there are other intervening factors which trigger vulnerability in some at risk communities; (c) it is important to distinguish between unaffectedness and resilience - although they overlap and are correlated - affectedness refers to visible signs of VE, while resilience refers to the ability to prevent, pre-empt and react to threats through collective action; (d) VE comes up at the meeting point between ideology, grievance and opportunity, whose impact to become a violent extremist can largely be avoided through social cohesion, strengthening of civic values, increased cooperation among community actors and improved institutional performance; and last (f) the existence of factors conducive to resilience can strengthen communities and prevent them from becoming affected even when factors of vulnerability are present, particularly in the presence of proactive engagement by actors that promote resilience.¹⁰³ Faced with the challenge of VE and the enabling drivers, the Government of Albania undertook legal, institutional and other respective measures to counter the spread of radicalization and VE in the country. The following subsection aims to provide a review of the Government of Albania's efforts to counter VE.

CVE in Albania

Following the rise of FTFs phenomenon, the Government of Albania took legal and institutional measures. In early 2014, the government amended the penal code, specifically Article 265/a "Participating in combat operations of foreign countries"; Article 265/b "Organizing for participating in combat operations of a foreign country" and Article 265/c "Calling for participating in violent combat operations in a foreign country."¹⁰⁴ As a result of these changes, in March 2015, Albania dismantled a nine-person FTF recruiting ring. The members were arrested on charges of inciting acts of terrorism and after a yearlong trial the group was sentenced to a collective 126 years in prison.¹⁰⁵

Albania was among the first countries in the region that adopted a National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism and its Action Plan (NSCVE).¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Ibid. 27-30

¹⁰⁴ Republic of Albania, Penal Code of the Republic of Albania. Penal Code, Tirana: Center of Official Publications (2017), pp. 165-166

¹⁰⁵ Counter Extremism Report, "Albania: Extremism and Counter-Extremism," Report, New York: Counter Extremism Project (2017)

¹⁰⁶ Council of Ministers, "On Adopting the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism and its Action Plan," Decision of Council of Ministers, Tirana: Official Gazette (2015)

The NSCVE is the main policy documents on P/CVE and sets out four strategic objectives:¹⁰⁷

- Strengthen coordination, collaboration, and partnership, at the local, national, and international levels, among government agencies, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, religious communities, and the media in designing and implementing effective CVE interventions;
- Encourage local research to improve the understanding of the conditions, factors and drivers of radicalization to violence as well as the existing levels of community resilience against VE;
- Build community resilience and narrow the breeding ground for radicalization and VE through tailored preventive community-based education, employment, and policing programs and policies;
- Reduce the impact of violent extremist propaganda and recruitment online by using social media to develop and disseminate alternative positive messages.

To achieve the strategic objectives the NSCVE foresees three priorities and ten measures (table 1).

Priority 1 Community outreach and engagement	Priority 2 Countering extremist propaganda while promoting democratic values	Priority 3 Developing long-term comprehensive CVE policies
1. Encourage critical thinking, civic participation, and promote values of tolerance through education. 2. Address socio-economic drivers of radicalization through vocational education and training (VET) and employment services. 3. Build trust and confidence and increase community safety through community policing. 4. Empower civil society to build community resilience.	5. Propose a creative and innovative communication strategy to complement the NSCVE. 6. Influence attitudes and behaviours towards violent extremism through contextualised campaigns and other communication initiatives.	7. Develop knowledge and expertise on countering violent extremism through research and increased information sharing. 8. Enhance capacities of practitioners and frontline workers. 9. Evaluate CVE policies: apply and share lessons learned. 10. Develop partnerships at the regional and international levels.

Table 4. Priorities and measures of the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism 2015

¹⁰⁷ National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (2015) https://mb.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/strategija_kombetare_per_luften_kunder_ekstrmizmit.pdf

Another action was to establish the Coordination Center for CVE, which is responsible for coordination and capacity development of local stakeholders and frontline practitioners involved in efforts to counter VE in Albania and the region by sharing best practices and developing effective evidence-based responses to counter the threat of VE. The Center was established pursuant to the Council of Ministers’ decision 737 from December 2017, as a public legal entity.¹⁰⁸ The upgraded CVE Centre is working with different line ministries and local authorities in the implementation of the CVE strategy. The CVE Centre should be provided with sufficient funding, staff and political support to perform its tasks effectively.¹⁰⁹ The CVE Center aims to have an inclusive approach in different coordination levels and apart from central and local official institutions it aims to cooperate with other actors and stakeholders that are not directly connected to the Centre. To this end, the Center cooperates with networks based on fields of interest as the Network of Civil Society, the Network of Religious Communities, the Network of Journalists, Women’s Network, Youth Network, Researchers’ Network, and the Network of Business Community.¹¹⁰

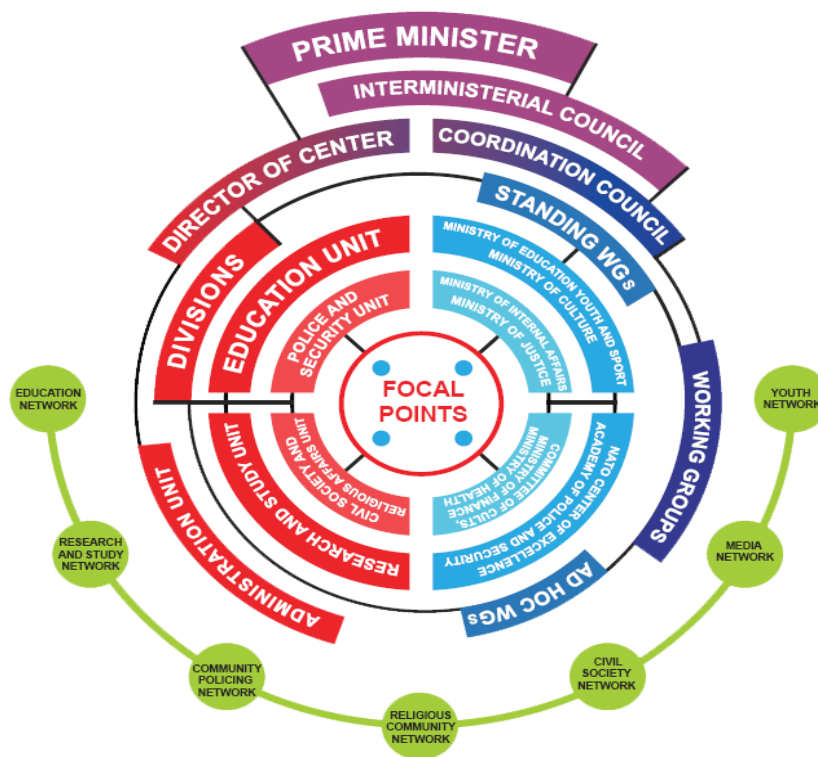


Figure 4: The Structural Approach of the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism in Albania

¹⁰⁸ Counter Extremism Report, “Albania: Extremism and Counter-Extremism,” Report, New York: Counter Extremism Project (2017)

¹⁰⁹ European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document. Working Document, Strasbourg: European Commission (2019), pp. 38

¹¹⁰ Mandrit Kamolli and Arjan Dyrnishi. Albania’s Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Implementation, Outcomes and Alignment with the EU Approaches and Framework. Policy Paper, Tirana: Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (2018) pp. 28-29.

The CVE Center has achieved good results in terms of building local capacities, developing a network of stakeholders and actors engaged in P/CVE actions, and implementing the Action Plan of the Strategy. However, the CVE Center has been cautious to engaging in developing capacities to implementing Measures 5 and 6 under Priority number two of the Strategy, namely: “Propose a creative and innovative communication strategy to complement the Albanian National Strategy”, and “Influence attitudes and behaviours towards violent extremism through contextualized campaigns and other communication initiatives.”

These two measures have been broadly framed as strategic communication objectives to prevent and counter VE. Although the CVE Center has developed constant awareness raising activities on a national level, specific action is needed to address required challenges in some identified hotspots where religious grounded disputes have flared up and shall have inspired incidents. A study¹¹¹ confirms that for the most part the Government of Albania has played a role of monitoring and cooperating, however, the lack of knowledge-sharing with local communities has been striking. For example, although much has been discussed in the literature about factors influencing VE, some of the local Albanian communities and institutions – three or four years after the emergence of the FTFs phenomenon – still seem to have left the issue near the end of their priority lists.¹¹² It also states that one other priority area of the Albanian government is to propose a creative and innovative communication strategy to complement the Albanian National Strategy, however, little has been done to engage various actors such as state officials, academics, the media and technology companies, civil society, religious communities, and social workers.¹¹³ Awareness about the strategy and the risks of VE is thus generally low. Even though the NSCVE suggests the development of information-sharing systems and protocols to achieve more effective prevention of VE, state institutions remain reluctant to share information with CSOs or other actors. Moreover, such data is often not shared even among different units of the same institution.¹¹⁴ When the Government of Albania began its CVE efforts, a total of 145 citizens, including children and women, had left the country for joining the war in Syria. In this realm, the Government had to work on repatriation efforts of their citizens (mainly women and children) who were stuck in Syria, as the Syrian civil war came to an end after the fall of ISIS. The following subsection elaborates on Albania’s repatriation efforts.

¹¹¹ Redion Qirjazi and Romario Shehu. 2018. Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania. Research, Berlin: Berghof Foundation., pp. 24-25

¹¹² Ibid. pp. 23

¹¹³ Ibid. pp. 25

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 23-24

Repatriation efforts of the Government of Albania

Concerning the repatriation of Albanian citizens in Syria, the Government of Albania has a political decision for returning women and children from the conflict areas in Syria.¹¹⁵ However, there was little information provided to the public due to the confidentiality of the matter - and despite the constant expression of willingness to bring them back - nothing concrete had completed until 27 October 2020,¹¹⁶ when the Albanian state repatriated a woman and four children from the Kurdish-controlled al-Hol camp in North-eastern Syria. The repatriation process of around 75 remaining nationals is ongoing.¹¹⁷ The National Coordinator of CVE Center in Albania has argued the government has everything in place for receiving and reintegrating the returnees.¹¹⁸

While BIRN has identified a total of 52 Albanian citizens in al-Hol camp, 11 women and 41 children, 13 of whom were born in Syria,¹¹⁹ little is known about the male FTFs. In this regard, the US Department of State's most recent Country Reports on Terrorism 2019 underlines the terrorism threat in Albania consists of FTFs returning from Iraq and Syria and Albanian youth being radicalized to terrorism.¹²⁰ Similarly, the EC 2019 report states that the government needs to (a) develop programmes to reintegrate returning FTFs and their families, (b) improve the programmes to prevent radicalization in prisons, and (c) strengthen the monitoring mechanisms involving civil society and religious communities.¹²¹ A key role in the decision of the citizens to join the war in Syria was the extremist propaganda, disseminated mainly through online channels. In this context, the following subsection analyzes the tackling of extremist propaganda in Albania.

¹¹⁵ Sojati, A. (2019, December 23). Syria recruits, Agron Sojati: We need to be careful because we are talking about terrorists, not tourists. (S. Balla, Interviewer)

¹¹⁶ A2CNN "PM Rama: We have the register of all the Albanians in Syria" Link: <https://a2news.com/2020/05/12/shqiptaret-ne-siri-a2-pyet-kryeministrin-rama-kemi-regjistrin-e-te-gjithe-personave/>. See also: A2 CNN "Albanians in Syria / MEFA: We have been engaged with partners since the spring for repatriation" Link: <https://a2news.com/2019/11/13/shqiptaret-ne-siri-ministria-e-jashtme-jemi-angazhuar-me-partneret-qe-ne-pranvereper-riatdhesimin/>

¹¹⁷ Voice of America, "Albanian IS Repatriation From Syria Will Be Long Journey, Experts Say" <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/albanian-repatriation-syria-will-be-long-journey-experts-say>

¹¹⁸ A2CNN "Repatriates from Syria, Dervishi: Working groups have been set up to provide any assistance". <https://a2news.com/2020/10/30/te-riatdhesuarit-nga-siria-dervishi-jane-ngritur-grupe-qe-do-te-japin-asistence-te-cfaredollojshme/>

¹¹⁹ Fatjona Mejdini, "Families of Albanian ISIS fighters face long road home," Balkan Insight (2019). April 18. Accessed June 26, 2020. https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/18/families-of-albanian-isis-fighters-face-long-road-home/?fbclid=IwAR3INBcXjTfH0UgKEXImvr_LgM4ARGYADqkAxULN8JNO_D8tldckPzygQ5s

¹²⁰ US Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism. Report, Washington D.C.: US Department of State (2020) pp. 61-62

¹²¹ European Commission, 2019. Commission Staff Working Document. Working Document, Strasbourg: European Commission. pp. 38

The violent extremism “communication war”

So far, Albania has not appropriately dealt with the “communication war” in terms of tackling the extremist propaganda. As in many other countries, much of the emphasis has been placed on tackling terrorism financing and threats as well undertaking restraining measures such as removal of extremist content online or monitoring offline activities (See annex 3). However, such measures do not reflect the scale of extreme propaganda in society, nor they do address the problem effectively.

The spread of extremist ideas in Albania is mostly linked to peer-to-peer communication, using small personal networks. Over the years, online and offline channels of communication have also been emphasized as an important tool in the hands of violent extremists to spread their propaganda and ideology. Early court cases in Albanian in 2009 dealt with the spread of extremism propaganda online. During the FTFs crises in 2014 online channels played a key role to radicalize and recruit individuals. As a consequence, Albanian authorities amended the Penal Code in 2014 to tackle the spread of extremist propaganda online and increased the online surveillance capacities.

Albanians were one of the target groups of ISIS online propaganda in 2015-2017, which proved effective in radicalizing and recruiting about 500 fighters and their families from their countries in Western Balkans and Europe. A 2015 study discovered a sophisticated online public communication strategy of ISIS in Albanian language,¹²² aiming at recruiting them as fighters in conflict areas. Furthermore, the Albanian language is also one of the five languages used for communication in what is considered the official online site of ISIS (<https://hilafeti.wordpress.com>), showing the danger that the propaganda of this terrorist group might pose for the radicalization of Albanians.

According to INSTAT statistics, 82.2% of Albanian households had internet access in 2019, marking a higher internet penetration rate than the world average (estimated at 58.8 percent).¹²³ Having a young population, our country uses smartphones excessively, which offer low-cost internet service on the basis of solid 4G infrastructure anywhere. INSTAT data also reveals that “daily/almost daily” internet usage has recorded the highest percentages over the years for all age groups, the main users belonging to age group of 16-24 years at about 93.1% and age group of 25-34 years at 92.4%.

In the FTFs case, the dissemination of radical messages has happened both in-person and online by the so called “illegal imams” some of whom were arrested in 2015. These imams used mosques that used to be out of the MCA jurisdiction. The demographics and data show that low income

¹²² Academy of Political Studies, (2015) Public relation online strategies of ISIS in Albania:

http://www.asp.al/pdf/Working_paper-Public_relation_strategies_of_ISIS_in_Albania.pdf

¹²³ STATISTA, Global Internet Penetration Rate (2020): <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269329/penetration-rate-of-the-internet-by-region/#:~:text=This%20statistic%20shows%20the%20internet,from%2035%20percent%20in%202013.>

poorly (religiously) educated individuals were targeted. The measures and restrictions adopted by the law enforcement authorities have influenced the transition of communication online.

Other studies suggest that involvement of moderate religious clerics is important when it comes to countering the narratives of religious extremists and dismantling their outreach to vulnerable religious believers, especially those at an early phase of religious practice.¹²⁴ Working with affected individuals requires the involvement of MCA clerics with solid religious knowledge and with influence among the community of believers.

The escalation of religious conflicts, the widespread technology that conveys messages in real time, the proliferation of terrorist groups, as well as numerous influencing actors and factors have all in concert contributed to the rise of VE propaganda in Albania, while no proportional action has been undertaken to address it. While extremist propaganda played an important role in the radicalization of citizens, other factors were important as well. It is important to note that factors conducive to vulnerability are not the same but specific to different contexts. That is why the next subsection elaborates on the radicalization trends only in the Municipality of Tirana, which had almost half of the FTFs from Albania.

Radicalization trends in the Tirana Municipality

Tirana Municipality is Albania's capital and the country's main administrative and economic centre. It hosts the headquarters of the main political parties and is the place where most religious communities have their headquarters and conduct the bulk of their activities. Tirana is the largest city by population in Albania, according to official statistics as of January 2020 around 31% of Albania's 2.85 million citizens reside in Tirana. This numbers can climb up to 50% taking in consideration unofficial demographic dynamics and the universities students. Since the foreign fighter phenomena burst out from 2014 onward, it has been identified by the CVE Center as one of the country's hotspots of radicalization and extremism.

Tirana municipality was the host of the largest number of residing foreign fighters that did leave Albania to join the wars in the Middle East, 70 out of 144 that joined the terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq (ISIS/AL-Nusra/ Al-Qaeda). It is important to state that all citizens involved in the process of radicalization and violent extremism that leads to terrorism did encounter such doctrine in different worship places, such as "illegal mosques" and education institutions wherein radicalising materials and teachings were openly delivered. A confidential document addressing the phenomena of "illegal mosques" were send to the Parliament members where was noted that

¹²⁴ For information about the role of religious authorities in PCVE check: <https://www.cfr.org/event/engaging-religious-communities-countering-violent-extremism>; <https://www.mv.undp.org/content/maldives/en/home/presscenter/speeches/2019/TheRoleofReligiousLeadersinPreventingExtremism.html>; and <https://berghof-foundation.org/library>. For a more unorthodox role of religious communities in P/CVE check: <https://idmalbania.org/reconsidering-the-role-of-civil-society-and-religious-authorities-in-building-community-resilience-in-albania/>.

89 mosques did have no influence from the Albanian Muslim Community. The arrested self-proclaimed imams, Mr. Balla and Mr. Hysa, did exercise their radical views and activities at the respective “Unaza e Re” and the “Mëzez” mosques which are settled in Tirana Municipality. Such data indicates that Tirana is the one municipality where VE ideology has not been sporadic but instead has been focused in particular areas – which indicates that factors may be community related, focusing on the peripheral Tirana’s suburbs. Also, the city has witnessed interreligious tensions and the emergence of hostile narratives over the last few years that were not previously noticed. As such a common assessment for “misinterpretation of the mission of Islam” or a “lack of proper understanding” appears to be shared among the religious leaders in Tirana community. Accordingly, the Myfti¹²⁵ of Tirana stated that some mosques were completely isolated and practicing Islam outside of the reach of the Muslim Community of Albania MCA, and therefore this opens the circle that the possible indoctrination (not only those 70 mentioned) had occurred during this period.

While there has been an expressed willingness on the part of the Albanian government to respond to these tensions and unexpected crises, there is lack of solid research to guide the process of designing effective P/CVE messages and narratives and devising the most credible means and ways to convey them through a strategic approach that builds a resilient and sustainable narrative.

In addition to this subsection, the following subsection (the last of section V) also aims to understand the local context where half of Albania’s FTFs were recruited, based on a discussion of several factors.

PESTL Analysis

This section briefly analyses the political, economic, social, technological and legal factors (PESTL) with the aim to understanding the environment under which the phenomenon of VE takes place. The PESTL analysis is a tool used to identify the macro factors that impact a particular topic or organization.¹²⁶

Political Factors

The Albanian Parliament consists of 140 members elected through regional proportional electoral system with a four-year mandate. The last parliamentary elections were conducted on June 25, 2017, in which the Socialist Party secured a second mandate with 74 members in the Parliament, allowing it to govern the country alone. The next parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place on 25 April 2021. The 2019 was marked with a tense political environment, the opposition

¹²⁵ Mufti is called the leader of the Muslim religious community in a specific region of a country.

¹²⁶ Ho, Joseph Kim-Keung. "Formulation of a systemic PEST analysis for strategic analysis." *European academic research* 2.5 (2014): 6478-6492.

parties Democratic Party and Socialist Movement for Integration in a sign of protest against the government relinquished their parliamentary mandates, thus paving the way for a number of political changes. The most important one was that the local elections that took place in June 2019 were boycotted by the opposition parties. The ruling majority Socialist Party won 60 out of 61 municipalities, including the Tirana Municipality where Mr. Erion Veliaj was elected for the second consecutive term.

Albania's population on 1 January 2020 resulted in 2.845.955 inhabitants,¹²⁷ showing a decrease with 0.6% compared with the same period one year before. The data shows that the population estimates of 1 January 2020, only two regions of the country recorded an increase in population compared to 2019, while ten of them marked a decline. The largest increase was observed in Tirana region (+1.2%). As such, in the region of Tirana lives 31.8% of the population organized in 5 municipalities.

The trust in politics, state institutions and desire of citizens to engage in political activism has deteriorated in the recent years,¹²⁸ which coupled with poor governance are factors often mentioned to affect radicalization growth.

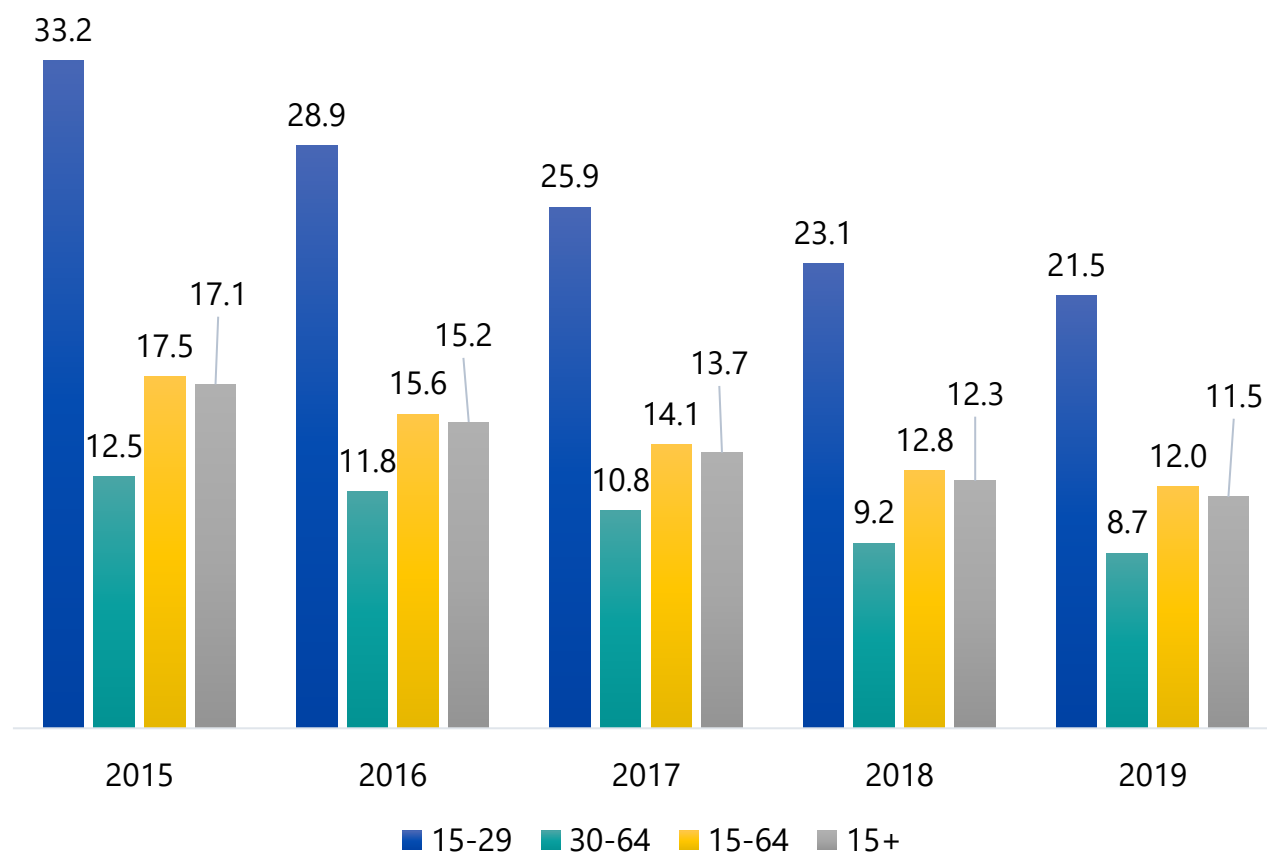
Economic factors

VE emerged as a combination of ideology, grievances and opportunity, arising from the interaction between ideological, structural and socio-economic factors of vulnerability. Factors such as absolute and relative poverty, social fragmentation, social exclusion and discrimination and illegal economic activity, are known to be associated with frustration with the economic and political system. Although, as explained above, there is no simple correlation between the socio-economic status and demography of young adults, and their likelihood of becoming radicalised, unemployed youth and isolated individuals from under-developed regions might especially be vulnerable to propaganda of extremist ideologies that advocate the use of violence for protesting against the existing order and for obtaining desired changes, as well as personal benefits. The presence of religious extremists and individuals who exert pressure on religious believers to join extremist causes has been confirmed also in the municipality of Tirana.

¹²⁷ [Institute of Statistics. Population of Albania in 2020. http://www.instat.gov.al/media/6849/popullsia_me-1_janar_2020.pdf](http://www.instat.gov.al/media/6849/popullsia_me-1_janar_2020.pdf)

¹²⁸ Public Perception Poll on Political Engagement in Albanian 2020, Institute for Democracy and Mediation, National Democratic Institute < <https://idmalbania.org/survey-of-political-engagement-in-albania-2020/>>

Unemployment rate in Albania (2015-2019)



Graph 1. Source of information: Institute of Statistics, Labour Force Surveys 2015-2019

Economic deprivation and isolation can form a vicious circle that makes it even more difficult for individuals to get out of it. Even if individuals are not identified with VE, the desire to “escape” from their reality of marginalization can potentially be a factor associated with involvement in VE. Economic deprivation makes it difficult for individuals to maintain their connection with society, and even more difficult to secure a living. Moreover, the constant lack of economic opportunities brings anger and loss of hope.

While many of the foreign fighters and the convicted recruiters originate from more distant areas (rural areas of Librazhd, Pogradec, Dibër, etc.), they were residing and operating also in the outskirts of main urban centres, such as the capital Tirana.

The youth, the most vulnerable group to radicalization, are over-represented in the unemployment statistics. In 2019, youth unemployment was estimated to be 21.5 percent, similar rate stands for 2020. The National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) and the National Strategy for Social Protection 2015–2020 estimate that the poorest areas are the coastal and mountainous rural regions. Well-educated persons are unable to find jobs that fit with their qualifications. Such

disparity between education and employment might be a source of frustration for many young people. Deprivation of socioeconomic needs—especially when combined with other factors such as widespread corruption and lack of security and justice—may be a factor exploited by VE groups.

Social Factors

Estimates of the population in 2020 shows that Tirana experienced a population growth compared to the previous year by experiencing an increase of 1.2 %. During 2019, in Albania there were 28,561 babies born, a decrease of 1.3% compared to the previous year. In the first quarter of 2020 the highest value of birth is recorded in the region of Tirana, where the number of births is 2,059. The number of deaths in 2019 in Albania is 21,937 persons, an increase of 0.6% compared to the previous year. In the first quarter of 2020 the highest number of deaths is registered in Tirana, with 1,499 deaths. With regards to the religious composition of Tirana, 55.7% of its citizens are Muslim, 6.4% are Orthodox, 5.4% are Catholic and 3.4% are Bektashi in Tirana.¹²⁹ The ethnic groups in Albania include Albanian 82.6%, Greek 0.9%, and other 1% (including Vlach, Romani, Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Egyptian).¹³⁰ The number of emigrants in 2019 in Albania was 43,835 persons, an increase of 13.3% compared to the previous year. While in 2019, the number of immigrants is 20,753 persons, a decrease of 12.3 % compared to the previous year.

Technological factors

One of the main factors contributing to the rise of ISIS was its use of social media to spread its propaganda and to recruit militants from the Arab world and across the globe.¹³¹

The content of online radicalization in the Albanian language is increasing. As was mentioned earlier, this concern is also stated in the Albania 2019 Report of the European Commission, which highlighted that online radicalization content in Albanian is on the rise.¹³²

While social media enables people to communicate and stay up to date with relatives around the world, join or promote worthwhile causes and raise awareness on important issues, it can also serve as a dangerous opportunity for self-radicalization, especially for young people, because the daily/weekly frequency of the internet usage by this category is very high.

¹²⁹ The Institute of Statistics. 2011. Instat Albania. Accessed June 24, 2020

<https://instatgis.gov.al/#/l/prefectures/population/prefpop1>

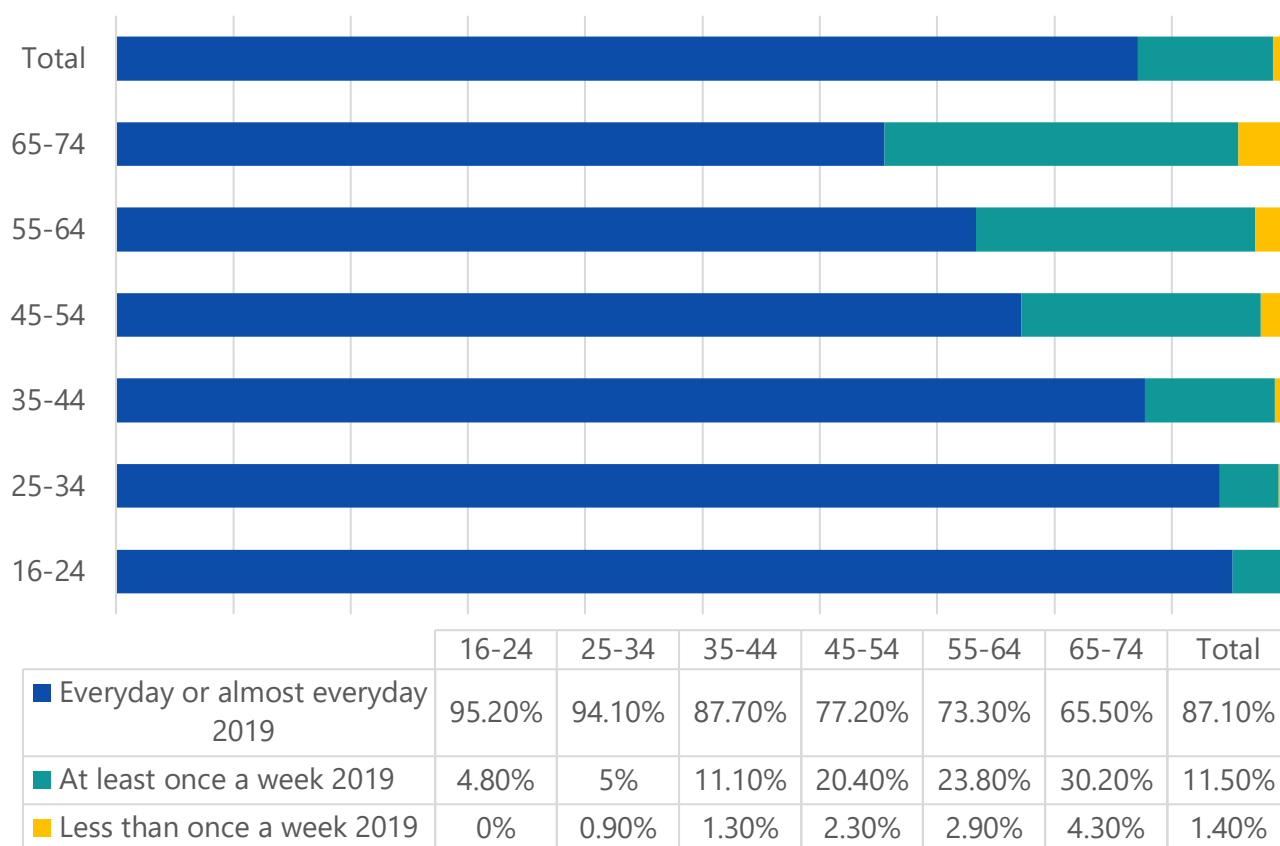
¹³⁰ Ibid. Clarification: A total of 15.5% of the population in 2011 census did not specify their ethnic group.

¹³¹ Badawy, A and Emilio Ferrara, "The Rise of Jihadist Propaganda on Social Networks" (Cornell University, 2017)

Available at: <https://arxiv.org/abs/1702.02263>.

¹³² European Commission, Albania 2019 Report: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-albania-report.pdf>

ICT usage frequency distribution by age groups 2019 in %



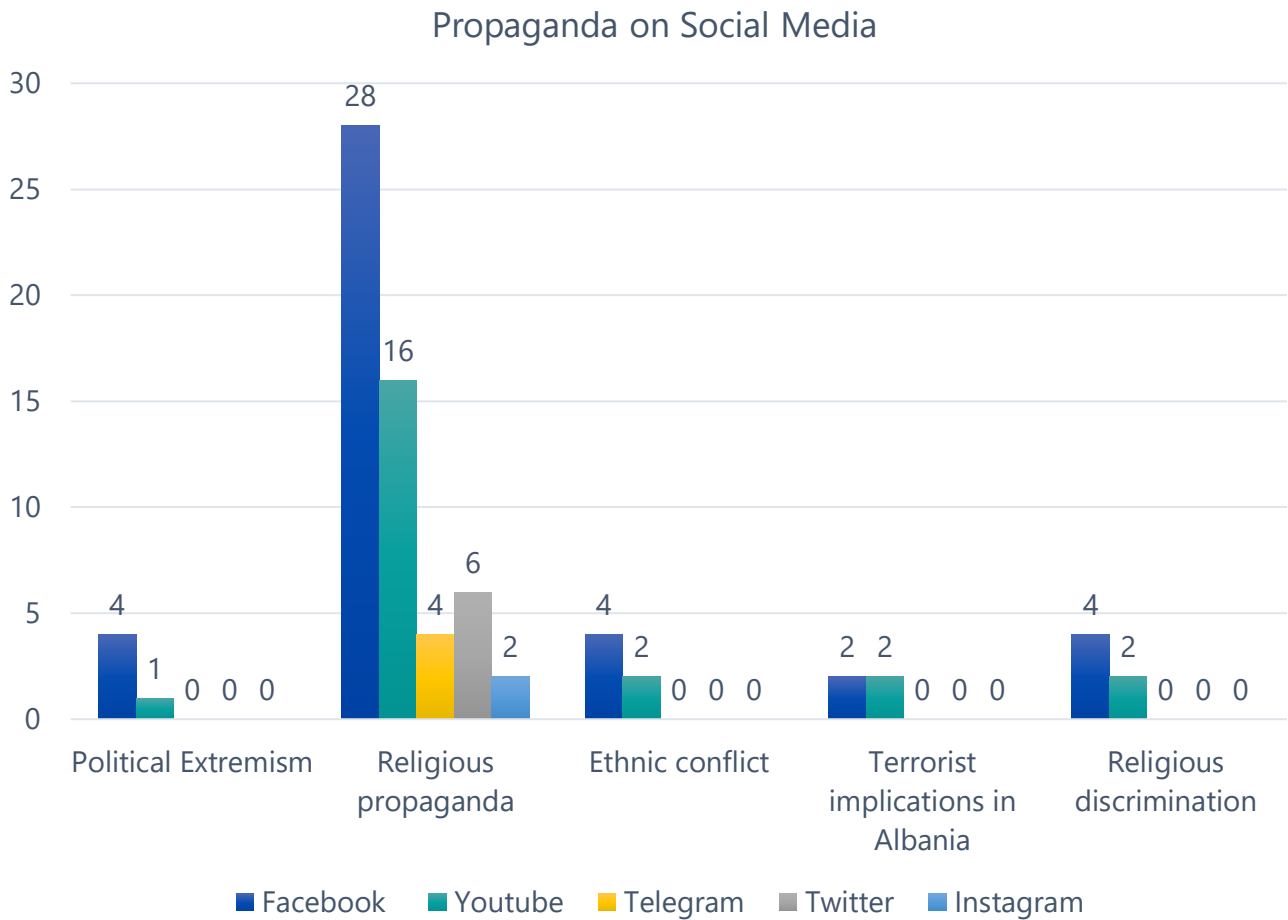
Graph 2. Source of information: Institute of Statistics, ICT (information and communication technology) usage frequency distribution by age groups 2019, in %

Although online radicalization cannot bring immediate threat, it may jeopardize the sustainability and security of the country in the future. Communication channels can serve as enabling factors of VE.

According to the 2020 study by the Academy of Political Studies¹³³ Facebook is the most used platform by users who spread extremist propaganda in Albanian language, although extremist content is evidenced also in personal accounts and organizations on platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Telegram and Instagram. The main form of VE content in social media is religious propaganda.¹³⁴

¹³³ Akademia e Studimeve Politike (Academy of Political Studies). (2020). Raport Monitorimi “Mbi elementët e ekstremizmit të dhunshëm që qarkullojnë në platformat online në Shqipëri” (Monitoring Report “On the elements of violent extremism circulating on online platforms in Albania). Retrieved from http://www.asp.al/pdf/Monitorimi_CVE_ALB_-_Pa_anekse.pdf.”

¹³⁴ Ibid, Fig 1.



Graph 3. Number of found links, spreading radicalization and violent extremism

Legislative factors

As one of the countries that has been affected by the VE leading to terrorism, Albania is committed to meet national security goals by preventing and combating VE. For this purpose, the legal and institutional framework has been developed and consolidated in line with international anti-terrorism developments, at the same time strengthening internal institutional mechanisms and investing in regional and international partnerships of this field.

The Albanian government has taken both institutional and legal actions in the area of PVE. In February 2014 the Albanian government amended the penal code (Articles 265/a, and 265/b) to allow for more flexible interpretation of terrorist acts while imposing harsher penalties on perpetrators; Albania was one of the first countries in the region to approve a National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism and a corresponding Action Plan 2015-2020; Albania appointed a National Coordinator on CVE who is responsible for implementing the strategy and coordinating directly with the Prime Minister; Albania established in December 2017 the Coordination Center

for Countering Violent Extremism; Albania adopted the National Cyber Security Strategy 2020-2025¹³⁵ (For more information on the legislative and institutional actions of Albania see Annex 3).

However, regardless of the efforts, Albania has still work to do in countering VE. As the EC report states¹³⁶ the CVE Coordination Centre should be given sufficient funding, staff and political support to fulfil its tasks, and more needs to be done as regards reintegration and resocialization of returnees and to prevent radicalization in prisons.

This entire section (V) was focused on the already existing literature in Albania. The following section VI (Target Audience Analysis) will provide primary data from the survey conducted in Tirana on behalf of this study.

¹³⁵ https://cesk.gov.al/legjislacioni/2020/strategjia_kombetare_sigurise_kibernetike.pdf

¹³⁶ European Commission, Albania 2019 Report: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-albania-report.pdf>

Chapter VI: Target Audience Analysis



Based on the findings from the review of the literature, the PESTL analysis, and in line with the theoretical assumptions regarding the drivers of VE, a questionnaire with 105 questions was drafted to collect data from citizens of the Tirana Municipality. This section provides the results of the survey and an interpretation of the data collected.

The survey data were collected through face-to-face interviews through a stratified random sample of 800 adults between 18 to 64 years old. In the first strata, observations were proportionally distributed among 24 administrative units that are part of Tirana Municipality based on their adult population. In the second strata, observations were proportionately distributed among urban and rural areas. Then proportional gender and age quotas were developed for each substratum. Mock interviews were conducted to test the survey questionnaire and observe the reactions of interviewers in real-like interviewing situations to make possible modifications to reduce bias and increase accuracy.

The public survey aims to explore different perceptions and opinion of the general public about their understanding of VE and means to counter it, with a particular focus on the communication approach. The quantitative methodological approach supplied the study data especially useful to develop the findings and construct a policy approach. To this purpose, a questionnaire was developed, piloted and then administered. The margin of statistical error for the whole sample is calculated at +/-3.3%. The sample was designed to be representative to the whole population. However, the accuracy of representative should be considered with caution considering the size of the sample and the population under evaluation.

Demography

This first subsection provides demographic information of the survey respondents. The majority of respondents 75% reside in urban areas, whereas 25% reside in rural areas. Regarding the education, 60% hold high school degree, 27% hold university degree, nearly 8% of respondents have completed only the compulsory (8-9-year) education, and 5.5% hold post-graduate degree. In terms of occupation, nearly 42% of respondents work in the private sector, 22% are declared self-employed, nearly 12% are declared unemployed, and 10% work in the public sector.

The unemployment level is almost identical to the 2020 second quarter report from the Institute of Statistics, which ranks unemployment level at 11.9%.¹³⁷ Therefore, the sample might be representative of the population. The following subsection displays the religious beliefs of the survey respondents.

¹³⁷ Institute of Statistics 2020, <http://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/tregu-i-pun%C3%ABs-dhe-arsimi/pun%C3%ABsimi-dhe-papun%C3%ABsia/#tab2>

Religious beliefs

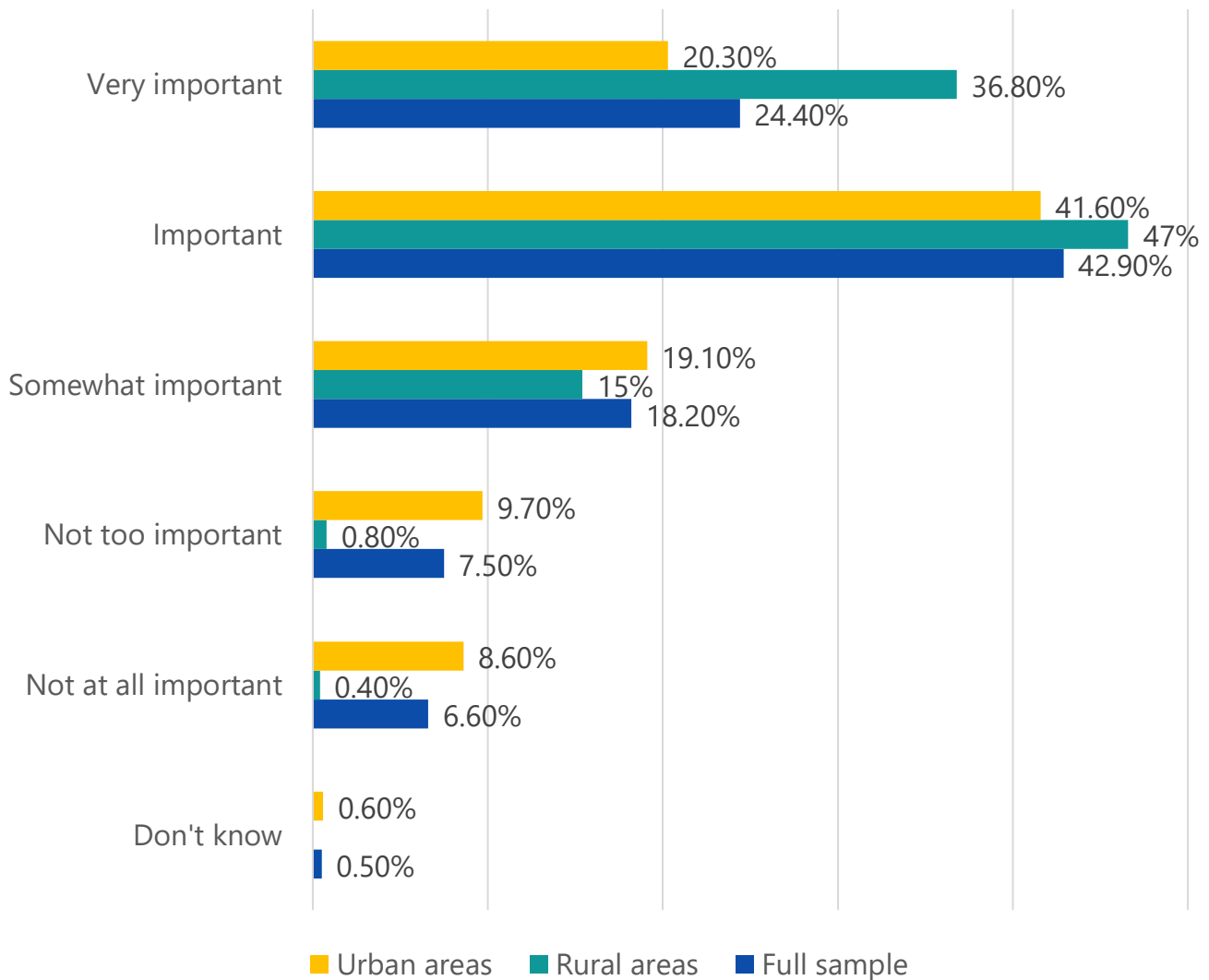
Almost all the respondents (92%) believe in God or a universal spirit. When they were asked how certain they are about their belief in God or a universal spirit, the majority (52.5%) responded “absolutely certain” and 37% responded “fairly certain.”

The respondents were asked which religion they believed in, and the majority (64%) were Muslims, 12% Orthodox Christians, nearly 10% Bektashi, 5% Catholic Christians, the same percentage as atheists. As explained earlier in this study, in the section “Religion in Albania” Albania has a nearly 2.8 million population, where the three largest religious communities in the country are Muslim (56.7%), Catholics (10%) and Orthodox (6.8%). As regards to the official religious composition of Tirana, 55.7 percent of its citizens are Muslim, 6.4% are Orthodox, 5.4% are Catholic, and 3.4% are Bektashi. Nevertheless, the percentages in this report were approximate values, taking into consideration that 13.8% of the total population in 2011 census preferred not to answer to the question on religion, and that for 2.4% of the persons who answered, the information provided was irrelevant.¹³⁸

When asked how important they do consider religion for them, 43% of respondents declared it is important, nearly 24% declared it is very important, and 18% declared it is somewhat important. Only 6.6% of respondents declared religion is not at all important. For those residing in rural areas, religion is very important for 36.8% of them and important for 46.6%. Generally, the respondents of the rural areas appear to attach higher importance to religion.

¹³⁸ Albanian Institute of Statistics. (n.d.). INSTAT. From Census 2011: <http://instatgis.gov.al/#!/prefectures/population/prefpop1> (retrieved 10 October 2020).

How important is religion for you?

