



U.S. EMBASSY
Tirana, Albania



**STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION
ON PREVENTING AND
COUNTERING VIOLENT**

**A PRACTICAL MODEL
OF ITS INSTITUTIONAL
IMPLEMENTATION IN ALBANIA**



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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report aims to provide a detailed overview of all phases of implementation of the project “Support the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism to delivering strategic communications on P/CVE through capacity building and research”. The importance of this report lies in two main reasons. Until the start of this project, strategic communication was a neglected priority of the Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism Strategy in Albania (the Strategy), despite the proven value of this priority in preventing and countering violent extremism. On the other hand, given that this is the first project implemented in Albania with the aim of implementing strategic communication,¹ this report serves as a milestone which will give other practitioners of strategic communication against violent extremism an example of practical implementation of this communication and make it easier for them to take further action in this field.

The project for which this report was compiled aimed to improve the knowledge and capacities of the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism (Center) and all line ministries (Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, and Ministry of Education and Sports) and their subordinate institutions (Agency for Support of Local Self-Government, State Police, General Directorate of Prisons, Probation Service, Center for Juvenile and Youth Crime Prevention, Social Service, and the Health Care Services Operator) to counter violent extremism propaganda. The project aimed to achieve this goal through its two components, which are complementary to each other. The first component assessed the capacities and needs of the targeted institutions to fulfill their institutional roles and tasks in this aspect, while the second component aimed to improve the capacities of these institutions and address the identified needs. Through its implementation, the project achieved the following results:

- Improving the overall understanding of strategic communication to counter violent extremism by government institutions involved in the implementation of the Strategy;
- Improving the expertise and knowledge of line ministries and related agencies on developing and deploying preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) strategic communications;
- Consolidation of communication practices and dissemination of strategic P/CVE messages from the Center, line ministries and their subordinate frontline institutions;
- Needs assessment to develop and effectively deploy P/CVE messages and communications.

¹ The first project related to strategic communication in Albania was developed in 2020, which also published the research report "Exploring P/CVE strategic communication - a research-based approach". However, this project aimed to analyze recent trends regarding the role of Islamic propaganda in promoting radicalization and VE in Albania, but did not aim to develop and disseminate P/CVE messages in Albania or build the capacities of relevant institutions to do so.

The project was implemented for a period of 16 months, starting in August 2021 until October 2022. In the following sections, this report chronologically reflects the entire implementation of the project according to the two components and related activities. The first part presents the report "Examining the shortcomings of P/CVE strategic communication in Albania", which examines the legal, sub-legal, institutional and political framework for P/CVE strategic communication in Albania, in order to assess the commitment of the institutions responsible for its development and implementation. The second part presents the report "Training needs assessment", which through interviews and group discussions makes an assessment of the needs and capacities of the employees of the institutions responsible for P/CVE strategic communication in Albania, the results of which guided the content of the training in the first phase. The third and fourth parts of this report present (i) the report from the first phase of training with employees from line ministries and their subordinate institutions; and (ii) the report from the first phase of the tabletop exercise to develop P/CVE strategic communication. The fifth part presents the report "Training needs assessment", which, through interviews and group discussions, makes an assessment of the needs and capacities of the employees of the institutions responsible for P/CVE strategic communication in Albania, the results of which on the one hand shed light on the shortcomings that remained in place despite the completion of the first phase of the project, and in turn guided the content of the second phase training. The sixth and seventh parts of this report present (i) the report from the second phase of training with employees from line ministries and their subordinate institutions; and (ii) the report from the second phase of the tabletop exercise to develop P/CVE strategic communication.

Examining the shortcomings of P/CVE strategic communication in Albania



Following the phenomenon of Albanian foreign fighters joining the conflicts in the Middle East, as well as the spread of violent extremist propaganda in the country, Albania has undertaken certain measures to address this phenomenon. One of the most important measures was the adoption of the National Strategy for the Countering Violent Extremism in 2015 (hereinafter the Strategy), whose second priority was the fight against violent extremism propaganda, along with the promotion of democratic values. The Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism (hereafter the Center) is the main institution responsible for developing and deploying narratives against Violent Extremism (VE), as well as for the coordination and involvement of various institutions or stakeholders, for the fulfillment of this priority. The involvement of all involved institutions, as well as the strengthening of cooperation with the Center and other stakeholders in this process, constitute two essential components for the implementation of a communication strategy against VE.

