



POLICY BRIEF:

The Impact of COVID-19 on PVE efforts

Global trends and the Kosovo context

Abstract

This policy brief intends to identify the implications for the Republic of Kosovo's (RKS) Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) efforts, as it faces the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, to identify global patterns of challenges to PVE efforts, as a result of the pandemic, the literature review was used, focusing in three major areas: the impact of the pandemic on communities vulnerable to radicalization and violent extremism; the impact and intensity of extremist ideologies on vulnerable communities; and the impact of the pandemic on Civil Society Organizations' PVE efforts and the Government PVE efforts. The review showed that many countries around the world had already identified patterns in challenges to their PVE efforts.

Global trends showed that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on PVE efforts, signifying a complex environment where two security risks are now interlinked, but where COVID-19 is adversely affecting PVE efforts. With global trends as a backdrop, the review showed that the RKS has large gaps when it comes to its early identification of challenges it is facing in its PVE efforts, as the RKS faces a pandemic simultaneously. Additionally, the pandemic has tested RKS institutions, as well as the CSOs and the society as a whole, bringing up serious structural issues that make PVE even more complex and challenging. This brief recommends specific actions to be taken by relevant actors, to address the RKS specific gaps and needs.

Introduction

The Republic of Kosovo is one of many countries affected by the threat of radicalization and violent extremism, a threat that on a global scale, has negatively impacted the national security of many countries around the world.

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) has been one of the main national security priorities of central and local government efforts around the world, for many years now. Civil society organizations and international organizations have been major contributors to these efforts. However, with the occurrence of the COVID-19 and its fast spread leading to a global pandemic, there has been a downward shift of PVE as a national security priority. Efforts, human capacities, and funding by governments, international and local organizations have been redirecting to containing the spread of COVID-19 and providing relief for countries and people affected by the pandemic. These shifts are happening at the detriment of PVE efforts, creating new vacuums that grow already existing human security needs further and feed already existing individual and community vulnerabilities, allowing for higher influences by radical and violent extremist groups, terrorist groups, and their agendas. The Republic of Kosovo is no different, as it does not have immunity to these global changes and threats as well as already existing patterns, though it does present a uniquely complex picture of a country facing multiple threats on various fronts, at the same time, be that political, national or human security-related. As the RKS faces a pandemic outbreak and a major threat to its national security, amidst chronic political turmoil, disunity, and lack of societal security, it is important to determine the state of the RKS in light of global trends in PVE efforts, in the face of a pandemic.

Therefore, the objective of this policy brief is to identify implications for the RKS PVE efforts, in light of the pandemic. This will be done by identifying global patterns in challenges to PVE efforts in light of the pandemic in order to identify the RKS specific gaps and needs in the area of PVE, as it faces a pandemic.

Methodology

In this policy brief, to identify global patterns, during the pandemic, literature will be reviewed to pinpoint: the impact of the pandemic on communities vulnerable to radicalization and violent extremism; the impact and intensity of extremist ideologies on vulnerable communities; and the impact of the pandemic on Civil Society Organizations' PVE efforts and the Government PVE efforts.

Based on the global patterns, the Republic of Kosovo context will be analyzed to draw similarities and differences, to identify gaps and needs, and to outline possible recommended actions. Secondary data will be used through this brief, supplemented with select unstructured interviews (focused on issues identified during the literature review) with relevant PVE actors from the Republic of Kosovo and abroad, pertaining to the RKS as a case.

Background: PVE during COVID-19 Global Patterns

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, the world has been facing a situation where besides the obvious threat to human life it is also facing a major threat to human security, human rights and freedoms, and even national security. With the outbreak hitting countries one after the other, each country started adopting individual measures to halt the virus from spreading, including approving a state of national emergency, restricting free movement, restricting and eventually shutting down businesses, all the way to a complete state lockdown. With the measures came also questions as to what this crisis was doing to human rights and freedoms, what were they exactly doing to businesses and their future, as well as what were these measures doing to vulnerable communities and individuals.