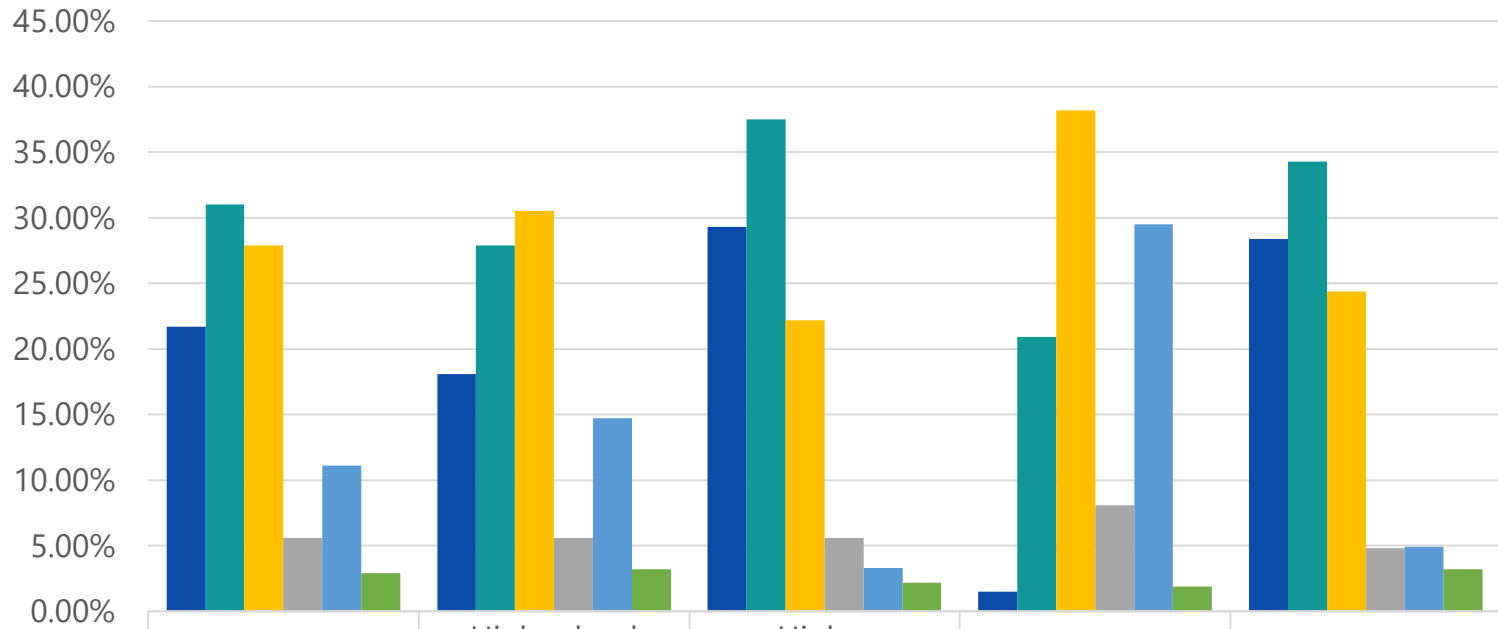


Graph 4 - Importance of religion

Regarding attendance of religious services, 31% said seldom, 28% a few times a year, 22% never, and 11% once a week.

However, frequency of attendance to religious services shows some variations in relation to the residence and education. Only 1.5% of those residing in rural areas said that they never attend such services while 29.9% of those with higher education do so. Those residing in rural areas have the highest frequency of weekly attendance 29%, compared with 11.1% of the whole sample and 3.3% of those with higher education.

How often do you attend religious services / ceremonies?



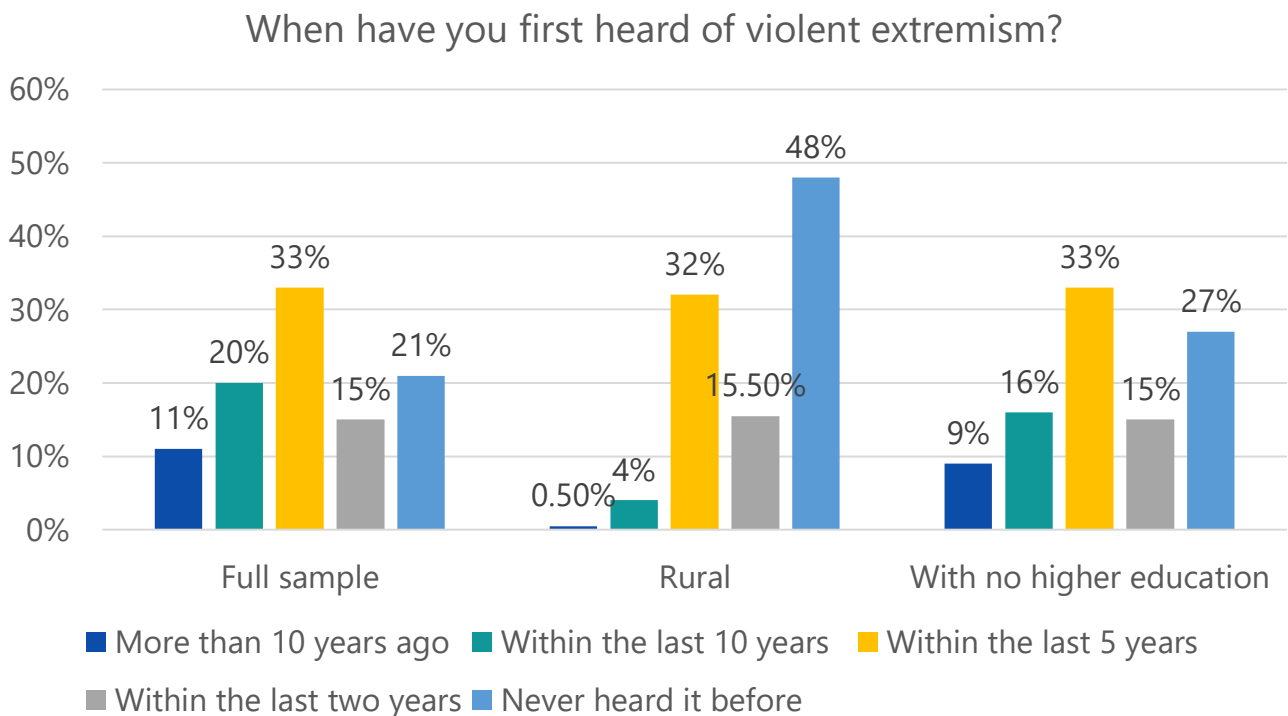
	Full sample	High school education	Higher education	Rural	Urban
■ Never	21.70%	18.10%	29.30%	1.50%	28.40%
■ Rarely	31%	27.90%	37.50%	20.90%	34.30%
■ Several times a year	27.90%	30.50%	22.20%	38.20%	24.40%
■ Once or twice a month	5.60%	5.60%	5.60%	8.10%	4.80%
■ Once a week	11.10%	14.70%	3.30%	29.50%	4.90%
■ More than once a week	2.90%	3.20%	2.20%	1.90%	3.20%

Graph 5. Frequency of attendance of religious services

Respondents' experience and understanding of violent extremism

This subsection explores respondents' experience and understanding of VE. Given that VE is a rather recent term introduced in the Albanian public discourse, the respondents were asked about their familiarity with the term. The vast majority of respondents, 73%, declared they are familiar with the term violent extremism, while 24% declared they were not aware. However, there is a considerable difference for those living in rural areas. While 81% of respondents in urban areas declared they were familiar with the term, only 48% of respondents in rural areas were familiar with the term.

Respondents were asked about the time when they first came to know about violent extremism. A third of the respondents have heard about extremism within the last five years, one fifth of respondents have heard about extremism within the last ten years, one sixth of respondents have heard about it within the last two years. Meanwhile, nearly one-fifth of respondents claimed to have never heard about extremism. Noteworthy, the two categories with the highest percentage of respondents who have never heard about extremism are rural areas, 48%, and respondents without higher education 27%.



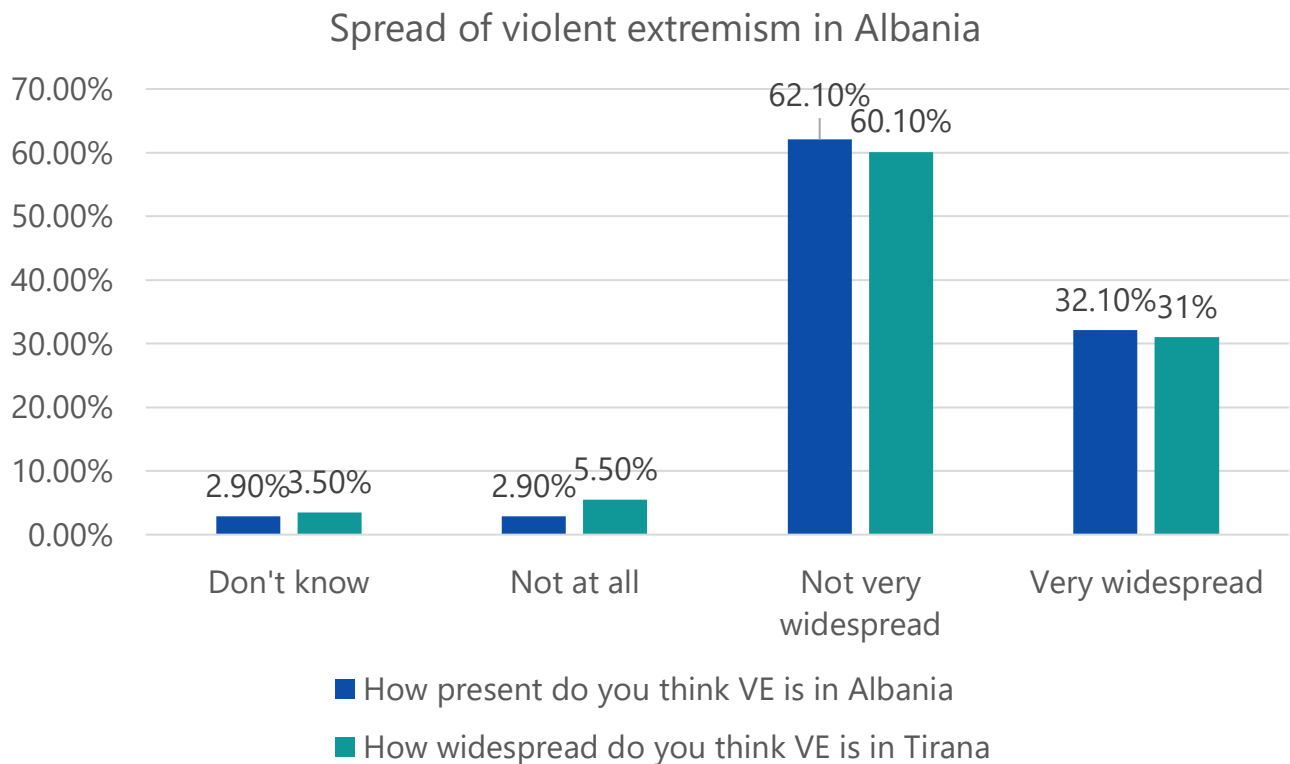
Graph 6 - When did you first come to know about violent extremism

In order to ensure that the respondents gave responses consistent with the scope of the survey, the respondents were provided at this point during the survey with the definition of violent extremism and violent extremists.¹³⁹

Although the focus of the research was Tirana municipality, respondents were asked to provide their opinion on how widespread violent extremism is in the Tirana Municipality but also in Albania as a whole. The majority of respondents (60%) said it is not too widespread in Tirana municipality, while 31% of respondents said it is too widespread.

Near similar opinion was given on the presence of violent extremism in Albania as the majority of respondents said it is not too widespread (62%), while around a third of respondents said it is very widespread.

In overall there does not seem to be a difference in the Tirana Municipality and the country as a whole.

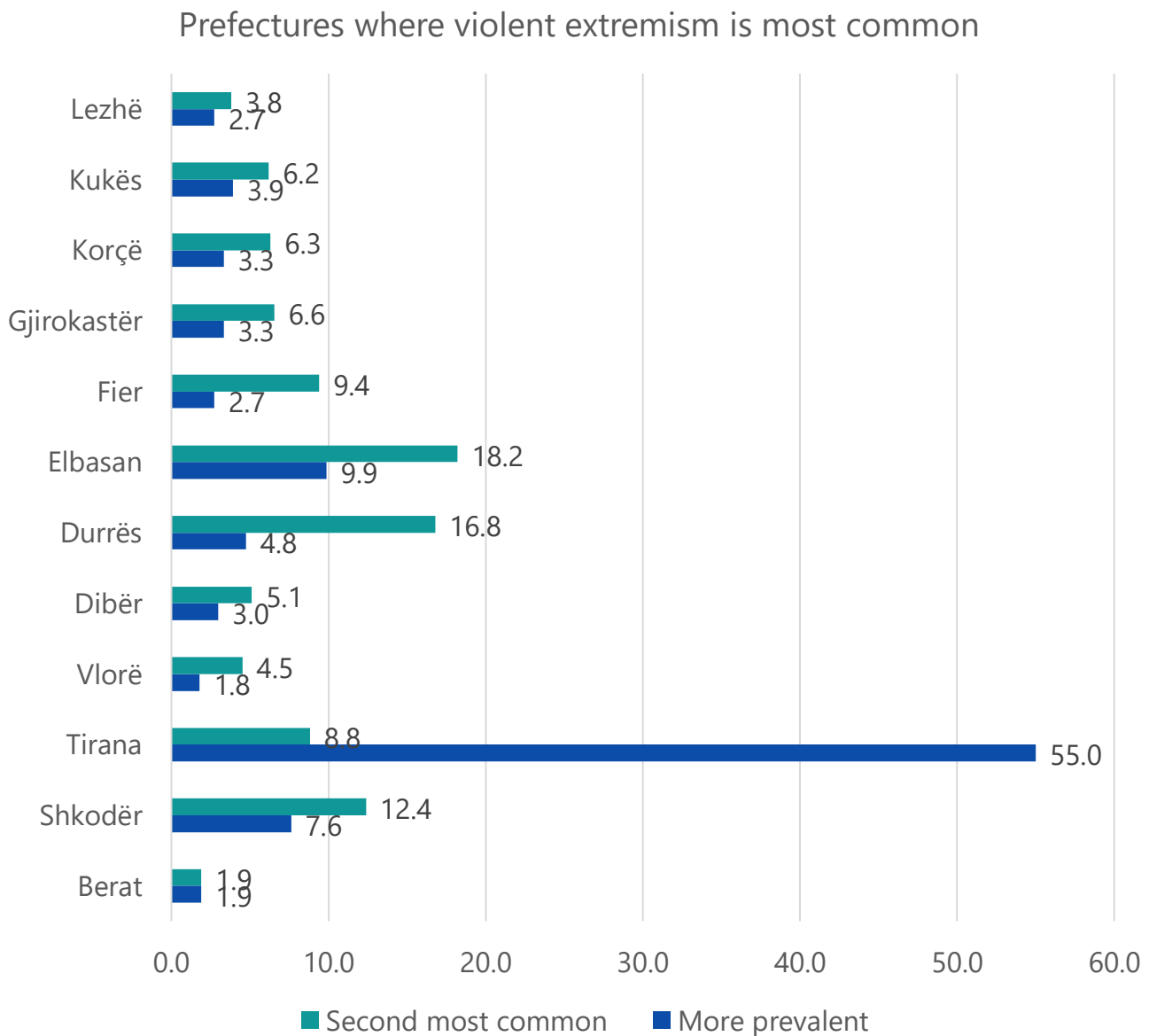


Graph 7 - Presence of violent extremism in Albania and Tirana Municipality

¹³⁹ Violent extremism refers to the beliefs and actions of people who support or use ideologically motivated violence to further political, religious or ideological objectives. Violent extremists do not only comprise individuals who are willing to embrace physical violence but also individuals who actively support, recruit or advocate in favour of a violent extremist ideology.

In addition to Tirana municipality and Albania as a whole, the citizens were asked to give their opinion on the presence of violent extremism in the 12 prefectures. The respondents were asked to provide first the response on the prefecture in which they thought violent extremism is more common, and then asked to pick a second prefecture with the most widespread violent extremism. This question was intended to substantiate previous assumptions on other so-called hotspots in the country.

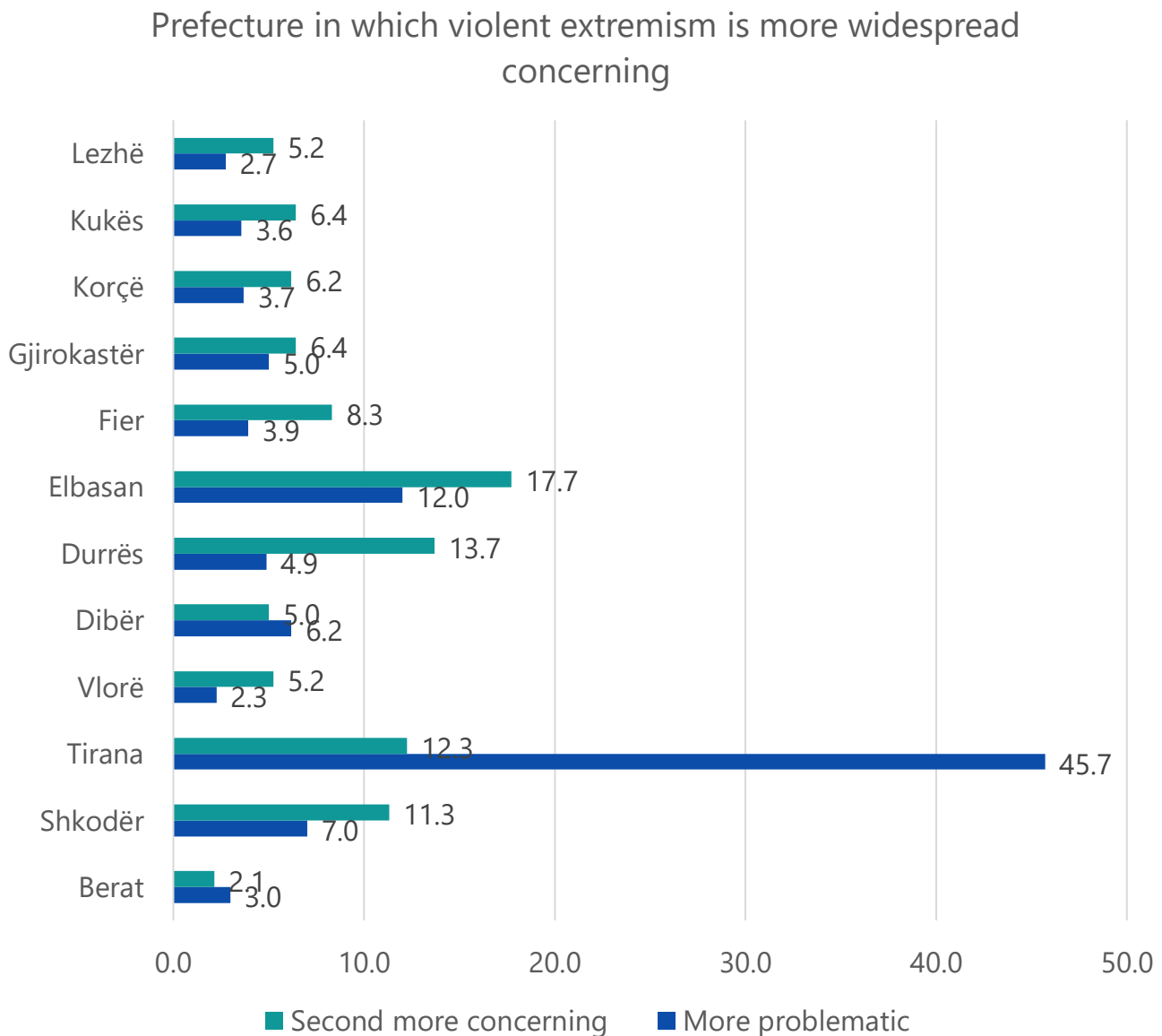
The responses show that the prefectures of Tirana, Shkodër, Elbasan, Gjirokastrë, Fier and Kukës, are regarded as having a higher violent extremism presence, but Tirana ranks higher.



Graph 8 - Spread of violent extremism in the 12 prefectures of the country

In addition to the opinion on the presence of violent extremism, the citizens were asked to provide their view on the areas where they thought violent extremism is more concerning in the 12 prefectures.

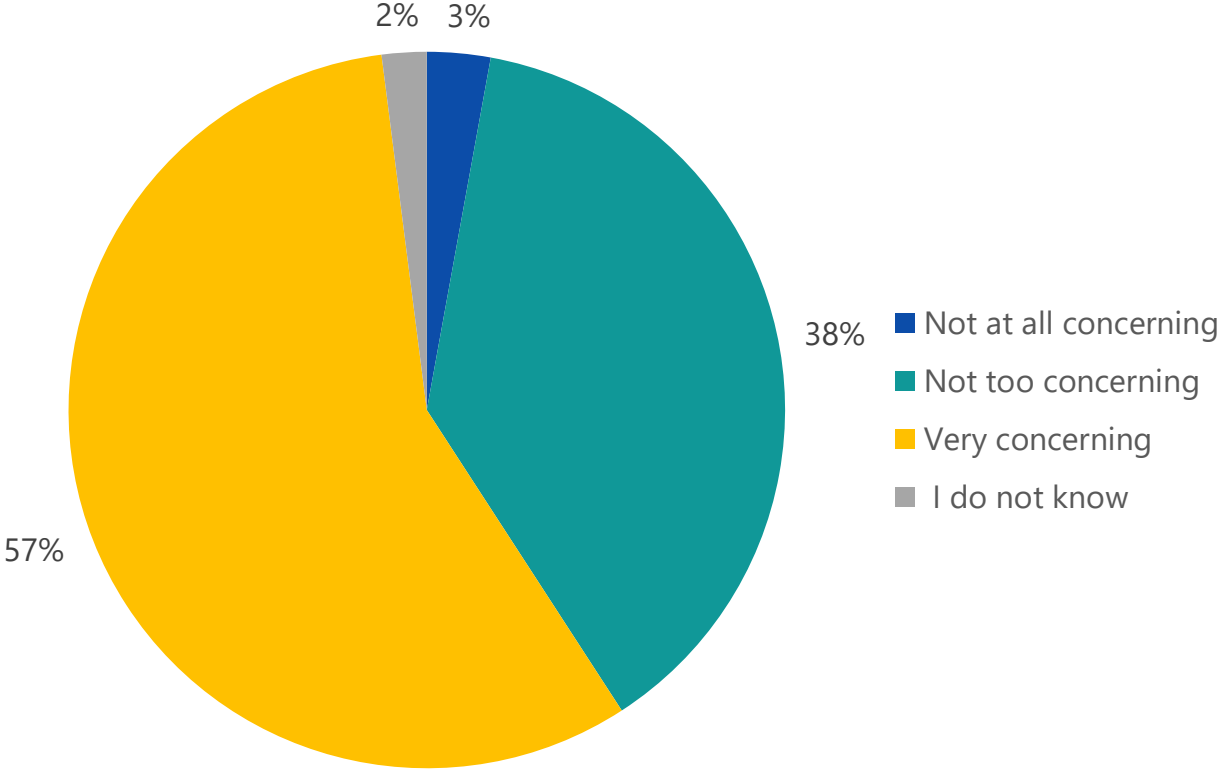
The prefectures of Tirana, Elbasan, Gjirokaštër and Durrës are singled out with Tirana towering above the others. Nearly one in two respondents believe violent extremism is more concerning in the region of Tirana. Respondents were asked to give their opinion on a second region which they considered violent extremism is more concerning. Nearly 18% of respondents believe violent extremism is more concerning in Elbasan, 14% in Durrës, 12% in Tirana and 11% in Shkodër.



Graph 9 - In which prefecture is the spread of violent extremism more concerning

The citizens were also asked to provide their views how much they thought this phenomenon is concerning for the social stability of Albania. The majority of respondents, 57%, see the phenomenon as very concerning, 38% think it is not very concerning, while nearly 3% said that it is not at all concerning.

How concerning do you think violent extremism is for cohesion / social stability in Albania?

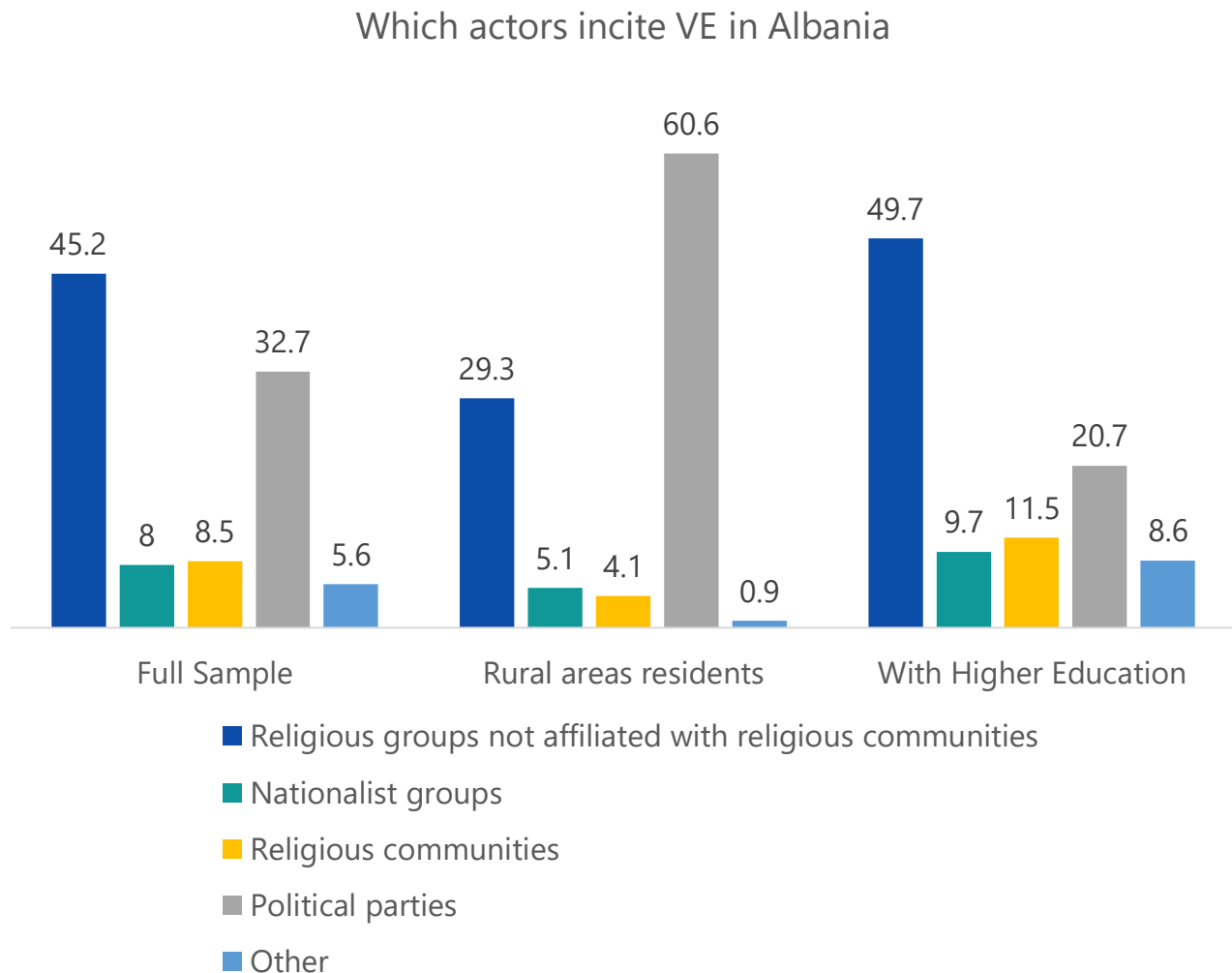


Graph 10 - How concerning is violent extremism for the social stability in Albania

Actors that promote violent extremism

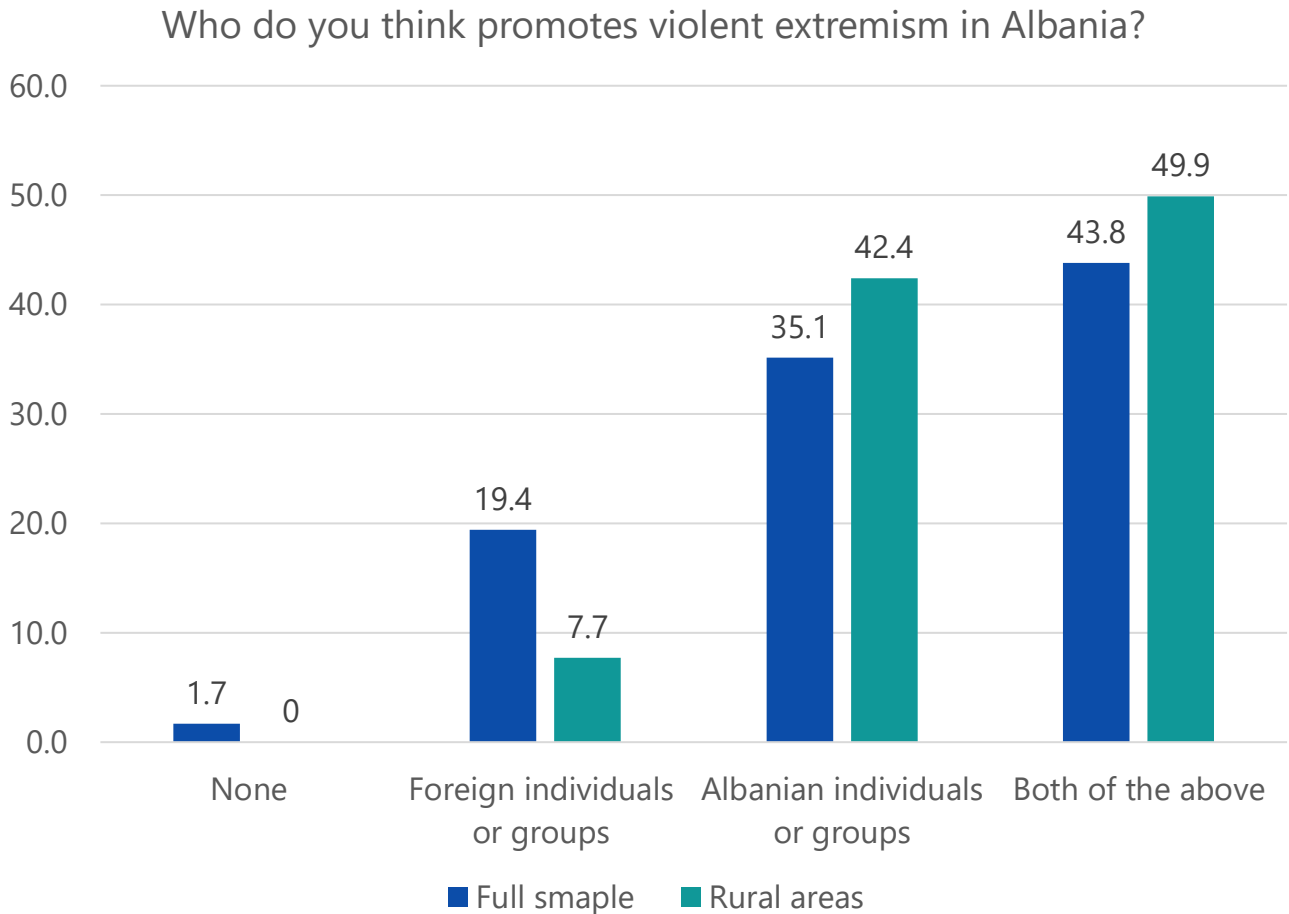
This fourth subsection provides information on respondents' perception of actors who promote VE. Respondents were asked about which actors they thought incite violent extremism in Albania. 45% believe that violent extremism is incited by religious groups that are not related to the official religious communities. Nearly one-third of respondents believe it is incited by political parties.

However, 61% of the respondents from rural areas regard the political parties are the ones inciting violent extremism. Only 29% of respondents from rural areas believe violent extremism is incited by religious groups that are not related to the official religious communities. Noteworthy, respondents with higher education are the category with the highest percentage, 11.5%, that believes official religious communities incite violent extremism.



Graph 11 - Which actors incite VE in Albania

When asked about the promoters of violent extremism in Albania, 35% of respondents point at Albanian individuals or groups, and 19% of respondents point at foreign individuals or groups. A total of 44% of respondents believe both Albanian and foreign individuals and groups are promoting violent extremism. Noteworthy, respondents from rural areas provide the lowest percentage, 7.7%, that foreign groups or individuals promote violent extremism in Albania.

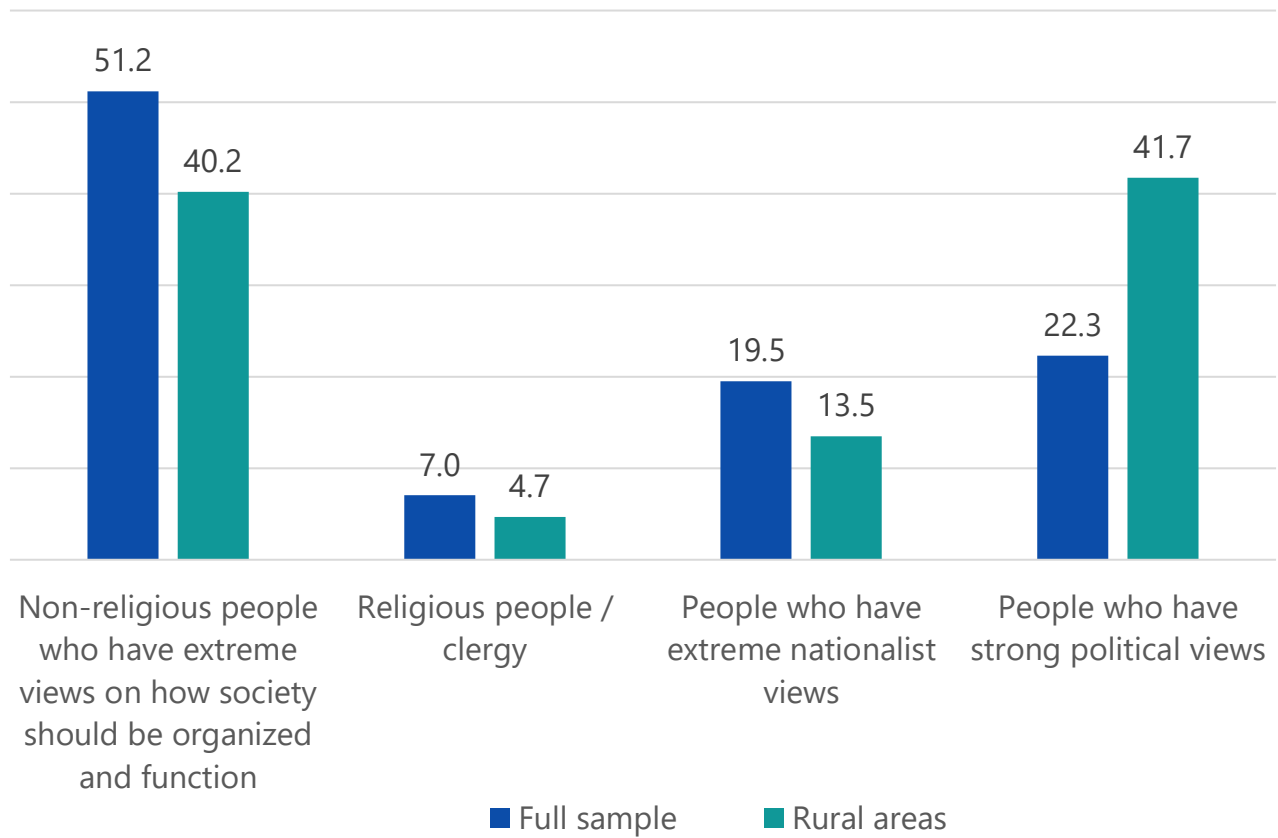


Graph 12 - Actors that promote violent extremism in Albania

The majority of respondents believe violent extremism messages are spread by people who have extreme opinions on how society should be organized and function. One-fifth of respondents believe such messages are spread by people who hold hard political views, and another one-fifth of respondents believe the messages are spread by people who hold extreme nationalist views. Only 7% of respondents believe violent extremism messages are spread by religious people. Contrarily to all the other categories, respondents from rural areas, 42%, believe people who hold hard political views are the main actors who spread violent extremism messages.

The citizens living in rural areas show a high level of influence of the people with strong political views as being responsible for propagating violent extremism. This perception can be linked with lack of adequate knowledge on violent extremism (48% have not heard of it before) and attribution of it to politics, which can be linked with the fact that these areas are poorer economically and socially and trust in politics is lower.

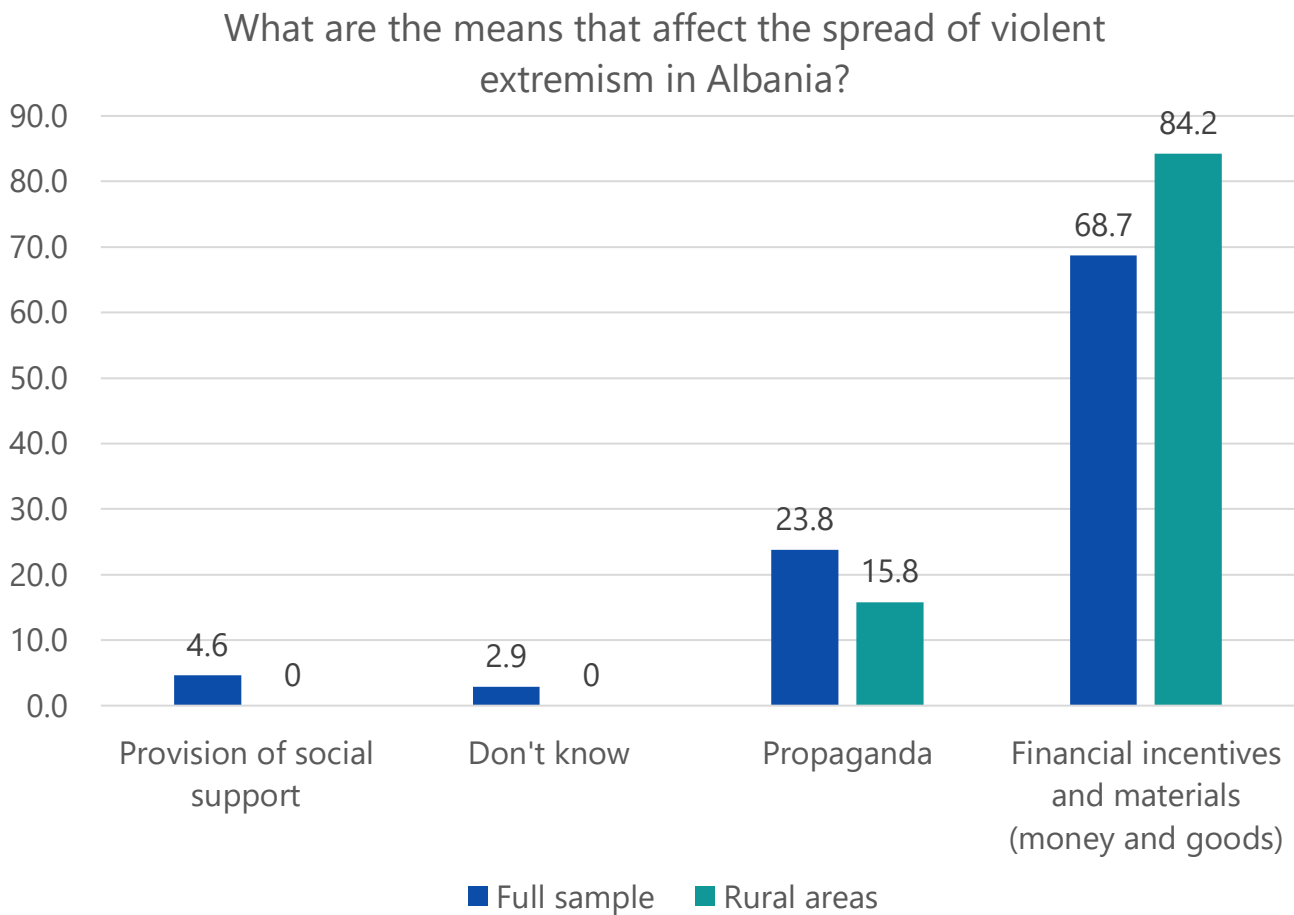
Which of the following categories of people do you think spreads messages of violent extremism?



Graph 13 - People who spread VE

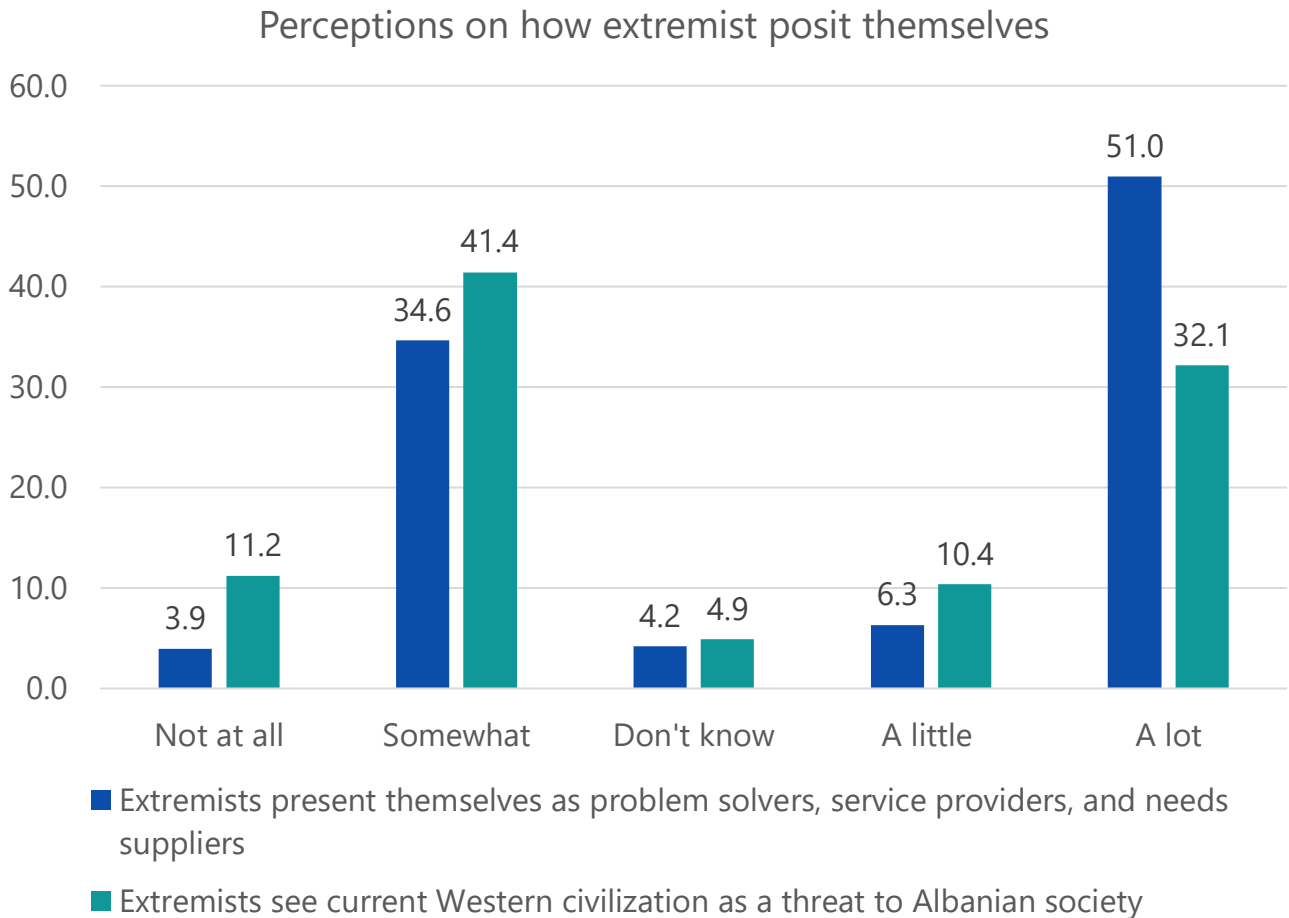
The graph below shows the results respondents provided regarding what means are used to influence the spread of violent extremism. The large majority (68.7%) believe that financial and material incentives are instrumental for the spread of violent extremism in Albania.

Only 23.8% of respondents believe that propaganda influences the spread of violent extremism. For the respondents living in the rural areas, the financial and material incentives are regarded as more influential for 84.2% of them and only 15.8% of them regard propaganda as an instrument of radicalization.