In contrast to the development and implementation of other priorities of the Strategy², the second priority was still remaining in the process of being developed and then being implemented. This was due to the fact that the Center has encountered a number of challenges in relation to the implementation of this priority, in accordance with its measures 5 and 6. Some of the obstacles encountered in this direction were the lack of adequate knowledge and capacities from the relevant institutions to effectively develop and deploy strategic communication, in order to prevent and counter VE propaganda. This has negatively affected the cohesion of action to generate input and partnerships, to influence behavioral change and develop a comprehensive strategic approach to communication.³

In the 2020 annual report of the Center, it is emphasized that in relation to the development of Strategic Communication – as one of the important objectives for the work of the institution – a series of activities have been carried out and a series of results have been achieved, among which can be mentioned, the drafting of a "Communication Strategy", following the return of Albanian citizens from conflict zones. Moreover, during the second half of 2020, the visibility of activities that were carried out by the Center has been significantly improved, through the media outreach of its representatives, as well as through the launching of the institution's official accounts on YouTube and Twitter.⁴

During the last two years, the Center has increased its activity by engaging international and local actors to support the implementation of the second strategic objective, such as organizing coordination meetings to carry out studies on the implementation of messages against VE in cooperation with the Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG)⁵, or cooperation with other media organizations. Nevertheless, this challenge was still relevant at the beginning of the implementation of this project, and there was a need to improve the knowledge and capacity gaps, as well as to strengthen the collaborative approaches of the institutions involved in this field.

² Strategic Objective 1 "Community outreach and engagement" and Strategic Objective 3 "Developing long-term comprehensive CVE policies"

https://mb.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/strategjia_kombetare_per_luften_kunder_ekstrmizmit.pdf

³ <http://csdgalbania.org/sq/eksplorimi-i-zhvillimit-te-nje-komunikimi-strategjik-per-pkedh-ne-shqiperi/>

⁴ <https://cve.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Raporti-Vjetor-2020-Qendra-CVE-shqip.pdf>

⁵ Center for Coordination on Countering Violent Extremism <https://cve.gov.al/?lang=sq>

Following the analysis of the legal, institutional and political framework, this report came to the conclusion that, although there is a legal framework with institutions responsible for the implementation of the national strategy, Albania does not have a legal basis dedicated to strategic communication, which guides the institutions on the roles and the tasks they have to fulfill the obligations of the strategy. Even in relation to the process of returning Albanian citizens from Syria and Iraq, the approved by-laws define obligations for various aspects of the operations of returning citizens, but do not further elaborate the obligations for communication with the public. During the observation of the practice of communication against VE propaganda by Albanian institutions, it was noted that the relevant institutions had a lot to improve in relation to strategic communication. These institutions did not follow Ingram's model of strategic communication. They lacked the variety of messages that address pragmatic and identity choice appeals that are deployed both offensively and defensively. The overarching narrative did not match the VE system of meaning in Albania, and therefore did not attack the linkages that set their self-reinforcing cycle in motion. It also lacked a variety of communication tools to maximize the reach, timeliness and targeting of the message; and the messages posted by the institutions did not seem to take into account the full spectrum of audiences.

To address the knowledge and capacity gaps, a better understanding of the legal, political and institutional framework for each responsible institution involved in this process was needed. This helped to assess the capacities of state employees engaged in this field, and identified their concrete needs to develop and deploy strategic communication, in accordance with all other institutional actors involved, and paved the way for strengthening the inter-institutional cooperation in this regard.

Methodology

The research is designed to shed light on the institutional capacities and necessary knowledge on strategic communication issues, through the analysis of laws, policy documents and regulations of the line ministries, to determine their adequacy in relation to effective engagement to deploy P/CVE strategic communication. The analysis included institutions such as the Center, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), the Ministry of Education and Sports (MES), the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MHSP), the Ministry of Interior (MoI), and some of their agencies that are included in the implementation of the action plans that each of these ministries has for the P/CVE issues. The data collection process included the review of relevant documents on the topic, during which data were collected from the strategies, laws and policy documents and regulations of the relevant institutions.

Upon collecting the legal and policy documents for all institutions involved in the implementation of the P/CVE strategy, they were analyzed to determine their suitability in relation to effective engagement in the delivery of P/CVE strategic communication.

At the same time, the researchers looked into the communication instruments or channels used by each of the institutions involved, to deploy strategic communication in relation to the field they cover. This enabled the identification of a clear presentation of the involvement of the relevant institutions in this regard.

General context

Since the approval of the Strategy, which has emphasized that *'VE is a contemporary global phenomenon and currently poses a serious threat to international peace and security, the Albanian Government considers the fight against violent extremism one of the fundamental priorities of its political program'*, there have been a number of initiatives that guide and lead the work of the state structures involved in this process. It should also be emphasized that this strategy was adopted with the support of the international community and by changing the existing paradigm of fighting VE only with the strong approach (through the engagement of security forces, such as the army, police, etc.) this marks a further step of the involvement of all actors of society in dealing with security issues.⁶

Now the concept of the involvement of the whole-of-society for the prevention and countering of this negative phenomenon is widely known, and thereby joint efforts are needed for this, through the engagement of all societal actors by **including here the efforts in developing a strategic communication with the public, through locally tailored approaches to this phenomenon.**⁷

Another important element that is evident in the Strategy is the legal and institutional space that this document creates/enables for the Albanian Government to draft guiding principles, policies and actions to face radicalism and VE. This is an aspect that directly affects the creation of a prosperous and inclusive environment for citizens, which is also the final goal of the strategy, simultaneously cultivating the culture of respect for fundamental freedoms throughout the country. The need for cooperation between a wide range of state institutions or agencies for P/CVE reflects the complexity of VE and that it can affect anyone, so this approach has proven to be more effective against this phenomenon.