According to Brookings, despite much public debate and analysis on the impact of the pandemic on PVE, there is very little data to corroborate the headlines. According to research surveys conducted with local NGOs in eight developing countries, that focus on building local community resilience in accordance with PVE efforts, there are six main recurring themes that point out the impact of COVID-19 on the vulnerability of communities, the impact of radical and extremist groups, Civil Society Organizations' PVE efforts and government CVE efforts (Rosand,

Koser, & Schumicky-Logan, 2020). For the purpose of this brief, we will draw upon existing literature to identify these trends.

1. Impact of COVID-19 on communities vulnerable to radicalization and violent extremism

Government measures to halt the spread of COVID-19 have gravely impacted all human security aspects of people, chief among them economic security (job security) and food security, as well as basic human rights like the freedom of movement. Schools are out, all social and public events canceled, businesses shut down and basically, a lot of countries have been undergoing a statewide lockdown, to prevent the spread. In developed countries and more advanced developed states (Coleman, Senior Programme Manager at ICCT, 2020), these restrictions have inadvertently cut off young people from the outside world, confining them to their homes and creating an opportunity for higher amounts of time online and therefore the potential for influences by radical and extremist agendas (Rosand, Koser, & Schumicky-Logan, 2020). State lockdowns have perpetrated a situation of isolation and unlimited access to online sources, increasing the vulnerability of individuals and making them prone to further radicalization and potentially acts of violent extremism. According to an Analysis by the RRP (Regional Research Public Union, 2020), Al Qaeda has already been encouraging people to use the isolation created due to the pandemic as a chance to learn about Islam. At the same time, ISIS published a strategic paper called "Crusaders' Biggest Nightmare", using the isolation as an opportunity for fast dissemination of their calls on followers to launch attacks on "infidels" (Regional Research Public Union, 2020). As internet traffic is growing fast, due to the isolation, virtual space is being used as a major opportunity, even more so than before the pandemic, by radical and terrorist organizations, to further their agendas. This, in congruence with the lack of a support system that the pandemic related measures have undone (institutional PVE work, NGO PVE activities, school efforts and all its accompanying support infrastructure like teachers and psychologists, etc.) creates a space of total vulnerability for any young person, who without a support system, is at the mercy of online radicalizing and mobilizing factions (Regional Research Public Union, 2020).

On the other hand, less developed areas, such as the Sahel, or even cases like many areas in India, it has been much harder to enforce lockdowns. The low level of development and the high level of poverty have forced governments to loosen restrictions as it is not sustainable to keep isolating people at home. At the same time, the poverty levels also signify these populations lack access to the internet, in which cases online radicalization is not a possibility (Coleman, Senior Programme Manager at ICCT, 2020).

As governments respond to the pandemic with strict measures to halt the spread of the virus, impacting social, economic, and educational aspects of human life, we can see a decline in human security (Rosand, Koser, & Schumicky-Logan, 2020). With the increase of government measures, inducing social isolation and the psychological side effects that go along (anxiety, depression) in addition to losing jobs and access to education, the sense of purpose, identity and the ability to be resilient are endangered, putting societal security “the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats” (Buzan & Weaver, 1997) at a great risk, which in return puts national security at risk. Many find themselves in a precarious economic situation, which is likely to worsen due to the crisis. While some have already lost their jobs, others fear the possibility of unemployment once lockdown measures are eased. This has led to increased levels of uncertainty, stress, and anger, growing inequalities, and deepening social fractures. Furthermore, weeks of confinement can result in an increased sense of isolation and vulnerability for those who live alone. This all makes for fertile ground for extremist recruiters (Regional Research Public Union, 2020).

An unintended, yet dangerous consequence exacerbated by the pandemic is the impact it has on human security worldwide, especially economic security (job security), food security, community security, and especially health security (ability to provide adequate healthcare services). The COVID-19 pandemic is only exposing further already existing inequalities in all human security areas and especially healthcare. This pandemic is not only exposing each state’s ability to respond to a national security threat, in this case, a pandemic, testing its response apparatus or lack thereof, but it is exposing the level of priority healthcare systems hold in each state’s national agendas, the level of investment in public healthcare, the quality of healthcare as well as a state’s ability to meet the healthcare needs of its citizens. Furthermore, the pandemic

is also testing the same areas at a global level and the response of international organizations, which seem to lack an integrated approach to address the challenges posed by COVID-19. Unfortunately, those who suffer most now are the same people who have suffered from inequality and lack of access to quality healthcare already. As the Director of Analysis for the Médecins Sans Frontières contends "I hope COVID-19 not only teaches us to wash our hands but makes governments understand that healthcare must be for all" (Whittall, 2020).