Graph 14 - Means that affect the spread of VE

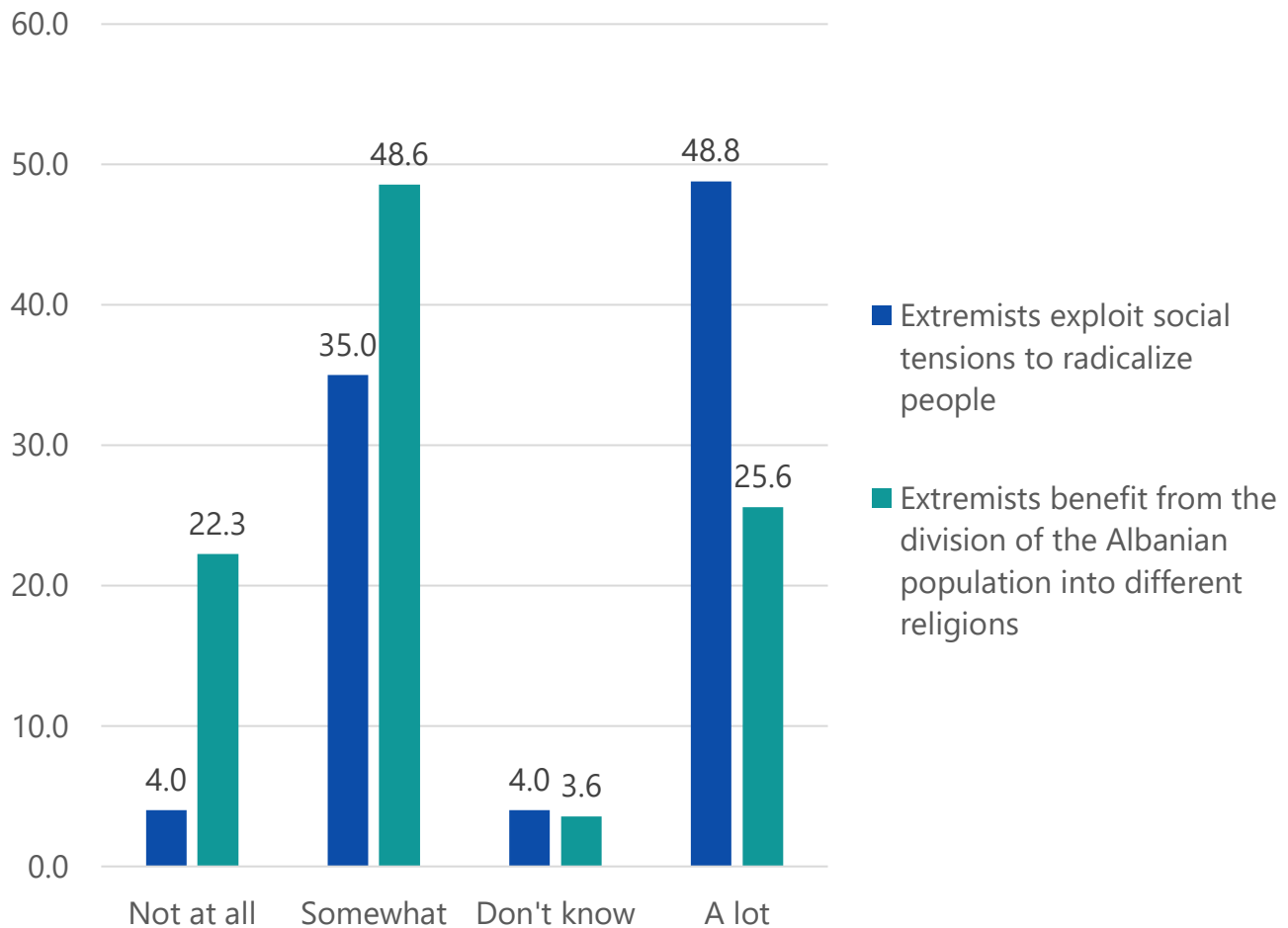
Nearly half of respondents strongly agree that extremists present themselves as problem-solvers and providers of services and needs. Another 34.6% of respondents agree on this to some extent. When asked how much they agreed with the statement “extremists see present western civilization as a threat to the Albanian society”, 41% of respondents agreed to some extent, 32% strongly agreed, while 22% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.



Graph 15 - Violent extremists posit themselves as problem solvers, providers of services and filling people’s needs

Almost half of respondents strongly believe that extremists target social tensions to radicalize people, and another 47% agree to some extent with the statement. When asked on the extent extremists take advantage of the composition of the Albanian population into different religions, almost half of them agreed to some extent, while nearly one-fourth of them strongly agreed. Another 22% strongly disagreed.

Opinion on the impact of social tensions and religious divisions on radicalization



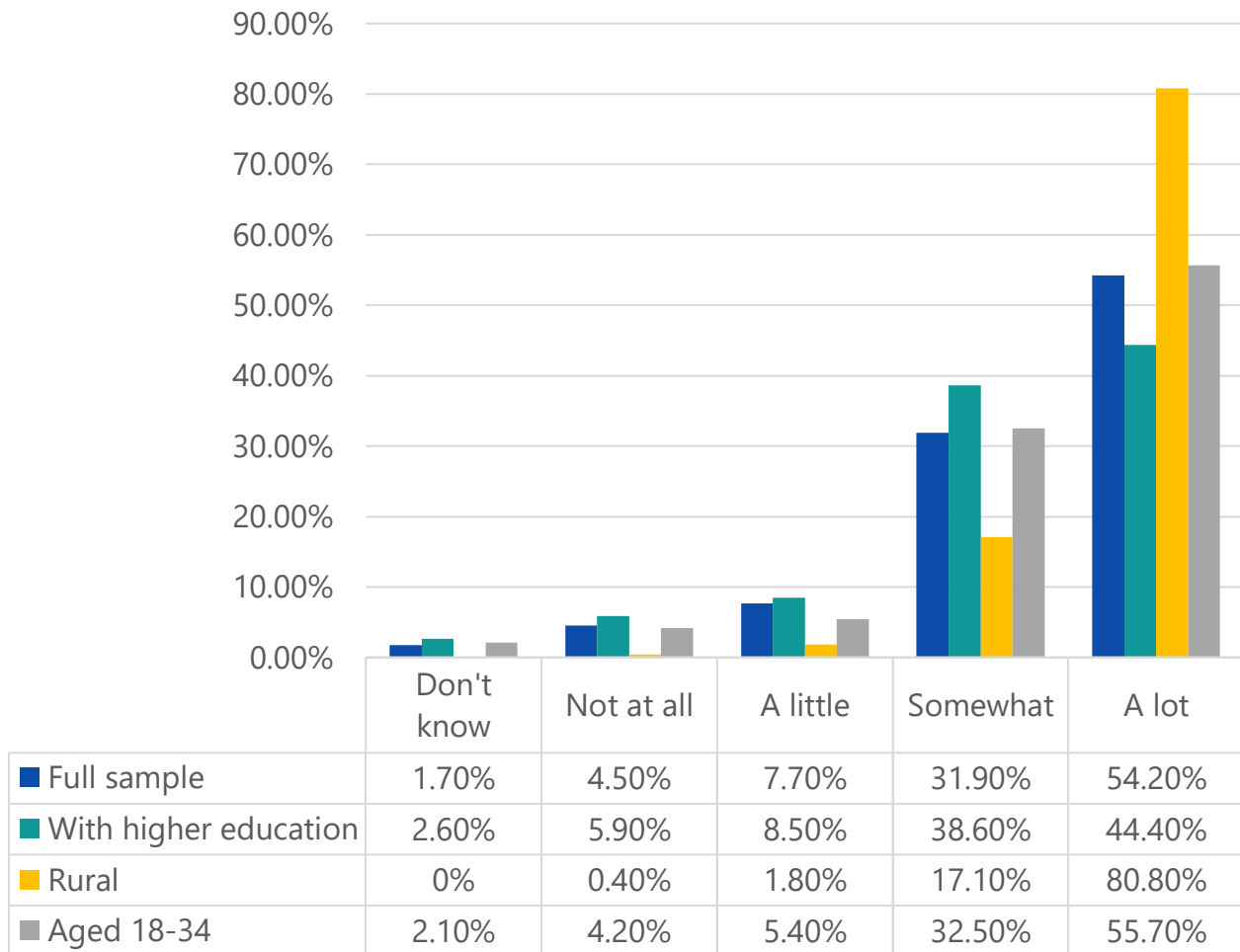
Graph 16 - Violent extremists exploit social tensions and religious divisions for radicalizing people

Religious tolerance has been hailed as one of the fundamental features of the Albanians in the public discourse. However, it is important to explore how much this belief is shared by the respondents of this survey. The citizens were asked to provide their opinion on the statement “religious tolerance is a quality of the Albanian society that cannot be defeated by violent extremists” in order to find out.

The survey data show that some of the large majority of the respondents share this belief, although how strongly they do so vary. More than half of respondents (54%) strongly agreed, while another 32% agreed to some extent. A total of 12% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Respondents from rural areas were the ones who strongly agreed the most (80.8%).

The most sceptical portion of the population are those with higher education. Only 44% agree a lot with the statement that religious tolerance is a quality of Albanian society that cannot be defeated by violent extremists and 5.9% say they do not agree at all. Those aged between 18 and 34 years old appear as believing slightly more than the overall sample with this statement.

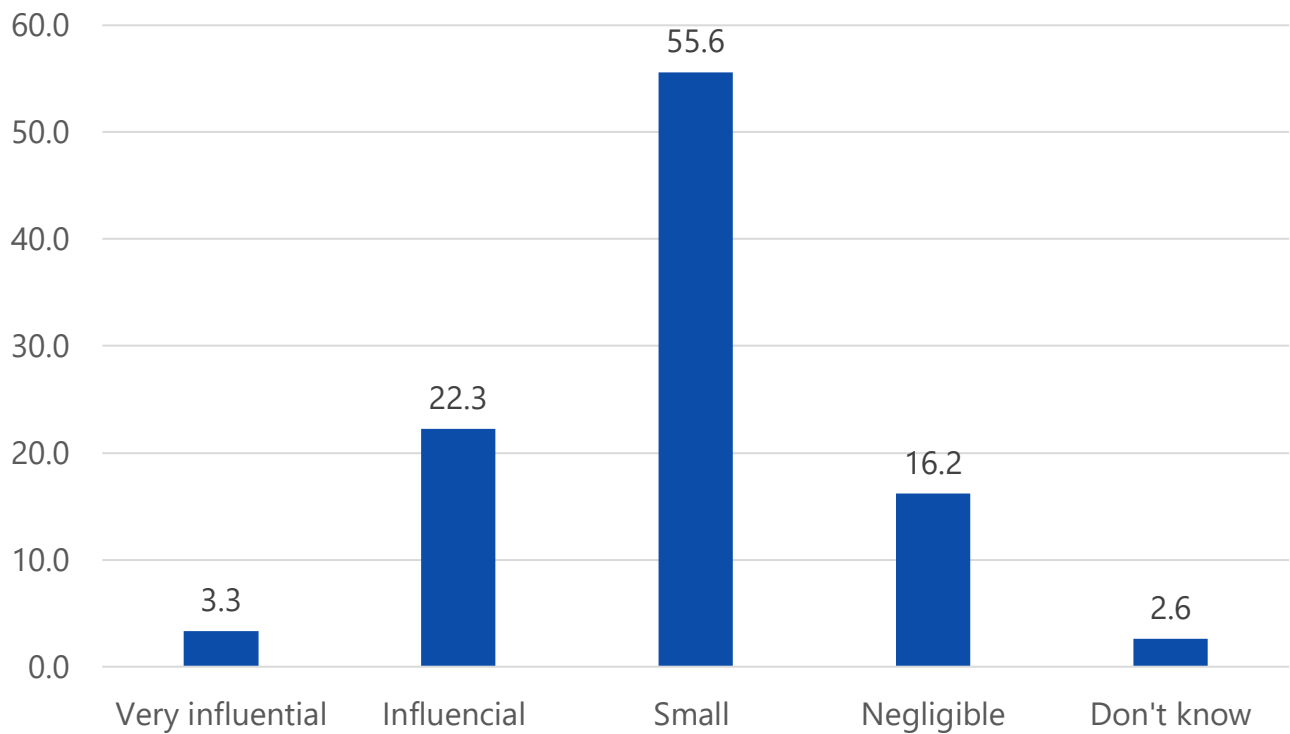
How much do you agree with the statement: religious tolerance is a quality of the Albanian society that cannot be defeated by violent extremists?



Graph 17 - Opinion on whether religious tolerance in Albania can be defeated by violent extremists

The citizens were asked to provide their opinion on the influence of extremist religious groups in the Tirana municipality. 25.6% of the respondents think that the extremist religious groups are influential or very influential in Tirana while another 55.6% think their influence is small. Only 16% say that their influence is negligible.

The influence of extremist religious groups in Tirana

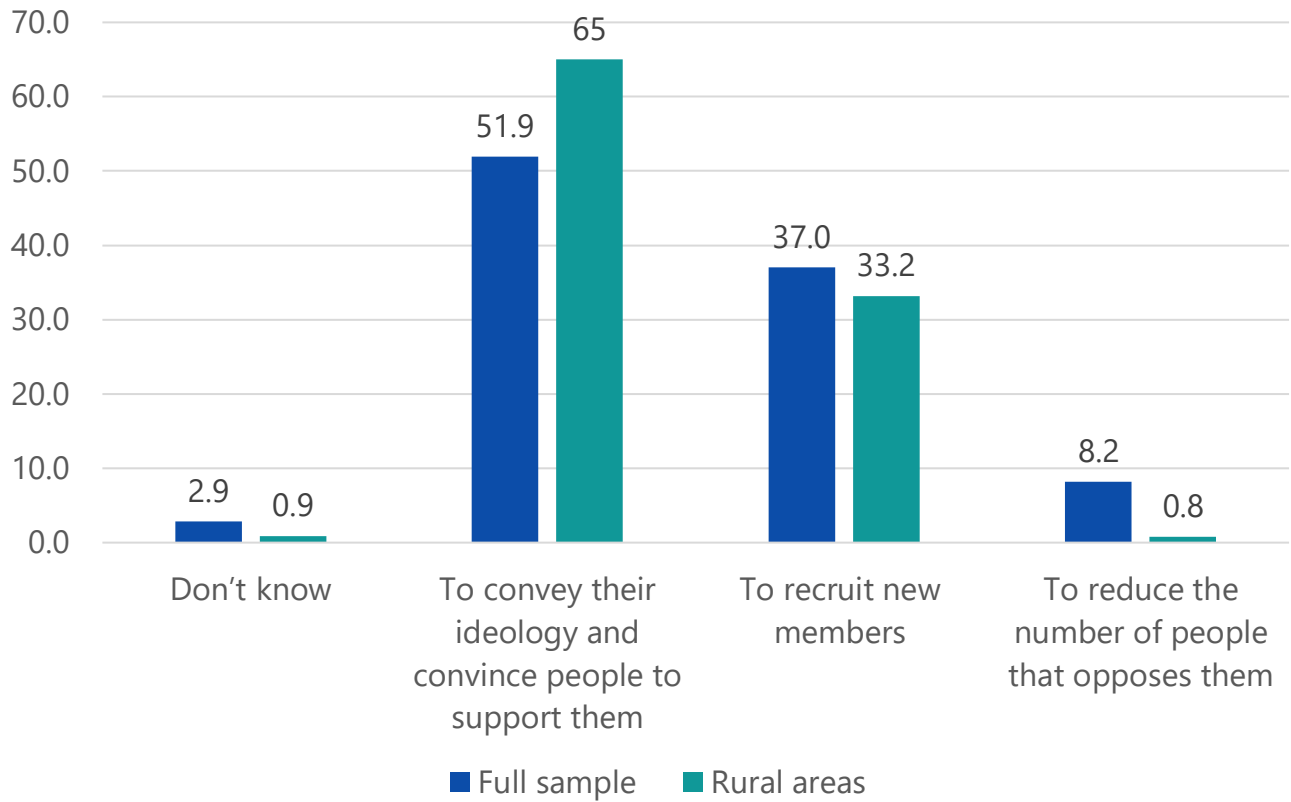


Graph 18 - The influence of extremist religious groups in Tirana

They think that members of extremist groups approach people to convey their ideology and persuade new people to support them (51.9%), to recruit new members (37%) and to reduce the number of people who oppose them (8.2%).

A larger percentage of the rural areas' residents (65%) think that members of extremist groups approach people to convey their ideology and persuade new people to support them.

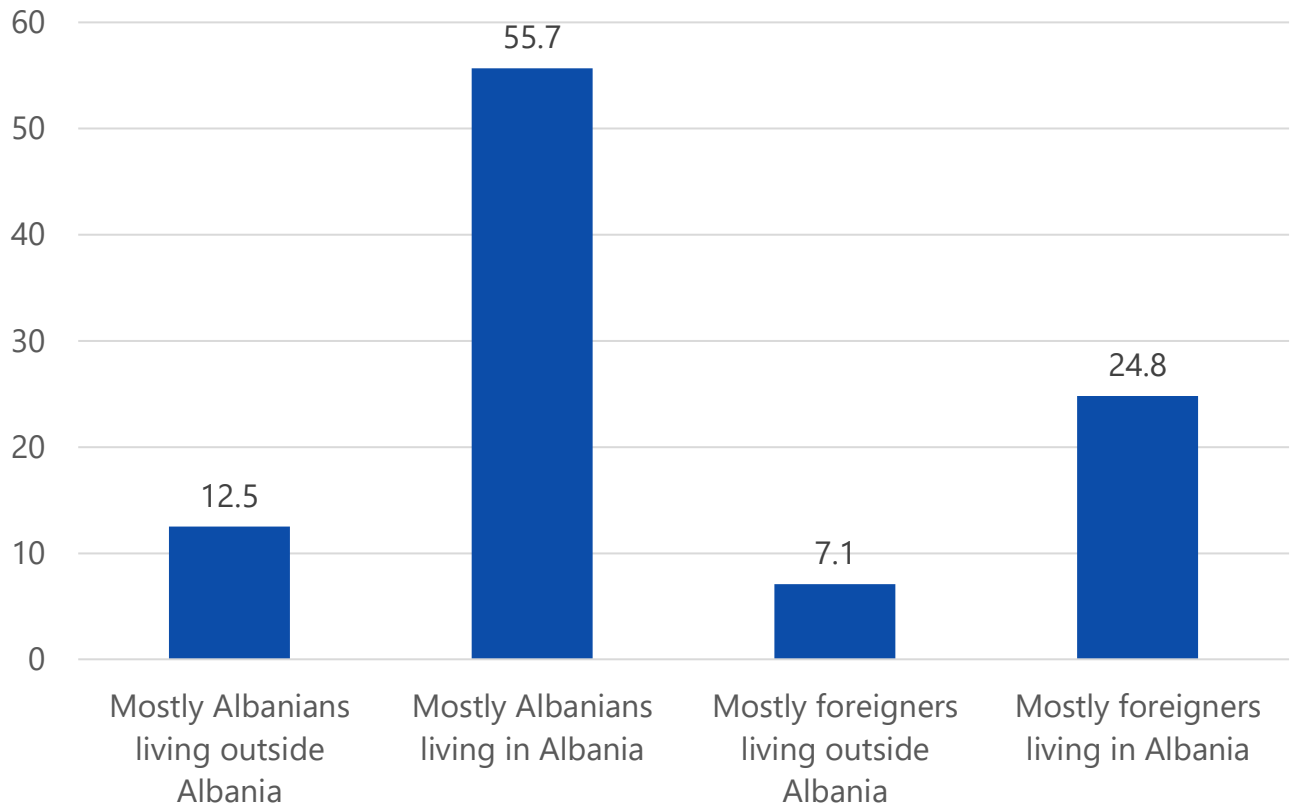
Why do you think members of extremist groups reach out to new people?



Graph 19 - Motivation of members of extremist groups when reaching out new people

55.7% of the respondents are of the opinion that those who try to reach out people for recruitment purposes are Albanians living in Albania, while 24.8% think that they are mostly foreigners living in Albania.

To your knowledge, members of extremist groups that try to reach out to people in Albania are:

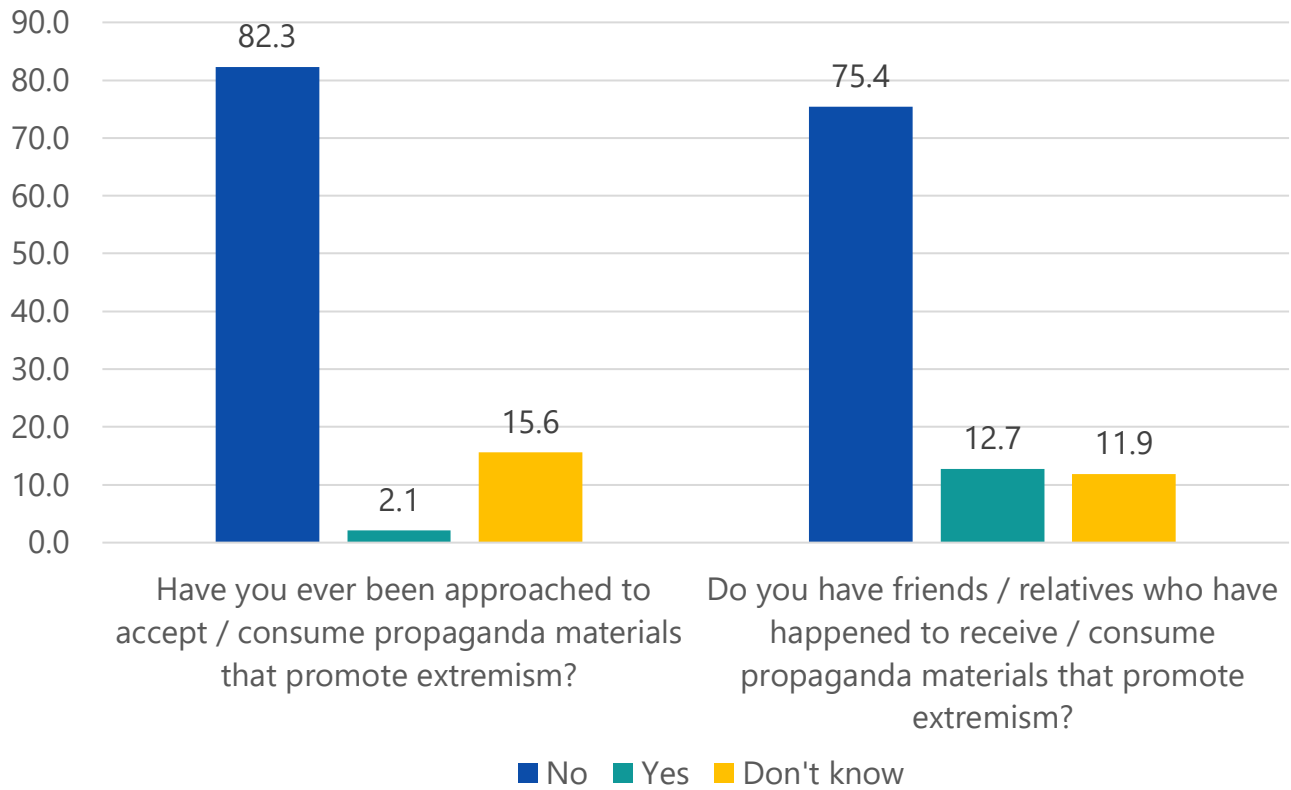


Graph 20 - Those who try to recruit Albanian citizens for radicalization purposes

In terms of personal experiences only 2.1% say that they have been approached to consume propaganda materials that promote extremism, while 12.7% say that this has happened to their friends or relatives.

The percentage of female respondents that have been approached to consume such materials is higher (18.3%) than males (12.9%).

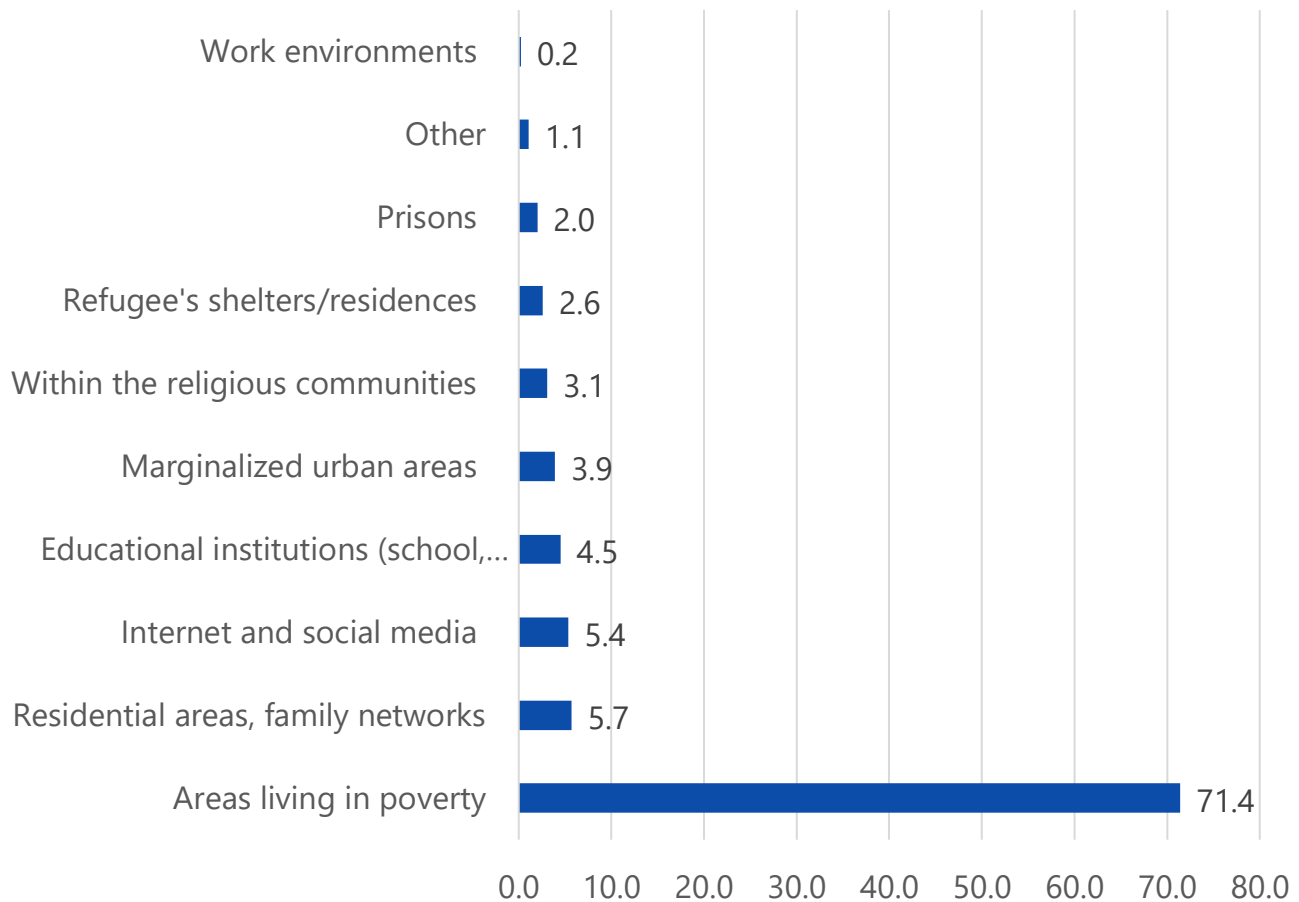
Experiences with exposure to materials with violent extremist content



Graph 21 - Exposure to materials with violent extremist content

The overwhelming majority of respondents, 71.4%, believe that recruiters are more likely to turn an individual into a violent extremist in the areas that live in poverty. Other less at-risk environments are seen the family and friendship networks (5.7%), internet and social media environments (5.4%) and educational facilities (4.5%) can successfully turn an individual into a violent extremist. The religious communities are also regarded as resilient, as only 3.1% of those respondents thinks that the recruiters are less likely to turn an individual into a violent extremist in those environments.

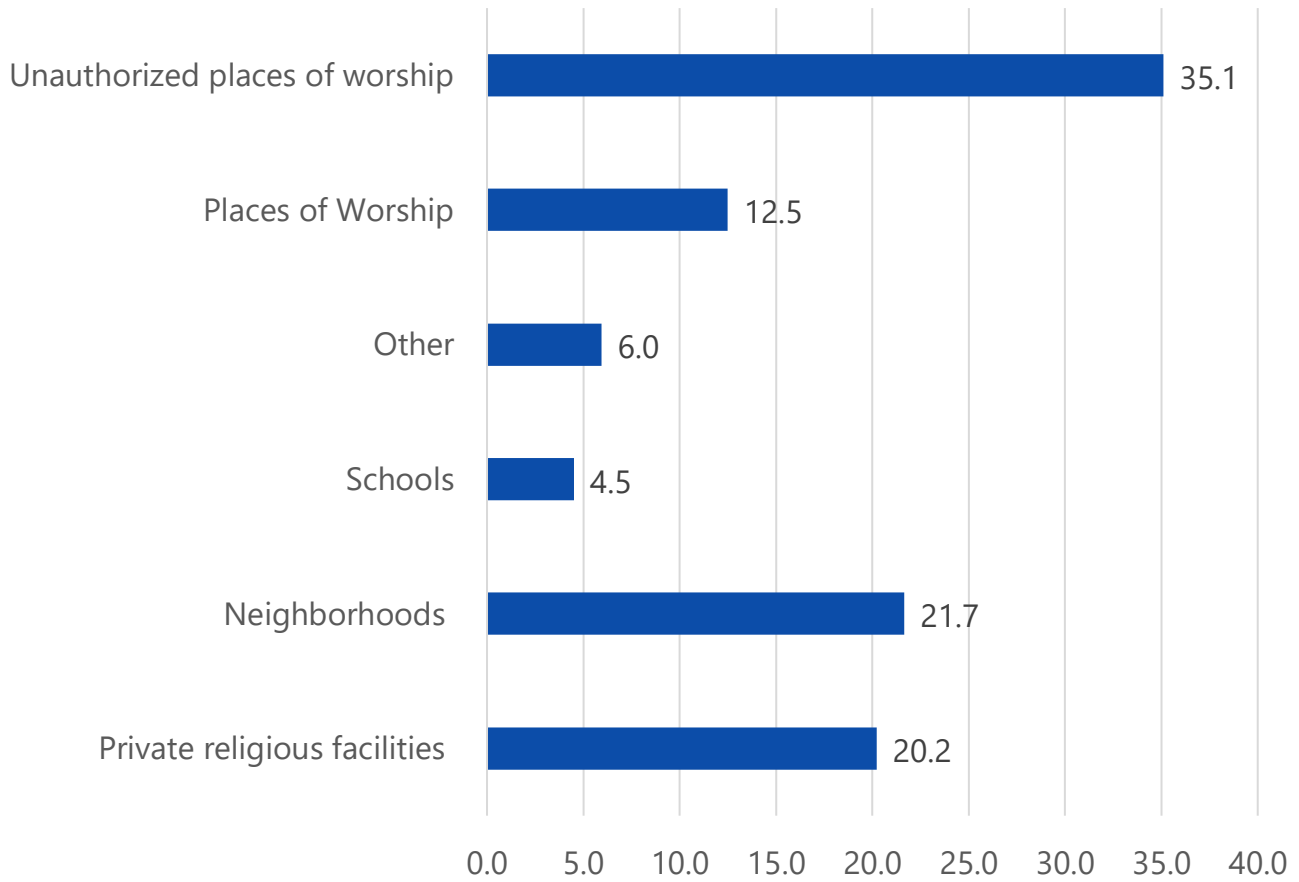
In which environments and contexts are recruiters more likely to successfully turn an individual into a violent extremist?



Graph 22 - Environments where recruiters are more successful

Regarding the specific environments exposed to radicalization, a large majority of citizens 35.1% think that unauthorized religious sites are the most exposed to the risk of radicalization. This phenomenon is interlinked with the last decade events that took place in Albania. Mosques and religious sites outside the authority of Muslim Community of Albania served as radicalization and recruitment cells for foreign fighters that later joined the war in Syria and Iraq or arrested by law enforcement authorities. Neighbourhoods and private religious sites (20.2% and 21.7% respectively) were also significant in terms of risk to radicalization.

Which of these places are most exposed to the risk of radicalization?

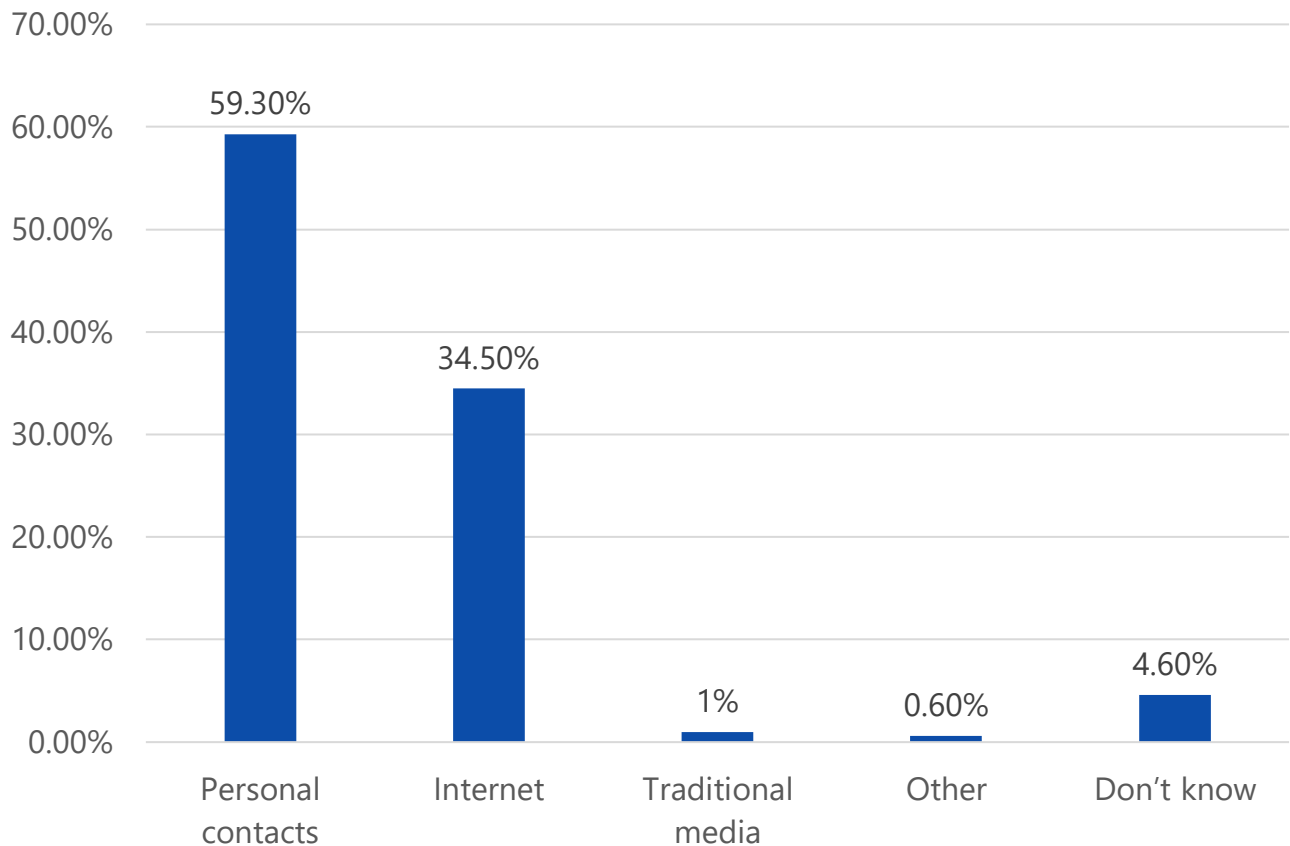


Graph 23 - Which sites are more exposed to radicalization's threat

The citizens were asked to provide their opinion on whether the radical groups continue to recruit people at the present time. 68.8% of citizens are of the opinion that radicalization is an ongoing process and groups continue to recruit people. Only 9.6% do not believe so, while another 21.6% have no opinion.

Regarding the ways the extremist actors target and approach those whom they want to recruit, 59.3% believe that personal contacts are the most common way to spread violent extremist messages, followed by communication through online communications (22.5%) and through the internet (12%).

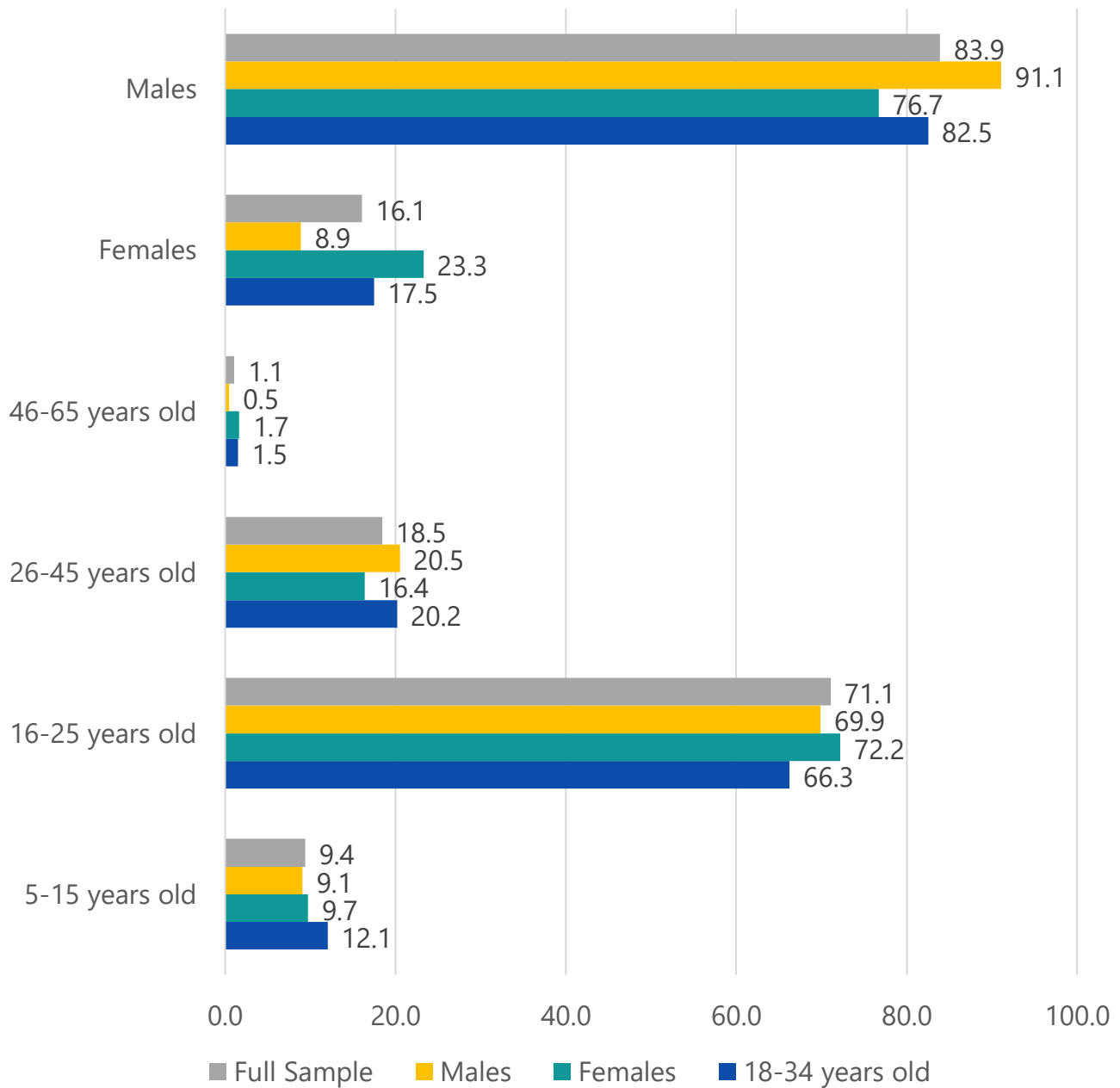
What are the most common ways to spread the message of violent extremism?



Graph 24 - What are the most common ways to spread the message of violent extremism?

Regarding those most exposed to the risk of radicalization, the majority of respondents 71.1% believe adults of age 16-25 are more at risk for radicalization while 18.5 % also believe that adults at age 26-45 are also at risk of radicalizing. Gender perspective on radicalization risks provided interesting data. A significant majority of respondents (83.9%) in the full sample believe that males are more exposed to radicalization. However, analysed separately, female respondents have a higher percentage (23.3%) than the full sample believing that they are more exposed to radicalization when compared to the overall responses.

Who are most at risk or radicalization?



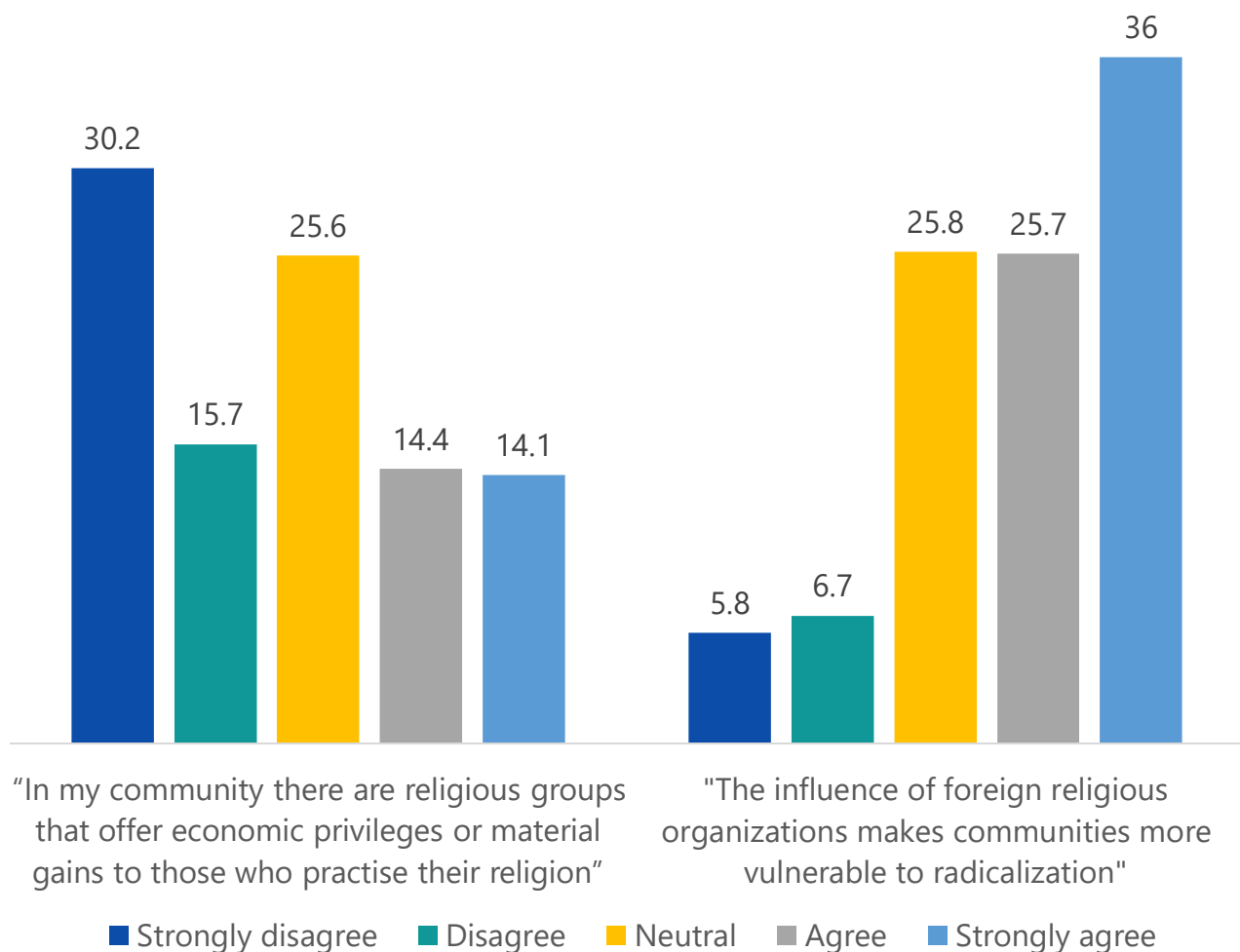
Graph 25 - Which groups are more at risk of radicalization

Many foreign religious organizations and humanitarian foundations arrived in Albania since the early transition to support the restoration of religion. Some of these organisations have been attributed with the responsibility of promoting religious extremist ideas often by offering financial and material privileges in exchange of taking radical positions.

28% of respondents agrees or strongly agrees with the statement “in my community there are religious groups that offer economic privileges or material gains to those who practice their religion,” while almost half of respondents (46%) either disagrees or strongly disagrees with the statement.

Asked on whether these organisations make the communities vulnerable to radicalization, 61% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement.

Role and influence of foreign organizations in the radicalization process



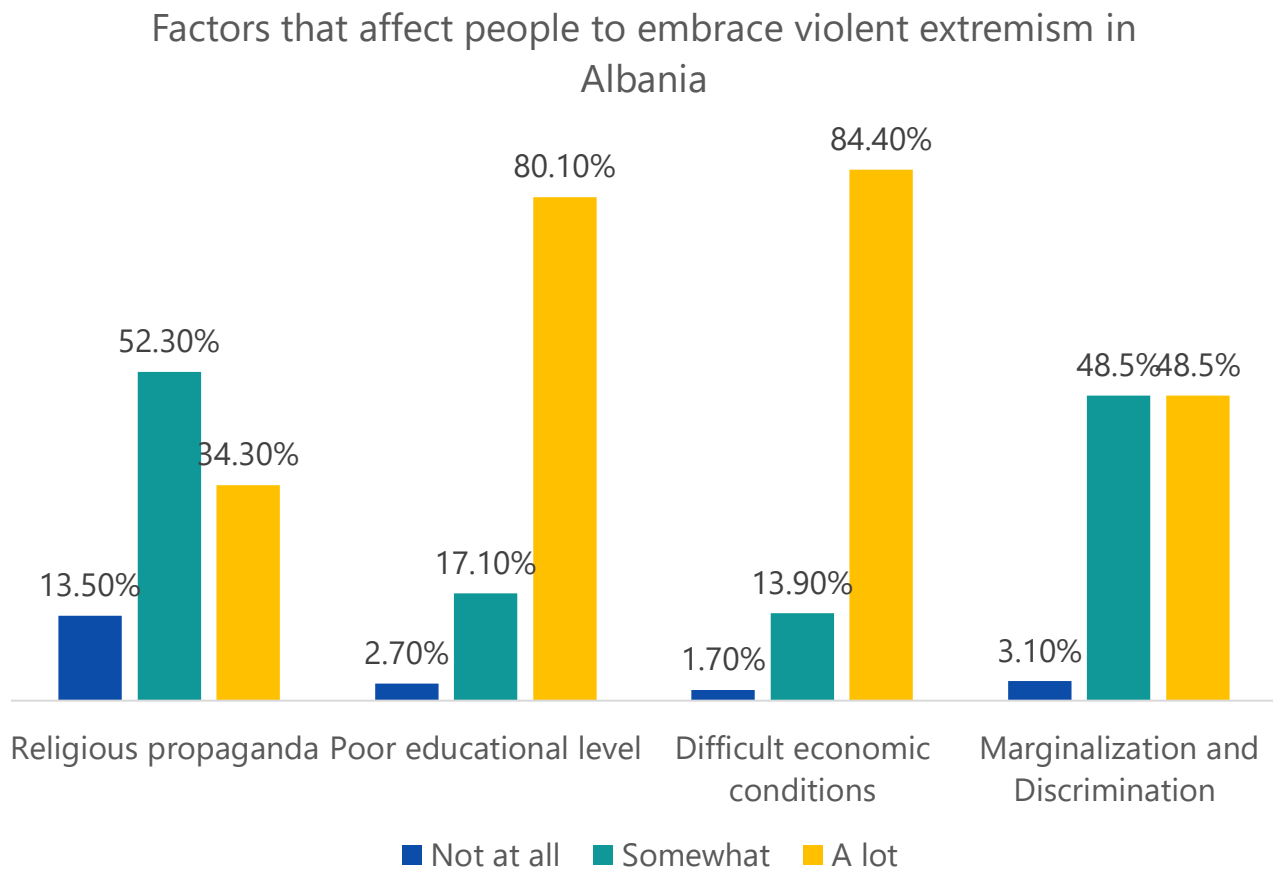
Graph 26 - Role and influence of foreign organizations in the radicalization process

Factors that influence people to embrace violent extremism

In addition to the actors who promote VE, this fifth subsection displays respondents' perceptions on factors that influence people to embrace VE. Respondents were asked to assess to what extent they believed each factor influence people to embrace violent extremism.