In accordance with the general institutional interventions and current developments to fulfill the obligations imposed in this direction, the Center engaged during 2020 in a project implemented by CSDG⁸, which aimed to conduct research to guide the development and deployment of strategic communication, to prevent and oppose VE propaganda, as well as to support the development of the capacities of the Center to achieve this objective. This intervention aimed to strengthen the capacity of the institutions responsible for the implementation of measures 5 and 6 of the Strategy, related to strategic communication in order to prevent and counter VE. The main result of this project was the preparation of the research report "Exploring P/CVE strategic communication - a research-based approach" which analyzes

⁶ Arjan Dyrmyshi, 'Albania's approach to address radicalism and violent extremism <http://csdgalbania.org/sq/ep-content/uploads/2018/11/Qasja-ndaj-trajtimit-te%CC%88-radikalizmit-dhe-ekstremizmit-te%CC%88-dhunshe%CC%88m.pdf>.

⁷ The Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Extremism of the United Nations guides member countries as follows: 1. National plans should be developed in a multi-disciplinary manner, to include countermeasures and prevention of violent extremism measures, with the help of a wide range of governmental actors, such as law enforcement, social service providers and ministries of education, youth and religious affairs, as well as non-governmental actors, including youth; families; women; religious, cultural and educational leaders; civil society organizations; the media; and the private sector. Analyzes of local and national drivers of violent extremism form an important starting point for developing national plans.

⁸ The project was supported by Hedayah, with funds from the European Union.

recent trends regarding the role of Islamic propaganda in promoting radicalization and VE in Albania.⁹ The institutions involved in research and capacity building activities were the Center, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), the Ministry of Education and Sports (MES), the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MHSP), the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and employees of some of the subordinate agencies of these ministries that have a role in P/CVE issues. In addition, the data collection process also included high school students, university students, as well as representatives of religious communities.

Some of the most important findings of this study shed light on the existence of a combination of factors, as a result of which the implementation of the Strategic Communication Objective has lagged behind compared to the other objectives foreseen in the Strategy. This has led to a lack of capacity development, expertise and relevant institutional practices in terms of strategic communication. Some of the main factors identified by the study include a lack of clear understanding of the role that VE narratives play, lack of concrete measures needed to counter it, which has resulted in underdeveloped practice, and a lack of expertise among institutions responsible for the implementation of the Strategy.¹⁰ The study identified a lack of formalized or structured communication between the ministries and other relevant institutions involved in the implementation of the Strategy and its Action Plan; at the same time it identified the needs of employees at the management and technical levels to improve their knowledge on strategic communication in the preparation and distribution of messages against VE, as well as the leading role of the Center in this regard.¹¹

In order to further investigate the findings mentioned above, it was necessary to carry out an analysis of the legal framework and the policies or instruments used to deploy the necessary messages through strategic communication for P/CVE issues. This is expected to help the relevant institutions to have a clear understanding of their duties and roles in this field and pave the way for strengthening multi-agency cooperation in this regard.

Legal framework for P/CVE strategic communication

It is now widely accepted by researchers of the field that the fundamental purpose of strategic communication is to intentionally influence specific audiences and the general public. While certain disciplines are conceptually based simply on providing information (i.e. technical communication) or on creating and maintaining mutually satisfactory relationships (public relations), these are only necessary, but not sufficient conditions for organizations/institutions to achieve important strategic goals. To be relevant today, communication theory and research must focus on how communications can contribute to each organization's/institution's purpose.¹² Strategic communication is also defined as the systematic planning and execution of information flow, communication, media development and public relations in the long term. It sends messages tailored to a specific audience, to achieve the intended long-term result.

⁹ <http://csdgalbania.org/sq/eksplorimi-i-zhvillimit-te-nje-komunikimi-strategjik-per-pkedh-ne-shqiperi/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Defining Strategic Communication, INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION, 1(1), 3–35 Copyright © 2007, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., pp. 10-11.

Communication management is a combination of processes that balance three factors: messages, communication channels and audiences.