Many have lost their jobs or fear to lose them soon, as the economic situation is expected to worsen because of the measures taken during the pandemic. What follows this is a massive sense of insecurity, higher resentment at government authorities, and growing inequalities, all leading to a much higher level of vulnerability of certain people groups and communities to radicalization and extremist ideologies and factions (Regional Research Public Union, 2020).

Government severe restrictive measures are further exacerbating the radicalization challenge, as its restrictive measures are hindering the economy and therefore every aspect of the human security of every individual, widening the already existing inequality gap and heightening structural grievances (Coleman, Senior Programme Manager at ICCT, 2020), making them even more vulnerable as their basic human security needs are not met. In consequence, trust in government authorities is dwindling, creating more space for non-government interventions, even terrorist groups, coming in to substitute state services.

2. Impact and intensity of extremist ideologies on vulnerable communities

There is a major risk posed by the COVID 19 pandemic to societal security and the social cohesion that goes along with it. The lockdowns and the increase of the social influence have created a bigger opportunity for extremist groups to fabricate and spread propaganda about the virus, blaming groups of interest to their agendas. There is a noticeable overall increase of right-wing extremism as well as extremist and terrorist organizations using this time to push their propaganda further (even through conspiracies about the pandemic).

Right-wing extremists have been capitalizing on the pandemic, to push forward their agendas and spread propaganda, perpetrating a collapse of social cohesion (Rosand, Koser, &

Schumicky-Logan, 2020). Groups like the Nordic Resistance Movement, Hundred-Handers are already spreading hate speech and xenophobic propaganda as well as raising efforts to recruit new supporters (Regional Research Public Union, 2020). Right-wing extremist organizations like white supremacists and neo-Nazis are ramping up their hate speech and dissemination of their agendas, including calls on those infected with COVID-19 to spread the disease to law enforcement and minority communities. The efforts of these right-wing extremist organizations are proving to be lethal as they are leading to real plots and terrorist attacks (Khalil, 2020). The pandemic has clearly exacerbated far-right-wing extremist groups to further their isolationist, xenophobic, racist, and anti-foreigner, anti-immigration agendas, blaming the minority groups for the spread of the disease. This trend, only further fuels marginalization among minority communities, raising their vulnerability and making them more prone to Islamist radicalization. Globally, the pandemic has also fueled conspiracy theories about the source of the virus, or even how real it is, damaging national efforts to enforce measures to halt the spread (Regional Research Public Union, 2020). However, there is growing concern that the occurrence of COVID-19 may lead to a resurgence of bioterrorism and terrorist organizations using biological weapons (Cranfield University, 2020; Zúkalová, 2020).

Specific areas and countries, in Africa and the Middle East, seem to be at higher risk, as international presence and funding are downsizing and redirecting home, due to the pandemic, lowering human security and national security as well as internal stability and offering opportunities for terrorist groups to benefit from the situation. One example of such a case is France, which pulled its troops out of Iraq amid concerns about its capacities to address the pandemic in France (The Associated Press, 2020). The resulting adverse effects from pulling out military troops, from mission areas, are from mild to severe for the respective areas and countries, but also for the EU, as refugees and asylum seekers will increase (Regional Research Public Union, 2020).

As the pandemic spread across the globe, beyond the impact it has had on governments and their response to it, it has played an important role in drawing the attention of terrorist groups as well, which have used this as an opportunity to forward their own agendas. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have both made public statements about the pandemic, using it to elevate

their views on Islam, as well as using the situation to put blame on the West and its values as well as the “oppression of Muslims”. They have made public calls for conversion to Islam as well as calling on their followers to use the pandemic and the strain on state security institutions as an opportunity to wage jihad and carry out terrorist attacks, globally (Joscelyn, 2020; Coleman, *The Impact of Coronavirus on Terrorism in the Sahel*, 2020).