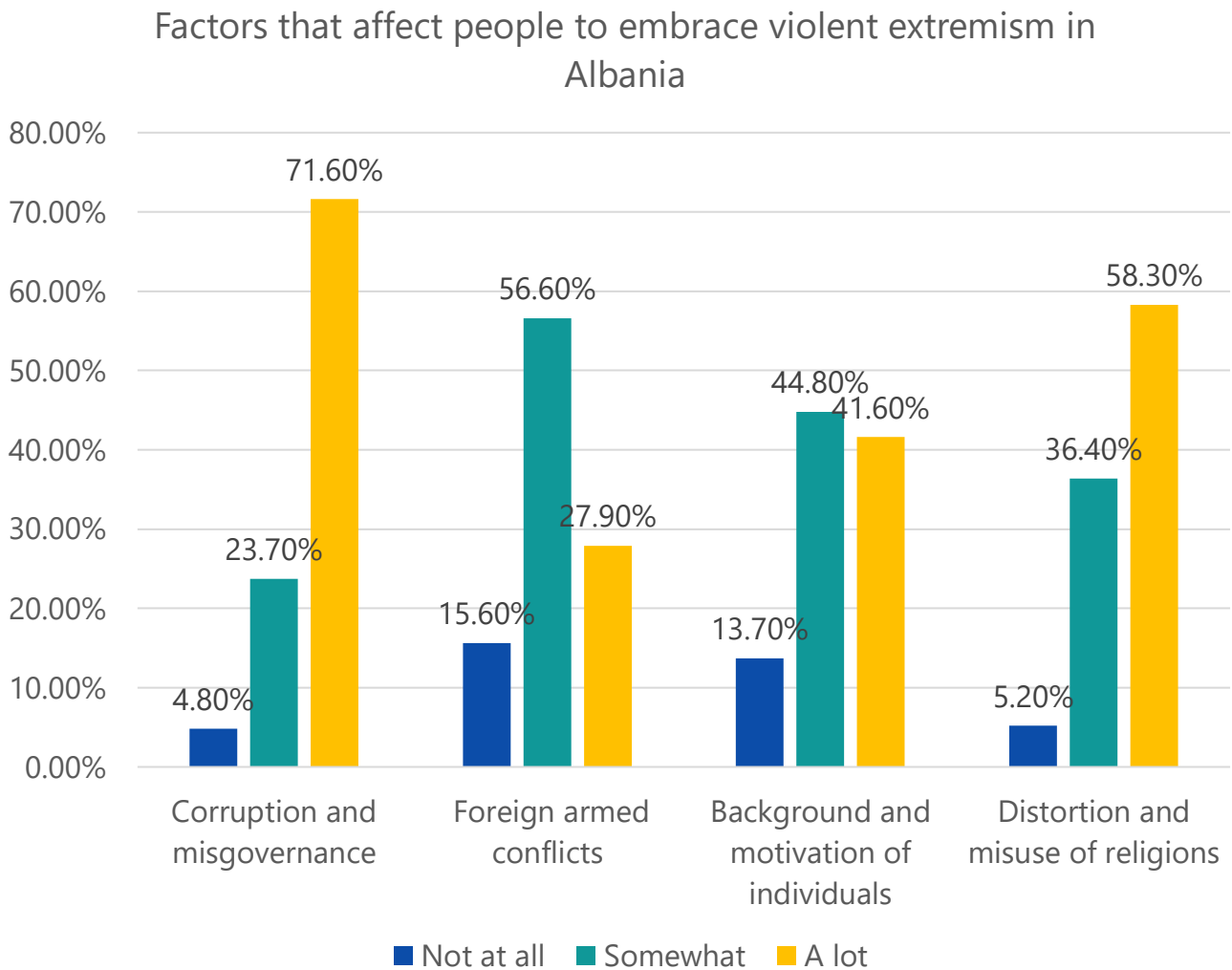
The vast majority of respondents believe that the main influencing factors on people to embrace violent extremism include the difficult economic conditions and lack of opportunities (84%), poor education (80%), corruption and bad governance (72%), and distortion and misuse of beliefs (58%).

Less than half of respondents believe the following factors are also highly influencing people to embrace violent extremism: marginalization and discrimination (49%), individual's background and motivation (42%), religious propaganda (34%), and armed conflicts abroad (34%).



Graph 27 - Factors that affect people to embrace VE in Albania

It is worth noting that despite the relevance attributed in the literature to religious propaganda and individual background and motivations, the percentage of those who think that they do not affect at all people to embrace violent extremism is the highest, 13.5% and 13.7% respectively.

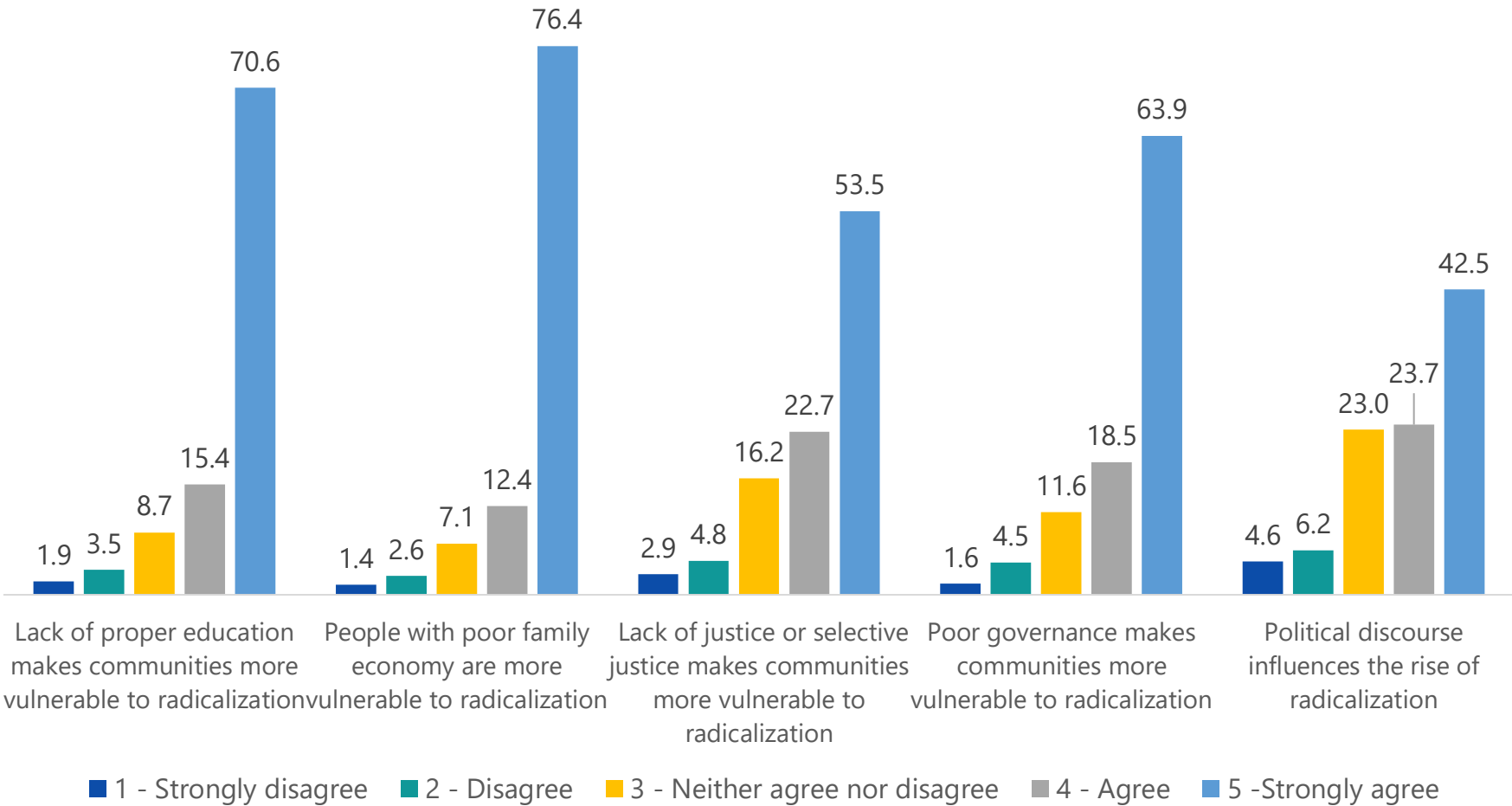


Graph 28 - Factors that affect people to embrace VE in Albania

The respondents were provided with statement on which they could agree or disagree (on a scale from 1 to 5) on various factors that are a commonly acknowledged in previous research as drivers of radicalization.

There is a strong correlation with the results of the previous answers. Poor economic conditions and lack of adequate education are regarded as stronger drivers by a larger number of respondents, followed by poor governance, lack or selective justice and a negative political discourse contribute to radicalization.

Opinions on various factors that contribute to radicalization

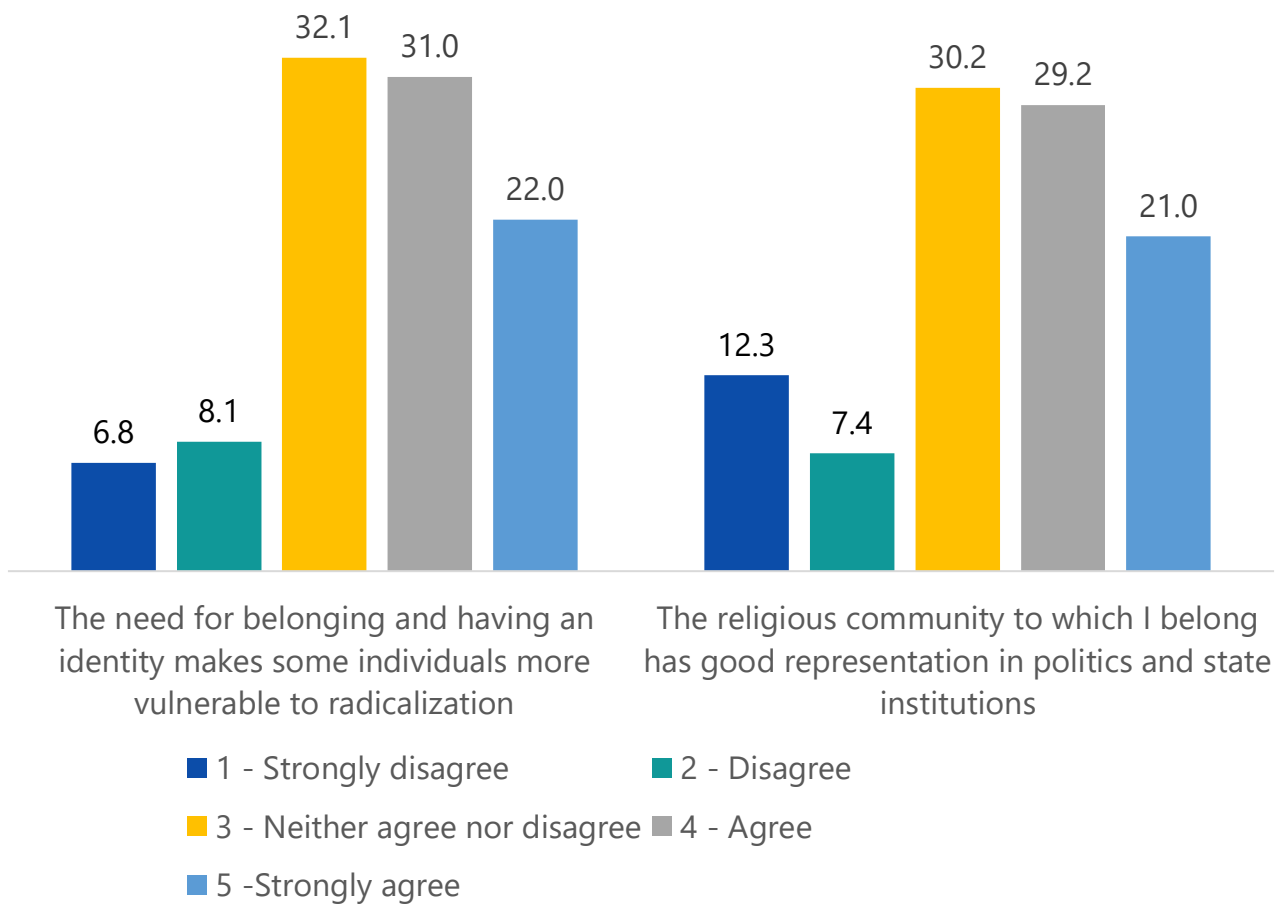


Graph 29 - Factors that contribute to radicalization

The need for identity and the perception of inadequate political representation have been also identified in the literature as radicalization drivers. About 50% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that the need for identity and belonging makes individuals more vulnerable to radicalization.

On the other hand, a similar percentage agree or strongly agree that their religion has good representation in politics. About 30% have no clear opinion on both questions while some 20% say that their religious community is not adequately represented in politics. 15% either disagree or strongly disagree that the need for identity and belonging makes individuals more vulnerable to radicalization.

Identity and political representation as radicalization drivers



Graph 30 - Identity and political representation as radicalization drivers

Position in relation to violent extremism

The sixth subsection is focused on recognising the Ingram's audiences in the Municipality of Tirana, as it is central to conceptualising and tailoring messages to tackle the narratives and messages that promote VE. In an effort to collect data to understand these audiences, the respondents were asked to provide their opinion on a range of questions that could help gauge the standing of these audiences towards extremism.

Some of the debated issues in the recent and current context include the control of radicalized groups and individuals by the state, the freedom to express and propagate their opinions and ideology as part of the freedom of speech that is upheld by constitutional rights, and the denial of radicalism by framing it as religious freedom, which can be protected even by engaging in violent acts if necessary. A number of statements were provided to the respondents on which they could choose to agree or disagree.

The findings show that 68.6% of the respondents think that those who hold radicalized views should be completely banned. On the other hand, 5.8% disagree or tend to disagree while another 22.5% tend to agree that groups who promote radical ideas should be banned.

About one third of the respondents (32.5%) think that radicalized groups should have the right to express their opinions and ideology but should be controlled by the government institutions. Coupled with the number of people 27.7% that tend to agree with guarantying the radicalized group's a controlled freedom of expression, a large number of Tirana citizens believe in the role of state to control radicalized groups.

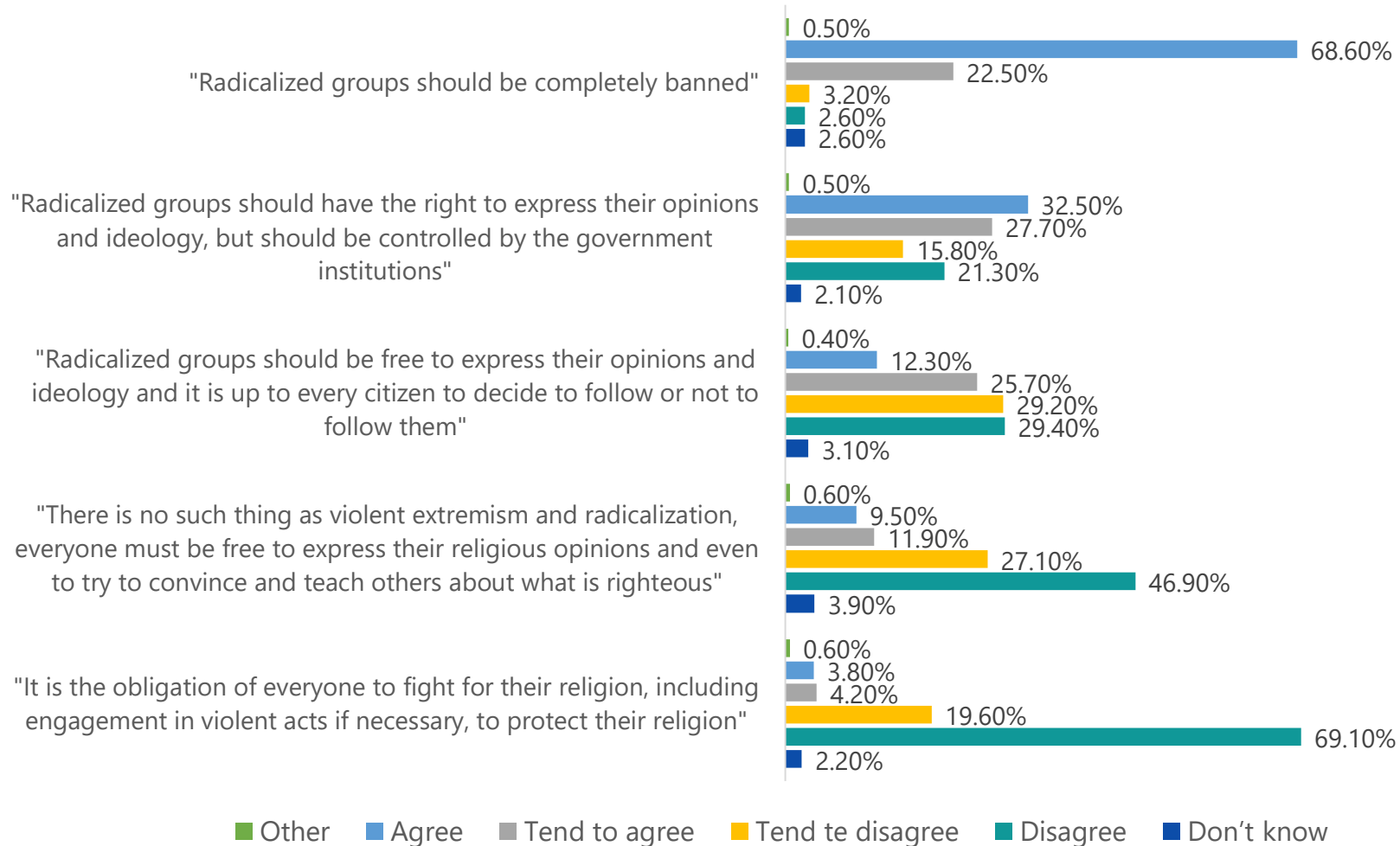
12.3% of citizens think that radicalized groups should be free to express their opinions and ideology, and it is up to individuals whether they decide to follow them or not, whereas 25.7% tend to agree with this. Although there are no notable changes among different categories of respondents, the respondents within each category are highly divided in their answers. For example, in the full sample, while 38% of respondents either tend to agree or fully agree with the statement, another 59% either tend to disagree or fully disagree with the statement. Such in-group discrepancies are noted in all categories of respondents. The highest lack of consensus among in groups is in those with higher education where the difference between those who tend to agree/fully agree with those who tend to disagree/fully disagree is only 11% in favour of the latter.

9.5% of citizens strongly agrees that violent extremism and radicalization is freedom of religious expression, while another 11.9% tend to think the same.

7% of citizens strongly agrees or tend to agree that it is the obligation of everyone to fight for their religion, including engagement in violent acts if necessary, to protect their religion convictions.

The graph below provides in detail the full spectrum of opinions on those issues.

Perceptions of radicalization in Tirana



Graph 31 - Perceptions of radicalization in Tirana

The system of meaning as the basis of radicalization

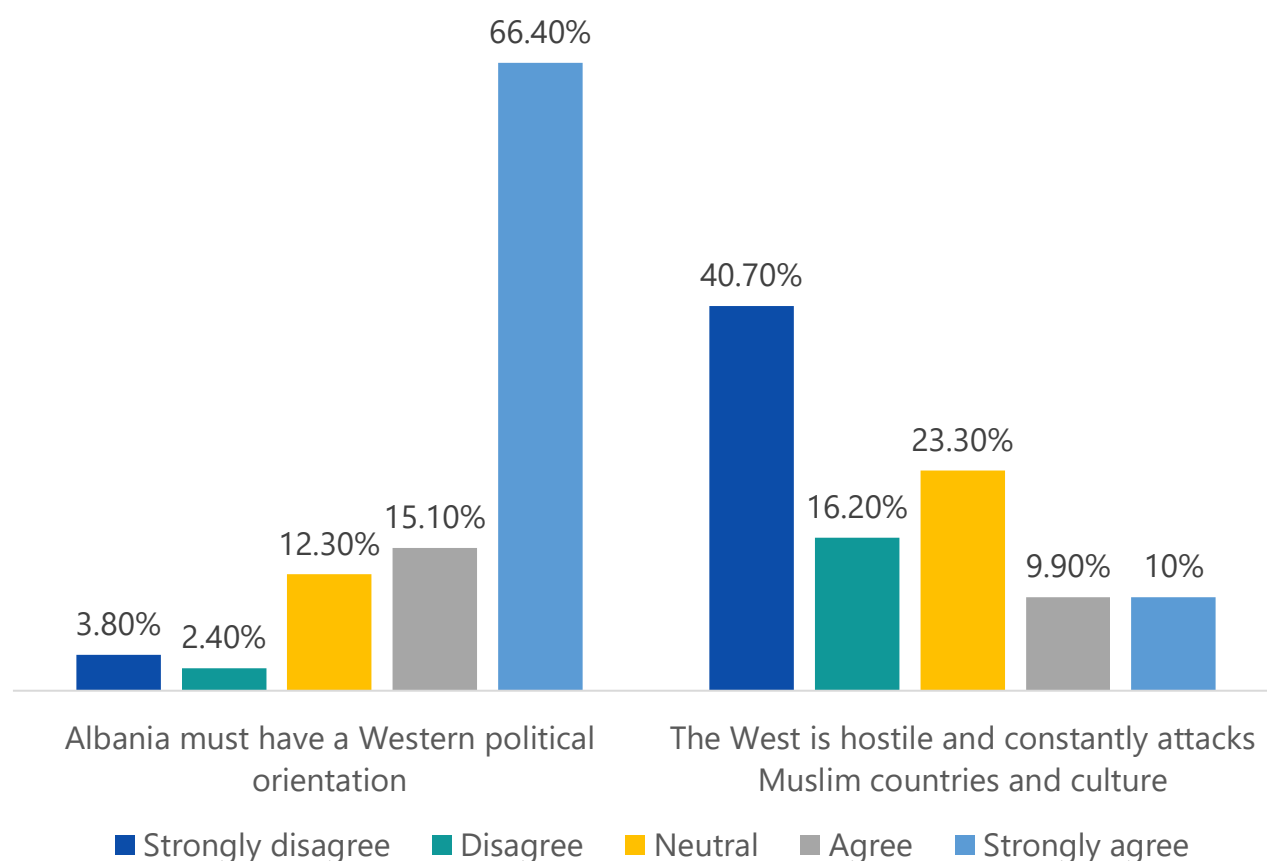
Another set of questions was designed to collect data on the extent to which the audiences perceive the crisis of identity that violent extremists convey to those audiences. Questions were designed to get the opinion of the citizens on a range of issues that have been promoted by extremists such as portraying the West as an enemy of Islam, delegitimising the Albanian state institutions, and the overall promotion of the in-group crisis.

The narrative that the West is hostile to the religion of Islam, and as such it is obligation for Muslims to position themselves against the West or even fight for it, has been identified as one of the dominating ones by an array of studies. The survey tried to grasp the extent of this narrative in the Tirana municipality audience by asking questions on whether the West is hostile to Muslim countries and culture and about Albania's western political orientation.

81.5% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that Albania must have a western political orientation while 6.2% strongly disagree or disagree with this statement. Another 12.3% have no clear-cut opinion on this question. Although there is a vast consensus of respondents from all categories that Albania should have a Western political orientation where only 6% tend to disagree or fully disagree with this, it is interesting that one in ten respondents from 18-34 years old either tend to disagree or fully disagree with the statement.

The percentage of those who agree that the West is hostile to Muslim countries and culture is higher, as nearly 20% think so, while another 23% are undecided. Some 57% disagree with the statement

Opinion regarding the West, Islam and Albania

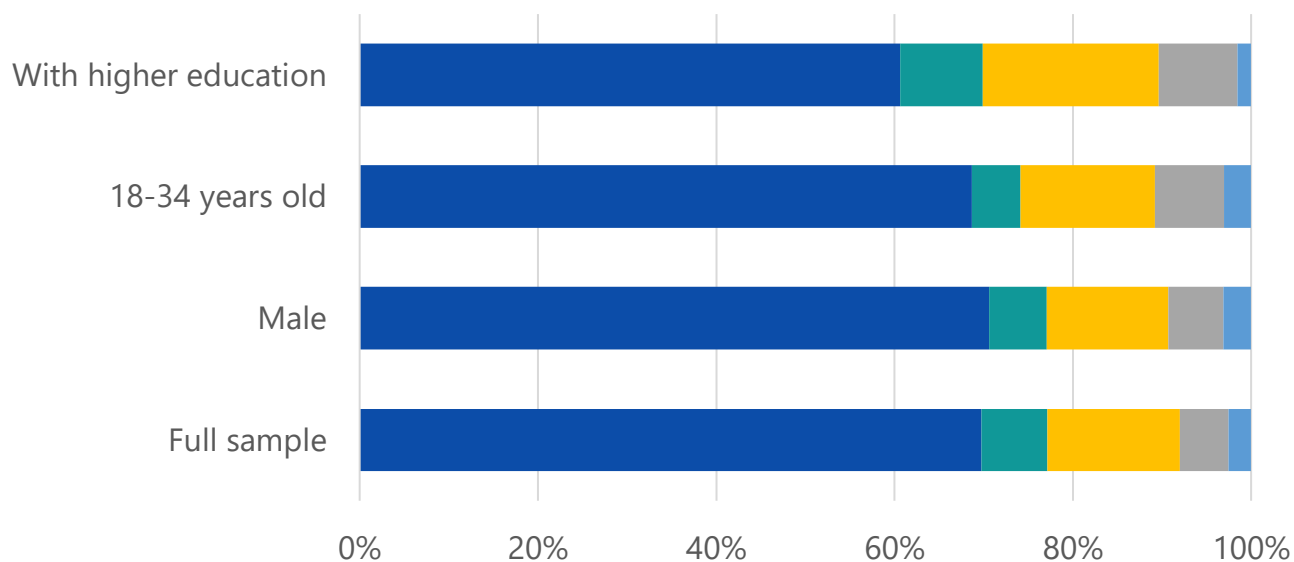


Graph 32 - Opinion regarding the West, Islam and Albania

Given the influence and role of ISIS in promoting radicalism and attracting Albanian people to join it, the citizens were asked to provide their position by asking them to agree or disagree with the statement that ISIS was the true representative of Islam.

Over two thirds of the respondents strongly disagree or disagree with this statement. However, 8% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that ISIS was the true representative state of Islam (5.5% agree and 2.5% strongly agree), while some 15% have no clear-cut position. Slightly higher percentages who perceive ISIS as the true representative of Islam are observed among males between 18 to 34 years old and respondents with higher education.

The Islamic State in Syria and Iraq was the true representative of Islam



	Full sample	Male	18-34 years old	With higher education
Strongly disagree	69.80%	70.60%	68.70%	60.70%
Disagree	7.40%	6.50%	5.40%	9.30%
Neutral	14.90%	13.60%	15.10%	19.70%
Agree	5.50%	6.20%	7.80%	8.90%
Strongly agree	2.50%	3.10%	3%	1.50%

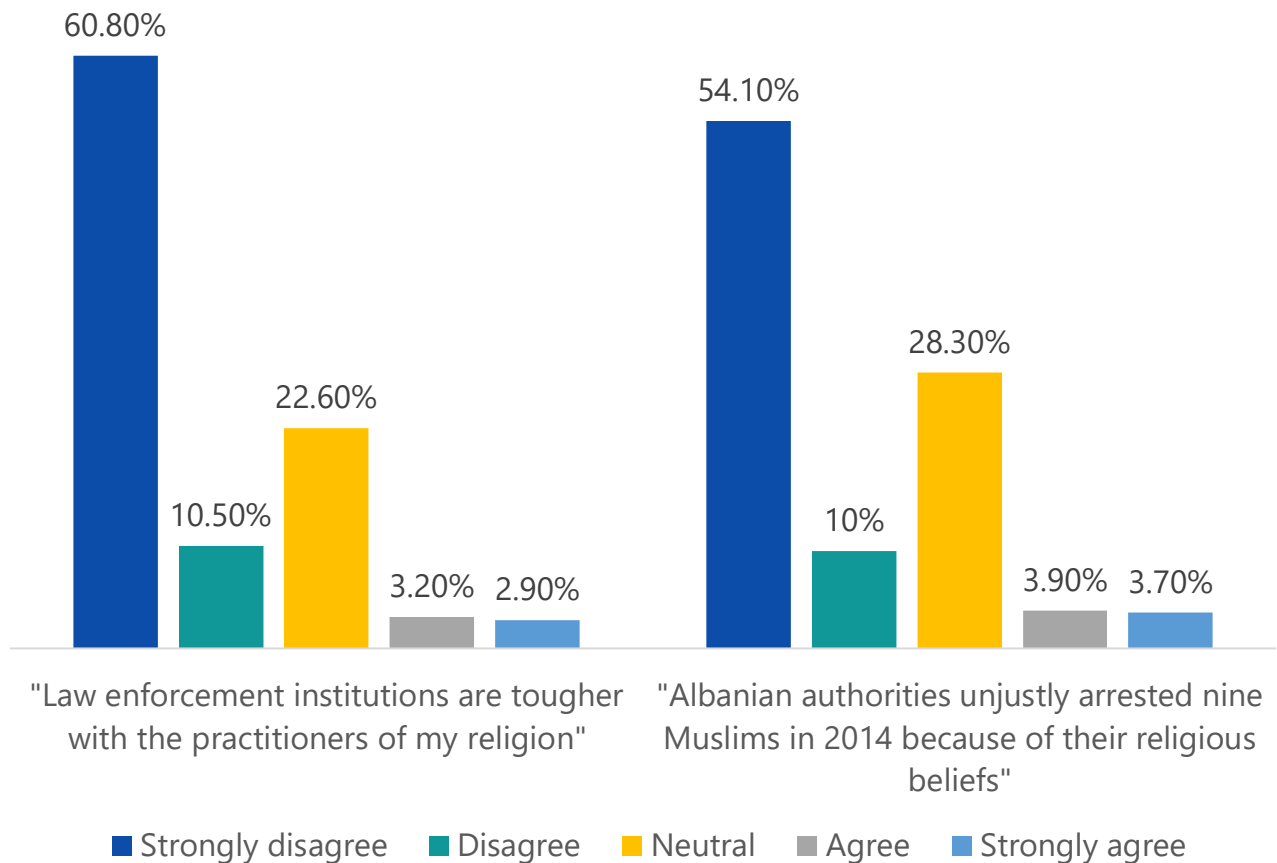
Graph 33 - Opinion on Islamic State

In 2014, Albanian authorities arrested nine people, two of whom were self-declared imams of two mosques in the suburb areas of Tirana. The arrested were accused of “recruiting persons for committing terrorist acts or financing terrorism”, “incitement, public appeal and propaganda for committing criminal acts with terrorist aims”, and “inciting hate or contention between nationalities, races and religions.” The arrested were convicted later by the court with imprisonment that varied from 5 years to 18 years.

The survey shows that 7.6% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that they were unjustly arrested due to their religion. Another 28.3% has no clear-cut opinion on this issue while nearly two thirds, disagree or strongly disagree.

Similar opinion is given on the overall stance of the impartiality of law enforcement institutions in general which are regarded as being tougher with the adherents “of my religion”.

Opinion on the fairness of law enforcement and justice institutions regarding religious radicalism

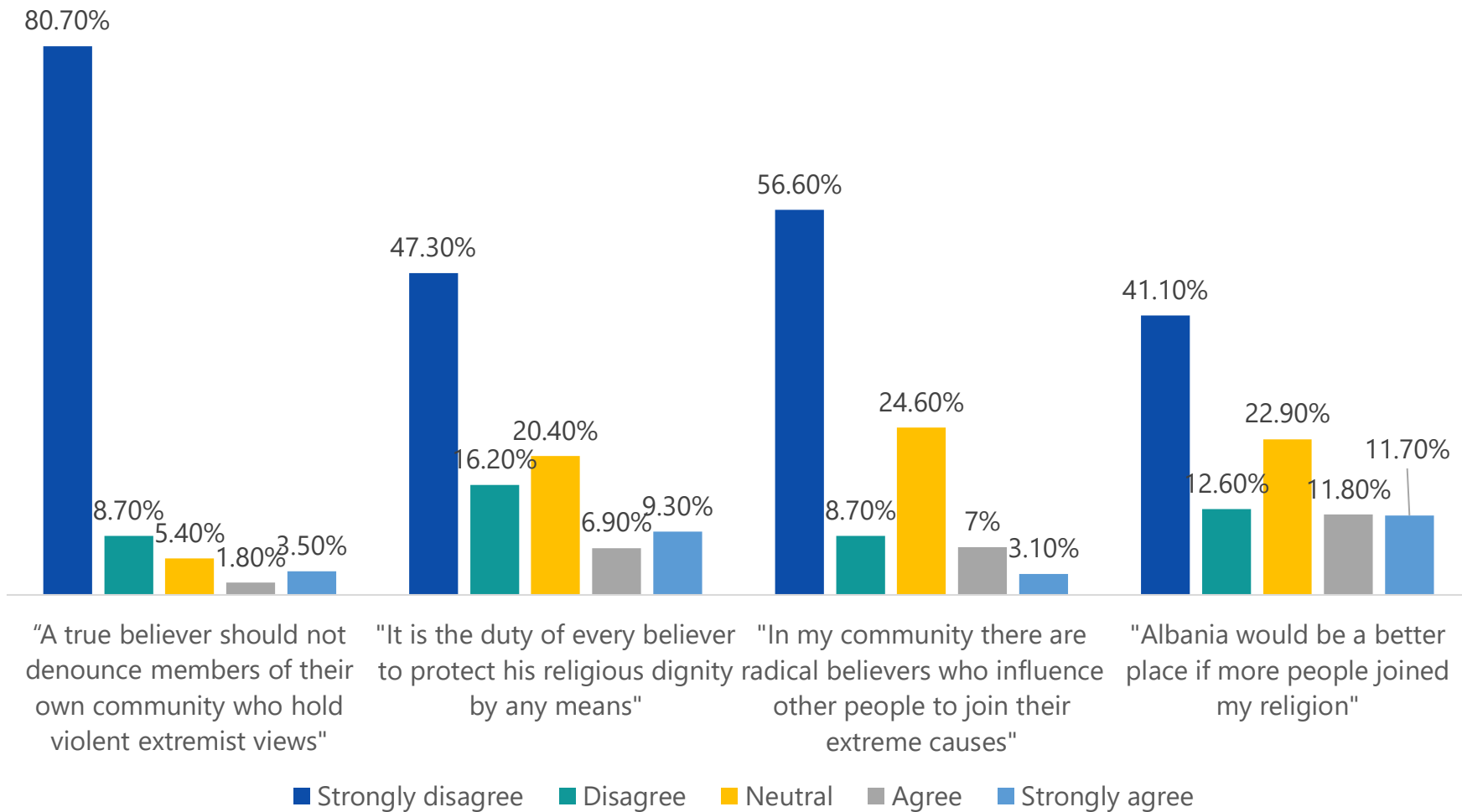


Graph 34 - How much do you agree with the statement: "Albanian authorities unjustly arrested nine Muslims in 2014 for their religious beliefs"

Given that the radical groups tend to mould a strong in-group bond that is used to create the divide with those in the outer group, the respondents were asked on the extent they agreed that a true believer should not denounce members of their religious community who hold violent extremist views.

The largest majority of nearly 90% agree or strongly agree that those holding violent extremist views should be condemned. However, 5.3% of the respondents said that they disagree or strongly disagree with this, while another 5.4% has no clear-cut opinion.

Opinion on religion and radicalization



Graph 35 - Respondents' opinion on religion and radicalization

The respondents were also asked to give their opinion on the extent to which they thought believers should protect their religious dignity by any means. 63.5% of the respondents disagree or strongly disagree that it is the duty of the believers to protect his religious dignity by any means. On the other hand, there are 16.2%, agree or strongly agree with the statement that a believer has the duty to protect his/her religious dignity by any means, while another 20% have a neutral opinion.

The respondents were asked also to give their opinion on the presence of radical individuals in their communities who sought to influence other people to join their extreme causes. Two third think that there are no such radical believers in their communities. Only 10% agree or strongly agree with this statement, while another 24.6% have a neutral opinion.

Another question addressed the tendency of violent extremist narratives to challenge the religious diversity and harmony in Albania. The respondents were asked their opinion on whether Albania would be a better place if more people joined their religion.

23% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement while another 23% has no clear position on this. A little more that the half of the respondents 53.6%, strongly disagree or disagree.

Religious tensions as potential extremism drivers

One of the measures undertaken to prevent radicalization has been the criminalisation of the participation in foreign conflicts. Respondents were asked to give their opinion on the support for this legal measure. 60% of citizens think that the engagement of Albanian citizens in conflicts abroad must not be allowed. 12% citizens disagree with the statement and support the idea of Albanian citizens joining the foreign conflicts. In another study about 21% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "Inciting of or engagement in armed conflicts abroad must not be allowed."¹⁴⁰

Asked on whether the Albanian authorities should repatriate the Albanian citizens who after the defeat of ISIS have remained in the camps in Iraq and Syria, the majority agrees (25.7%) or strongly agrees (47.6%). Only 12.3% disagree or strongly disagree.

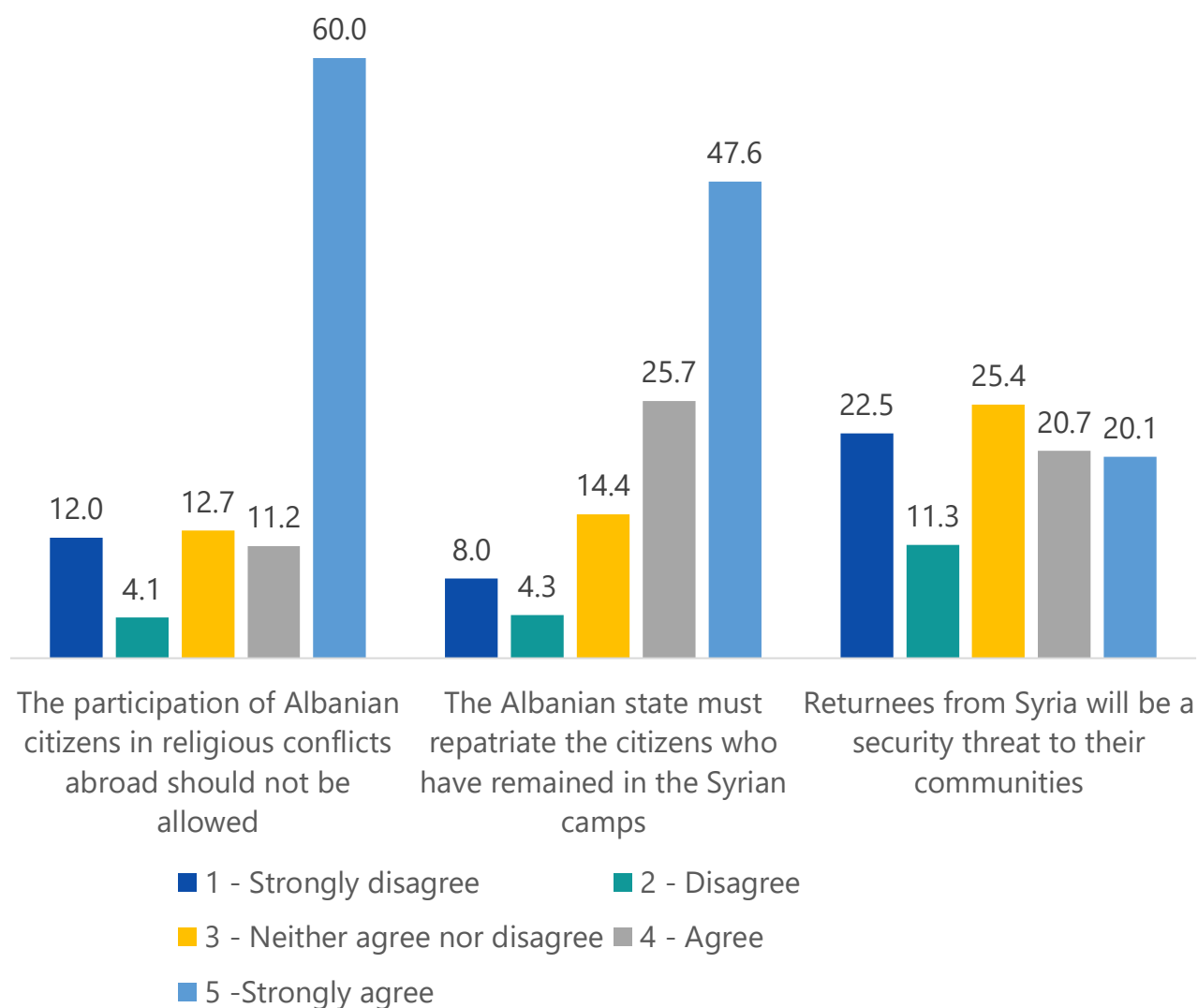
The responses show that public is divided on the issues, thus state institutions should play a role to raise awareness and clarify citizens on the real threats of radicalizing and the need to integrate certain individual back in society.

The opinions are fragmented regarding the perceived security threat from the returnees. 41% of respondents believe or strongly believe that returnees from Syria will be a security threat to their communities, while 33% of respondents either believe or strongly believe that returnees from Syria will not be a security threat to their communities. One-fourth of the audience is neutral.

Only 19% of respondents from rural areas either agree or strongly agree that returnees from Syria will be a security threat to their communities. While respondents with higher education have the highest percentage (52.5%) of either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Given the high percentage of respondents who believe that returnees from Syria will be a security threat, this means that there is still work for the government to do in order to make sure that returnees are not an actual threat to receiving communities, convince the public that they are not a threat to their communities, and listen to the potential concerns and grievances of the public on this point.

¹⁴⁰ Vurmo, Gj. et al. (2018). Religious Tolerance in Albania. Tirana: Institute for Democracy and Mediation and UNDP. <http://idmalbania.org/religious-tolerance-albania/> (retrieved 10 October 2020).

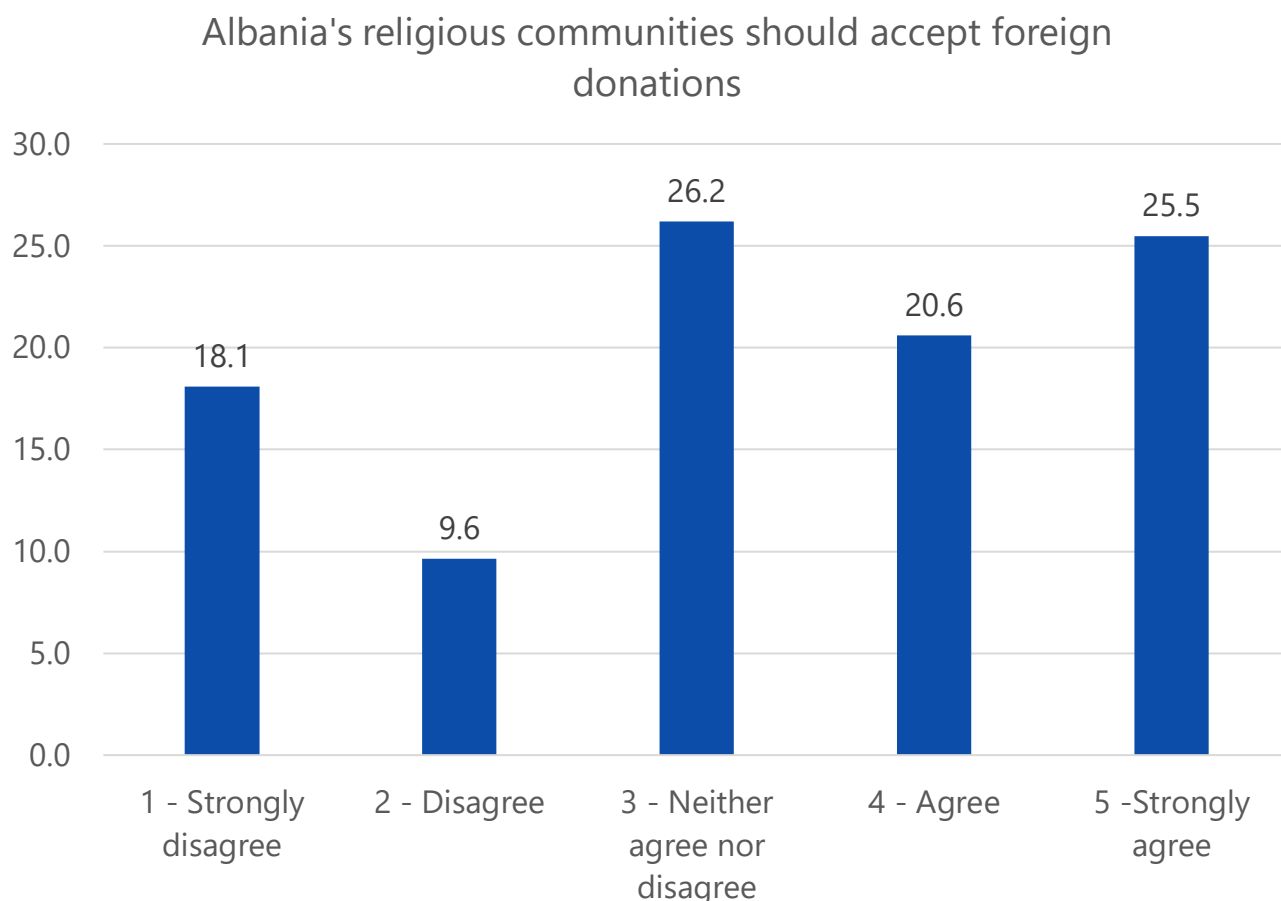
Opinion on the participation in foreign fights and the returnees from Syria and Iraq



Graph 36 - Opinion on the participation in foreign fights and the returnees from Syria and Iraq

Since donations by various foreign religious organisations have been used to promote violent extremist narratives, some European countries have undertaken measures to control or ban altogether such donations. In 2004 Albania adopted the law “Measures against Terrorist Financing” and froze the assets of terrorist financiers curtailing the activities of suspected Islamic NGOs.

