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COMMENTARY



The lack of public debate on violent
extremism and how media reports
about it in Macedonia

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The phenomenon of violent extremism is considered to be a global threat, as anybody could be a potential victim of indoctrination into extremist ideologies.

Almost no country has been spared so far from the phenomenon, and different states have chosen various approaches to tackle the issue. On international level the phenomenon has been handled solely from the security aspect so far, as the Coalition against ISIL¹ confirms that, however the focus has started to shift towards more inclusive solutions. The concept of Countering Violent-Extremism (CVE) advised that states should work on creating more resilient communities which are considered as crucial partners in this fight.²

1 Joint Statement Issued by Partners at the Counter-ISIL Coalition Ministerial Meeting and a list of states participating the coalition: <http://1.usa.gov/1HZPBdG>

2 Remarks by U.S. President Barack Obama at the Leaders Summit on CVE <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/29/remarks-president-obama-leaders-summit-countering-isil-and-violent>, UN Headquarters, New York,

These holistic measures rely on the support of all stakeholders that could contribute towards building a solution that would not only act after radicalization has occurred, but it would have as well a preventative role in the whole concept of countering violent extremism.

An important step in building the counter narrative to the extremist ideologies is building public awareness on the issue about the threats coming from the radicalization. There should be a public debate where experts, religious leaders and state officials will share their opinion and insights in regards to CVE, and put to test these ideas/opinions as how much they apply in the context where they take place. The public debate will help in clearing misconceptions that might arise when dealing with such sensitive issues. The media can play its constructive role when giv-

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ing attention to the topic, but most certainly it could be a two-edged sword when the subject is dealt without precaution and unprofessionally.

In Macedonia the public debate about the subject of radicalization is still poorly-developed and uncoordinated. Since the beginning of 2015 there have been few public condemnations of the phenomenon, namely by the Chief of the Islamic Religious Community³, also there have been announcements/statements from state officials that Macedonia as a country faces threat from violent extremism.⁴ However there has not been a single TV debate that has dedicated time for the subject to be thoroughly addressed for the wider public. It is important to note there is a TV Show called "Ikre" aired on national

3 Islamic leaders want fight against terrorism, but at same time request respect of human rights [Krerët islamë në Maqedoni duan luftimin e terrorizmin por dhe respektimin e të drejtave] <http://kohane.net/?id=&l=69660>, 06.08.2015

4 National Security in the focus of the speech of President Ivanov <http://bit.ly/1ZxaGUG>, 22.12.2015

TV channel TVM2 in Albanian language which is prepared by the Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia tackling only topics related to Islam. Unfortunately this show is not promoted and as such not much recognized among the public, and so far has not held any discussion on the subject of violent extremism.

On the other hand, the printed media and the internet news portals write a lot on the topic of DAESH, but these news outlets quite often lack the ability to put the subject into perspective. They mainly report mere facts, use terminology that is considered to be wrong or publish sensational headlines that might in contrary fuel tensions. The lack of professionalized journalists on security subjects leads to this topic being handled improperly.

Second most common mistake media tend to do is linking the radicalization phenomenon to one ethnic community. According to statistics from the national census of 2002, 33% of the population in Macedonia is considered to be Muslim, while Albanians in Macedonia, as most often

linked with this phenomenon, mark only 25% of the population.⁵ The police action "Cell" just further proved that there is not a pattern or proven example as who gets radicalized and that it does not necessarily affect just one ethnic community in Macedonia, since part of the arrested persons belonged to other ethnic communities such as ethnic Macedonians or Muslim Macedonians.⁶

There are other examples where media outlets link completely unrelated cases with ISIS (DAESH). This was the case with various protests that took part over the last year against the current government, where on some news portals they appeared with sensational headlines such as supporters of ISIS joined the citizens' protests.⁷ Such

sensational headlines should be avoided at any case by the journalists. The same goes for the propaganda videos that get constantly uploaded to the internet by domestic news portals in order to get more traffic to their website, they are also counter-productive as they only perpetuate the propaganda and the radicalization further by exposing citizens even more to the material that is primarily used to attract potential recruits.⁸

The Internet provides violent extremists with powerful tools to propagate hatred and violence and to identify and groom potential recruits, creating global online

communities that promote radicalization. Additionally it is known, that propaganda materials often get translated in the local languages, and without having a public debate where religious leaders identify those harmful messages circulating and build the counter-narrative, and put together with the fact that Islamic Religious Community is not very active and present in the social media engaging with youngsters, the wider public especially the youth, is left vulnerable and un-protected.

The emergence and diffusion of hate speech online is a new and fast evolving phenomenon and collective efforts are needed to understand its significance and consequences, as well as to develop effective responses. Therefore the need for initiating an inclusive debate in Macedonia on the topic needs prompt action.

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⁵ Macedonia Demographics Profile:

http://www.indexmundi.com/macedonia/demographics_profile.html

⁶ Action "Cell" : Skopje main recruiting centre for fighters for Syria [АКЦИЈА „ЌЕЛИЈА“: Скопје бил главен регрутен центар за борци во Сирија] <http://www.telegraf.mk/aktuelno/makedonija/ns-newsarticle-295685-akcija-kelija-skopje-bil-glaven-regruten-centar-za-borci-vo-sirija.nspix>, 06.08.2015

⁷ Supporters of Hamas, Al Aksa at the protests in Skopje [Поддржувачи на Хамас, Ал Акса на протестите во Скопје] <http://puls24.mk/mk/vesti/podrzuvaci-na-hamas-al-aksa-na-protestite-vo-skopje-zaev-i-muslimansko-bratstvo-pus>

⁸ tosat-niz-glavniot-grad, 25.04.2016

⁸ Example of a such sensational headline: ISIS issues call for jihad and occupation of Istanbul (VIDEO) [ISIS bën thirrje për xhihad në pushtimin e Stambollit! (VIDEO)]

<http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/isis-ben-thirrje-per-xhihad-ne-pushtimin-e-stambollit-vid-eo-123654/?archive=1>, 18.08.2015