Terrorist groups are using the global instability and the state’s overburdened capacities to respond to the pandemic as an opportunity to thrive. This has become clear when looking at specific cases, globally, like the western Sahel, where the lack of government capacities to address the healthcare needs in addition to other basic human security needs is creating a major threat to the stability of countries in this area, like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. As stability becomes more fragile, and state capacities to meet human security needs in this area such as food security, health security, and economic security, are scarce, the terrorist groups operating in that area are exploiting the situation to their advantage. Al-Qaeda affiliate, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and Islamic State affiliate, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), are exploiting the government scarce security capacities as well as capacities to respond to community human security need in the areas of healthcare, food security, and economic security, to muster support for their agendas and to launch terrorist attacks in the region. The number of attacks as well as the lethality of such attacks has increased exponentially during the past year, in the western Sahil. To add to the problem, organizations already supporting PVE and CVE efforts in these areas may already start shifting their capacities to their own countries, expanding the vulnerability of these communities as well as creating new opportunities for influence and recruitment by terrorist groups (Coleman, *The Impact of Coronavirus on Terrorism in the Sahel*, 2020).

3. COVID 19 impact on Civil Society Organizations’ PVE efforts

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, government priorities in matters of addressing major threats to their national security have been reshaped to include fighting the spread of COVID-19 at the top of their threat assessment lists. This has meant that government funding has been redirected towards fighting the virus, and therefore, even international organizations’ funding, including diverting PVE and CVE funding to fighting the pandemic. This has serious implications

for PVE activities, which, either at a state institutional level or civil society level / NGO level, have to cut back or cease altogether, before defeating another serious threat to national security or creating self-sustainable local mechanisms to do so (Rosand, Koser, & Schumicky-Logan, 2020).

State lockdowns have also severely cut down the level of CSO's PVE activities, leaving already marginalized and vulnerable groups at the mercy of the radical and extremist groups who are willing to use the "vacuum" to spread their doctrine, even though substituting state services. At the same time, countries are dealing with the return of foreign fighters and their families, something held high on the EU's agenda, yet a highly controversial issue, politically, but also capacity wise. Despite the call of experts and international organizations, to treat the repatriation of Foreign Fighters' adequately and swiftly as to prevent further security threats to individual states but also the EU, the EU, and all European governments are not treating this matter with the seriousness that it requires (Regional Research Public Union, 2020). Furthermore, there are fears, that should COVID-19 spread through refugee camps like Al Hol or Al Roj in North-East Syria, where families of ISIS detainees are held, it will only further exacerbate the issue of radicalization. Yet, this may already be done by the extremely poor living conditions which could radicalize them further and who may travel to Europe, posing a threat to whatever destination they are in (International Crisis Group, 2020).

The diverting of foreign funding from PVE related activities in support to COVID-19 is another serious issue, limiting resources available for CSOs to continue the PVE efforts necessary. The UN, which has halted most of its planned activities, is going to review its Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, by June 2020, to ensure that the objectives dealing with human rights and roots causes of violent extremism are not suffering on the backs of a predominant focus on the first two objectives dealing with combating terrorism and capacities to do so (Street & Rogers, 2020). Therefore, the review of the strategy requires also that certain issues like ensuring human rights oversight for counter-terrorism efforts, ensuring all states have an equal opportunity to contribute and participate and ensuring counter-terrorism efforts during COVID-19 do not contribute to growing distrust in government institutions, and that civil society has a guaranteed voice and access to resources (Street & Rogers, 2020).

On January 28, 2018, a number of CSOs from the PVE field wrote a letter to the Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, offering experience-based advice and suggestions on defining the UN's priorities under their Office of Counter-Terrorism (OCT), in their efforts to improve the UN's approach in reducing global violent extremist and terrorist threats. The focus of recommendations was to focus on state and local ownership, a whole of society approach, and locally tailored solutions as well as sustainability, human rights, and an integrated approach to PVE between international actors, governments, and local actors/communities. As to what impact this will have in addressing the funding redirections, funding issues, and other challenges faced by NGOs who carry the weight of PVE on the field, remains to be seen. Still, a clear understanding by international donors about the long-term negative effects, of cutting CSO PVE activities and curtailing PVE funding, on human and national security is necessary to avoid missteps in the way forward.