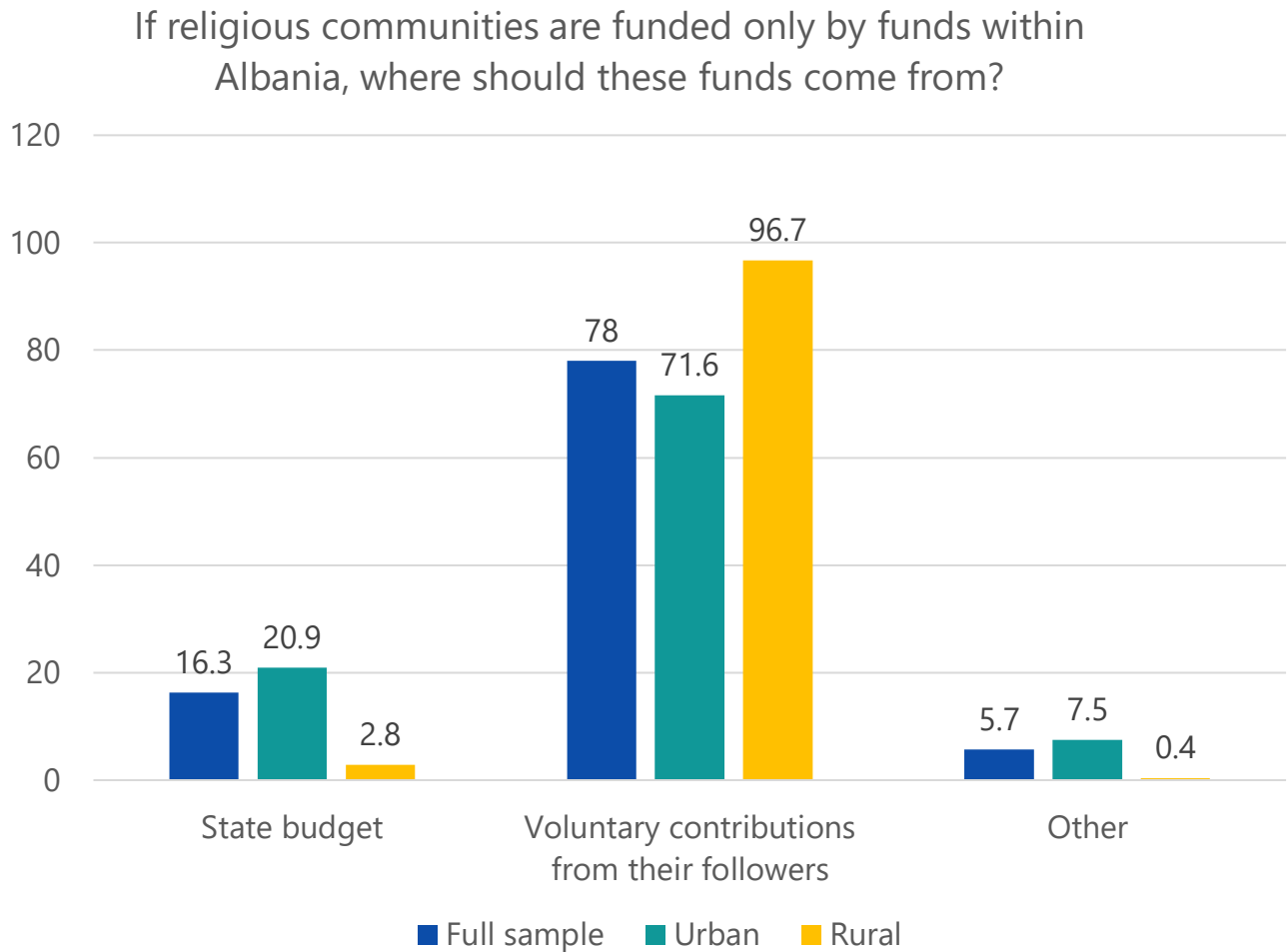
Asked on whether religious communities of Albania should accept foreign donations, nearly half of respondents (46%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the religious communities may accept such donations, while 28% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Respondents from rural areas had the highest percentage of strongly disagreeing (33.3%).



Graph 37 - How much do you agree with the statement: "Albania's religious communities should accept foreign donations"

The respondents were also asked to give their opinion on whether the funds should come from, in case the foreign donations were to be banned. 78% responded that if religious communities were to be financed only by funds within Albania, those funds should come from voluntary contributions of their followers. Only 16% of respondents think those funds should come from state budget.

Urban and rural respondents showed an evident difference of opinion. 21% of respondents from urban areas think those funds should come from state budget, while only 3% of respondents from rural areas think so.

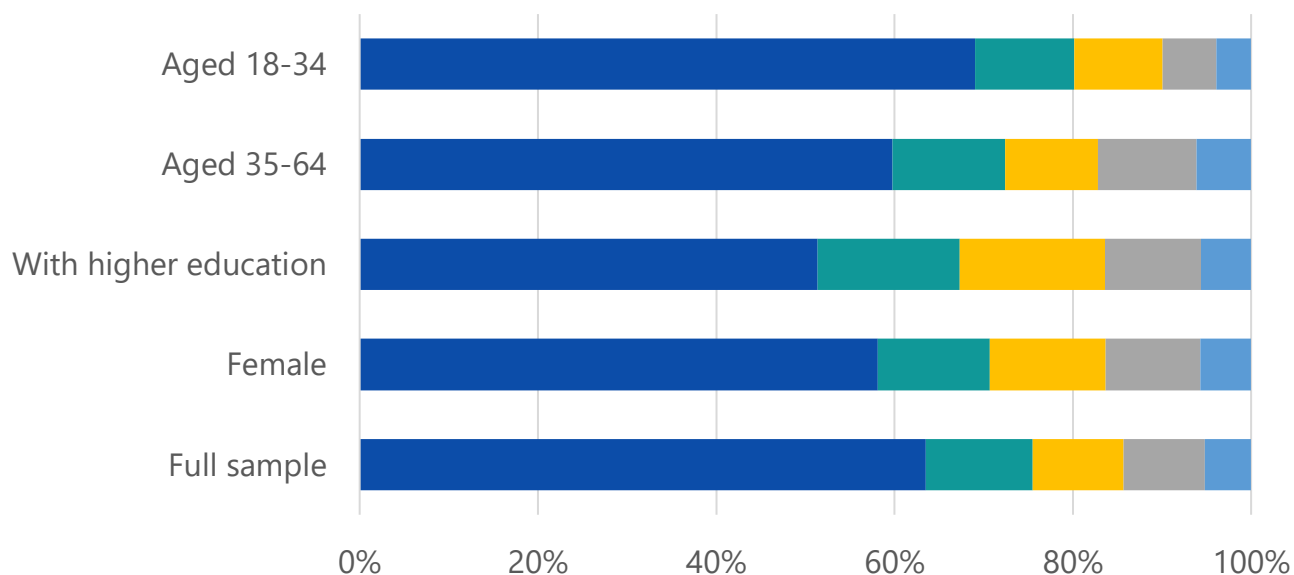


Graph 38 - If religious communities are funded only by funds within Albania, where should these funds come from?

Another debated issue that is regarded as a source of societal division that may lead people to embrace radicalism is the wearing of evident religious symbols. The respondents were asked to provide their opinion on the extent they agreed with the statement “the beard for man or headscarf for women reveal that we are dealing with religious extremists.”

Over 75% disagree or strongly disagree with the statement while 14% of respondents agree or completely agree. The respondents with higher education and the female respondents show a higher association of the religious symbols with extremism. Although most of the categories of respondents have similar answers, it is interesting that respondents from 18-34 years old have the lowest percentage (10%) of either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, while respondents from 34-64 years old have the highest percentage (17%) of agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

Beards for men or headscarves for women mean we are dealing with religious extremists



Graph 39 - Opinion on religious symbols and extremism

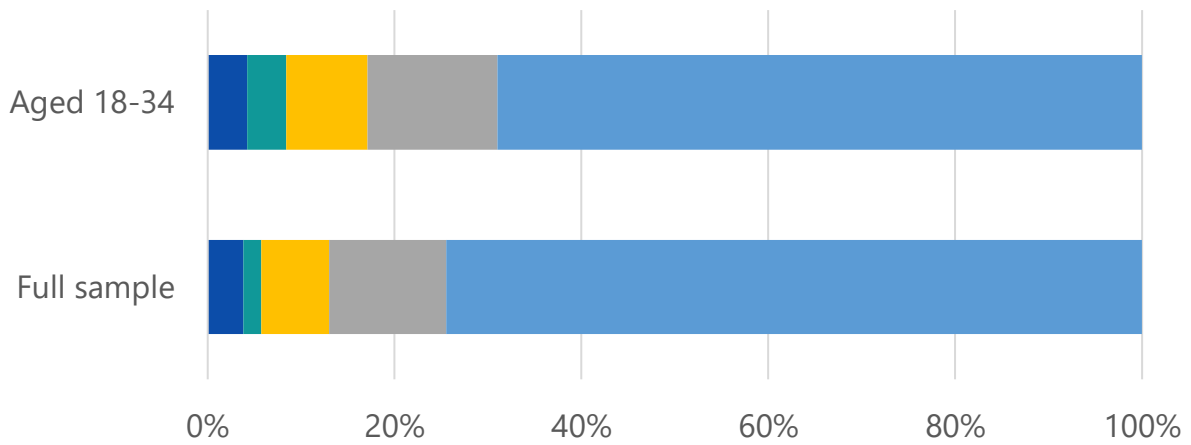
Another topic, which relates to the Albanian debate with regards to the role of the state and the relations between the state and the religions, is the claimed right of various religious groups to conducting faith-based activities in sites that are beyond the remit of the legally recognised religious communities, such as it has been the case of those known as “illegal mosques.”

Mosques in Albania operating outside legal standards and authority of MCA have become potential places for the growth of radical Islamist ideas and radicalization hubs.¹⁴¹ The majority of foreign fighters that joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq from Albania had some connections with a mosque in the suburbs of Tirana that was operating outside the authority of the MCA. Many citizens still consider sensitive the worship places outside the authority of the official religious organizations.

¹⁴¹ Fatjona Mejдини. Uncontrolled Mosques Proliferate in Albania. BIRN December 17, 2015. <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/12/17/state-slams-albanian-muslim-over-uncontrolled-mosques-12-17-2015/>

The majority of the respondents, 74.5% are of the opinion that religious sites without the permission of the respective religious community should be banned. However, around 5.7% strongly disagree or disagree with this statement, while 7.3% have a neutral opinion. The number of respondents residing in the rural areas who agree or strongly agree is much higher (96.2%), which can be related to the fact that the problem of religious institutions and buildings operating without the permission of the respective religious community has been present only in the urban areas.

“Religious sites without the permission of the respective religious authority should be banned”



	Full sample	Aged 18-34
Strongly disagree	3.80%	4.20%
Disagree	1.90%	4.20%
Neutral	7.30%	8.70%
Agree	12.50%	13.90%
Strongly agree	74.50%	69%

Graph 40 - How much do you agree with the statement: "Religious buildings/sites without the permission of the respective religious authority should be banned"?

According to another national survey, 22% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with banning illegal religious sites.¹⁴²

An argument that has been at the basis of the justification of the presence of foreign clerics in Albania, has been the lack of qualified Albanian clerics. The respondents were asked to provide

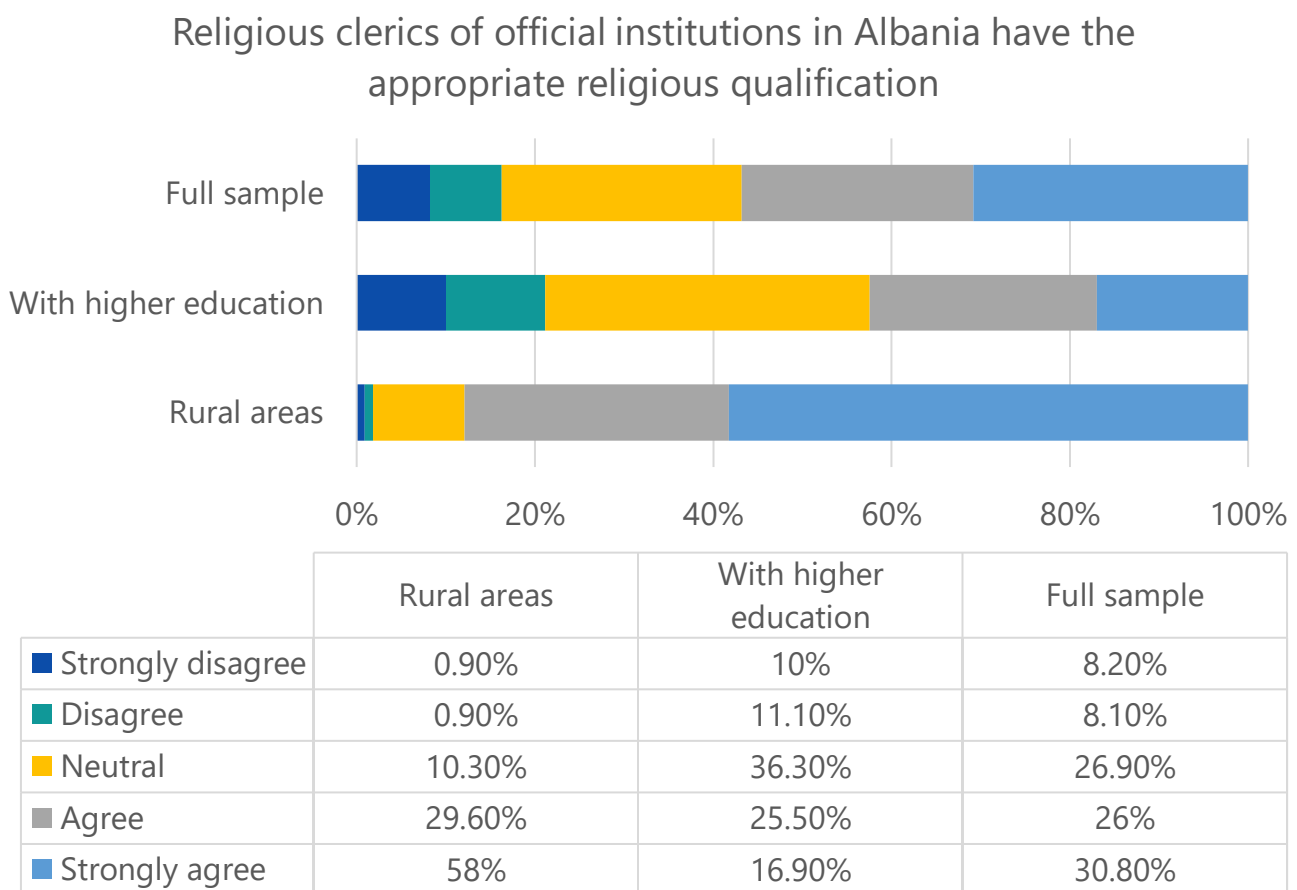
¹⁴² Vurmo, Gj. et al. (2018). Religious Tolerance in Albania. Tirana: Institute for Democracy and Mediation and UNDP. <http://idmalbania.org/religious-tolerance-albania/> (retrieved 10 October 2020).

their opinion on whether religious clerics of official institutions in Albania have the appropriate religious qualification.

The responses show great fragmentation on this and variations across urban and rural inhabitants and those with higher education.

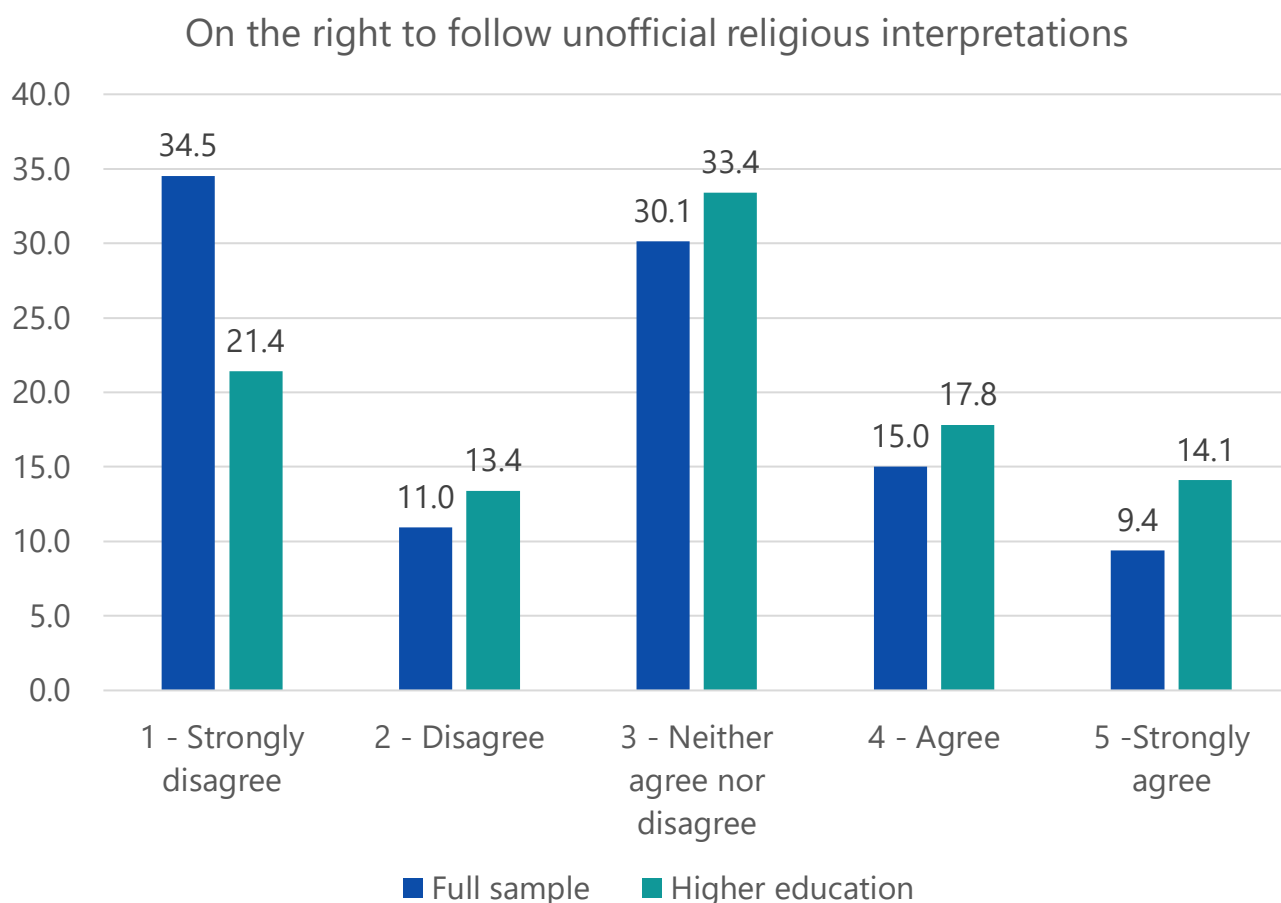
16% of the total sample of the respondents disagree or strongly disagree with this statement while only nearly 2% of the rural inhabitants share the same opinion.

Those with higher education represent the highest percentage (21%) of those who disagree or strongly disagree with the fact that religious clerics of official institutions in Albania have the appropriate religious qualification.



Graph 41 - Opinion on appropriateness of religious qualification of clerics

Non-official religious sites, in the case of Albania, have been a source of radicalization.¹⁴³ Asked if people have the right to follow unofficial religious interpretations if they do not agree with the interpretation of the official communities of their religions, one in four respondents either agree or strongly agree. Meanwhile, of those with higher education, almost one in three either agree or strongly agrees with the statement. A significant percentage have no clearly taken opinion. Only 45% of the whole sample disagrees or strongly disagrees that people should follow unofficial religious interpretations.

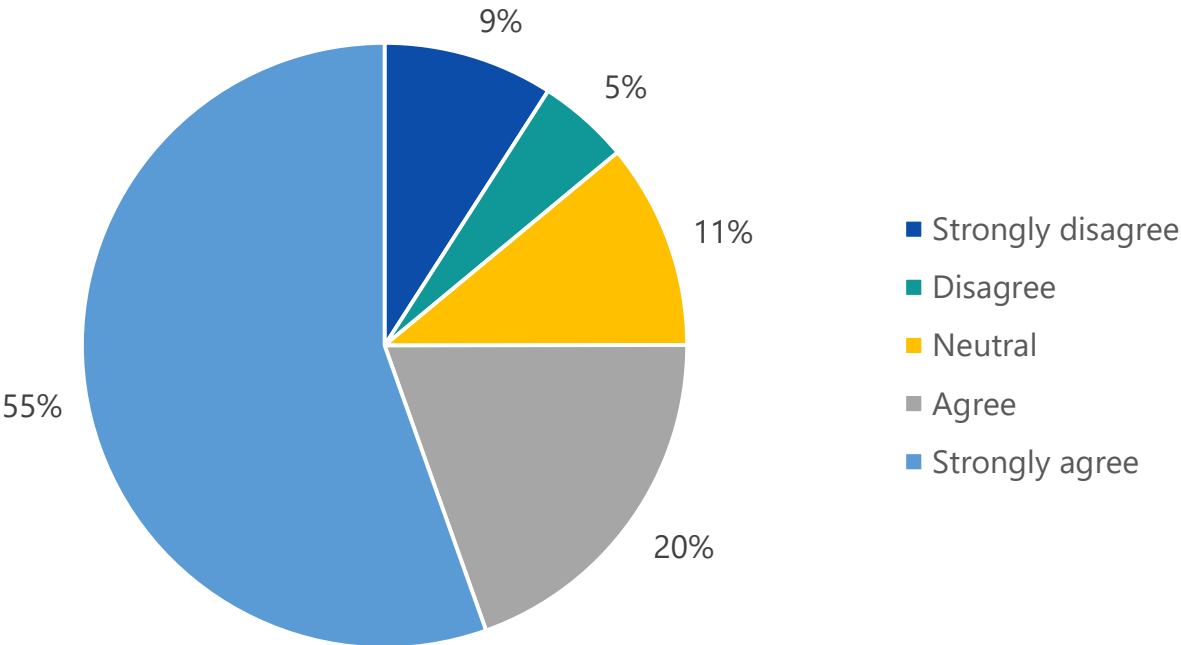


Graph 42 - Opinion on the right to follow unofficial religious interpretations

¹⁴³ Çobo, S, 2016, "Imams Recruited even Mothers with Children, 70 people were sent to Syria." From Gazeta Shqip: <http://gazeta-shqip.com/lajme/2015/02/26/imamet-rekrutuan-edhe-nena-me-femije-derguan-ne-siri-70-luftetare/>.

Regarding the role of the state in monitoring religious activities, three quarters of the respondents (75.1%) agree or strongly agree, while 11% have no position on this issue. An aggregate of 14% of the respondents strongly disagree or disagree that the state should monitor religious activities. Among the respondents, males 14.6%, and those residing in rural areas 18.3% make for the largest part of those who hold such opinion.

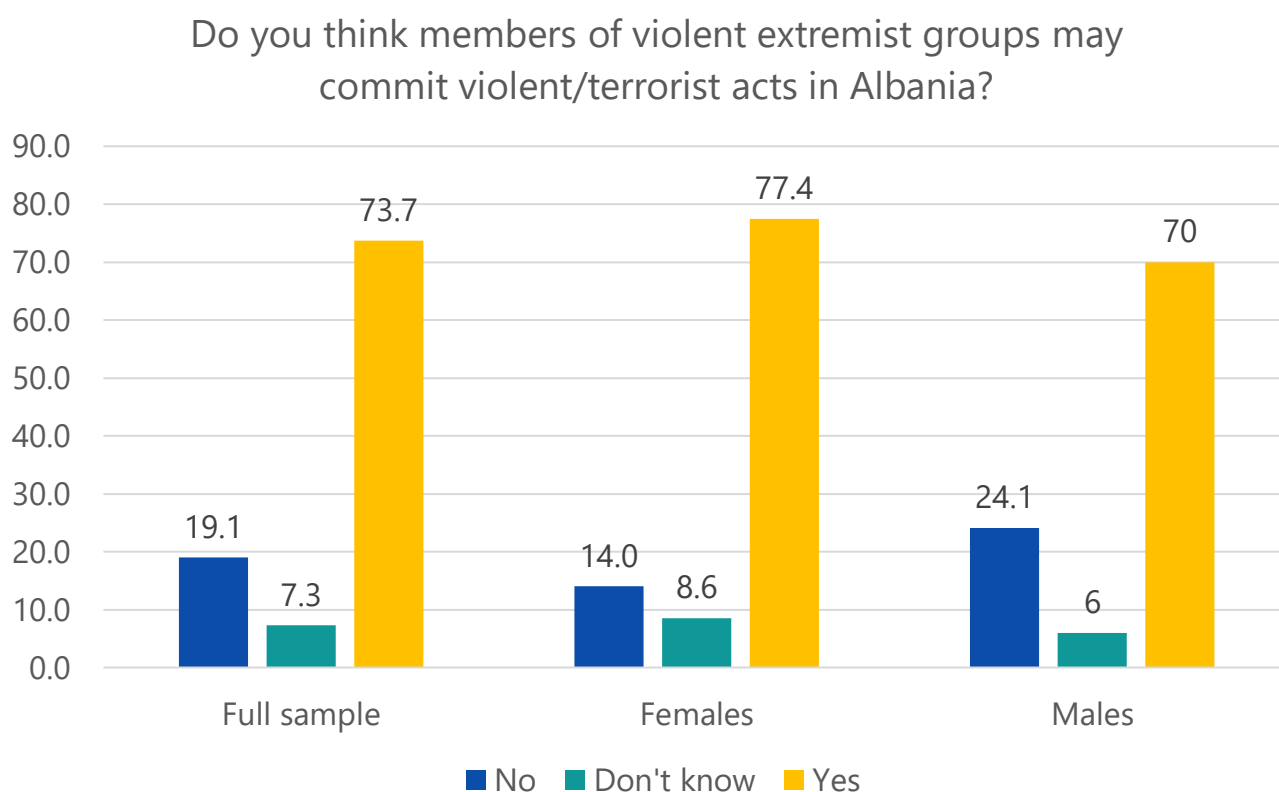
Religious activities should be monitored by the state



Graph 43 - Opinion on the role of state in monitoring religious activities

Approaches to preventing and countering violent extremism

In general, violent extremism is regarded with concern by the majority of the citizens surveyed. Asked to give their opinion on the possibility that members of violent extremist groups may commit violent terrorist acts in Albania, 73% are of the opinion that such a risk exists, while 19.1% believe the opposite. The perception that such risk exists is higher among the female respondents, 77.4%.



Graph 44 - Opinion on the possibility of terrorist acts in Albania by VE groups

Violent extremism is regarded also as a threat to democracy, social cohesion and security by the majority of the citizens.

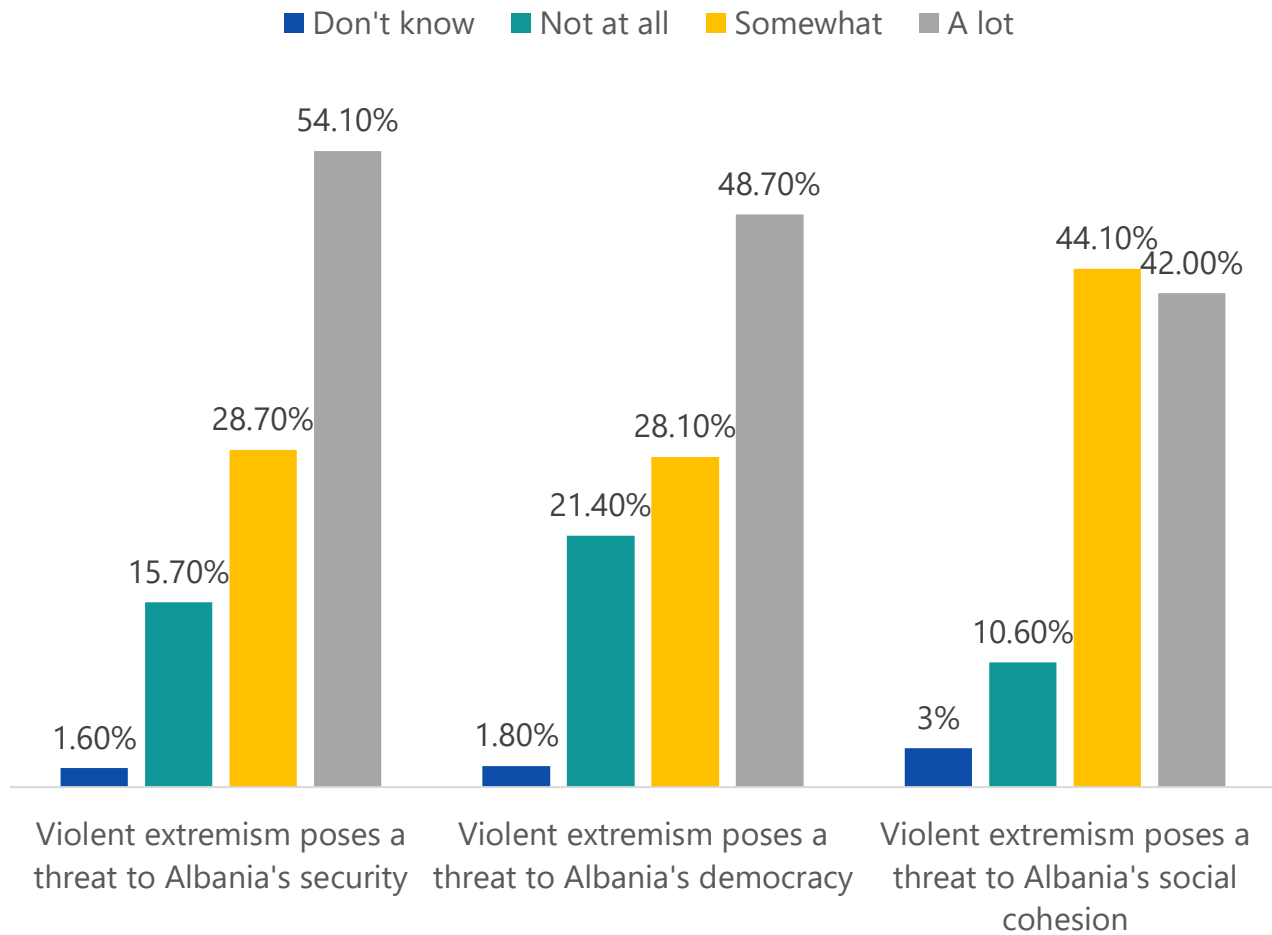
42% of respondents strongly agree that violent extremism poses a threat to Albania’s social cohesion, and another 44% agree. Respondents from rural areas have the lowest percentage (3%) of responses who strongly disagree with the statement.

54% of respondents strongly agree that violent extremism poses a threat to Albania’s security, and another 28.7% agree. Respondents from urban areas (21%) and those with higher education

(22%) are the two categories who have the highest percentage of strongly disagreeing with this statement, while only 1% of respondents from rural areas strongly disagree with the statement.

48.7% strongly agree that violent extremism poses a threat to Albania’s democracy, while 28.1% of respondents strongly disagree with such statement.

Opinion on threats posed by violent extremism



Graph 45 - How much do you agree with the statements: violent extremism poses a threat to the social cohesion, security, democracy of Albania?

The respondents were asked to provide their opinion on the role of law enforcement to countering violent extremism as well as the role of communication and messaging.

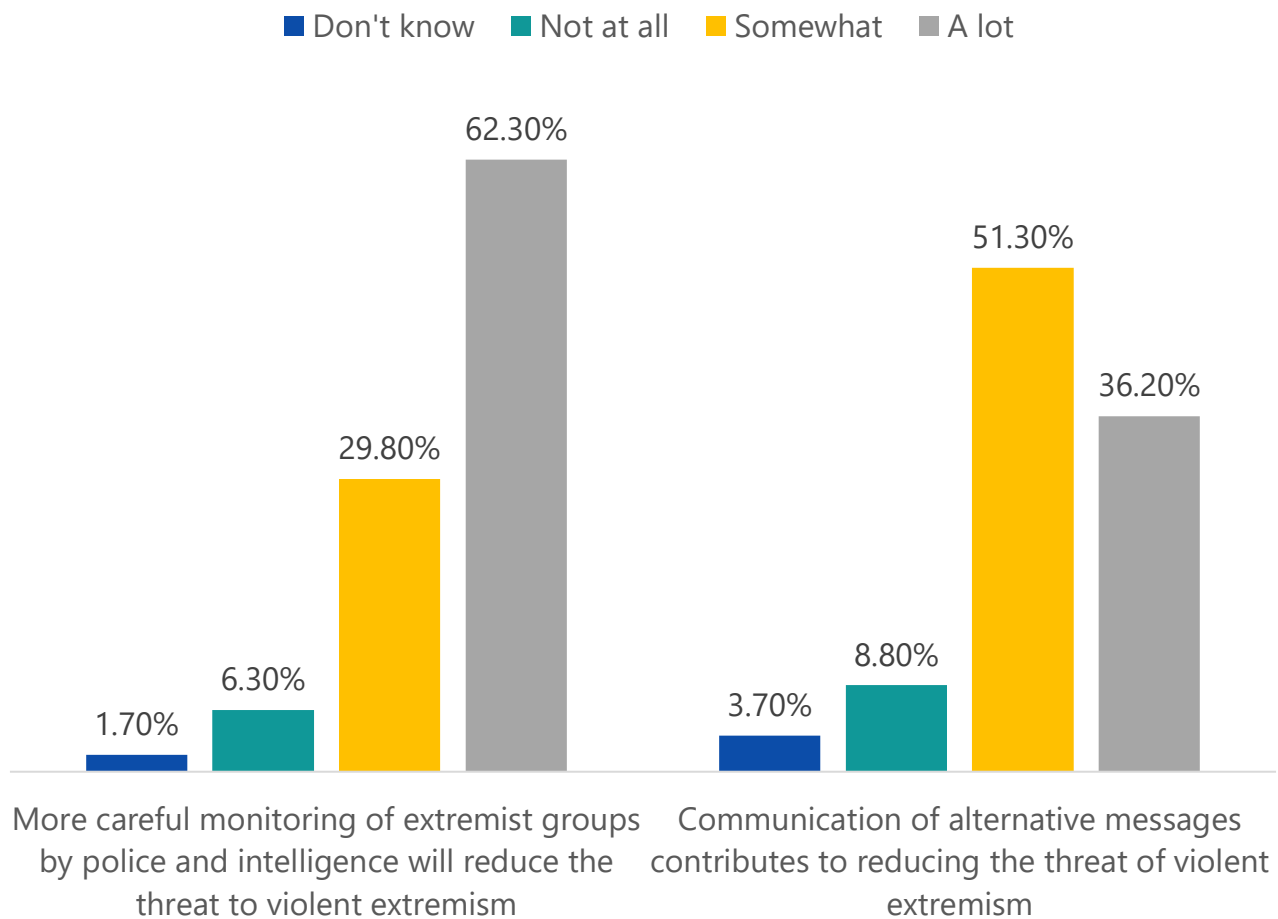
In overall there seems to be an inclination towards law enforcement approach rather than the communication of alternative messages and narratives.

62.3% of the respondents think that a more prudent monitoring of extremist groups by police and intelligence will reduce the threat of violent extremism a lot. Only 36.2% think that the communication of alternative messages will have the same contribution to reducing the threat of violent extremism.

In rural areas, those who think monitoring by police and intelligence will contribute a lot is the highest, 79.2%. But they also support communication, as 56.7% state that this will contribute a lot.

The respondents of the age group 18 to 34 are the more sceptical regarding communication and only 35.8% state that it can contribute by a lot to reducing violent extremism.

Means to reducing threats from violent extremism



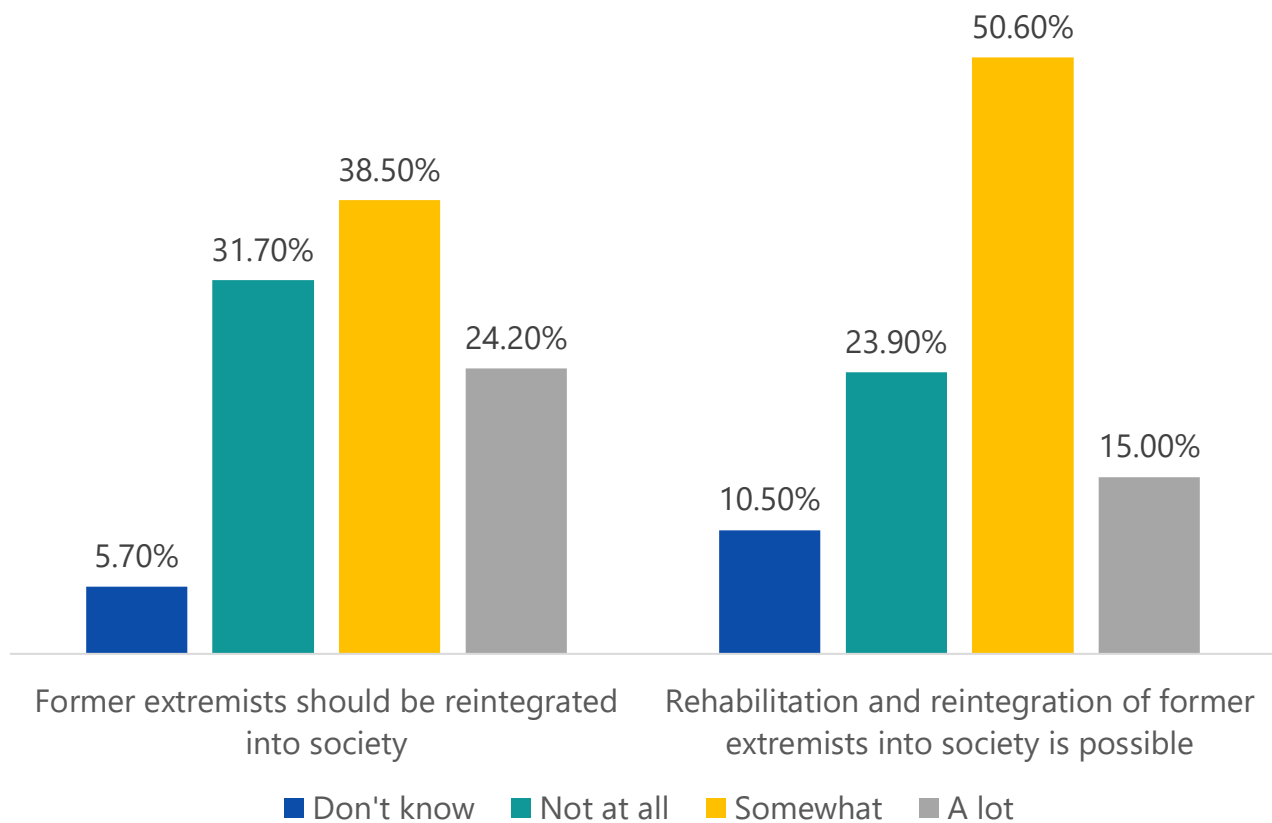
Graph 46 - Means to reduce threat from violent extremism

The reintegration into the mainstream society has been identified as viable prevention approach as it seeks to counter the social divide that violent extremists promote, so the survey tried to capture the opinion of the citizens with respect to this approach.

The results show that the respondents are not so certain about the power of reintegration of violent extremists in the society. Only 24% responded that they agree a lot that former extremists should be reintegrated into society, while 31.7% of them disagree, and another 38.5% somewhat agreeing.

When asked on whether reintegration is possible, only 15% say that they agree a lot while 23.9% disagree.

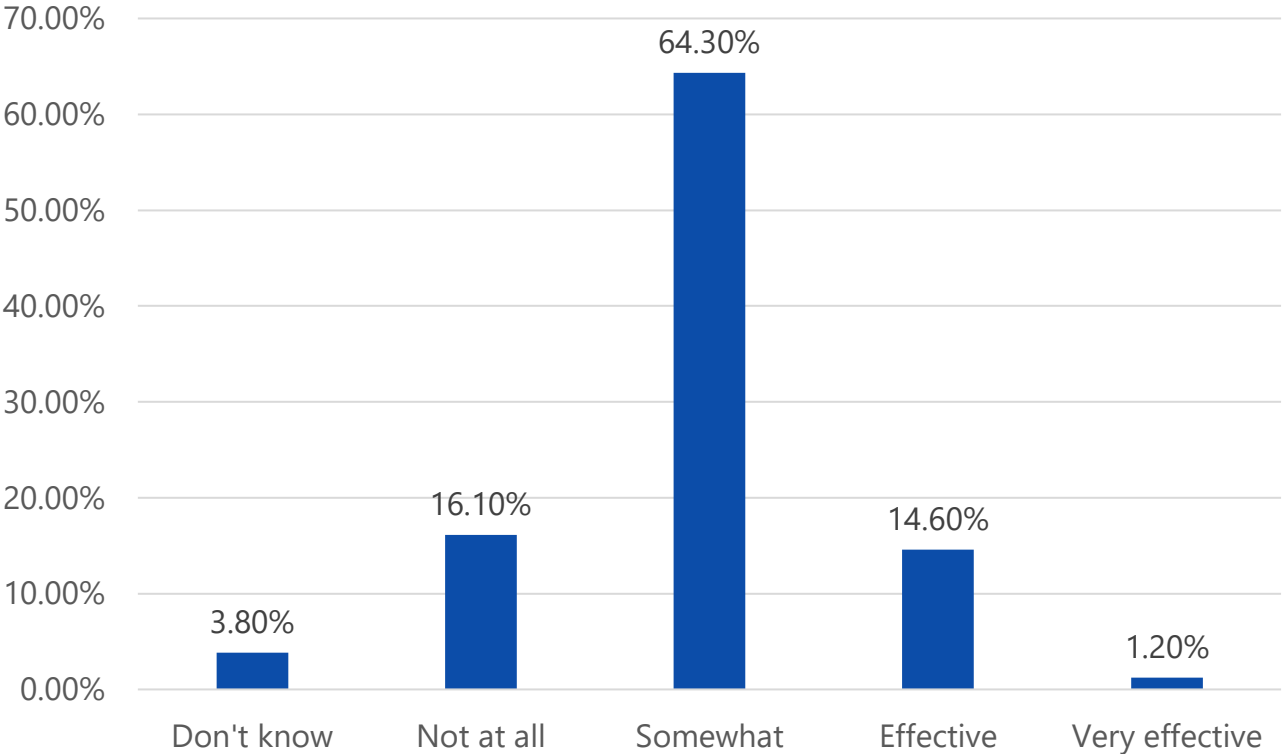
Support and confidence on the integration of former extremists



Graph 47 - Support and confidence on the integration of former extremists

The respondents were also asked to provide their opinion on what extent they considered the overall measures undertaken in Albania to tackle VE were effective. The largest majority of the respondents (64%) think that those measures are somewhat effective. About 15.8 % regard them as effective or very effective and the same percentage, 16%, think that they are not at all effective.

To what extent do you assess the effectiveness of the general efforts undertaken so far to counter violent extremism in Albania?

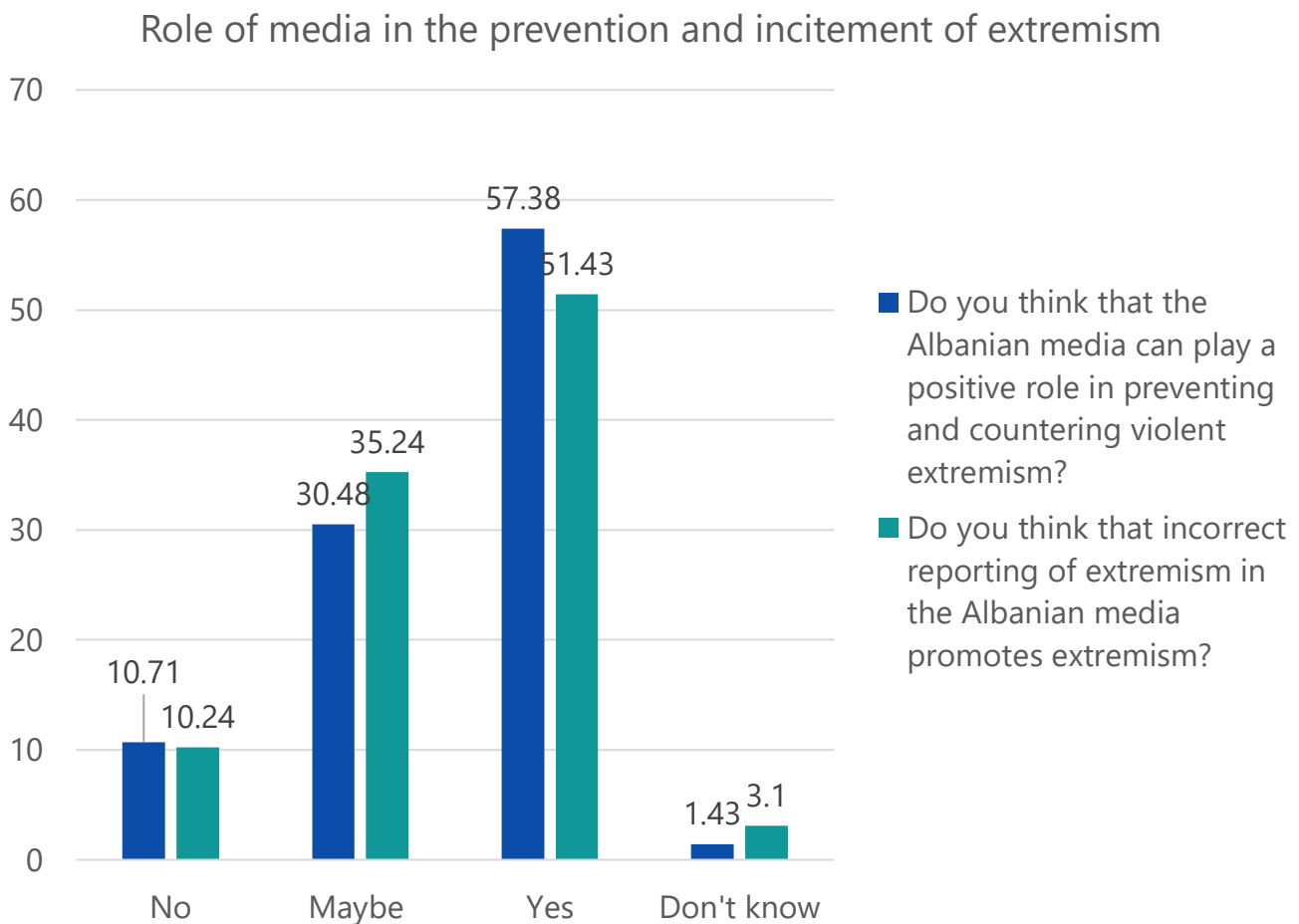


Graph 48 - To what extent do you assess the effectiveness of the general efforts undertaken so far to counter violent extremism in Albania?