4. Government CVE and PVE efforts

Globally, community policing has proven to be a challenge, during the pandemic, a common trend in government PVE efforts. Community policing is proving a challenge under severe lockdown restrictions, hindering the effects it has on PVE. Vulnerable vacuums are resurfacing among many communities as state law enforcement presence becomes less and less about community policing and more about enforcing state measures against COVID-19. This vacuum, combined with an ever-spreading popular distrust in the success of government efforts to halt the spread of COVID-19 is proving to be an opportunity for other actors to fill in this role, be those radical or extremist factions (Rosand, Koser, & Schumicky-Logan, 2020).

Globally, there is another concerning pattern that has been plaguing countries in their fight of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that is the loss of trust in public institutions (Rosand, Koser, & Schumicky-Logan, 2020). As governments fail to respond adequately to the global pandemic, as health institutions fail to meet the flux of millions of infections and the death of over three hundred and fifty thousand patients (Our World in Data, 2020), people are, "en masse", losing faith in government institutions' ability to address their healthcare needs. This loss of confidence

is a huge blowback on previous efforts to build trust as a way to bridge a gap that has been so effectively used by radical and terrorist groups.

Governments have shifted focus away from PVE activities, a mistake, which is leading to an interrupted process of fighting this security threat, creating a deliberate vacuum to be used by the radical and extremist groups.

Analysis

PVE during COVID-19: the Kosovo Context

Since March 12, the government of the Republic of Kosovo (RKS) started applying containment measures considering the COVID-19 pandemic. The measures started with milder restrictions on public events and gatherings, and mainly closed schools, but as the situation deteriorated and the cases of infections started raising the government's measure became more severe. Besides closing all schools, the government closed all business save for essential ones, suspended all public transport, canceled all public events, and restricted the freedom of movement, enforcing a national curfew. The country's borders closed, and the country was in a state of lockdown (OECD, 2020).

The Republic of Kosovo, like many countries around the world, has had to face the threat that radicalization and violent extremism present to its citizens and its national security, a threat that is still present. Yet, like many countries, during the current fight against the spread of the COVID-19, the RKS is also struggling to halt the adverse impact of this state of emergency on its PVE efforts, however, in need of improvement they may have already been. Additionally, the RKS is also suffering from its chronic problem of political instability and government changes, making it practically impossible to hold on to the institutional memory and continuity required to properly prevent and counter radicalization and violent extremism.

COVID-19 and the RKS Government PVE efforts

The Republic of Kosovo has faced radicalization and violent extremism as a national security challenge for years now, but there have been specific areas identified as more vulnerable to violent extremism. Municipalities close to the Macedonian border, like Kacanik, Hani i Elezit, Viti, Gjilan but also Mitrovica, have been considered more vulnerable, considering the higher levels of recruitment and mobilization (over 1/3 of RKS combatants). The already existing foreign extremist network funded radicalization, recruitment and mobilization efforts have been met with some local institutional efforts that would bring them to a halt, like the National Strategy for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism (NSPVERLT) (Office of the Prime Minister, 2015) and its subsequent implementation plan and line ministry strategies. Still, the strategy has not been without limitations, as it was drafted with urgency, in response to the US State Departments report on the alarming rate of foreign fighters in the RKS, and brought to RKS government's attention the seriousness of radicalization and violent extremism as a threat to its national security as well as societal security (US Department of State, 2014). The strategy was challenged by a lack of a thorough understanding of the nature of radicalization and violent extremism as a new threat in the RKS as well the underlying causes specific to the RKS context, making it lack a tailored, countrywide integrated approach to PVE. This has allowed for limited efficiency in its implementation and a lack of genuinely coordinated efforts amongst all actors in PVE, be those state, CSO, local or international actors. Add the severity of political instability and the RKS is facing two major threats to its citizens and national security, COVID-19, and the threats that violent extremism possesses, without the assurance of a well-functioning emergency management system, a stable government or an integrated approach to addressing national security threats.

Since the first effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the RKS, and the subsequent measures taken to halt the spread which has caused massive lockdowns and induced isolation and higher online presence, measures proving to increase the vulnerability of communities towards radical and extremist agendas, there is little institutionally known information about the state of vulnerable communities in the RKS, considering this new context. While the state restrictive

measures to halt the spread of COVID-19 put a hold on PVE activities, the government reforms only further exacerbated this gap in PVE. The new government which came into place, as part of its reforms, terminated all national coordinator positions, including the position of the National Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism, a position foreseen by the NSPVERLT. This action, combined with the lack of appointing a national security adviser, that would also cover the PVE portfolio, has put national security low on the new government's priority list, especially PVE, activities for which have not been reported on centrally as the strategy foresees since the new government came into place (Interviewee, 2020). As a result, there has been no reporting, since the new government came into place, about central and local institutions, nor international and local organizations and CSOs on PVE activities foreseen under the NSPVERLT. While it is a fair assumption to contend that institutions at the operational level are continuing to conduct counterterrorism activities, like the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Kosovo Police as well as the Kosovo Intelligence Agency, there are no indication that previously ongoing radicalization and mobilization trends have ceased to exist in the RKS.

Additionally, there is talk of an evaluation of the NSPVERLT for 2015-2020, a process done jointly by the Office of the National Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism and the IOM back in January 2020, but such a report, even if not classified, has never been made public. This leaves a lot of unknowns about the PVE process during these past five years and stagnates the ability of the state, the CSOs and communities, to be able to move forward with concrete, well-coordinated, and comprehensive steps.

COVID-19 and the RKS community context: community vulnerabilities and the impact of extremist agendas

Since the beginning of the problem with radicalization and violent extremism, extremist networks grew roots across Kosovo, especially in the southern and northwestern parts, spreading ultra conservative Islam mixed with a political agenda, through imams or alumni who had studied in Middle Eastern religious institutions, who initially focused on radicalization, recruitment and mobilization. As the intensity of the Syrian war changed, and overall access to an actual conflict

zone decreased, so did the agendas of these extremist networks. Whereas then, the calls of Al Qaeda and ISIS were to join others in the fight against “infidels”, there is a public shift now, especially in light of the conditions cause by the pandemic, where they are indoctrinating new followers through online sources and calling upon their followers to wage terrorist attacks in their countries of origin. Just to what extent are these efforts spread across the RKS and what impact are they having on communities already vulnerable to these factions, is difficult to precisely pin, under the current circumstances. This is especially the case in a country like the RKS, where collecting data on several important indicators, like time spent online and internet use behavior is an impossibility. At present, the Kosovo Police has capabilities to monitor the dark net, information that is classified. Yet, the RKS lacks an institute or a platform that would collect and analyze mainstream internet data, despite the existence of the Regulatory Authority of Electronic and Postal Communications (RAEPC). As it is, the RKS lacks the capacity to provide public web analytics data showing and comparing internet use, before and after COVID-19, as well as other important information in this regard, like age groups, gender, and topics of interest.

Nonetheless, according to an analysis of The New York Times, with pandemic related isolation, people have generally increased their online presence, especially in applications that allow distance work and video communication. According to Statista (Clement, 2020), the pandemic and its subsequent isolation is having a major effect in consumer behavior worldwide. Regarding the impact of the pandemic on global online traffic, Statista reports “In the week ending April 19, online traffic across 20 different industries increased by 25.4 percent compared to the reference period in January and February 2020. Online transactions increased by 42.8 percent compared to the index period” (Clement, 2020). Therefore, it is a safe assumption, even for the case of RKS, that the isolation caused by COVID-19 induced quarantines, the increase in amounts of time available to be online and the shifting but intense agenda of radical and extremist networks to an online base can be correlated. This possibility entails a serious danger for the RKS municipalities and communities, already more vulnerable to these influences; be that because of serious setbacks in having their human security needs met, because of previous impact, the ongoing influence of returned combatants and their families or a combination of all.

Civil Society Organizations' PVE efforts

According to the European Commission, there will be a reorientation of EU funding to ensure “that funds will be drawn from programs that cannot be implemented as planned due to the pandemic. Vital programs providing basic services such as health, food security, nutrition, water and sanitation and education can continue to function and will be broadened as much as possible to address the coronavirus specifically” signifying a major shift in funding governments and CSOs, with a focus on anti-COVID-19 measures (European Commission, 2020). This signifies that the pattern already noticed by the rest of the world in PVE funding being redirected to domestic needs and measures to halt the spread of COVID-19 is becoming a reality for Western Balkans in general, and the RKS specifically.