Sources of information

News media has been acknowledged as a powerful factor that can contribute to preventing and countering VE. However, the media can also play the opposite role intentionally or inadvertently. The citizens were asked to provide their opinion on the role of media in preventing and countering violent extremism as well as on its potential negative impact.

The respondents credit a lot of importance to the media in the prevention of efforts, but also in inciting violent extremism through incorrect reporting. Only about 10% think that the media cannot play any role at all.

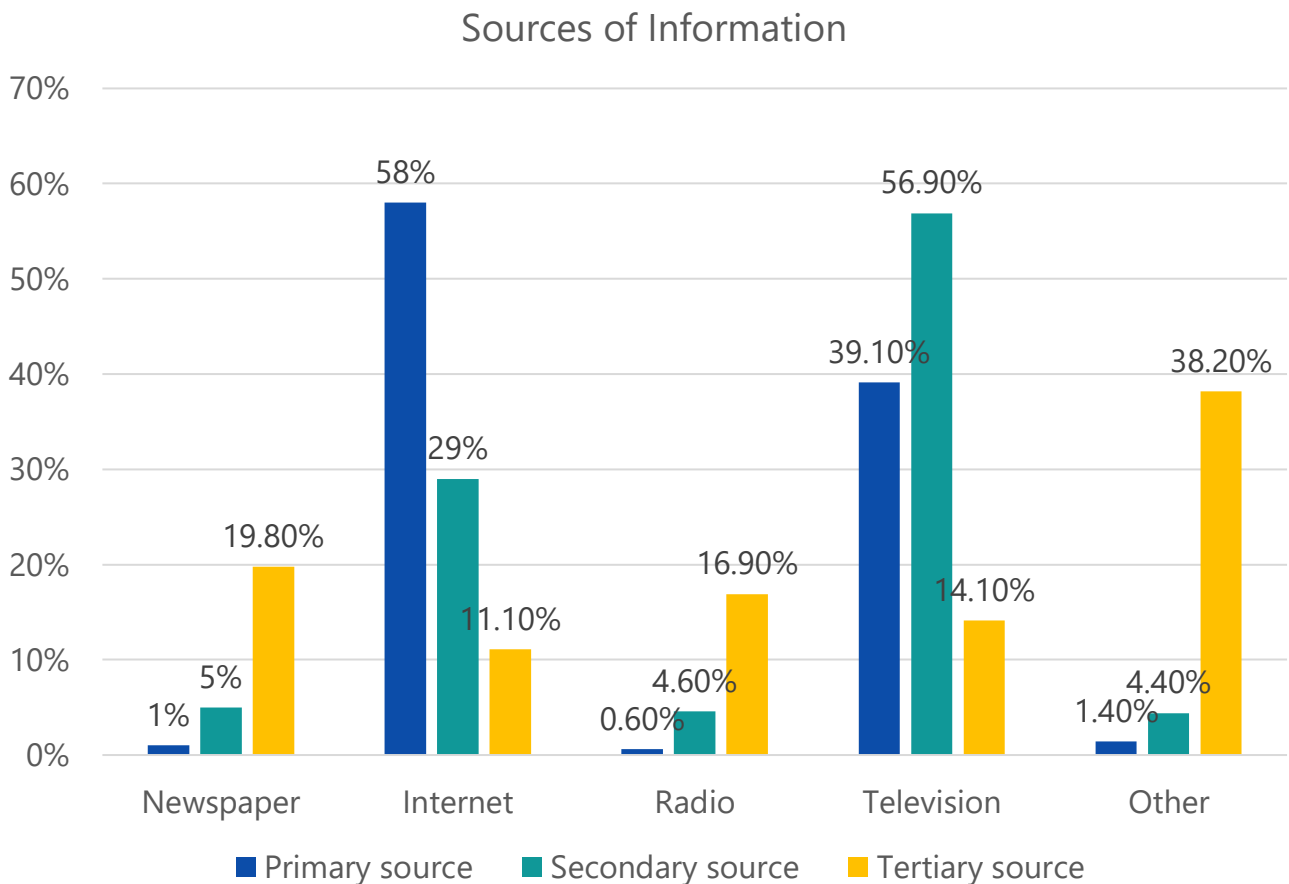


Graph 49 - Role of media in inciting and preventing extremism

In order to identify the most frequent channels of information that can be used to convey preventive and counter narratives, the respondents were asked to provide information on the sources of information they used. They were asked to provide their most frequent source of information, their second most frequent source of information and third most frequent source of information.

The majority of the respondents (58%) ranked internet as their most frequent source of information. This percentage is similar to the data published by the Data Report 2019.¹⁴⁴ More than two million citizens of Albania, 69% of total population, are internet users.

Whereas 39% of respondents ranked TV as their most frequent source of information. The majority of respondents ranked TV as their second most frequent source of information, while 29% ranked internet. Last, 20% of respondents ranked newspaper as their third most frequent source of information, 17% ranked radio, 14% TV, and 11% of the respondents ranked internet as their third most frequent source of information.

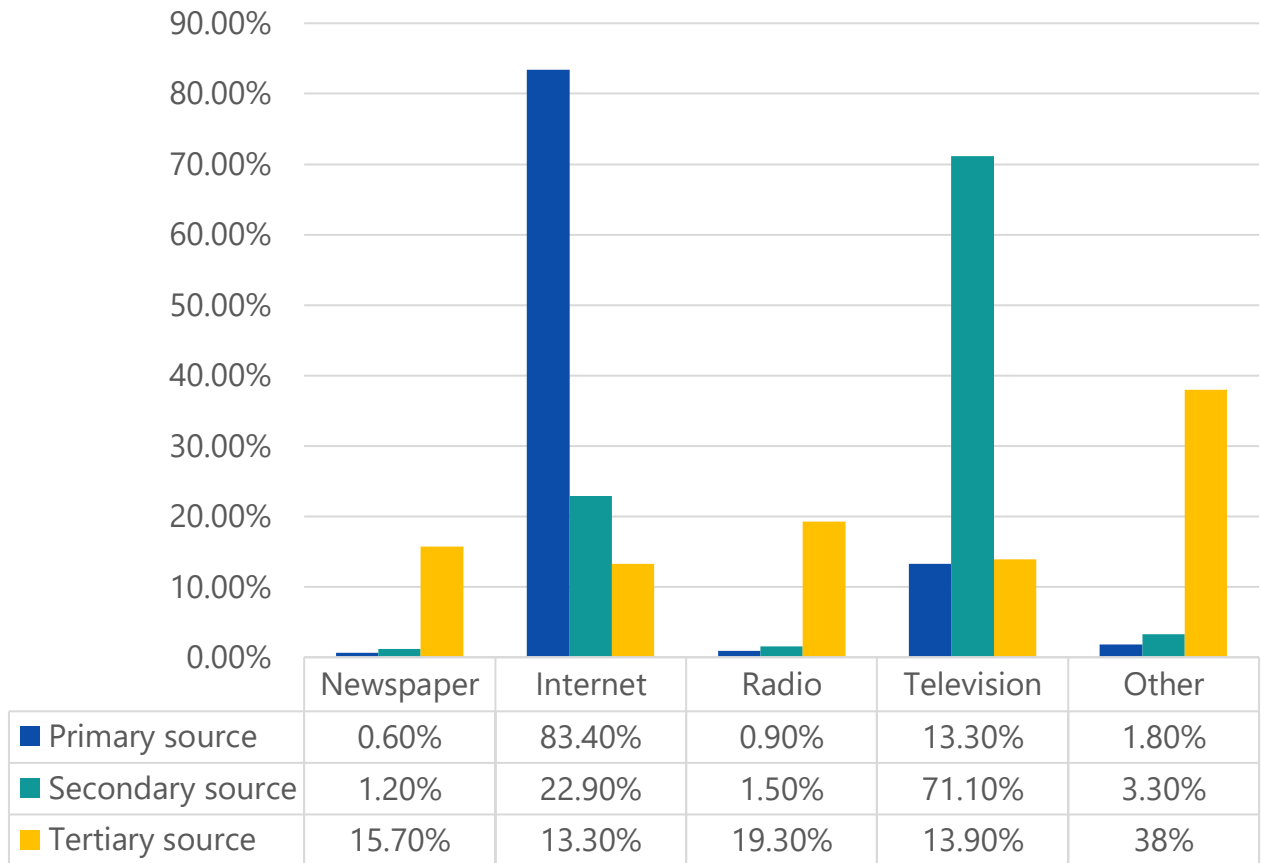


Graph 50 - Sources of information (whole sample)

The results of the survey show that although the internet and the television remain the main sources of information, even for the population of 18 to 34 years old, the internet is far more used as a primary source by them and similarly the television as the secondary sources (Graph below).

¹⁴⁴ Digital Around the World in 2019, Albania <https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2019-albania-january-2019-v01>

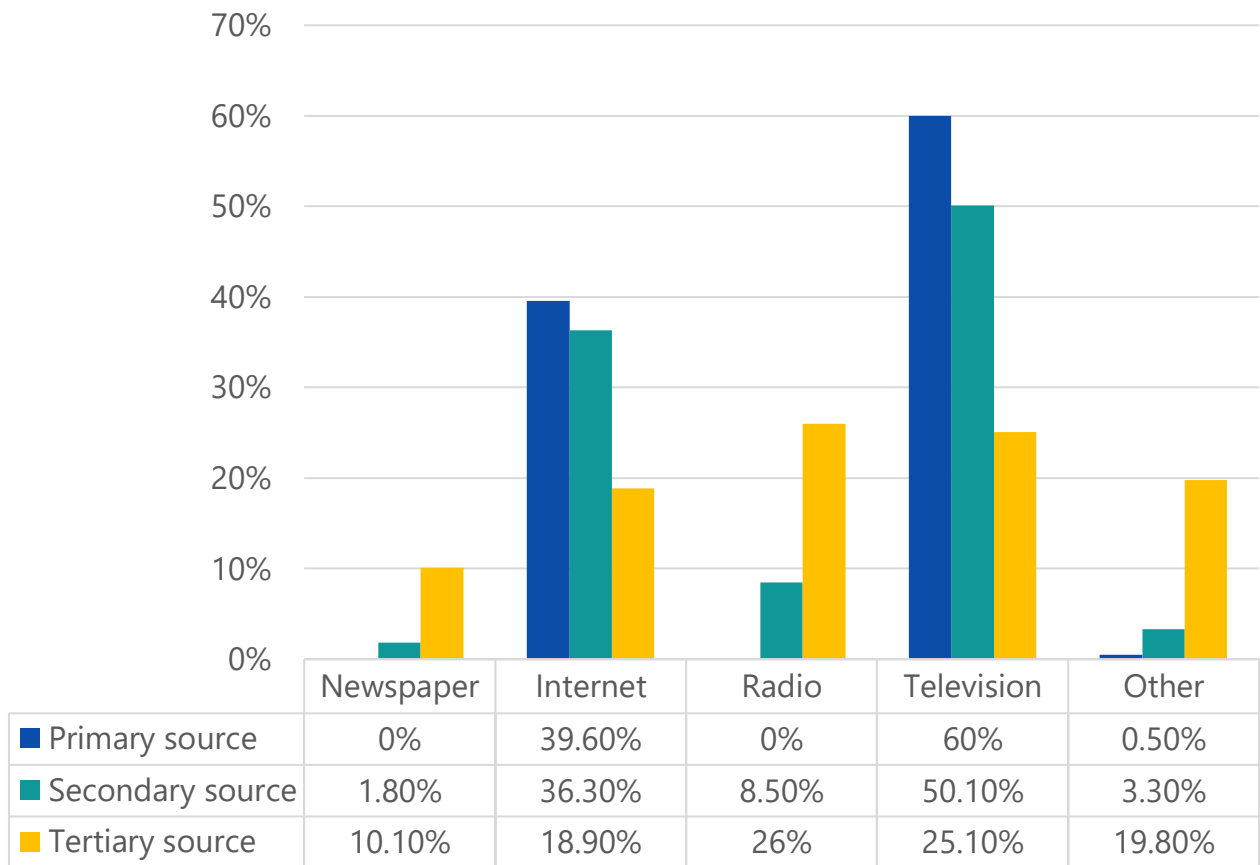
Sources of Information for 18-34 years old



Graph 51 - Sources of information (18-34 years old)

For the residents of the rural areas the television remains the most important source of information, due also to the limited internet access in those areas followed by internet.

Sources of Information for rural areas



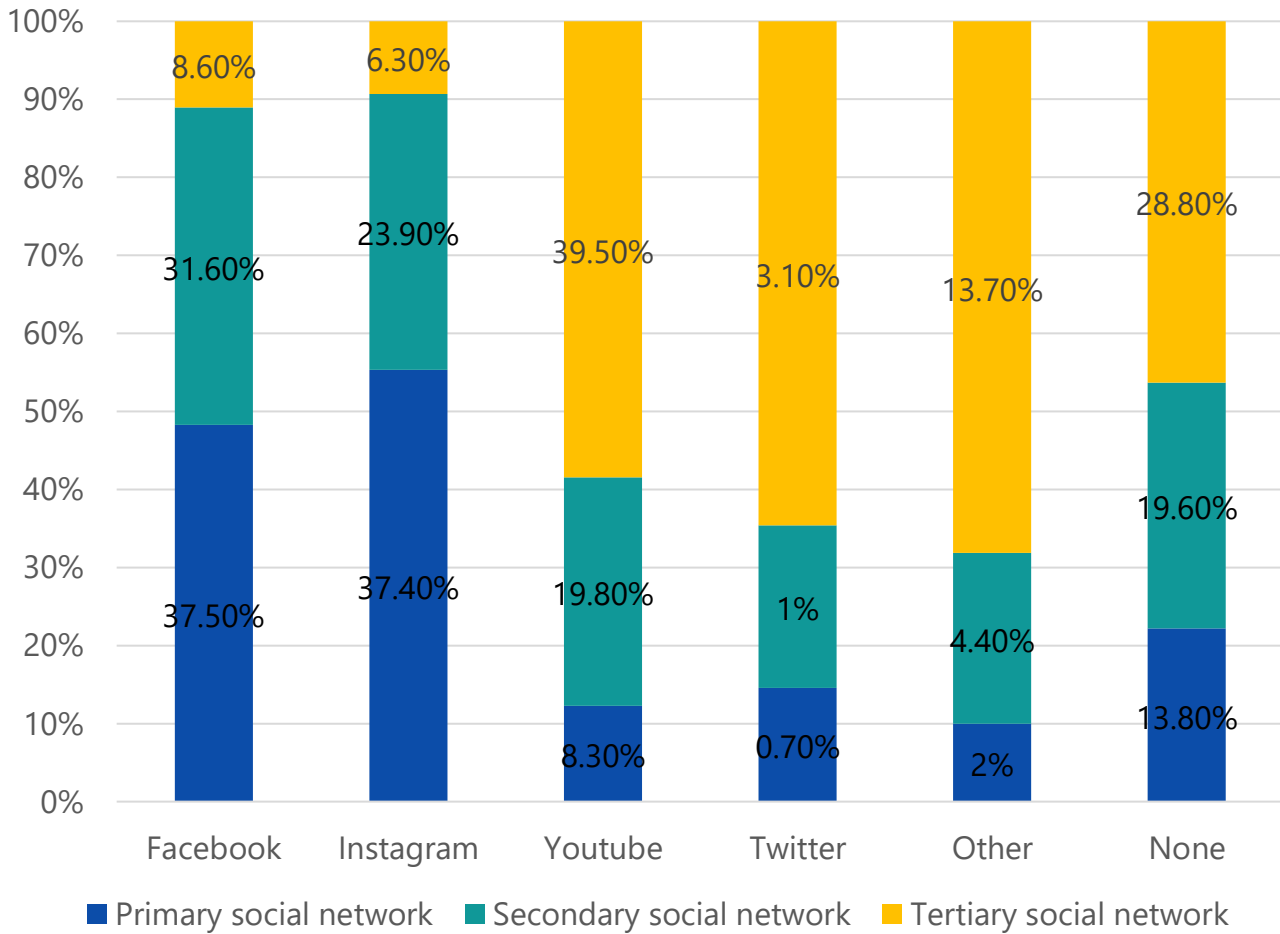
Graph 52 - Sources of information (rural areas residents)

Use of social networks

There are an estimated 2.07 million internet users, and 1.40 million social media users in Albania as of January 2020.¹⁴⁵ Respondents were asked to rank their most frequently used social networks. In alignment with the existing social media data for the country the two most common reported networks by the respondents of this survey were Facebook (38%) and Instagram (37%).

¹⁴⁵ The Global Digital Report 2020, Albania. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-albania>.

Use of social media

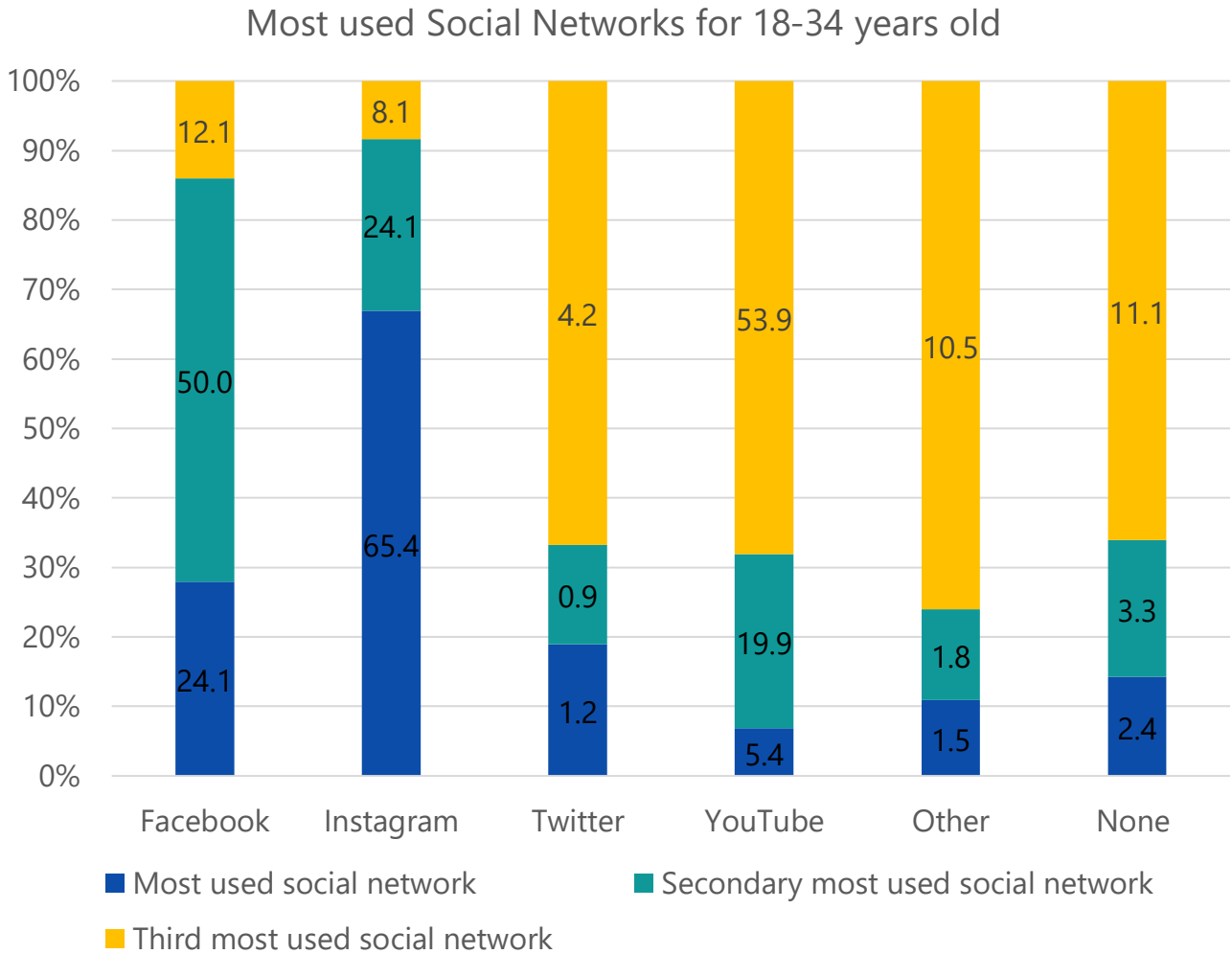


Graph 53 - Use of social media

YouTube was not highly reported, at 8% of the survey respondents. Only 14% of respondents declared they do not use any social network. With regard to the second most used social network, 32% said Facebook, 24% Instagram, 20% YouTube. A total of 20% of respondents declared they do not use any social network. With regard to the third most common social network they use, 39% said YouTube, 9% Facebook, 6% Instagram. A total of 29% of respondents said they do not use any social network. The findings from the survey reflect those of the Global Digital Report 2019, which indicate that there are 1.3 million (46% of Albania's population) Facebook monthly active users and 900,000 (32% of Albania's population) Instagram monthly active users in Albania.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ The Global Digital Report 2019, Albania. <https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2019-albania-january-2019-v01>

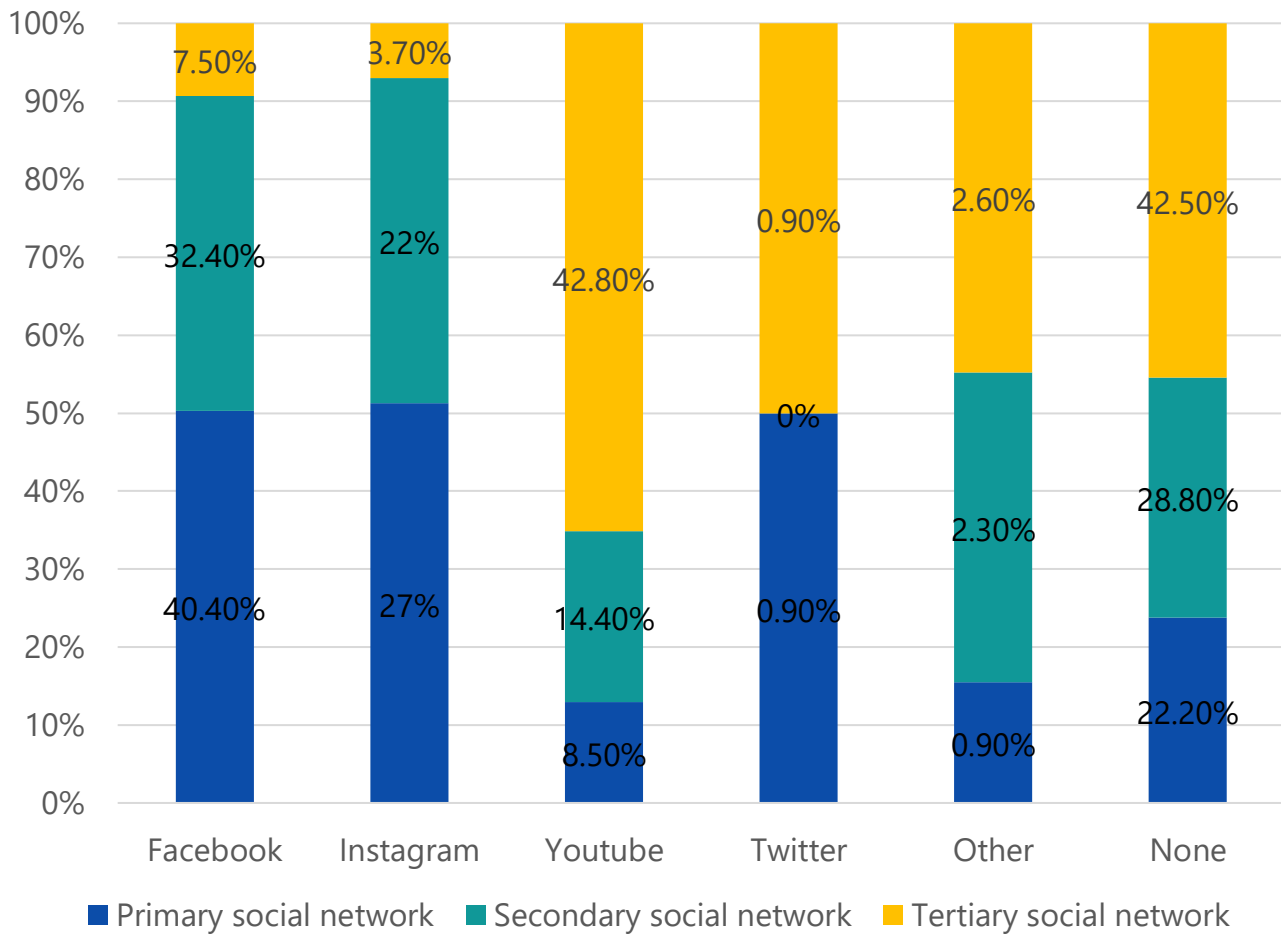
For the 18-34 years old age group, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube appear as the most used social networks but at higher rates than the average (Graph below).



Graph 54 - Use of social media (18-34 years old)

For the residents of the rural areas Facebook is the most used social media network followed by Instagram and YouTube. 42% say that they use no social media at all, which is quite significant and in proportion with the more limited use of internet by the rural areas' residents.

Most used social networks in rural areas

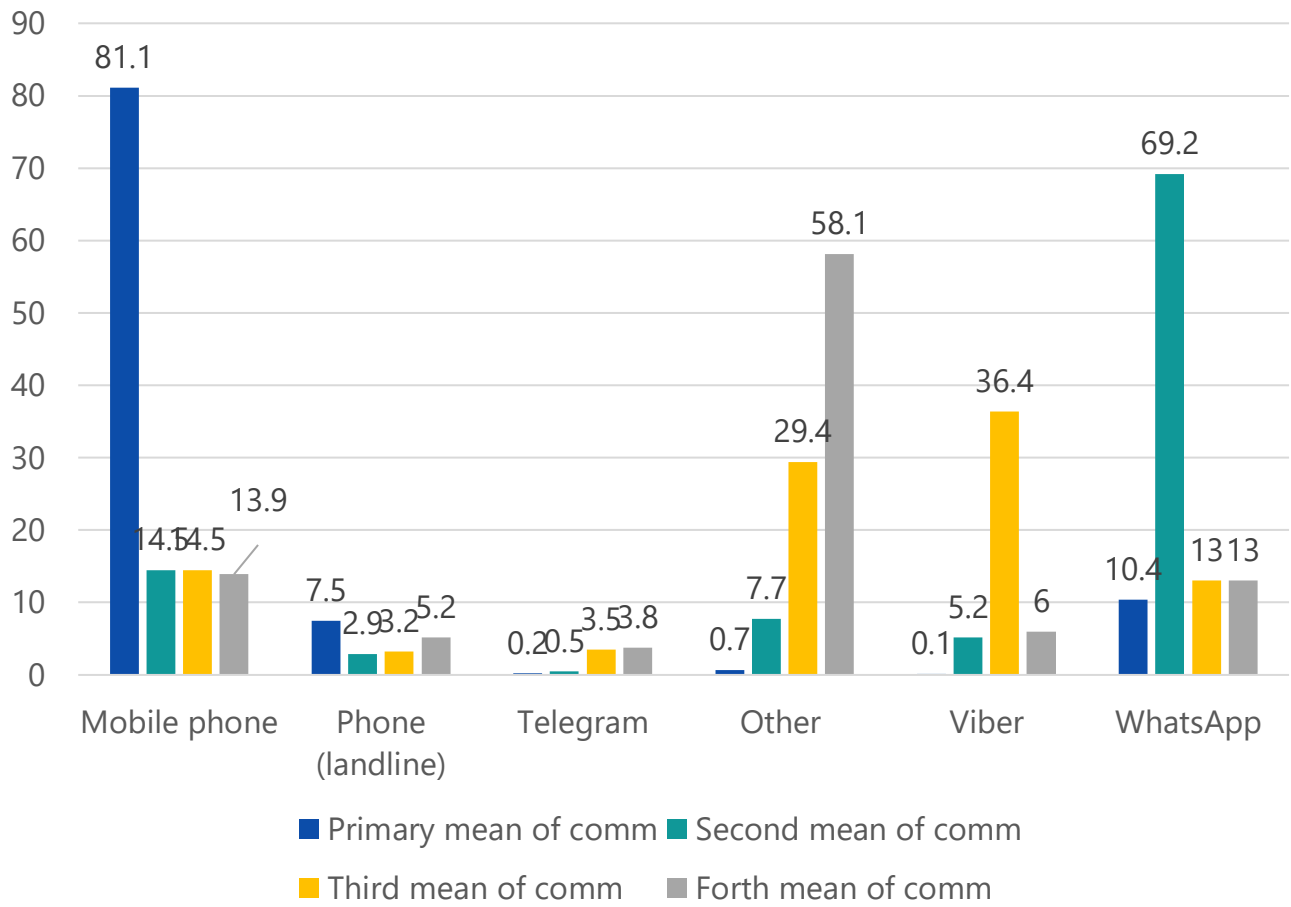


Graph 55 - Use of social media (rural areas residents)

The vast majority of respondents (81%) use mobile phones as their first means of communication. Whereas, one in ten respondents uses WhatsApp as their first mean of communication. A total of 69% of respondents use WhatsApp as their second means of communication, whereas 14% of respondents use mobile phones as their second means of communication. Nearly one in three respondents use Viber as their third means of communication, 14% use mobile phones as their third mean, and 13% use WhatsApp. Telegram, which has been identified as a highly preferred mean of communication by ISIS,¹⁴⁷ thanks to its secure encryption, is used as the third and fourth communication mean by 3.5% and 3.8% respectively. Only 0.2% and 0.5% use it as a first and second mean.

¹⁴⁷ Bloom, Mia, Hicham Tiflati, and John Horgan. "Navigating ISIS's preferred platform: Telegram1." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31.6 (2019): 1242-1254.

Most frequent mean of communication



Graph 56 - What is the most common means of communication that you use?

Credible actors and approaches to communication of messages

The survey data show that respondents believe that the most credible actors to deliver messages against radicalization are: (1) people who can reach large audiences (65%), (2) cultural personalities (63%) and official religious representatives (57%). Noteworthy is the fact that political personalities or state representatives received the lowest number of responses (23% agree).

Most of respondents (57%) either agree or completely agree with the statement “representatives of official religious institutions are credible actors for delivering messages against radicalization.” Only 17% of respondents disagree or completely disagree with the statement. The majority of respondents (63%) either agree or completely agree with the statement “Culture personalities (academics, artists, community leaders, and active citizens) are credible actors for delivering messages against radicalization.” Only 13% of respondents disagree or completely disagree with such statement. Most of respondents (65%) either agree or completely agree with the statement “people with large audiences are credible actors for delivering messages against radicalization.” Only 16% of respondents disagree or completely disagree with the statement.

The most adequate ways for delivering positive messages are identified awareness raising campaigns (82% agree or strongly agree), religious lectures (80% agree or strongly agree), social media (58% agree or strongly agree) and mainstream mass media (50% agree or strongly agree).¹⁴⁸

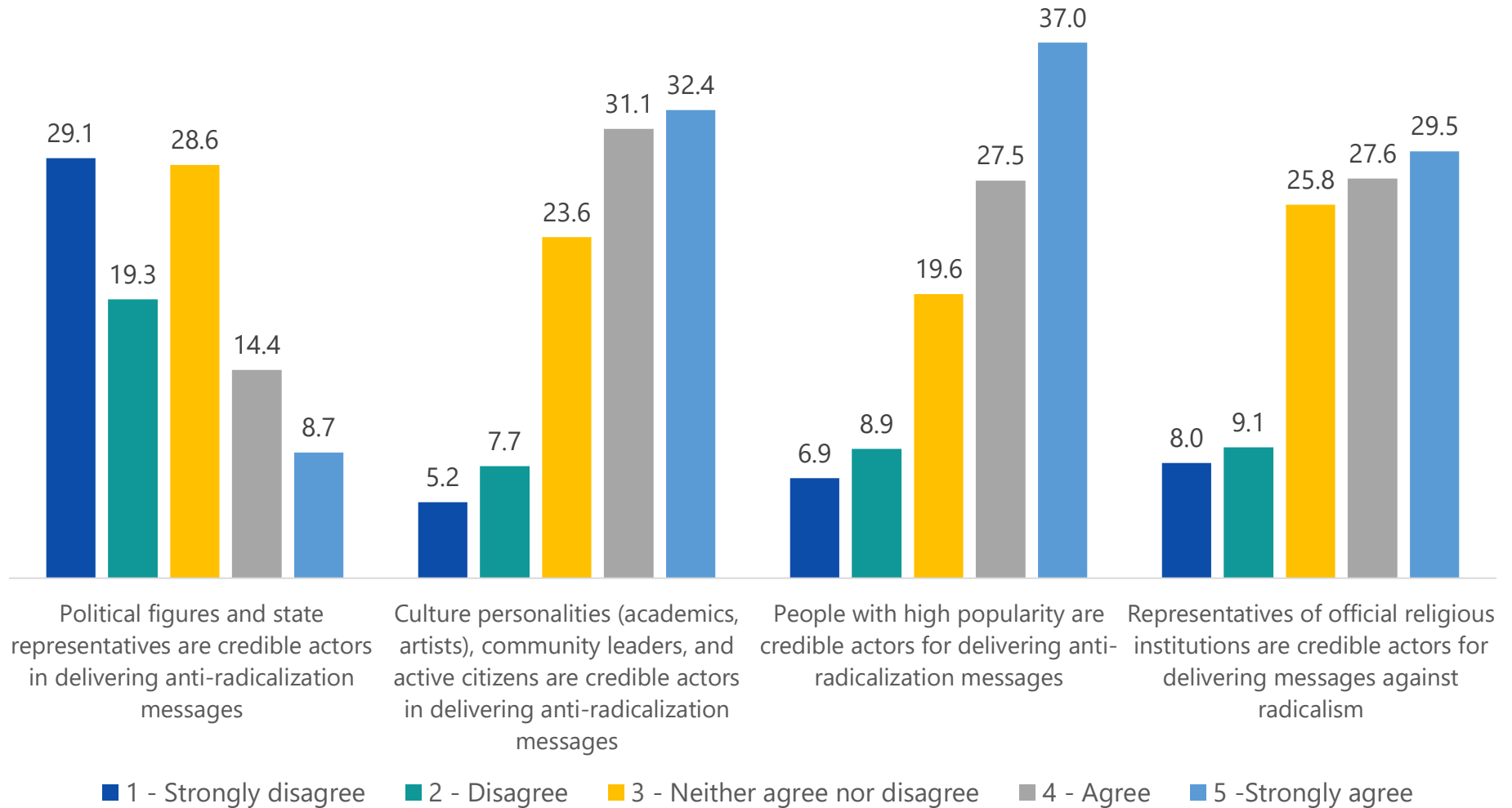
¹⁴⁸ “Mass-media is a trustful and effective platform of information”

“Religious lectures have a positive impact for the believers of their communities”

“Social media is a more effective platform of information compared to mass-media for delivering messages about tolerance and coexistence”

“Awareness raising campaigns can have a successful impact for promoting tolerance and coexistence”

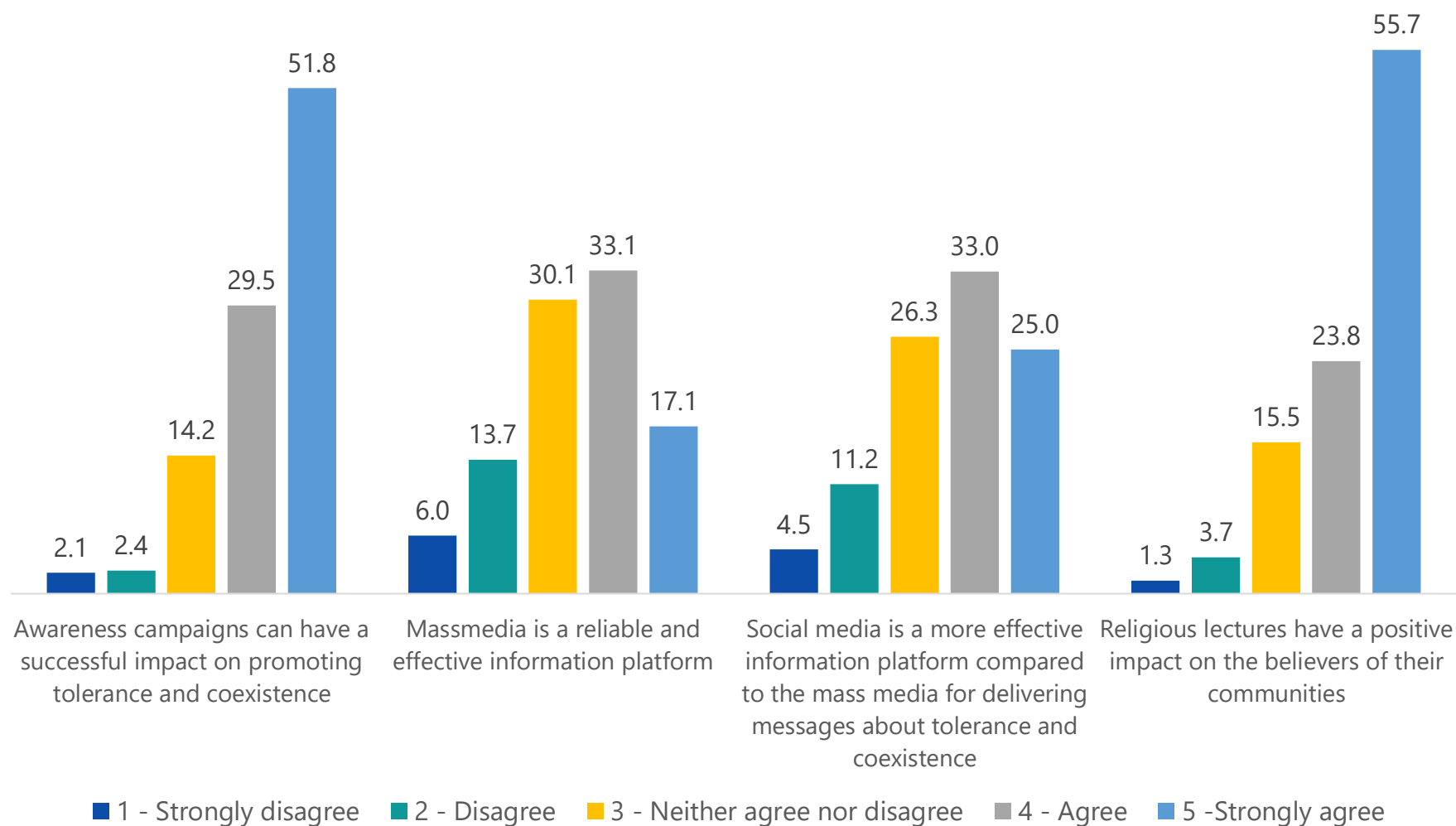
The most credible actors to delivering P/CVE messages



Graph 57 - To what extent do you agree with each statement?

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with each statement. Half of respondents either agree or completely agree with the statement “mass-media is a trustful and effective platform of information.” However, one in five respondents either disagrees or completely disagrees with the statement. The vast majority of respondents (80%) either agree or completely agree with the statement “religious lectures have a positive impact for the believers of their communities.” A tiny percentage of 5% either disagrees or completely disagrees with the statement. Notably, one in ten respondents with higher education completely disagrees with the statement. The majority of respondents (58%) either agree or completely agree with the statement “social media is a more effective platform of information compared to mass-media for delivering messages about tolerance and coexistence.” Another 16% of respondents either disagree or completely disagree with the statement. The vast majority of respondents (82%) either agree or completely agree with the statement “awareness raising campaigns can have a successful impact for promoting tolerance and coexistence.” Only 4% of respondents disagree or completely disagree with the statement.

Opinion on the approaches to delivering messages and narratives



Graph 58 - The most adequate ways of communicating positive messages

The Audience Spectrum in Albania

According to Ingram,¹⁴⁹ in order to come up with a strategic approach to prevent and counter violent extremist propaganda, it is important to know first the strategic **logic that underpins this content** and the **audiences to whom it is to be deployed**.

As mentioned in the above section Countering VE and its Propaganda, Ingram holds that the correct way to challenge extremist “systems of meaning” is to attack the linkages that promulgate their self-reinforcing cycle using a two-tiered strategy. Therefore, this section will explore the audience spectrum drawing conclusions from the key points of the survey analysis.

As regards to the audience spectrum, Ingram emphasizes the need to address the full spectrum of target audiences that may be vulnerable to violent extremist propaganda or who may be useful to counter it. As described earlier in this report, Ingram divides target audiences in five categories:

1. **Antis:** those against the violent extremist groups;
2. **Curious:** those consuming violent extremist propaganda;
3. **Engaged:** those who adhere to the violent extremist group’s “system of meaning” and/or are engaged with violent extremist networks;
4. **Tacit supporters:** those who express support for violent extremist groups, disseminate their messaging, and regularly engage with these networks; and
5. **Active supporters:** those who are planning or who have engaged in actions, including violence, to support the violent extremist group.¹⁵⁰

Based on survey data analysis the following key points can serve the study to identify roughly the division of audiences in Tirana municipality based on Ingram’s categories. The Figure 5 shows the distribution of the target audience in percentages drawn on the basis of the survey results.

The spectrum of target audiences as divided below is of exploratory nature based on the data generated by the survey analysis. However, these percentages are not further explored but nevertheless they contain elements worth taking into consideration.

Based on survey data analysis the following key points can serve the study to identify roughly the division of audiences in Tirana municipality based on Ingram’s categories. Certain questions in the

¹⁴⁹ Ingram, H., 2016. A “Linkage- Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners. *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

survey questionnaire were designed as such to understand to the extent possible the number of people who fully support VE groups - the target group called 'active supporters.

These questions included elements such as total support for VE, use of violence to support their cause, support for ISIS, etc. From the survey data the percentage of respondents that support this elements ranges from 2.5% to 3.8%.

Active supporters

- 2.5% of the respondents strongly disagree with the idea to completely ban radicalized groups, which could be a proxy indicator for support for those groups.
- 3.8% of the respondents believe that it is the obligation of everyone to fight for their religion, including engagement in violent acts if necessary, to protect their religious convictions. Similarly, 4.2% tend to think that they are willing to justify and use violence to protect their religious convictions.
- 3.5% of the respondents strongly agree that a true believer should not denounce members of their own community who hold violent extremist views.
- 3.1% of the respondents strongly agree that in their community there are radical believers who exert influence on other people to join their extreme causes.
- 2.5% of the respondents strongly agree that ISIS was the true representative of Islam. Although this answer alone might not be an undisputed argument that those respondents are supportive of ISIS, as some of them may have no knowledge of Islam at all, the close similarities with the previous percentages in this group provide a stronger possibility that most of the respondents might be active supporters.

Other questions in the survey intended to understand those who express support for violent extremist groups, disseminate their messaging, or engage with these networks – “tacit supporters”. These questions included elements such as existence of people with radical views in communities, those who exert influence in other people, a tendency to justify violence for religious purposes, a tendency to support violent groups, etc. The range of respondents who support these ideas is more diverse ranging circa from 3% to 7%.

Tacit supporters

- 7% of the respondents agree that in their community there are radical believers who exert influence on other people to join their extreme causes.
- 4.2% of the respondents tend to think that they are willing to justify and use violence to protect their religious convictions.

- 3.2% of the respondents tend to disagree or completely disagree with banning of radicalized groups.
- 5.5% of the respondents agree that ISIS is the true representative of Islam.

Questions that aimed to understand “engaged” - those who adhere to the violent extremist group’s system of meaning and/or are engaged with violent extremist networks included tendency to agree that ISIS is a true representative of Islam, support for Muslims arrested in 2014, support for fighting in foreign conflicts and disbelief that VE exists.

Engaged

- 14.9% have a neutral position on whether ISIS was the true representative state of Islam. The hesitation to completely reject ISIS can be interpreted as a lack of knowledge of Islam but considering the constant call of violent extremists that ISIS is the true representative of Islam, it can also be interpreted as a reflection of such calls to this audience.
- 9.5% of respondents fully agree that there is no such thing as violent extremism and radicalization, everyone must be free to express their religious opinions and even to try to convince and teach others about what is righteous.
- 5.4% of respondents have a neutral position whether a true believer should denounce members of their own community who hold VE views.
- 9.4% of respondents believe that people have the right to follow non-official religious interpretations if they do not agree with the interpretation of their official religious communities. This finding does not necessarily indicate that all who responded in this form are engaged, however, the constant call of violent extremists to discredit the official religious communities and portray themselves as the true representatives of religious might have reflected in this audience.
- The survey shows that 3.7% citizens strongly agree, and 3.9% tend to agree that the 9 Muslims arrested on terrorism charges were arrested unjustly in 2014 only due to their religious convictions.