The EC has already given 5 million Euros for the RKS's COVID – 19 healthcare equipment needs (laboratory equipment and protective gear, respirators, ambulances, and hospital beds). A total of 374 million Euros have been re-allocated by the EC, for countries in Western Balkans, to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, out of which, 63 million Euros only for the RKS. Yet, there has not been any mention of civil society organizations and funding directed toward their sustainability issues or those of their primary activities. This trend by major international organizations and donors, means that for organizations in the RKS, whose primary activities are PVE related, sustainability is not ensured, nor is future continuity to build community resilience and mechanisms to deal comprehensively with the threats of radicalization and violent extremism. This means that municipalities most vulnerable, risk becoming even more vulnerable. According to Shtuni (Shtuni, 2016), “Frustrated expectations, the growing role of political Islam as a core part of identity in some social circles, and group dynamics appear to be the telling drivers of radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization in Kosovo”. Thus, a shift of government focus, foreign donors' focus and especially local CSOs activities to pandemic related issues, at the expense of PVE efforts and funding, leaves vulnerable communities to their own devices. This means, vulnerable communities facing a new situation with returned combatants and their

families, a lack of a national strategy for reintegration and rehabilitation, decreased CSO support, isolation, exposure to online extremist influences and major political crisis that lead further polarization, only further fueling their initial frustrated expectation and an identity crisis. The EU calls for proposal for 2020 which focus in many areas of need, but none related to the PVE component of security are a sign that the redirecting of funding has already started happening.

Discussion and Limitations

Some of the key challenges for the RKS now are related to addressing the roles and capacities of all actors, in PVE. As it moves forward, the RKS must be careful not to ignore other human and national security threats, as new ones like COVID-19 pandemic evolve. History has proven that short term thinking at the policy level has major consequences in the long term. Therefore, the RKS's major challenge at present is to ensure its national security priorities are correctly identified and/or updated and prioritized, based on an updated national security threat assessment and regional and global context, to ensure that human, technical and funding capabilities are appropriately built or assigned. At present, the RKS is without a National Strategy that would address PVE, as its last strategy's timeline ended this year. The RKS does not have a public report on the lessons learned from the 5 years of the first strategy, nor a follow up draft and it still lacks a National Security Adviser or a National Coordinator that would oversee the state PVE efforts, in coordination with all actors, including CSOs. Additionally, the RKS does not have an updated national security strategy, despite the Strategic Security Sector Review (SSSR) of 2012-2014, nor does it have a more recent SSSR or a National Reintegration and Rehabilitation Plan. The lack of clear policy priorities in matters of national security, strategic documents and human capacities, at present, leaves the RKS in the dark as far as PVE, at the same time that RKS, like countries around the world are dealing with increased social vulnerabilities due to COVID-19 and the isolation it has induced as well as returned/repatriated combatants.

As the RKS faces a pandemic at the same time that it faces potential security ramifications due to the return of former IS combatants and their families (Metodieva, 2018), the lack of clear

policies, a strategic guide and priorities, puts all state and CSOs PVE activities at risk, but especially the CSO activities, which depend on a national plan and donor funding.

While returned IS combatants and their families have not yet been a source of terrorist attacks locally, they do present a level of risk. According to Metodieva (Metodieva, 2018), motivation for travel to conflict zones, reasons for returning and gender and age characteristics should be considered in assessing the risk. Of those who have returned, some have been prosecuted, but there are also cases that have “disappeared from the view of the security services” (Metodieva, 2018), which means PVE efforts might not be at the forefront, currently, on matters of security, because of the pandemic, but they certainly are very important to ensure national security.

Limitations. This brief has had a few limitations in bringing forth all the information it considered significant to treat the subject. First and foremost, the subject deals with matters of national security and treats information that official channels have classified and cannot share with the public, limiting information from the National Security Council and its Secretariat, as well as the Kosovo Police, its counter terrorism unit and the Kosovo Intelligence Agency. Additionally, the lack of a National Security Adviser at the Office of the Prime Minister as well as the lack of a National Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism have left the RKS in an information darkness.