The following audience aims to define respondents who are curious about violent extremists and their rhetoric. Several findings from the survey were retrieved for describing the percentage of respondents who fall into this category. In this regard, the survey explored topics such as “support for freedom of speech even for radicalized groups, and their accessibility of VE materials’. Although the findings from a single answer do not reveal the real motivation of respondents to answer in that way, the close similarities of all percentages in this group are an indication of this audience’s share in the surveyed population.

Curious

- 12.3% of citizens strongly agree that radicalized groups/individuals should be free to express their opinions and ideology and it is up to citizens to follow them or not.
- 15.6% of respondents confirm that they have been approached to accept/consume violent extremist materials.
- 11.9% of respondents confirm that their friends/relatives have been approached to accept/consume violent extremist materials.

All these elements combined together also help to understand the “antis” group. In all the questions mentioned above, there is a tendency of respondents ranging from 70% to 80% that completely disagree or totally condemn violent extremism, their ideas and the use of violence.

Antis

- 69.1% strongly disagree and 19.6% disagree that it is the obligation of everyone to fight for their religion including engagement in violent acts if necessary.
- 68.6% of respondents fully agree and 22.5% agree that radicalized groups should be completely banned.
- 63.5% of respondents either strongly disagree or disagree that it is the duty of every believer to protect their religious dignity by any means.
- 69.8% strongly disagree and 7.4% disagree that the Islamic State in Syria was true representative of Islam.
- 80.7% of citizens strongly disagree that a true believer should not denounce members of their own community who hold violent extremist views.

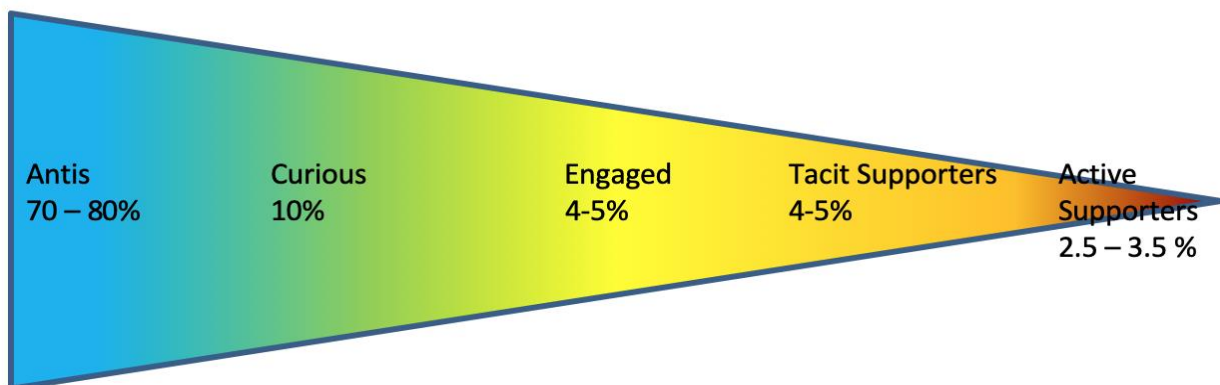


Figure 5: The distribution along the antis - active supporters' axis, based on interpretation of survey data

The charter in colors (Fig 5) shows approximately calculation of the distribution of the target audience in percentages. The spectrum of target audiences as divided below is of exploratory nature based on the data generated by the survey analysis. The percentages are not based on a scientific methodology, nevertheless, the approximate percentages of results in each audience suggest that it contains elements that are worth exploring.

Violent Extremist System of Meaning in Albania

In our study based on the Ingram's framework,¹⁵¹ we presume that violent extremist propaganda is geared to providing its audiences with a "competitive system of meaning." Looking at the data collected from the literature review, analysis of the socio-political landscape of Tirana city, the analysis of the survey data, and VE messages deployed over the last year, this present study also tested the construct of the "system of meaning" in Albania/Tirana by collecting messages that were used for radicalization purposes. The messages were collected through online research by filtering social media (mainly Facebook) posts, listening to video messages posted on YouTube, as well as by extracting messages from court files of the court proceedings of 9 Albanian individuals who were convicted in 2016 for recruiting citizens to take part in the Syrian war. The list of 70 key VE messages is divided into four groups. The first group includes anti-democracy/secularism messages; the second group includes religious incentives (extreme interpretation of Islam - pro Isis; "us vs them"); the third group includes solidarity with fellow Muslims (as well as perceived discrimination); and the fourth group includes financial incentives.

From the messages collected and analysed,¹⁵² it can be concluded that Islamic extremist groups in Albania use similar narrative as ISIS and Al Qaeda, although the messages that are spread in Albania are tailored to the unique circumstances in the Albanian context. Hence, the messages call for a struggle against the West, democracy and secularism, and for an Islamic state ruled by *sharia*.

The people outside the defined in-group, what Ingram has named the out-group, are considered "traitors" or "enemies". The out-group is directly charged with responsibilities for the crises. They are depicted with negative values such as *infidels*, *unfair*, *hypocrites*, people who rule without justice, kill innocent people to maintain their power, secularists that discriminate Muslims, and portrayed as people who will go to hell.

¹⁵¹ H. J. Ingram, "A "Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (2016), pp. 4-7.

¹⁵² We have collected messages used for radicalization purposes by individuals who have embraced radicalism in their efforts to influence others. The messages were collected through research conducted online by filtering social media and listening to video messages posted on YouTube. Media articles have also been studied. Additionally, certain messages were extracted from court files of the court proceedings of Albania on 9 individuals who were convicted in 2016 for recruiting Albanian citizens to take part in the Syrian war. Although this list may not be completely comprehensive it does contain a considerable amount of the messages used. Most of the messages are provided in this subsection.

They describe the Muslim Community of Albania (the only official institution representing Islam) as an extension of the state apparatus designed to oppress the Albanian Muslims.

“The leaders of the MCA (Muslim Community of Albania) during the old regime were the instrument of communism, the same happens today as they are the instruments of the government. Why are you Muslims so thoughtless? Why is so hard to understand that the offspring of modern communism are identical copies of the offspring of classical communism?”¹⁵³

They express an enormous hate toward the West, considering them as haters of Islam that fight their groups and want them killed. They also distrust international organizations, which they describe as being established by the West as tools to oppress Muslims and prevent the rise of Islam. Western states are seen as natural colonialists who are unfair, hypocrites and the enemies of Muslims in their countries.

“No one should think that the West has compassion for Muslims. They have dinners when Muslims are killed.” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has been in the field of jihad for over 20 years, he has sacrificed his children, his family and his relatives. Those who blaspheme him, do so because he blocked the plans of the disbelievers.”¹⁵⁴

The perception of crisis by violent extremist groups does not revolve only around discrediting official religious institutions and their hate for the West, but also their belief that Muslims are threatened by secularization and the lack of institutionalized representation, since the MCA is not considered an appropriate representation.

“I do not agree with the democratic system [in Albania], because in this system, people formulate the laws, but we are limited because God creates the laws. The laws that derive from people are based on individual interests.”¹⁵⁵

Following the work of official religious communities to discredit ISIS and the war in Syria during the period when most of the Albanian FTFs were leaving Albania, the extremist messages quickly adapted their rhetoric. They tried to convince aspiring FTFs that the war in Syria is a “holy war” and that believers were encouraged to join that war.

¹⁵³ This passage was filtered through examination of Facebook posts in 2020. The aim of the message is to describe the Muslim Community of Albania (the only official institution representing Islam) as an extension of the state apparatus designed to oppress the Albanian Muslims. By doing this, they seek to portray themselves as the saviours and true representatives of Muslims in Albania (translated by the authors of this study).

¹⁵⁴ This passage is extracted from court files of the court proceedings of 2013-2014 of 9 Albanian individuals who were convicted on VE charges. The passage spreads their message that the West is evil and is in war with Islam - the notion of dar-al-harb and dar-al-Islam. Their message also tends to convince the audiences that the leader of ISIS is the true leader of Muslims worldwide.

¹⁵⁵ This passage is taken from a 2016 interview with Albanian imams that were imprisoned on VE charges in 2015. The passage reflects their message against democracy and secularism, and their call for an Islamic state ruled by sharia (translated by the authors of this study).

*"All sorts of rumours have come out and they have accused the Islamic State in Sham as "khawarij ", for killing Muslims, etc. Today someone opens his mouth and stains their blood, the one who give their lives for Allah. The Free Army, brothers, is the one that fights for building democracy, fights for raising the taghut. Because they do not want the rise of Islam they don't want the state of Islam. The Free Army is fighting against the rise of sharia, ordered by the West."*¹⁵⁶

The Albanian political system is portrayed as an evil regime without justice or respect for human dignity and rights, and a regime who eagerly and constantly fights against Islam and Muslims. These arguments were based on several precedents. First, VE recruiters strongly condemned the 2014 changes in the Penal Code prohibiting Albanian civilians from joining foreign conflicts.

*"May Allah destroy Albanian parliamentarians, because they want to pass the laws that will restrict believers, from helping Muslims in every corner of the world."*¹⁵⁷

The adoption of law defining "Measures against Terrorist Financing" and freeze of assets by the government of Albania of terrorist financiers curtailing the activities of suspected Islamic NGOs in 2004, also angered violent extremist recruiters.

*"The outlaw imposed on the Islamic charitable associations (the war against them from 1997-2007) has no facts, it's more a war against Islam."*¹⁵⁸

The arrest by the First Instance Court of Serious Crimes of 9 individuals accused of "recruiting persons for committing terrorist acts or financing terrorism", "incitement, public appeal and propaganda for committing criminal acts with terrorist aims", and "inciting hate or contention between nationalities, races and religions" was another precedent that is perceived as state-sponsored war against Muslims. They draw parallels between the arrests of the 9 individuals with the arrests of innocent people during Albania's communism era. They also believe that some of the 9 individuals are being tortured in the prison.

¹⁵⁶ This passage is also extracted from court files of the court proceedings of 2013-2014 of 9 Albanian individuals who were convicted on VE charges. The passage spreads their message that foreign fighters and ISIS are the true representatives of Islam and true believers must join their cause, regardless of the criticism towards them. Given the initial incoordination of Albanian groups in Syria, the recruiters make sure that to call on Albanian foreign fighters to join the front of ISIS and not end up supporting the Free Syrian Army (translated by the authors of this study).

¹⁵⁷ This passage is extracted from court files of the court proceedings of 2013-2014 of 9 Albanian individuals who were convicted on VE charges. The passage reflects their anger at Albanian decision makers who voted a law prohibiting Albanian civilians from participating in foreign conflicts abroad (translated by the authors of this study).

¹⁵⁸ This passage is retrieved from filtering social media platforms in 2020. Through this message the Albanian political system is portrayed as an evil regime without justice, respect for human dignity and rights, and a regime who eagerly and constantly fights against Islam and Muslims. They are referring to the law adopted in 2005 which bans foreign associations with links to terrorism (translated by the authors of this study).

*"The government has decided to humiliate the imam as much as possible, just as the communist regime of Enver Hoxha, did with the imams. Violating the laws, they have enacted themselves, this regime is showing that it's prepared to even physically eliminate him without no fear at all."*¹⁵⁹

*"In March 2014, two imams and some believers were arrested for agitation and propaganda even though they did not kill or robbed anyone. The offspring thought that this kind of punishment will turn Muslims into wised and obedient chickens. Oh no no, such actions already rooted hatred not in our blood but in our DNA. If the puppies of communism continue on their way, earthquakes like the one in September or November are small compared to what will happen. Even if a volcano erupted at the top of Dajti Mountain, it would still be small compared to what will happen."*¹⁶⁰

Extremist groups such as ISIS portray themselves as the only true Muslims who are following the right path of Islam (promoting thus the positive values to the in-group), and one cannot be a true Muslim without supporting and participating in their cause. According to them, religion prevails over anything else, and every true Muslim must protect Islam and their dignity at all costs. Members of the in-group are perceived and portrayed as heroes of sacrifices, they are the ones that protect the Muslims and the values and the ones who will go to Jannah (paradise). They are strong believers who engage in violent acts to protect noble cause and they are responsible for the "ummah".

*"Hey brothers, I advise you for the sake of Allah, if you would like to come and win the trade with Allah, come here because you have the strongest chance. I swear we have seen brothers smiling, there are many brothers who have seen the Prophet as in their dreams promising that they will be soldiers of Imam Mahdi. I have a message for the infidel all over the world and the apostates and the mushriks. I swear you infidel do not think that you will win, as long as there is someone in heaven who protects us, there is no one on earth who is able to humiliate us. How can you frighten us, we see paradise in the barrels of your rifles, I swear do not think of it, remove it from your heads. I swear you will uncover brothers who love death more than you love life."*¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ This passage was re retrieved from filtering social media platforms in 2020. Through this message the Albanian political system is portrayed as an evil regime without justice, respect for human dignity and rights, and a regime who eagerly and constantly fights against Islam and Muslims. They are referring to some media reports that one of the imams arrested on VE charges was being tortured in prison (translated by the authors of this study).

¹⁶⁰ This passage was retrieved from filtering social media platforms in 2020. Through this message the Albanian political system is portrayed as an evil regime without justice who constantly fights Muslims. The aim of the message is to threaten decision makers and to motivate Muslims' hatred towards the state (translated by the authors of this study).

¹⁶¹ This passage is retrieved from a YouTube clip of 2013, and is one of the first Albanian foreign fighter messages from Syria. The message aims to portray the war in Syria as a holy war where the real jihad is being fought (translated by the authors of this study).

For the violent extremist groups in Albania, the attacks taking place in the Western states are justified for a number of reasons: as payback for their colonial past, as a counteraction of their current wars in the Middle East, as a response West's 'war' against Islam, and as a mean of showing off the strength of their group. In general, they are characterized by the following features (a) *takfiri* mindset¹⁶², (b) *al-wala' wa-l-bara*— "loyalty and disavowal",¹⁶³ and (c) the belief of *dar-al-Islam* (land of Islam) and *dar-al-harb* (land of war).¹⁶⁴ The idea of perpetual war between Muslims and non-Muslims, through a dichotomist discourse of *dar-al-Islam* and *dar-al-harb* is a frequent narrative of the Islamic radical thinking in Albania. A corollary to this idea is the concept of *dar-al-Islam* (land of Islam) and *dar-al-harb* (land of war). In the mind of violent extremists (in Albania and ISIS-affiliated groups in general), *dar-al-Islam* refers to a land ruled by a Muslim ruler who shares their Islamic interpretation, and the *sharia* is held as the rule of the land. In contrast, a land is considered as *dar-al-harb* when it is ruled by a Muslim or non-Muslim that do not share their Islamic interpretation or when the *sharia* is not recognized as the rule of the land.¹⁶⁵ Influenced by this dichotomist thought, the Islamic violent extremists constantly reinforce the idea of "*ummah*" rather than belonging to their respective countries. This crisis of belonging is an ongoing issue of the contemporary Muslim societies, where Albanians are not immune. Although many Muslims believe in prioritizing the *ummah* over the nation, this does not constitute an extremist position, as they can be loyal to both the *ummah* and to their own countries. In contrast, Islamic VE believe that a Muslim can only and exclusively be loyal to the *ummah* and that he/she must fight against those who are not part of the *ummah*.

The identity crisis that violent extremist groups intend to instigate has not been effectively spread in the Albanian context. This may be because Albanians, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims, have developed a pluralistic approach to religion, and are also exposed to secularism and nationalism for the most part of the post-Ottoman period, especially in the early twentieth century.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, Albanians consider themselves "Europeans," and have largely separated religion from politics.¹⁶⁷ However, the number of ethnic Albanian Muslims from the Balkans joining violent extremist groups' calls for violent jihad, unprecedented both as a religious phenomenon among Albanian Muslims, has infiltrated the Albanian specific national context in recent years and poses a challenge to Albania's religious harmony.

¹⁶² Takfirism refers to the action or practice of declaring that a fellow Muslim is guilty of apostasy (i.e. not believing in the essential tenets of Islam) and therefore no longer a Muslim.

¹⁶³ "*Al-wala' wa-l-bara*" refers to loving for the sake of Allah and disavowing all that reject Allah as the enemies.

¹⁶⁴ Shpend Kursani (2018): Salafi pluralism in national contexts: the secular state, nation and militant Islamism in Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2018.1474548

¹⁶⁵ Muhammad Haniff Hassan. (2007). Revisiting Dar Al-Islam (Land of Islam) and Dar Al-Harb (Land of War). (RSIS Commentaries, No. 001). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

¹⁶⁶ Endersen, Cecilie. 2015. Faith, fatherland or both? Accommodationist and neo-fundamentalist Islamic discourses in Albania. In *The revival of Islam in the Balkans: From identity to religiosity*, ed. Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy, 222–241. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

¹⁶⁷ Shpend Kursani (2018): Salafi pluralism in national contexts: the secular state, nation and militant Islamism in Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2018.1474548

The developments in Albania and predominately elsewhere in the east or west world shape the perceptions of crisis, the out-groups (i.e., the enemies of violent extremists) are framed as being responsible. As shown in Figure 6, violent extremism exploits this perception of crisis to either incite people to follow and support them or to encourage them to undertake violent acts against the “enemies”. Those are their only solutions about the crisis.

In analysing the data collected for this project, the solutions proposed by violent extremists on the crisis are the violence against “enemies” and support towards violent extremists, as well as calling for the establishment of sharia and calls for fighting for this cause.

“I call all the young people to come for jihad for the sake of Allah. Obey to Allah, obey to the messenger, and let’s raise Islam, our honour, our iman, against the taghut, against the disbelievers, because we have the most powerful Allah.”¹⁶⁸

“Hey Muslim brothers who would like to boost the word of Allah, the one who are fighting in the soil of Sham who are doing jihad, be patient for the sake of Allah, be thankful to Allah who has allowed you to come to jihad. Fight, fight, fight, fight and we will never back down.”¹⁶⁹

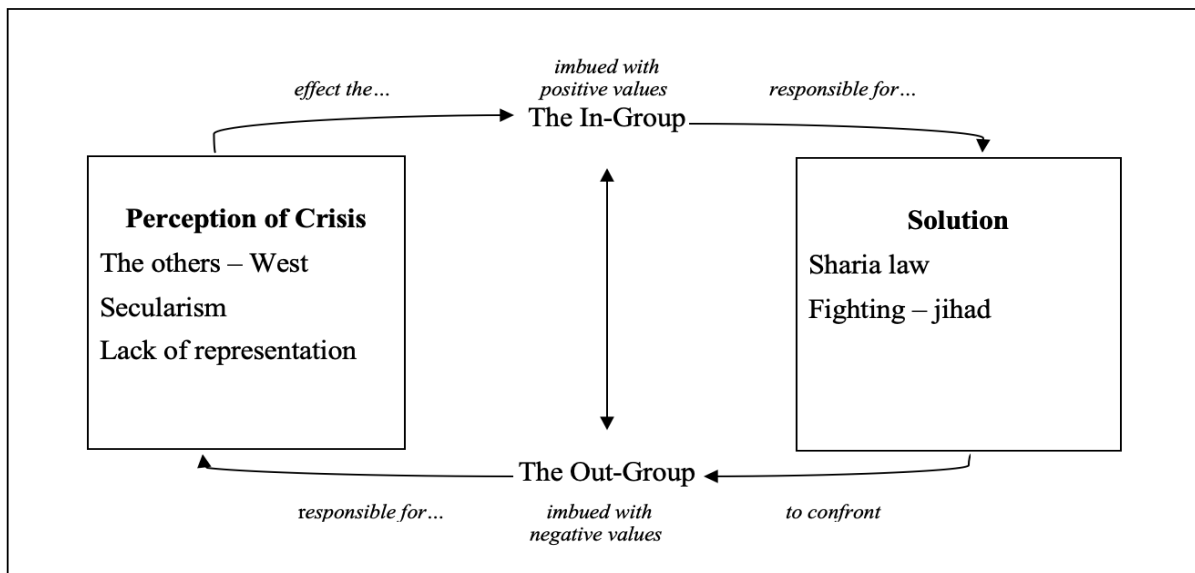


Figure 6: The messages that reinforce the system of meaning in the Albanian context

¹⁶⁸ This passage is also retrieved from a YouTube clip of 2013, and is one of the first Albanian foreign fighter messages from Syria. The message aims to portray the war in Syria as a holy war and calls specifically on youth to attend their cause. This message also indicates the target groups of recruiters.

¹⁶⁹ This passage is retrieved from a YouTube clip of 2013. Again, the recruiter aims to portray the war in Syria as holy, and also aims to motivate those who have already joined the war to continue their fight until the end. This message comes at a time when the first groups of Albanian foreign fighters voluntarily returned to Albania after being disappointed by what was going on in Syria. Through messages like this, the evolution of recruiters’ messages can be observed clearly.

Chapter VII: VE threat and CVE policy needs in Albania



This section assesses the response of Albanian authorities to the VE threat, with particular focus on strategic communications, factors hindering its efficient operation as well as activities and measures needed to ensure its functional and effective functioning. The primary data used in this section is collected through interviews and focus groups. A total of 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees of the line ministries involved in the project and six focus group discussions with a total of 127 participants, including representatives of state institutions working on security, education or social issues. The first subsection provides information on the coordination and strategic communication aspects, whereas the second subsection elaborates further the implementation of the NSCVE in Albania. Channels and tools of communication are analysed in the third subsection, whereas the last subsection elaborates the level of coordination and the capacities of the main actors involved in countering VE. Each subsection provides insights and recommendations for the relevant topic.

Background of coordination and strategic communication aspects in the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (NSCVE)

One of the main objectives of the NSCVE and its Action Plan is countering extremist propaganda by using effective channels of public communication.

CVE Center is the key institution responsible for drafting and disseminating narratives against VE, for reducing the impact of extremist propaganda on social networks and online recruitment, using social media as communication channels to promote alternative narratives and positive messages.

Measure 5 of the NSCVE proposes a creative and innovative communication strategy to complement its implementation, by establishing a Communication Working Group of various actors, such as state officials, academics, media and technology companies, civil society, religious communities, and frontline workers.

Strategic communication is defined as the systematic planning and realization of the flow of information, communication, media development and image care in the long run. It conveys tailored messages to a specific audience, to achieve the intended long-term effect. Communication management is a combination of processes that brings the balance of three factors: messages, media channels and audiences.

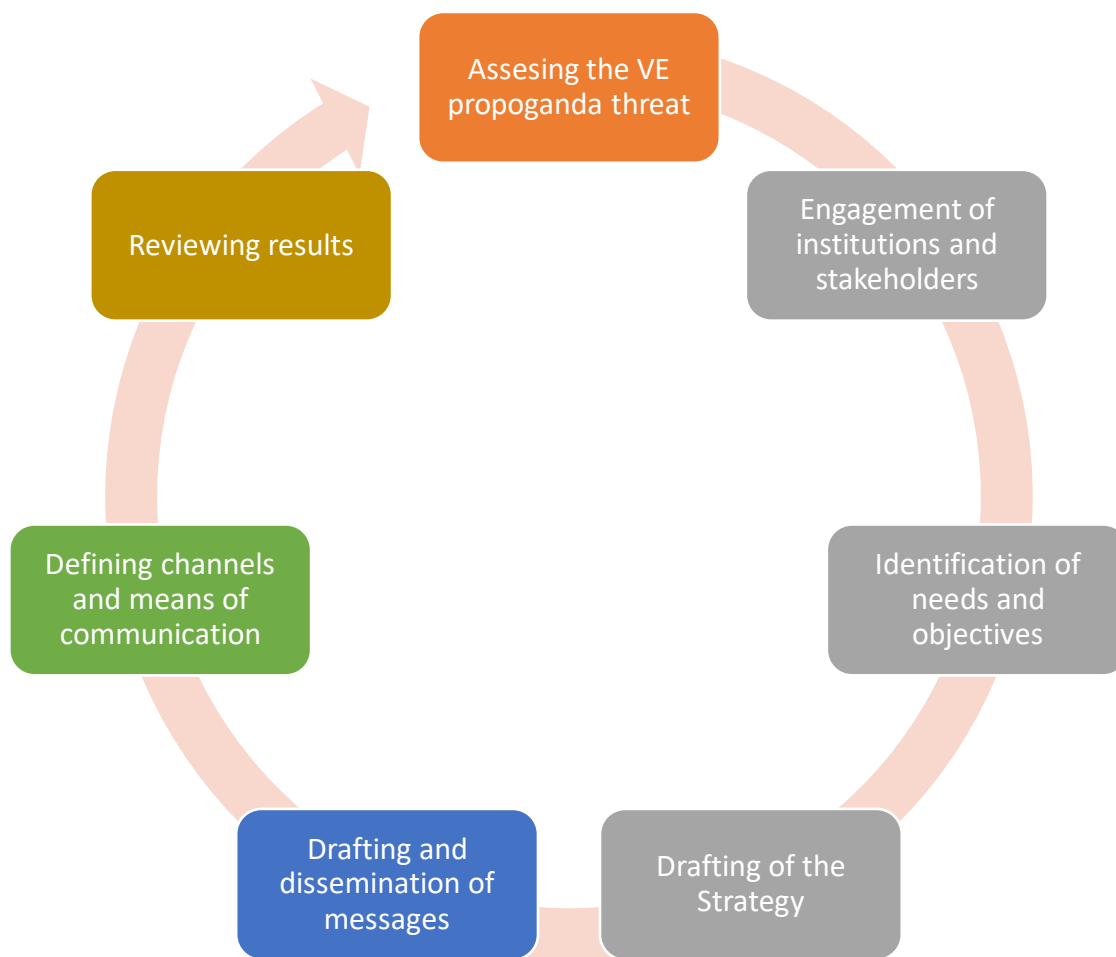


Figure 7: The stages involving the processes of drafting and implementing a communications strategy

The involvement of various institutions and stakeholders, as well as strengthening cooperation with and within the CVE Center in this process, constitute two essential components for implementing a communication strategy against VE.

The interviews and focus group discussions reveal that there is a lack of formalized or structured communication among the ministries and other respective institutions involved in the implementation of the NSCVE and its Action Plan. Employees of managerial and technical levels reveal the need for improvement in understanding the importance of strategic communication in the preparation and dissemination of messages against VE as well as the leading role of CVE Center in this regard.

Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in order to assess the implementation of Measure 5 of the NSCVE. The interviews were intended to identify problems and needs related to the necessary capacities on strategic communication as well as on the level of cooperation and coordination regarding the drafting and dissemination of narratives against VE. All the

participants of focus group discussions were representatives of line ministries and the subordinated agencies that are key institutions involved in the implementation of the NSCVE. The focus group discussions provided useful insights on the influence of VE propaganda and recommendations on the approach to tackling the problem.

Implementation of the NSCVE

Regarding the overall implementation of the NSCVE, most of the interviewees suggested that the responsibilities arising from this NSCVE have been met. Few of respondents indicated that the NSCVE has been only partially implemented, without identifying specific causes. It should also be noted that some of the responses consider the successful implementation of the NSCVE is linked to the effective inter-institutional cooperation and coordination as well as by increasing professional capacities (especially front-line professionals). The main project themes of the CVE Center have been “Countering VE in Schools” particularly through School as Community Center model; “Countering VE in Prisons”; and “Countering VE in Local Communities” particularly through Community Policing. Overall, the respondents believe the role of “Community Policing” and the “School as Community Center” constitute positive and very important commitments in terms of preventing VE.

The role of Community Policing is considered very important and effective, not only in terms of police interaction with certain actors, but in particular in identifying and preventing VE in problematic areas of the country. In this context, the interviewees also emphasize the importance and role of Local Public Safety Councils as a mechanism for preventing and managing the phenomenon of VE through cooperation with local government.

Regarding the progress of the implementation of the School as a Community Center, which is an initiative implemented since 2013 in Albania that aims to put the school at the center of local activism and multi-stakeholder partnerships, most of the responses consider this initiative as an already consolidated mechanism that works well and is supported by the community.

As regard to the challenges faced during the implementation of the NSCVE, most of the interviewees were not able to identify any challenge, while some of them believe there are no challenges at all. The few challenges identified by some interviewees are the lack of capacity/human resources for the implementation of the strategy; low cooperation of local communities; lack of specific cases of offenders sentenced with Probation Service, making this an unknown practice; and the lack of specific initiatives in terms of strategic communication. Covid-19 pandemic is also considered a serious obstacle to the proper functioning of the legal aid system.

When asked about the achievements of the implementation of the NSCVE, it is noteworthy that there are contradictions in the responses of the interviewees, as some of them consider some factors as obstacles while others as achievements, such as enhancing individual and community awareness; strengthening the capacities and expertise of frontline workers; conducting of

trainings for professional capacity building; involvement of many actors in the process (meetings); establishing a network of coordinators (education); and expanding and improving the legal framework (drafting guidelines).

The interviewees identified several elements that according to them might have a significant impact on a better implementation of the Measure 5 of the strategy, including the engagement and coordination of all actors (establishing a working group); strengthening human capacity (specifically conducting staff training); increase of financial capacities including the creation of a dedicated budget; defining specific procedures in cases where the community does not cooperate; raising awareness and meetings with the community; and the reformulation of the strategic document.

Although the interviewees consider the review of the current NSCVE as important, in order to address the new challenges, which were not initially foreseen, such as the restrictions posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, no concrete suggestions on how to specifically adapt the document were provided in the interviews. Some interviewees emphasize the need to change the legal framework, in order to improve the procedures for communication between central and local government actors, establishing an effective referral mechanism, addressing shortcomings in the implementation capacity of specific legal and regulatory provisions (such as services, human resources, facilitation instruments, etc.).

As mentioned above, Measure 5 of the NSCVE envisages the need for a communication strategy. The interviewees suggest that the communication strategy should contain a detailed plan/protocol for its implementation and consider elements related to the feasibility of its implementation (such as interactive methods or social networks). The interviewees suggest the CVE Center to conduct a need-assessment analysis to better determine the needs that arise for the design of a communication strategy. They also emphasize the need to strengthen institutional interaction with all institutions involved, as well as take measures to improve professional capacity (training, specific budget).

Channels and Tools of Communication

Most of the interviewed employees considered that those responsible for the implementation of the measures 5 & 6 of the National Strategy have enough knowledge about strategic communication and its importance.

Similar to the survey results on behalf of this report, the interviewees and focus groups participants described online platforms/social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) as the main tools of information, which can also be used for spreading extremist messages. While most respondents emphasized the need to monitor the online platforms, students attending the focus group discussions emphasized the significance of using online platforms and TV by creating

specific pages or TV shows in order to raise awareness against VE. The interviewees described the individuals with low economic income, individuals with low educational level, young people and marginalized groups as the most vulnerable groups by extremist narratives.

Interviewees consider the role of the Government in preventing the spread of extremist messages through monitoring and control of social platforms and other materials; creating better policies as regards the use of the Internet by young people; continuous awareness; capacity building; and performing in-depth assessments.

Main points from the focus groups

- **Social networks**, in some cases, play a negative role through the dissemination of ‘hate speech’. They should be used to promote tolerance and mutual understanding among youth;
- **Internet** should be turned into one of the main tools used against violent extremism by raising awareness and disseminating positive messages;
- **Social networks** should be used by young people, who through groupings on these platforms can inform and support each other against the phenomenon of violent extremism;
- **Special programs and TV shows** should be created for parents and teachers to inform and support each other against VE.¹⁷⁰

Quality and frequency of communication (Police & Citizens, Teachers & Students)

Regarding the role of the police in providing information to citizens on issues of VE, the interviewees emphasized that the police have played an active role in this regard, especially the front-line structures related to community policing. Some of the forms of communication mentioned included: awareness campaigns, leaflets, meetings or activities planned for this purpose. However, some of them emphasize that there is room for further improvement in this regard. This is the view of most interviewees regarding police training, emphasizing the fact that although police officers have been trained to deal with various aspects of violent extremism, there is still a need for better and more developed training programs.

Regarding the frequency of communication and the quality of the content of information exchanged between the police and members of the community, most of the interviewees state that the communication is not at the right level and in addition to being more frequent, its quality should be also improved. Trainings and meetings are mentioned as some of the forms to contribute

¹⁷⁰ Focus Group Discussion with high school pupils, 05.12.2020

to this aspect. Despite the ongoing challenge to increase the credibility of the police in public, all interviewees expressed that the community trusts the information presented by the police regarding the prevention of VE.

Several questions were addressed to the employees of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth about the way of communication and the level of trust between teachers and students; the influence of teachers in the formation of students and young people; and their role in identifying and preventing cases of VE. Almost all the answers affirm the importance of this relationship, emphasizing that communication and trust between teachers and students are good.

Given the importance and role of teachers, all interviewees pointed out that teachers have played an active role in providing information to students about VE issues. Close relationships not only with students but also with their family members are presented as an illustrative example to highlight the level of cooperation. The teachers emphasized that their role should be focused on creating values and attitudes to make young people resilient to VE.

Main points from the focus groups

- It is important to enrich the school curricula with programs on radicalization and VE, including their forms, threats and the ways to counter them;¹⁷¹
- Information and awareness campaigns about the risks of radicalization should be implemented also in elementary schools;
- There is a need for courses and activities to strengthen the critical thinking of students in schools;
- Introducing “religious education” in schools by trained religious experts might serve as a good mechanism for curbing misinformation and reducing youth’s vulnerability to religious extremism.¹⁷²

Prisoners and prison staff

Measure 5 and 6 of the NSCVE envisage the need of contextualized campaigns against VE, which means tailored messages to different audiences. A particular focus of such campaigns is to people in prison, which might serve as hotbeds of radicalization¹⁷³ because of the sophisticated techniques used by recruiters in prisons, the vulnerability factors of the prisoners, and the enabling environment. In this regard, while some of the interviewees state that they are not aware, or do not have information about the presence of the phenomenon of radicalization in Albanian prisons,

¹⁷¹ Focus Group Discussion with students, 04.12.2020

¹⁷² Focus Group Discussion with representatives of religious communities, 11.12.2020

¹⁷³ World Politics Review, Europe’s Prisons, Already Hotbeds of Radicalization, Are Filling Up With ISIS Recruits (2018) <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/26082/europe-s-prisons-already-hotbeds-of-radicalization-are-filling-up-with-isis-recruits>.

there were other interviewees who emphasized not only the presence of this phenomenon in prisons in Albania, but also the tendencies for radicalization of other persons in prisons. Respondents from the penitentiary system emphasize that prison environment is conducive for the spread of radicalization not only because of the presence of persons convicted of VE, but also because of prisoners' reaction to certain aspects which are related to the perceived lack of justice, mismanagement, or inappropriate treatment. Penitentiary system respondents believe that while the prison staff is well-trained and informed on the issues of radicalization and VE, the prisoners have either no information at all, or little information, received by the TV.

Returnees from Syria / Iraq & the capacities of Albania to host them

The interviewees emphasized that the main role of all actors towards returnees from Syria/Iraq should be to take measures and provide the necessary conditions to enable their reintegration into society. Most of the respondents state that Albania has sufficient capacities to properly manage the returnees from Syria/Iraq, emphasizing the need to prioritize the disabled returnees, women and children. Most interviewees state that the Government also has the sufficient capacities to ensure the criminal prosecution of returnees. Activities mentioned to ensure the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees without stigmatization, include information and awareness; continuous interaction with the community; trainings; and the interaction of all actors.

Experiences / Involvement / Protection of former violent extremists

None of the responses mentions cooperation with former violent extremists (except Community Policing), while in most of the cases, interviewees are in favour of involving former violent extremists in addressing messages/narratives against VE. Among the most effective forms the interviewees think can be used by former extremists to spread narratives against violent extremism are through sharing of their personal experiences in schools, communities, social networks, as well as awareness-raising meetings.

On the other hand, it is important that even in cases of involvement of former violent extremists, the verification of their image should be carried out first and their reintegration into society should be realized, showing the detachment from their past.

The interviewees proposed that some of the measures to be taken to protect former extremists (and the general public) should include monitoring and supervising them; reintegration into social life; cooperation with competent bodies (police); engagement in social activities; maintaining their confidentiality; and taking measures to provide basic socioeconomic conditions.

Coordination and capacities

As mentioned earlier in this section, in order to implement a successful communication strategy, it is imperative to have an inter-institutional cooperation of the key institutions and actors in this process. Most of the interviewees support this inclusive approach, while emphasizing the role religious communities, civil society organizations, schools and prison staff in this regard.

A significant proportion of interviewees identified their multi-actorial collaboration with several actors, such as the Albanian Helsinki Committee, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), European Commission (EC), International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP), and PAMECA V.¹⁷⁴ Other organisations referred by the CVE Center that have contributed with capacity building efforts UNICEF, Council of Europe, and International Organization on Migration (IOM).

The interviewees stressed that the inter-institutional cooperation or engagement has been good, however some of them also emphasize the need for a more comprehensive and active engagement, as not all institutions show the same level of commitment.

Among the measures proposed in the framework of inter-institutional cooperation and coordination in order to deliver messages against VE include exchange of information in a timely manner; establishment of the Communication Working Group, as envisaged in the NSCVE; approved protocols/working procedures for all actors; continuous inter-institutional cooperation and engagement; drafting an internal communication strategy; coordination of the communication process between different sectors; assignment of contact points; interaction of institutions with the community; and drafting joint intervention plans.

Employees of ministries consider the coordination with CVE Center as necessary, useful, effective and important. While emphasizing the need to strengthen the inter-institutional communication, respondents suggested the development of a communication strategy, with a detailed plan for its implementation and the allocation of funds to cover the contingencies that arise during the implementation of the strategy.

The interviewees emphasized that the Albanian government has all the capacities to tackle any individual suspected of perpetrating terrorist offenses in Albania. Regarding the question on the role of legislation in managing the safe return of Albanian citizens from Syria and Iraq - including victims and perpetrators, the interviewees were too general, without providing any specification or real measure in this regard. Several answers specify the need for a special financial support for the coordination structure, as well as the need to create a legal basis to regulate the whole process related to the return and fast reintegration of returnees.

¹⁷⁴ The PAMECA projects have started in 2002 and have operated in the framework of the assistance that the EU has given to Albania in the area of law enforcement and security and public order. Available at <https://pameca.org.al>

The lack of cooperation between different institutions and actors is also evident during the development of focus groups. In addition to the need to strengthen this cooperation, the participants in the developed focus groups highlight the need to outline clear and well-defined procedures for this cooperation.

Main points from the focus groups

- Students at School Boards should be involved in activities against VE;
- Cooperation with psychologists and school safety officers should be strengthened, in order to have a proactive role in disrupting radical tendencies while promoting tolerance and empathy;
- There is a need for programs at school that enable an inclusive environment and strengthen the sense of belonging of all students, especially vulnerable young people who might feel alone;¹⁷⁵
- Some of the mechanisms for dealing with radicalized youth should include: conversations on the VE subject, frequent contacts with teachers, parents, school psychologist and social workers;¹⁷⁶
- Religious communities need to be more active. Their role in preventing radicalization is essential;¹⁷⁷
- Institutions should coordinate work and cooperation with each other at the local-central-international level;¹⁷⁸
- A specific procedure should be established for cooperation between actors at central and local level;¹⁷⁹
- Educational institutions and other public entities should cooperate with religious communities;¹⁸⁰
- Improve cooperation and coordination between teachers, psychologists and safety officers;
- The relationship school-police-family-community should be harmonized.¹⁸¹
- Communication between structures for early identification of cases by local actors should be increased (this communication is lacking);
- Specific measures should be taken to facilitate communication with radicalized prisoners, as the latter refuse to communicate with social employees and prison staff;
- The direct communication of the representatives of religious communities with the radicalized persons has been positive, making the latter aware and return to the proper behaviour

¹⁷⁵ Focus Group Discussion with high school pupils, 05.12.2020

¹⁷⁶ Focus Group Discussion with teachers, 15.12.2020

¹⁷⁷ Focus Group Discussion with representatives of religious communities, 11.12.2020

¹⁷⁸ Focus Group Discussion with students, 04.12.2020

¹⁷⁹ Focus Group Discussion with ministry officials, 27.11.2020

¹⁸⁰ Focus Group Discussion with representatives of religious communities, 11.12.2020

¹⁸¹ Focus Group Discussion with teachers, 15.12.2020

Trainings and capacity building

Building or improving the capacities of the line ministries' employees is one of the main elements mentioned in the interviews. Although a significant part of the interviewees state that they have participated in trainings and are aware of various projects/initiatives by civil society organizations, the need for further training and capacity building is stressed out as very important because they are related to the effective implementation of the NSCVE as well as the achievement of concrete results in this regard. Other elements mentioned in the interviews are the logistical and financial support for the efficient implementation of the strategy; the exchange of experiences with actors and institutions from foreign countries for teachers, community policing staff and prison staff; and informing and raising awareness of prisoners.

Noteworthy, interviews reveal a significant lack of trained staff, especially teachers who can then be able to identify the first signs of radicalization among young people who are more vulnerable to radicalization. Half of the interviewees point out that teachers are not well trained to deal with various aspects of VE, while the other half, although emphasizing that teachers have received some training to address issues related to VE, argue that these trainings have been general, making the need for further improvement still necessary.

Chapter VIII: Concluding remarks



In response to the increasing VE trends over the last few years, mainly spurred by the emergence of ISIS and the success of its propaganda machine to attracting people to joining it, Albania has undertaken institutional and legal steps and mobilised resources to counter VE recruitment.

One of the key components of the NCSVE, which is the main document that guides P/CVE policy in Albania, is to undertake steps to respond to the VE narrative that is regarded a trigger of radicalization.

Due to a combination of factors the implementation of this component of the NCSVE has lagged behind, and so has the development of capacities, expertise and related institutional practices.

Considering this shortcoming, this study was designed to understand audiences in Tirana Municipality - identified as one of Albania's hotspots of radicalization - identify appropriate counter-narratives and campaigns on VE that need to be developed and deployed and identify credible actors who can disseminate the counter-narratives. Having done so, this study serves as a guideline for future interventions and campaigns against the VE propaganda.

In addition, the study conducted a comprehensive analysis of the emergence and radicalization trends and drivers in Albania over the last three decades, the evolution of the CVE policy in Albania and the narratives that are employed to foster radicalization. In order to perform this task, the report drew on a vast amount of data collected through existing literature and reports, media and social media, and on data collected through a survey with the public and interviews and focus groups with relevant key informants from the concerned institutions and societal actors.

The findings show that seven years since the outbreak of the foreign fighters' crisis, which revealed the scale of a hidden radicalization process, radicalization trends still continue in Tirana. As the problem gained attention and visibility through the immediate and enhanced governmental and international action to tackling the problem, so has done the VE propaganda. The criminalisation of foreign fighting and the arrest, trial and conviction of Albanian radicals, allowed them to come to the open and address the broader audiences in an unprecedented open and bold manner. More recently public protests have been organised by their supporters who contested the additional restrictive measures applied by the penitentiary institutions towards them.

While the actions undertaken to address the identified socioeconomic drivers have been more advanced, the developing of an adequate response to strategically counter violent extremist propaganda has lagged behind. The main factors identified include the lack of clear understanding on the role of the VE narratives, lack of concrete measures needed to counter it which has resulted in an underdeveloped practice and lack of expertise among the institutions responsible with implementing the NSCVE.

By deploying Ingram's "linkage-based" approach as a conceptual framework, this research has concluded that the VE narratives conveyed through different channels by violent extremists have

led to the fragmentation of the rather homogenous Albanian audience know as such three or two decades ago. The data suggest a presence of the full spectrum of the audiences, with those being against VE dominating the audiences but with others populating the other segments of the spectrum from engaged to active supporters.

As the first research that has explored the audience spectrum in Albania, the study has found the following share of audiences: Antis (70-80%) this audience completely disagrees and totally condemns violent extremism, their ideas, and the use of violence; Curious (10%) this audience shows support for freedom of speech even for radicalized groups, and they confirm their accessibility of VE materials; Engaged (5%) this audience shows support for Muslims arrested in 2014, support for fighting in foreign conflicts and disbelief that VE exists; Tacit supporters (5%) this audience shows a tendency to justify violence for religious purposes, and a tendency to support violent groups; Active supporters (2.5%) this audience shows strong support to radicalized groups, support the use of violence to support their cause/religion, and protects those who share VE views.

The analysis of the "system of meaning" concludes that Islamic extremist groups in Albania use similar narrative as ISIS and Al Qaeda, although their messages are tailored to the Albanian context. Hence, the messages call for a struggle against the West, a struggle against democracy and secularism, a struggle against the official religious communities, and for an Islamic state ruled by sharia. Extremist groups portray themselves as the only true Muslims who are following the right path and one cannot be a true believer without supporting and participating in their cause. The solutions proposed by violent extremists about the "crisis" are the violence against "enemies" and support towards violent extremists, as well as calling for the establishment of sharia and calls for fighting for this cause. In such circumstances, the adoption of a communication strategy is recognised as an important step that will serve to establish the necessary structures and the necessary expertise to performing a chain of activities ranging from identifying the communication needs, drafting and dissemination of messages, defining the channels and means of communication, engaging stakeholders to deliver communication, and assessing and reviewing results and impact.

Being the first empirical study designed with the purpose of guiding the development and deployment of P/CVE stratcomms in Albania, this research report is a valuable source of information for both practitioners and academia.

Chapter IX: Recommendations



Based on the analysis of the data and the direct recommendations collected from the interviews and focus groups, the following recommendations are drawn.

On the development and implementation of the communication strategy

- Development of the revised NSCVE with clear objectives, activities and defined roles for each actor that is responsible for the implementation of each activity.
- Establishment of a working group to develop communications strategy with clear, concrete, measurable objectives and targets to be achieved as well as clearly allocated tasks, responsibilities and resources.
- Development of a strategic communication annual plan in coordination and consultation with key stakeholders.
- Establish a working group to periodically monitor the implementation of the annual plan and ensure accountability for the delivery of actions.
- Review continually the results by developing tools and mechanisms to receive feedback.
- Establish mechanism to address unintended consequences derived from the communication actions.

On the messaging and narratives

- Develop messages and narratives by taking into consideration and involving different audiences to design and deliver targeted messages.
- Target more than one audience exploiting diverse channels and tools (online and offline).
- Develop messages and narratives that build on the role and influence of the different radicalization actors and radicalization drivers. It is important that messages are aimed at the appropriate target audience spectrum, the characteristics of the audience should determine the message.
- Develop messages and narratives that strengthen the legitimacy of the democratic institutions and the role of legitimate religious institutions in the country.
- Identify and promote actors and individuals with established credibility related to the audiences and communities to deliver messages against radicalization at tactical level.
- Minimize the government role during a campaign, since governments may be ineffective or counterproductive as messengers, due to their credibility gap with target audiences.
- Take in consideration the dynamics related to the use of social media and sources of information.

- Maintain a strategic approach to linking the communication actions targeting the different audiences. The communication campaign should take in consideration each element of the system of meaning otherwise the campaigns risk to be counterproductive.

On inclusion of stakeholders

- Include the private sector and civil society organisations to engage in the drafting and implementation of the P/CVE communication strategy.
- Develop action targeting the media to develop understanding and capacities for countering and preventing violent extremist propaganda.
- Establish clear roles and responsibilities of different government and nongovernment actors with respect to the development and implementing of the P/CVE communication strategy.
- Further strengthen the CVE Center capacities to implement priorities related to the delivery of strategic communications through inclusive approaches.

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ANNEXES

Annex 1 - The public survey sample

Administrative Unit	Nr of surveyed	Females					Males				
		Age									
		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-65	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-65
Total	800	80	80	80	80	80	80	80	80	80	80
Baldushk	10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Bërzhitë	10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Dajt	30	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Farkë	30	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Kashar	30	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Krrabë	10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Lagjja Nr. 12	30	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Lagjja Nr. 13	30	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Lagjja Nr. 14	20	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Ndroq	10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Njësia Nr. 1	40	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Njësia Nr. 10	40	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Njësia Nr. 11	50	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Njësia Nr. 2	50	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Njësia Nr. 3	40	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Njësia Nr. 4	50	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Njësia Nr. 5	70	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
Njësia Nr. 6	40	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Njësia Nr. 7	50	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Njësia Nr. 8	30	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Njësia Nr. 9	50	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Petrelë	20	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Pezë	10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Shëngjergj	10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Vaqarr	20	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Zall-Bastar	10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Zall-Herr	10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Annex 2 - The public Survey questionnaire

General Questions/Demographics

Age?

18-34 years
35-49 years
50-64 years
65 and over

Gender?

Male
Female

What area do you live in?

Rural
Urban

What is your level of education?

No education
Primary education (0-9 years)
High School
University
Postgraduate (MA, MSc, PHD, etc.)

Are you currently employed?

Yes, employed in the private sector
Yes, employed in the public sector
Yes, self employed
Student/pupil
Retired
Unemployed
Stay at home

Questions on belief in God

Do you believe in God or a universal spirit?

Yes
No
Other
Don't know

How certain are you about your belief in God or a universal spirit?

Absolutely certain
Fairly certain
Not too certain

Not at all certain
I don't believe
Don't know

Questions about religiosity

What religion do you believe in, if any?

Muslim (Sunni)
Bektashi
Christian Catholic
Christian Orthodox
Protestant
Atheist
Agnostic
Other
Refuse

How often do you attend religious services?

More than once a week
Once a week
Once or twice a month
A few times a year
Seldom
Never
Don't know

How important is religion for you?

Very important
Important
Somewhat important
Not too important
Not at all important
Don't know

Information about violent extremism

Are you familiar with the term violent extremism?

Yes
No
Don't know

If yes, when did you first come to know about it?

Within the last 2 years
Since 5 years ago
Since 10 years ago
Before 10 years ago
Not familiar

In this moment, the definition of VE is provided to guide the interviewee

Violent Extremism refers to the beliefs and actions of people who support or use ideologically motivated violence to further political, religious or ideological objectives. It represents the final stage of the radicalization process. Violent extremists do not only comprise individuals who are willing to embrace physical violence but also individuals who actively support, recruit or advocate in favour of a violent extremist ideology.

Perceptions about the presence of violent extremism

Based on the provided definition, how widespread/present do you think violent extremism is present in Albania?

- Very widespread
- Not so widespread
- Not widespread at all
- Don't know

Based on the provided definition, how widespread/present do you think violent extremism is present in the Municipality of Tirana?

- Very widespread
- Not so widespread
- Not widespread at all
- Don't know

Based on the provided definition, in which prefecture, do you think violent extremism is more widespread?

- Berat
- Dibër
- Durrës
- Fier
- Gjirokastër
- Korçë
- Kukës
- Lezhë
- Shkodër
- Tirana
- Vlorë

Concern about extremism

How concerning do you think violent extremism is for the social cohesion/stability in Albania?

- Very concerning
- Not so concerning
- Not concerning at all
- Don't know

In which prefecture do you think violent extremism is more concerning?

Berat
Dibër
Durrës
Elbasan
Fier
Gjirokastrë
Korçë
Kukës
Lezhë
Shkodër
Tirana
Vlorë

Causes of violent extremism

Which actors do you think incite violent extremism in Albania?

Religious Communities
Religious groups not related to the Religious Communities
Political parties
Nationalist groups
Other

Who do you think promote violent extremism in Albania?

Albanian individuals or groups
Foreign individuals or groups
Both
None

Which factors do you think influence people the most to embrace violent extremism in Albania?

24.1. Religious propaganda

Very much
Somewhat
Not at all

24.2. Poor level of education (in Albanian Arsimimi)

Very much
Somewhat
Not at all

24.3. Difficult economic conditions and lack of opportunities

Very much
Somewhat
Not at all

24.4. Marginalisation and Discrimination

Very much
Somewhat
Not at all

24.5. Corruption and poor governance

Very much

Somewhat

Not at all

24.6. Armed conflicts in the region or abroad

Very much

Somewhat

Not at all

24.7. Individual background and motivation

Very much

Somewhat

Not at all

24.8. Distortion and misuse of beliefs

Very much

Somewhat

Not at all

Which of the following categories of people do you think spread violent extremist messages?

Religious people

Albanian people who have studied in foreign countries

People who manifest their religion in a visually strong manner

People who have extreme opinions on how society should be organized and function

People who hold extreme nationalistic views

People who hold hard political views

What are the methods that you think radical groups use to promote violent extremism in Albania?

Propaganda

Financial and material incentives (money and goods)

Social support

Don't know

How much do you agree with the statement: extremists target social grievances to radicalise people?

Very much

Somewhat

Not at all

Don't know

How much do you agree with the statement: extremists present themselves as problem solvers and providers of services and needs?

Very much

Somewhat

Not at all

Don't know

How much do you agree with the statement: religious tolerance is a quality of the Albanian society that cannot be defeated by violent extremists?

- Very much
- Somewhat
- Not at all
- Don't know

How much do you agree with the statement: extremists see present western civilisation as a threat to the Albanian society?

- Very much
- Somewhat
- Not at all
- Don't know

How much do you agree with the statement: extremists take advantage of the composition of the Albanian population into different religions?

- Very much
- Somewhat
- Not at all
- Don't know

How much do you agree with the statement: violent extremism poses a threat to Albania's social cohesion?

- Very much
- Somewhat
- Not at all
- Don't know

How much do you agree with the statement: violent extremism poses a threat to Albania's security?

- Very much
- Somewhat
- Not at all
- Don't know

How much do you agree with the statement: violent extremism poses a threat to Albania's democracy?

- Very much
- Somewhat
- Not at all
- Don't know

Tackling radicalization

How much do you agree with the statement: close monitoring of extremist groups by police and intelligence will reduce the threat of violent extremism?

- Very much

Somewhat
Not at all
Don't know

How much do you agree with the statement: communication of alternative narratives contribute to reducing the threat of violent extremism?

Very much
Somewhat
Not at all
Don't know

How much do you agree with the statement: former extremists should be reintegrated in the society?

Very much
Somewhat
Not at all
Don't know

How much do you agree with the statement: rehabilitation and reintegration of former extremists into society is possible?

Very much
Somewhat
Not at all
Don't know

Extent of violent extremist propaganda outreach

In your opinion, what is the influence of the religious extremist groups in Tirana?

Irrelevant
Small
Influential
Very influential
Don't know

What do you think are the most effective ways used by violent extremist groups to radicalise / recruit new people?

Through online means
Through personal contacts
Both of the above
Neither
Don't know

Why do you think members of extremist groups reach out to new people?

To recruit new members
To convey their ideology and convince people to support them
To reduce the number of people that opposes them
Don't know

To your knowledge, members of extremist groups that try to reach out to people in Albania are:

- Mostly Albanians living in Albania
- Mostly Albanians living outside Albania
- Mostly foreigners that stay in Albania
- Mostly foreigners from other countries

Do you think members of violent extremist groups may commit violent/terrorist acts in Albania?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Have you ever been approached to accept/consume violent extremist materials?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Do you have friends/relatives who have been approached to accept/consume violent extremist materials?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Specific vulnerable groups

In which environments and contexts are recruiters more likely to successfully turn an individual into a violent extremist? (multiple answers available)

- Areas living in poverty
- Educational institutions (school, university...)
- Internet and social media
- Marginalised urban areas
- Neighbourhood, family and friendship networks
- Prisons
- In the working environment
- In the refugee shelters
- In the religious communities
- Other

Which age groups do you think are most at risk of radicalization?

- 5-15 years old
- 16-25 years old
- 26-45 years old
- 46-older

Who do you think are most at risk of radicalization?

- Males

Females

Do you think that radicalized groups continue to recruit people?

Yes

No

I don't know

Which are the most used ways used to spread violent extremist messages?

Personal contacts

Communication through online means

Internet

Traditional media

Other

Don't know

Which of the areas do you think are mostly exposed to the risk of radicalization? (multiple answers available)

Places of Worship

Neighbourhoods

Unauthorised religious sites

Private religious sites

Schools

Other

Positioning in the anti – engaged axis

How much do you agree with the statement: radicalized groups should be completely banned?

Tend to agree

Fully Agree

Tend to disagree

Fully disagree

Don't know

Other

How much do you agree with the statement: radicalized groups should have the right to express their opinions and ideology, but should be controlled by the government institutions?

Tend to agree

Fully Agree

Tend to disagree

Fully disagree

Don't know

Other

How much do you agree with the statement: radicalized groups should be free to express their opinions and ideology and it is up to every citizen to decide to follow or not to follow them?

- Tend to agree
- Fully Agree
- Tend to disagree
- Fully disagree
- Don't know
- Other

How much do you agree with the statement: there is no such thing as violent extremism and radicalization, everyone must be free to express their religious opinions and even to try to convince and teach others about what is righteous?

- Tend to agree
- Fully Agree
- Tend to disagree
- Fully disagree
- Don't know
- Other

How much do you agree with the statement: it is the obligation of everyone to fight for their religion including engagement in violent acts if necessary, to protect their religion?

- Tend to agree
- Fully Agree
- Tend to disagree
- Fully disagree
- Don't know
- Other

The system of meaning as the basis of radicalization

To what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree to 5 (strongly agree) "It is the duty of every believer to protect their religious dignity by any means"

- 1 2 3 4 5

To what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree to 5 (strongly agree) "A true believer should not denounce members of their own community who hold violent extremist views"

- 1 2 3 4 5

To what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree to 5 (strongly agree) "In my community there are radical believers who exert influence on other people to join their extreme causes"

- 1 2 3 4 5

To what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “Law enforcement institutions are harsher with religious practitioners from my religion”

1 2 3 4 5

To what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “Albania would be a better country if more people joined my religion”

1 2 3 4 5

To what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “The Islamic State in Syria was true representative of Islam”

1 2 3 4 5

To what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “The Albanian authorities unfairly arrested nine Muslims in 2014 because of their religious beliefs”

1 2 3 4 5

To what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “Albania should have a Western political orientation”

1 2 3 4 5

To what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “The West is hostile and constantly attacks Islamic states and culture”

1 2 3 4 5

What drivers and motivations behind religious inspired incidents in recent years in Albania?

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “The lack of proper education makes communities more vulnerable to radicalization”

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “The lack of- or selective justice makes communities more vulnerable to radicalization”

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “People who struggle financially are more vulnerable to radicalization”

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “Political discourse influences the rise of radicalism”

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “Poor governance makes communities more vulnerable to radicalization”

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “The influence of foreign religious organisations makes communities more vulnerable to radicalization”

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “The need to belong and have an identity makes certain individuals more vulnerable to radicalization”

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “The religious community I belong is well-represented in politics and state institutions”

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “In my community there are religious groups that offer economic privileges or material gains to those who practise their religion”

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “Official religious clerics in Albania have the adequate religious qualifications”

1 2 3 4 5

Perception of different segments of the audience on the impact of religious tensions?

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) “Do you think the returnees from Syria will be a security threat to their communities”

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) "The Albanian state should repatriate its citizens who are stuck in Syrian camps"

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) "The religious communities of Albania should accept foreign donations"

1 2 3 4 5

If religious communities are financed only by funds within Albania, where should those funds come from?

State budget

Voluntary contributions from their followers

Other?

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) "The beard for man or headscarf for women reveal that we are dealing with religious extremists"

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) "People have the right to follow non-official religious interpretations if they do not agree with the interpretation of their official religious communities"

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) "The engagement of Albanian citizens in religious conflicts abroad must not be allowed"

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) "Religious activities should be monitored by the state"

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) "Religious objects without the permission of the respective religious community should be banned"

1 2 3 4 5

Government and societal response

To what extent do you consider that the overall efforts deployed so far in confronting violent extremism in Albania are effective?

Not at all

Somewhat effective

Effective

Highly effective

Don't know

The more credible actors/voices to deliver the counter messages

Please assess the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (completely agree) "Political personalities and state representatives are credible actors for delivering messages against radicalization"

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (completely agree) "Representatives of official religious institutions are credible actors for delivering messages against radicalization"

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (completely agree) "Cultural Agents (academics, artists, community leaders, and active citizens) are credible actors for delivering messages against radicalization"

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (completely agree) "People with large audiences are credible actors for delivering messages against radicalization"

1 2 3 4 5

The best suited means to deliver the messages

Please assess the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (completely agree) "Mass-media is a trustful and effective platform of information"

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (completely agree) "Religious lectures have a positive impact for the believers of their communities"

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (completely agree) "Social media is a more effective platform of information compared to mass-media for delivering messages about tolerance and coexistence"

1 2 3 4 5

Please assess the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (completely agree) "Awareness raising campaigns can have a successful impact for promoting tolerance and coexistence"

1 2 3 4 5

Media Consumption

Which is your most frequent source of information?

TV	Radio	Internet	Newspaper	Other
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Which is the most frequent social media that you use?

Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube	Other/none
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Means of Communication

What is the most frequent communication mean that you use?

Landline phone	Mobile phone	WhatsApp	Viber	Telegram	Other
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What is the fourth most frequent communication mean that you use?

Landline phone	Mobile phone	WhatsApp	Viber	Telegram	Other
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Media reporting

Do you think Albanian media can play a positive role in countering and preventing violent extremism?

Yes
Perhaps
No
Don't know

Do you think inaccurate reporting on extremism in the Albanian media encourages extremism?

Yes
Perhaps
No
Don't know

Annex 3 - Timeline with the key events and measures undertaken in relation to violent extremism in Albania

2004	Adoption of the first legal provision in the Criminal Code defining terrorist organization as a special form of cooperation.
2004	Adoption of the law defining “Measures against Terrorist Financing” and freeze of assets by the government of Albania of terrorist financiers curtailing the activities of suspected Islamic NGOs.
2008	Government introduces new amendments on Criminal Code defining “Acts with Terrorist Aims”.
2008	Adoption of Inter-Sectorial Strategy against Organized Crimes, Trafficking and Terrorism.
2009	First terrorism-related case was initiated by the Criminal Court in the city of Durrës where A.K. was found guilty for “incitement and public appeal to commit criminal offenses with terrorist aims” sentencing the accused with 5 years of imprisonment. However, the charge was acquitted by Durrës Court of Appeal and A.K. was convicted instead with 2.8 years of imprisonment “for incitement of hatred or quarrel between nations, races, and religions”.
2009	Signing of Stabilisation and Association Agreement between EU and Albania where counter-terrorism and financing of terrorism are a priority field under Chapter III.
2011	The adoption by Council of Ministers of the Inter-Sectorial Strategy against Terrorism and Action Plan (2011-2015)
2011	The first Albanian FTF travelled to Syria after the outbreak of the conflict to fight alongside opposition forces against Syrian regime.
2012-2013	The bulk of Albanian FTFs travelled to Syria to fight alongside opposition forces against the Syrian regime. (2013) Adoption of the Inter-Sectorial Strategy for Fighting Organized Crime, Illegal Trafficking and Terrorism (2013-2020)

<p>2014</p>	<p>Amendment of Criminal Code to address the issue of ‘Foreign Fighters’ by adding three articles that prohibit joining an armed conflict outside state’s territory or training/recruiting and prohibition of propaganda to join a foreign conflict.</p> <p>Creation of Counter-terrorism Directorate, as part of the Albanian State Police, extended in 12 regions. The structure replaced the Counter-terrorism Sector within the Directorate for Serious Crimes of the Department of Criminal Investigations.</p>
<p>2015</p>	<p>Adaptation of the National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism and Action Plan.</p> <p>First Instance Court of Serious Crimes (the Court) started the judicial process against the 9 individuals accused of “recruiting persons for committing terrorist acts or financing terrorism”, “incitement, public appeal and propaganda for committing criminal acts with terrorist aims”, and “inciting hate or contention between nationalities, races and religions”.</p> <p>The last Albanian FTFs left the country.</p>
<p>2016</p>	<p>Prime Minister appoints the National Coordinator for Issues of Violent Extremism aiming to create mechanisms for engaging all actor in all levels to prevent radicalization and violent extremism.</p> <p>First Instance Court’s decision on ‘Imams’ Case’ after a marathon process of a total of 47 court hearings, filled with tensions and allegations. The punishments provided by the Court ranged from 7 years imprisonment the lowest to 18 years the harshest.</p>
<p>2017</p>	<p>Council of Minister decides to establish the Coordination Center for Fighting Violent Extremism. The aim of the Center is to coordinate the dynamics in the communities in harmonisation with public institutions structures as the best response against the phenomenon of radicalization and extremism.</p>
<p>2018</p>	<p>In June 2018, the office of the National Coordinator for countering violent extremism (CVE), who is charged with overseeing the implementation of the national strategy for CVE, was upgraded to a National Coordination Centre for CVE, under the lead of the National Coordinator.</p> <p>A protocol on cooperation in the fight against terrorism was signed with North Macedonia</p>
<p>2020</p>	<p>Albania repatriates a woman and four children from the Kurdish-controlled al-Hawl camp in north-eastern Syria. This is the first repatriated group. The repatriation process is ongoing as around 75 more Albanian citizens are still in Syria.</p>

Annex 4 - Interview questionnaires

Ministry of Justice

Part 1: Policy framework and legislation

Achievements and problems in implementation

1. What is the role of the Ministry of Justice in implementing the Albanian National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism?
2. Do you think that the obligations arising from the Strategy against violent extremism have been implemented?
3. What are the main obstacles that your institution/department has faced during the implementation of measure 5 and measure 6 of the Strategy?
4. Do you think that the activities and commitments arising from the implementation are sufficient to influence the improvement or achievement of objectives related to the measures 5 and 6 of the Strategy?
5. One of the actions in the Albanian CVE Strategy is to “Strengthen the capacity and expertise of law enforcement officials to prevent violent extremism.” As your organization progresses towards the goal, who are the main audiences that you want to be informed of your progress? Examples: judges, prosecutors, legislative officials, attorneys, prison guards, parole experts.
6. What do you want to tell each of those audiences listed above with respect to your plans?
7. What would you highlight as the main achievements of the Strategy so far?
8. Can you mention other relevant documents approved in Albania to combat violent extremism, in addition to the National Strategy?
9. Do you think that a communication strategy will contribute to preventing violent extremism? Please, elaborate on that.
10. What should the CVE Coordination Centre do to improve or strengthen the communication between other relevant institutions improve/correct the situation you just described above (to develop an internal communication strategy, meaning to promote the CVE Coordination Center work internally –among ministries involved in CVE-, to improve the communication/information sharing/coordination with all the entities working together on CVE including your ministry)?

Adaption of framework and capacities

11. Do you think that there is a need for improvements in the legal framework regarding the implementation of the Strategy and in particular its measures 5 and 6? If yes, what sort of improvements should be made?
12. In your opinion, what capacity-building is needed for the individuals that are responsible for implementing the Strategy?
13. What would you suggest improving in the future in the implementation of this Strategy? What do you identify as important needs?
14. Have you been part of different trainings which have improved your abilities related to the implementation of the Strategy and responsible tasks?
15. Are you aware of initiatives/projects, either inside or outside your ministry, that are already being done to implement the Strategy?

Part 2: The role of communication

The Role of communication and messages

16. Do you think that the people responsible for implementing measures 5 & 6 of the Strategy have enough knowledge about strategic communication and its importance?
17. What platforms are being used by violent extremist groups or individuals in Albania to spread their ideas, ideology and messages?
18. The individuals that are vulnerable to radicalization leading to violent extremism (for example, young people), whom do they most trust?
19. What role can/should the government play in preventing the spread of violent extremist messages online and offline? Can you identify some suggestions for how your ministry could do this better, including suggestion on target groups, messages, messengers and channels as per your ministry competencies?
20. How would you assess the presence of violent extremism in prisons? Are you aware of specific cases?
21. Do you think that prisoners are well informed on radicalization and violent extremism issues? Is there a need for additional information and guidelines?
22. Do you think that prisons' staff are well informed on radicalization and violent extremism issues? Is there a need for additional information and guidelines?

Part 3: Main actors and Programming

Government

23. How would you evaluate the inter-institutional cooperation so far? Do you think that all institutions have expressed the same degree of commitment?

24. What should be done in order to strengthen inter-institutional coordination and cooperation between government agencies to efficiently address common messages against violent extremism?
25. Can you specify some measures needed to be taken at the local level and central level in addressing violent extremism issues?

Other actors

26. Can you mention some key actors that can contribute to preventing violent extremism by disseminating counter-narratives on violent extremism? i.e., religious communities, civil society, etc.? In what form can be their specific contribution?
27. Can you mention previous collaborations with civil society organizations or other actors? Would you suggest specific measures for improvement in the future?
28. Should former violent-extremists be involved in disseminating counter-narratives?
29. Can their previous experiences serve to identify the challenges associated with disseminating extremist messages?
30. What measures should be taken in order to protect former violent extremist from possible acts of revenge?
31. Could you suggest some means in order to involve former extremists and victims of violent extremism to offer their experience and commitment to prevent violent extremism?

Albanian foreign fighters (FTFs) and Returnees in Syria and Iraq

32. What do you think that important actors, such as civil society, religious communities, etc., should do for returnees from Syria?
33. Do you think that Albania has sufficient capacities to properly manage the return of victims of violent extremism in Syria?
34. Do you think that the government is able to manage the safe return of Albanian citizens from Syria/Iraq? Do you think there should be a prioritization of the 3 main groups of returnees (including disabled, women, and children)? How could this process or capacity be improved?
35. Do you think that the government can manage the appropriate criminal justice proceedings for returnees, to include arrest and prosecution of those that have criminal evidence against them? How could this capacity be improved?
36. Do you think the government has the capacity to incarcerate any individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences in Albania? How can this capacity be improved?
37. What is the role that legislation can play in aiding the government capacity to manage the safe return of Albanian citizens from Iraq and Syria—to include victims and perpetrators?
38. How do you consider the coordination with the CVE Center in this regard?
39. How could we prepare the society to receive those returnees and facilitate their rehabilitation and reintegration without stigmatization?

40. What messages would you send to the society as part of the communication strategy and as per your ministry competences?

Ministry of Interior

Part 1: Policy framework and legislation

Achievements and problems in implementation

1. What is the role of the Ministry of Interior in implementing the Albanian National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism?
2. Do you think that the obligations arising from the Strategy against violent extremism has been implemented?
3. How do you assess the role of community policing is preventing violent extremism in Albania?
4. What are the main obstacles that your institution/department has faced during the implementation of measure 5 and measure 6 of the Strategy?
5. Do you think that the activities and commitments arising from the implementation are sufficient to influence the improvement or achievement of objectives related to the measures 5 and 6 of the Strategy?
6. One of the actions in the Albanian CVE Strategy is to “Strengthen the capacity and expertise of law enforcement officials to prevent violent extremism.” As your organization progresses towards the goal, who are the main audiences that you want to be informed of your progress?
7. What do you want to tell each of those audiences listed above with respect to your plans?
8. What would you highlight as the main achievements of the Strategy so far?
9. Can you mention other relevant documents approved in Albania to combat violent extremism, in addition to the National Strategy?
10. Do you think that a communication strategy will contribute to preventing violent extremism? Please, elaborate on that.
11. What should the CVE Coordination Centre do to improve or strengthen the communication between other relevant institutions (to develop an internal communication strategy, meaning to promote the CVE Coordination Center work internally –among ministries involved in CVE-, to improve the communication/information sharing/coordination with all the entities working together on CVE including your ministry)?

Adaption of framework and capacities

12. Do you think that there is a need for improvements in the legal framework regarding the implementation of the Strategy and in particular its measures 5 and 6? If yes, what sort of improvements should be made?
13. In your opinion, what capacity-building is needed for the individuals that are responsible for implementing the Strategy?
14. Have you been part of different trainings which have improved your abilities related to the implementation of the Strategy and responsible tasks?
15. Are you aware of initiatives/projects, either inside or outside your ministry, that are already being done to implement the Strategy?

Part 2: The role of communication

The Role of communication and messages

16. Do you think that the people responsible for implementing measures 5 & 6 of the Strategy have enough knowledge about strategic communication and its importance?
17. What platforms are being used by violent extremist groups or individuals in Albania to spread their ideas, ideology and messages?
18. The individuals that are vulnerable to radicalization leading to violent extremism (for example, young people), whom do they most trust?
19. What role can the government play in preventing the spread of violent extremist messages online and offline? Can you identify some suggestions for how your ministry could do this better, including suggestion on target groups, messages, messengers and channels as per your ministry competencies?

Information exchange and communication with public/citizens

20. According to the local legislation the Police should systematically communicate with public on violent extremism issues. In your opinion, how do you assess this communication so far?
21. Has the Police played an active role in giving relevant information to citizens regarding violent extremism issues?
22. Do you think that the Police is well trained in order to handle the different requests from media outlets?
23. How would you evaluate the frequency of the communication and the quality of the content of information exchanged between Police and community members?
24. In your opinion, does the community trust the information presented by the Police with respect to violent extremism and preventing it?

Part 3: Main actors and Programming

Government

25. How would you evaluate the inter-institutional cooperation so far? Do you think that all institutions have expressed the same degree of commitment?
26. What should be done in order to strengthen inter-institutional coordination and cooperation between government agencies to efficiently address common messages against violent extremism?
27. Can you specify some measures needed to be taken at the local level and central level in addressing violent extremism issues?

Other actors

28. Can you mention some key actors that can contribute to preventing violent extremism by disseminating counter-narratives on violent extremism? i.e., religious communities, civil society, etc.? In what form can be their specific contribution?
29. Can you mention previous collaborations with civil society organizations or other actors? Would you suggest specific measures for improvement in the future?
30. Do you work with former violent extremist as allies to prevent radicalization of further victims?
31. Should former violent-extremists be involved in disseminating counter-narratives?
32. Can their previous experiences serve to identify the challenges associated with disseminating extremist messages?
33. What measures should be taken in order to protect former violent extremist from possible acts of revenge?
34. Could you suggest some means in order to involve former extremists and victims of violent extremism to offer their experience and commitment to prevent violent extremism?

Albanian foreign fighters (FTFs) and Returnees in Syria and Iraq

35. What do you think that important actors, such as police, civil society, religious communities, etc., should do for returnees from Syria?
36. Do you think that Albania has sufficient capacities to properly manage the return of victims of violent extremism in Syria?
37. Do you think that the government is able to manage the safe return of Albanian citizens from Syria/Iraq? Do you think there should be a prioritization of the 3 main groups of returnees (including disabled, women, and children)?
38. Do you think that the government can manage the appropriate criminal justice proceedings for returnees, to include arrest and prosecution of those that have criminal evidence against them?
39. How do you consider the coordination with the CVE Center in this regard?
40. How could we prepare the society to receive those returnees and facilitate their rehabilitation and reintegration without stigmatization?

41. What messages would you send to the society as part of the communication strategy and as per your ministry competences?

Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth

Part 1: Policy framework and legislation

Achievements and problems in implementation

1. What is the role of the Ministry of Education in implementing the Albanian National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism?
2. Do you think that the obligations arising from the Strategy against violent extremism have been implemented?
3. How do you plan on implementing the idea of a “School as a Community Center” initiative?
4. One of the actions in the Albanian CVE Strategy is to “Encourage critical thinking, civic participation and promote values of tolerance through education.” As your organization progresses towards this goal, who are the main audiences that you want to be informed of your progress?
5. What do you want to tell each of those audiences listed above with respect to your plans?
6. What are the main obstacles that your institution/department has faced during the implementation of measure 5 and measure 6 of the Strategy?
7. Do you think that the activities and commitments arising from the implementation are sufficient to influence the improvement or achievement of objectives related to the measures 5 and 6 of the Strategy?
8. What would you highlight as the main achievements of the Strategy so far?
9. Can you mention other relevant documents approved in Albania to combat violent extremism, in addition to the National Strategy?
10. Do you think that a communication strategy will contribute to preventing violent extremism? Please, elaborate on why or why not.
11. What should the CVE Coordination Centre do to improve or strengthen the communication between other relevant institutions (to develop an internal communication strategy, meaning to promote the CVE Coordination Center work internally –among ministries involved in CVE-, to improve the communication/information sharing/coordination with all the entities working together on CVE including your ministry)?

Adaption of framework and capacities

12. Do you think that there is a need for improvements in the legal framework regarding the implementation of the Strategy, and in particular its measures 5 and 6? If yes, what sort of improvements should be made?
13. In your opinion, what capacity-building is needed for the individuals that are responsible for implementing the Strategy? What about capacity-building for your own ministry related to implementing the Strategy?
14. Have you been part of different trainings which have improved your abilities related to the implementation of the Strategy and responsible tasks?
15. Are you aware of initiatives/projects, either inside or outside your ministry, that are already being done to implement the Strategy?

Part 2: The role of communication

The Role of communication and messages

16. Do you think that the people responsible for implementing measures 5 & 6 of the Strategy have enough knowledge about strategic communications and its importance?
17. What platforms are being used by violent extremist groups or individuals in Albania to spread their ideas, ideology and messages?
18. The individuals that are vulnerable to radicalization leading to violent extremism (for example, young people), whom do they most trust?
19. What role can the government play in preventing the spread of violent extremist messages online and offline? Can you identify some suggestions for how your Ministry could do this better, including suggestion on target groups, messages, messengers and channels as per your ministry competencies?

Information exchange and communication with public/citizens

20. In your opinion, how do you assess the communication style and level of trust between teachers and young people?
21. Do you think teachers have played an active role in giving relevant information for students regarding issues around violent extremism? Please elaborate on examples, or how this could be achieved better.
22. Do you think that teachers are well trained in order to handle different request for information from their students or even media outlets? What additional training is needed?

Part 3: Main actors and Programming

Government

23. How would you evaluate the inter-institutional cooperation so far on the CVE Strategy? Do you think that all institutions have expressed the same degree of commitment?
24. What should be done in order to strengthen inter-institutional coordination and cooperation between government agencies to efficiently address common messages against violent extremism?
25. Can you specify some measures needed to be taken at the local level and central level in addressing violent extremism issues?

Other actors

26. Can you mention some key actors that can contribute to preventing violent extremism by disseminating counter-narratives on violent extremism? i.e., religious communities, civil society, etc.? In what form can be their specific contribution?
27. Can you mention previous collaborations with civil society organizations or other actors?
28. Would you suggest specific measures for improvement in the future?
29. Should former violent-extremists be involved in disseminating counter-narratives?
30. Can their previous experiences serve to identify the challenges associated with disseminating extremist messages?
31. What measures should be taken in order to protect former violent extremist from possible acts of revenge?
32. Could you suggest some means in order to involve former extremists and victims of violent extremism to offer their experience and commitment to prevent violent extremism?

Albanian foreign fighters (FTFs) and Returnees in Syria and Iraq

33. What do you think that important actors, such as civil society, religious communities, teachers, local sport idols, etc., should do for returnees from Syria, if anything?
34. Do you think that Albania has sufficient capacities to properly manage the return of victims of violent extremism in Syria?
35. Do you think that the government is able to manage the safe return of Albanian citizens from Syria/Iraq? Do you think there should be a prioritization of the 3 main groups of returnees (including disabled, women, and children)?
36. Do you think that the government can manage the appropriate criminal justice proceedings for returnees, to include arrest and prosecution of those that have criminal evidence against them?
37. How do you consider the coordination with the CVE Center in this regard?
38. How could we prepare the society to receive those returnees and facilitate their rehabilitation and reintegration without stigmatization?
39. What messages would you send to the society as part of the communication strategy and as per your ministry competences?

Ministry of Health and Social Protection

Part 1: Policy framework and legislation

Achievements and problems in implementation

1. What is the role of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection in implementing the Albanian National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism?
2. Do you think that the obligations arising from the Strategy against violent extremism has been implemented?
3. What are the main obstacles that your institution/department has faced during the implementation of measure 5 and measure 6 of the Strategy?
4. Do you think that the activities and commitments arising from the implementation are sufficient to influence the improvement or achievement of objectives related to the measures 5 and 6 of the Strategy?
5. One of the actions in the Albanian CVE Strategy is to “Empower civil society to build community resilience” As your organization progresses towards the goal, who are the main audiences that you want to be informed of your progress?
6. What do you want to tell each of those audiences listed above with respect to your plans?
7. What would you highlight as the main achievements of the Strategy so far?
8. Can you mention other relevant documents approved in Albania to combat violent extremism, in addition to the National Strategy?
9. Do you think that a communication strategy will contribute to preventing violent extremism? Please, elaborate on that.
10. What should the CVE Coordination Centre do to improve or strengthen the communication between other relevant institutions (to develop an internal communication strategy, meaning to promote the CVE Coordination Center work internally –among ministries involved in CVE-, to improve the communication/information sharing/coordination with all the entities working together on CVE including your ministry)?
11. Is the National CVE Strategy sufficiently flexible to allow for adaptation to new challenges faced within the country, such as the effects of COVID-19 on livelihoods and grievances of citizens? Why or why not.

Adaption of framework and capacities

12. Do you think that there is a need for improvements in the legal framework regarding the implementation of the Strategy and in particular its measures 5 and 6? If yes, what sort of improvements should be made?
13. In your opinion, what capacity-building is needed for individuals responsible for implementing the Strategy?

14. What would you suggest to improve in the future in the implementation of this Strategy?
What do you identify as important needs?
15. Have you been part of different trainings which have improved your abilities related to the implementation of the Strategy and responsible tasks?
16. Are you aware of initiatives/projects, either inside or outside your ministry, that are already in place to implement the Strategy?

Part 2: The role of communication

The Role of communication and messages

17. Do you think that the people responsible for implementing measures 5 & 6 of the Strategy have enough knowledge about strategic communication and its importance?
18. What platforms are being used by violent extremist groups or individuals in Albania to spread their ideas, ideology and messages?
19. The individuals that are vulnerable to radicalization leading to violent extremism (for example, young people), whom do they most trust?
20. What are some main psychological factors related to radicalization, and what the Ministry of Health can potentially do about it?
21. What role can the government play in preventing the spread of violent extremist messages online and offline? Can you identify some suggestions for how your ministry could do this better, including suggestion on target groups, messages, messengers and channels as per your ministry competencies?

Part 3: Main actors and Programming

Government

22. How would you evaluate the inter-institutional cooperation so far? Do you think that all institutions have expressed the same degree of commitment?
23. What should be done in order to strengthen inter-institutional coordination and cooperation between government agencies to efficiently address common messages against violent extremism?
24. Can you specify some measures needed to be taken at the local level and central level in addressing violent extremism issues?

Other actors

25. Can you mention some key actors that can contribute to preventing violent extremism by disseminating counter-narratives on violent extremism? i.e., religious communities, civil society, etc.? In what form can be their specific contribution?

26. Can you mention previous collaborations with civil society organizations or other actors?
Would you suggest specific measures for improvement in the future?
27. Should former violent-extremists be involved in disseminating counter-narratives?
28. Can their previous experiences serve to identify the challenges associated with disseminating extremist messages?
29. What measures should be taken in order to protect former violent extremist from possible acts of revenge?
30. Could you suggest some means in order to involve former extremists and victims of violent extremism to offer their experience and commitment to prevent violent extremism?
31. What, in your opinion, is the main role of mental health professionals in preventing violent extremism?

Albanian foreign fighters (FTFs) and Returnees in Syria and Iraq

32. What do you think that important actors, such as health practitioners, psychologists, social workers, civil society, religious communities, etc., should do for returnees from Syria?
33. Do you think that Albania has sufficient capacities to properly manage the return of victims of violent extremism in Syria?
34. Do you think that the government is able to manage the safe return of Albanian citizens from Syria/Iraq? Do you think there should be a prioritization of the 3 main groups of returnees (including disabled, women, and children)?
35. Do you think that the government can manage the appropriate criminal justice proceedings for returnees, to include arrest and prosecution of those that have criminal evidence against them?
36. How do you consider the coordination with the CVE Center in this regard?
37. How could we prepare the society to receive those returnees and facilitate their rehabilitation and reintegration without stigmatization?
38. What messages would you send to the society as part of the communication strategy and as per your ministry competences?

Annex 5 - Public institutions employees interviewed

Interviewer (No.)	Age group (years old)	Role/position	Duration of work (years)	Scope of activity
1.	/	Head of Unit	/	Provision of services, research and public health policies
2.	/		/	Provision of services, research and public health policies
3.	35 - 50	Contact point for VE	> 10	Health and social protection
4.	18 - 25	Specialist	< 1	Statistics (Health)
5.	35 - 50	/	3 - 5	Development programs in pre-university education
6.	> 50	/	> 10	/
7.	25 - 35	Specialist	3 - 5	Education (Curriculum, professional development, assessment and performance)
8.	35- 50	Teacher	> 10	Educational institution
9.	25 - 35	Specialist	1 - 3	Implementation of policies and administration of primary legal aid
10.	/	Specialist	/	Providing state-guaranteed legal aid service
11.	25 - 35	Inspector	1 - 3	Execution of criminal decisions
12.	> 50	Deputy General Director (temporary appointed)	> 10	Providing, treating and rehabilitation for prisoners
13.	35 - 50	Adviser	3 - 5	Prison System and Probation Service
14.	25 - 35	Specialist	3 - 5	Execution of criminal decisions
15.	25 - 35	Head of Unit	< 1	
16.	25 - 35	Specialist	1 - 3	
17.	> 50	Head of Unit	> 10	Community policing
18.	/	Specialist	/	
19.	> 50	Specialist	3 - 5	Prevention and fight against terrorism
20.	25 - 35	Specialist	1 - 3	Public Order and Security
21.	25 - 35	Specialist	1 - 3	Public Order and Security
22.	35 - 50	Inspector	1 - 3	Local government support (Law. 139/2015)
23.	35 - 50	/	1 - 3	Local government support (Law. 139/2015)
24.	25 - 35	Inspector	1 - 3	Local government support (Law. 139/2015)
25.	/	Specialist	/	Drafting policies and strategic documents
26.	25-35	Specialist	3-5	Drafting policies and strategic documents

Annex 6 - Focus group participants

FOCUS GROUP 1 - Employees in public sector 27 November 2020 - Zoom			
Participants (No.)	Participants (anonymized data)	Institution	Line Ministry
1.	P001	Ministry of Justice	Ministry of Justice
2.	P002	General Directorate of Prisons	Ministry of Justice
3.	P003	General Directorate of Prisons	Ministry of Justice
4.	P004	Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education	Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth
5.	P005	Directorate of European Union	Ministry of Internal Affairs
6.	P006	Directorate of Local Issues	Ministry of Internal Affairs
7.	P007	Central Operator	Ministry of Health and Social Protection
8.	P008	/	Ministry of Health and Social Protection

FOCUS GROUP 2 - First line workers 2 December 2020 - Zoom			
Participants (No.)	Participants (anonymized data)	Institution	Line Ministry
1.	P010	Institute of Executing Penal Decisions (IEVP), Fushë-Krujë	Ministry of Justice
2.	P011	Directorate of Free Legal Aid	Ministry of Justice
3.	P012	Directorate of Free Legal Aid	Ministry of Justice
4.	P013	General Directorate Probation Service	Ministry of Justice
5.	P014	Community Policing, Albanian State Police	Ministry of Internal Affairs
6.	P015	Anti-Terror Directorate, Albanian State Police	Ministry of Internal Affairs
7.	P016	Anti-Terror Directorate, Albanian State Police	Ministry of Internal Affairs
8.	P017	Child Protection Unit	Ministry of Health and Social Protection

FOCUS GROUP 3 - Students 4 December 2020 – Zoom		
Participants (No.)	Participants (anonymized data)	Gender
1.	P018	Female
2.	P019	Female
3.	P020	Male
4.	P021	Female
5.	P022	Female
6.	P023	Female
7.	P024	Female
8.	P025	Female
9.	P026	Female
10.	P027	Female
11.	P028	Female
12.	P029	Male
13.	P030	Female

FOCUS GROUP 4 - Pupils (Secondary education – High School) 5 December 2020 – Zoom			
Participants (No.)	Participants (anonymized data)	School (Class)	Gender
1.	P031	Petro Nini Luarasi (XI)	Female
2.	P032	Partizani (XII)	Female
3.	P033	Ismail Qemali (XII)	Female
4.	P034	Arben Broci (XII)	Female
5.	P035	Besnik Sykja (X)	Female
6.	P036	Sami Frashëri (XII)	Female
7.	P037	Andon Z. Çajupi (XII)	Female
8.	P038	Sinan Tafaj (X)	Female
9.	P039	Eqerem Çabej (XI)	Male
10.	P040	Myslym Keta (XII)	Female

FOCUS GROUP 5 - Religious Communities
11 December 2020 – Zoom

Participants (No.)	Participants (anonymized data)	Position	Religious community
1.	P041	Mufti of Tirana	Muslim Community of Albania
2.	P042	Member of the women's group at Inter-Religious Council of Albania	Orthodox Church
3.	P043		Orthodox Church
4.	P044	Member of the women's group at Inter-Religious Council of Albania	The Bektashi
5.	P045		Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania

FOCUS GROUP 6 - Teachers
15 December 2020 – Zoom

Participants (No.)	Participants (anonymized data)	School	School type	Profile	Gender
1.	P046	1 Maji	Elementary School	English Language	Female
2.	P047	100 Vjetori Pavaresisë	High School	History	Female
3.	P048	26 Nëntori	Elementary School	Physical education	Male
4.	P049	Abdulla Keta	High School	History	Male
5.	P050	Ahmet Gashi	Elementary School	History	Female
6.	P051	Aleks Buda	High School	Sociology	Female
7.	P052	Alush Bardhi	Elementary School	History-Geography	Female
8.	P053	Ardian Klosi	Elementary School	History-Civic education	Female
9.	P054	At Zef Pllumi	Elementary School	Social Sciences	Female
10.	P055	Bashkim Berisha	Elementary School	Albanian language-Literature	Female
11.	P056	Berzhitë	Elementary School	Higher-secondary education	Female
12.	P057	Çekrezë	Elementary School	History	Female
13.	P058	Dhora Leka	Elementary School	Basic Education First Cycle	Male
14.	P059	Dritas	Elementary School	History-Geography	Male
15.	P060	Edith Durham	Elementary School		Female
16.	P061	Fan Noli	Elementary School	Biology	Female
17.	P062	Ferraj	Elementary School	Physical education	Male
18.	P063	Flamur Shkoza	Elementary School	Mathematics	Female
19.	P064	Fushas	Elementary School	Geography	Male

20.	P065	Gjon Buzuku	Elementary School	Physics	Female
21.	P066	Hasan Prishtina	Elementary School	History-Geography	Female
22.	P067	Ibe	High School	Mathematics	Female
23.	P068	Ibrahim Hima	Elementary School	History	Female
24.	P069	Jeronim De Rada	Elementary School	History	Female
25.	P070	Kosova	Elementary School	History	Female
26.	P071	Kostandin Kristoforidhi	High School	Philosophy-Civic Education	Female
27.	P072	Kus	Elementary School	Biology	Female
28.	P073	Kushtrimi i Lirisë	Elementary School	Biology	Female
29.	P074	Lalm	Elementary School	History-Geography	Female
30.	P075	Lasgush Poradeci	Elementary School	Italian language	Male
31.	P076	Loro Boriçi	High School	Albanian language-Literature	Female
32.	P077	Mersin Duqi	High School	Mathematics	Female
33.	P078	Mihal Grameno	Elementary School		Female
34.	P079	Misto Mame	Elementary School	Albanian language-Literature	Female
35.	P080	Musine Kokalari	Elementary School	Literature	Female
36.	P081	Mustafa Greblleshi	Elementary School	Italian language	Male
37.	P082	Myslym Shima	High School	Albanian language-Literature	Male
38.	P083	Pal Engjeli	Elementary School	Biology-Chemistry	Female
39.	P084	Sadik Stavileci	High School	Philosophy-Sociology	Female
40.	P085	Sadri Nuri	High School		Female
41.	P086	Sami Frashëri	High School	Sociology	Female
42.	P087	Sami Kalasa	Elementary School	History	Female
43.	P088	Sandër Prosi	High School	Social Sciences	Female
44.	P089	Shesh	Elementary School	Physics	Female
45.	P090	Siri Kodra	Elementary School	English language	Female
46.	P091	Skënder Luarasi	Elementary School	Geography	Female
47.	P092	Vaqarr	High School	Mathematics	Female
48.	P093	Yrshek	Elementary School	French language	Female
49.	P094	Yzberisht	Elementary School	Albanian language-Literature	Female
50.	P095			Biology-Chemistry	Female



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