Secondly, Kosovo does not yet have any available data under any online analytics database, to be able to pinpoint exact numbers on online users, age groups, categories, and topics. This limits the precision one can provide for the impact of COVID-19 measures on vulnerable communities as far as their online presence is concerned.

Thirdly, the recent government of RKS, as of the start of the pandemic, has not taken any measures to overview the impact on central and local PVE efforts and activities, nor the implications thereof.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Since its independence, the RKS has been plagued by political instability, a serious obstacle in the RKS's ability to stabilize its institutions to a point where proper communication, cooperation and coordination could happen to the benefit of the RKS's strategic priorities. As for strategic priorities, the RKS still lacks the proper flow of processes and mechanisms to ensure that its strategic priorities are not only derived from thorough needs-based assessments to begin with, but are followed up by feasible implementation, monitoring and reporting, in order to allow steady progress. This has been especially the case with the security sector, where the RKS capabilities have been tested several times in the recent years, in how it handled violent extremism as a national security threat, but also very recently in its ability to handle a pandemic. The RKS' pre-existing challenges with measures taken to counter and especially prevent violent extremism, have become even more cumbersome under the pandemic.

As the RKS faces two serious national security challenges simultaneously, security threats which can impact each other in very real terms, it is showing clear signs of institutional inability to respond adequately to the complexity of the situation while responding to the needs of its people. This is especially the case, in comparison to many countries around the world. While on a global scale, many countries have already identified patterns on how these two threats feed off of each other, as above mentioned, the RKS remains in a data darkness as to what has and is happening to its vulnerable communities during this pandemic.

Therefore, having considered global patterns of the impact of COVID-19 and its measures on communities vulnerable to radicalization and violent extremism, on CSOs and their PVE activities and on government institutions, the RKS should consider the following recommendations:

1. The RKS Government should publish immediately, the findings of the review of its NSPVERLT and lessons learned.

2. The RKS should immediately, in coordination with the CSOs focused on PVE, coordinate efforts to assess the impact of COVID-19, specifically in the RKS, in vulnerable communities as well as the rest of the country.
3. The RKS government should immediately appoint a National Security Adviser that would oversee and coordinate the national security portfolio, including prevention of violent extremism.
4. The RKS government should draft a new PVE Strategy, in close coordination with the CSOs and based on lessons learned from the previous strategy implementation and the country assessment of the impact of COVID-19.
5. International donors should support CSO PVE programs that target extremism in all its forms, and which are locally implemented.
6. Greater support should be given to municipal authorities through adequate government funding for municipalities with greater human security vulnerabilities and with higher COVID-19 impact.
7. There should be greater sustainable commitment by the EU and other international organizations to funding locally tailored solutions to PVE and cross border cooperation in PVE efforts.
8. A more tailored, comprehensive, and culturally intelligent CSO approach to engaging local communities is needed, to raise local community resilience.
9. The RKS should, jointly with municipalities and CSOs, draft a National Reintegration and Rehabilitation Strategy, to allow for the possibility of a tailored and integrated approach to post-repatriation and prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of combatants but also the rehabilitation and reintegration of their families and especially children.
10. The RKS should assess and then build the necessary capabilities for data collection and analysis, dedicated to online data and online behavior.
11. The EU should support Western Balkans through higher direct investment, in order to minimize the lack of human security and vulnerabilities.
12. Current PVE projects should be reshaped to address the implications of COVID-19.

13. Donor funding should be steered to address challenges where the COVID-19 impact and the PVE efforts meet, ensuring the complexity of these two threats getting interlinked gets properly addressed.

14. Both, local CSOs and international donors, should be more long term focused, in implementing and funding PVE activities, as to address the financial sustainability implications of COVID-19. Long term self-sustainable efforts should take precedence and be funded.

As resources become more scarce, going forward, all parties involved in PVE and the impact of COVID-19, the central and local governments and the CSOs, must focus on tailoring well-coordinated, comprehensive and culturally intelligent approaches that can address complex and multilayered security challenges in a way that is sustainable in the long run. Continuing to do the necessary work in PVE should not oust the possibility of addressing the health threats from COVID-19. Addressing these two threats should not be considered mutually exclusive but an opportunity to find inventive, efficient, and sustainable ways to address multiple threats at the same time.

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