Putting this in the context of strategic communication on P/CVE, it means, among others, the active engagement of state institutions that are charged with responsibility for the implementation of the Strategy, such as: the Center, MES, MHSP, MoJ, MoI, MoD and MEFA.¹³ This also includes subordinate institutions of the above ministries, which are relevant to this issue, and which will be included in the analysis presented below, in relation to the legal/sub-legal definitions or the instruments they use to communicate with the public about P/CVE.

As identified by the CSDG study on the exploration of the development of a strategic communication for P/CVE issues, there is a lack of official structured communication between ministries and other relevant institutions, involved in the implementation of the Strategy and its Action Plan. To understand more about this, it was necessary to research the legal/sub-legal basis or policy documents that will be able to regulate or guide the structures involved in this field, as well as the instruments or strategic communication channels used by relevant institutions, according to their particular responsibilities.

Legal framework of the Prime Minister's Office

The Prime Minister's Office is the highest institution of the country's executive power and as such, determines the priorities that the government follows during its mandate. In this context, the most important document on the issue of preventing and countering VE is the Strategy. As mentioned earlier in this document, the fight against violent extremism propaganda is defined as a priority, together with the promotion of democratic values, the realization of which would be possible through the implementation of measures 5: "Propose a creative and innovative communication strategy to complement the Strategy" and 6: "Influence attitudes and behaviours towards violent extremism through contextualised campaigns and other communication initiatives". Another equally important strategic document in this context is the new national cross-sector counter-terrorism strategy 2021-2025 approved in December 2020. Among other things, this document describes the goals of the Center, which are: a) strengthening the coordination, cooperation and partnership at the local, national and international levels, between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, religious communities and the media, in identifying and implementing effective interventions; b) encouraging local research as a means to understand the conditions, factors and causes that promote radicalism that can lead to violence, and factors that can lead to community resilience against VE; c) strengthening community resilience and reducing the drive to radicalism and VE through education, employment and community policing prevention programs and policies; d) 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.¹⁴

¹³ The Ministry of Finance and Economy (MFE) has not committed to the implementation of the elements described in the Strategy regarding employment and vocational education (information derived from the Center).

¹⁴ Decision No. 1137, dated on 16.12.2020 "On the adoption of the Counter Terrorism Intersectoral Strategy, 2021–2025, and its action plan 2021–2023" <https://cve.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/vendim-2020-12-16-1137.pdf>. pp. 23.

Other important documents that define obligations for the institutions involved in this field, are listed below in a chronological order:

Order of the Prime Minister, No. 148, dated on 5/11/2019 “On the approval of the additional inter-institutional action plan for the reception and treatment of Albanian citizens returning from the conflict zones of Syria and Iraq”. This document would precede the first repatriation of Albanian citizens in the country from camps in Syria or Iraq, where foreign terrorist fighters and their families are being held in detention. The action plan aimed at undertaking inter-institutional measures for the re-integration of Albanian citizens who would be repatriated to the country, through the design and implementation of programs for their rehabilitation and further support. Among other things, the plan pays special attention to the relationship with the media and the public, to avoid the possible stigmatization of repatriated individuals or the manifestation of unpleasant situations in public. The institutions charged with tasks for its implementation are the Center - which has a coordinating, facilitating and monitoring role - MES, MHSP, MoJ, MoI, and the Ministry of Finance and Economy (MFE). As it is already known, in November 2019 Albania was hit by a strong earthquake, and in the following months by the COVID-19 pandemic, which hindered to some extent the progress of the implementation of this action plan.

The decision of the Council of Ministers for repatriating the Albanian citizens from the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq,¹⁵ is another important legal document that define the responsibilities of two ministries, namely the MHSP and MoI, as well as their subordinate institutions. Also, it defines the responsibilities of the Center, which has the task of multi-agency coordination, support and monitoring of the repatriation process and the development of rehabilitation and reintegration programs.¹⁶ This document guided the entire inter-institutional intervention that followed the first repatriation of five Albanian citizens at the end of October 2020. The document is classified as 'secret', thus, it cannot be assessed if it defines obligations for the involved institutions as regards to the strategic communication. The practice followed in the two operations of repatriating citizens has shown that the process of public information was led by the Prime Minister.

The analysis of the legal framework identified the lack of a legal basis dedicated to strategic communication, which guides the institutions on their roles and tasks to fulfill the obligations of the Strategy, or of other strategies that define obligations for this matter. The approved by-laws define obligations for various aspects of operations to repatriate citizens from Syria, but do not further elaborate on the obligations of the institutions engaged in this matter. Communication with the public about the return operations has been led by the Prime Minister, through public interviews before and after the repatriation operations of citizens from the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. This has helped guide subordinate institutions, on the public position/institutional line about these cases.

¹⁵ Decision of the Council of Ministers 826/2020. “On the provision of reception and accommodation services to unaccompanied children returning from Syria and Iraq.”

¹⁶ Decision No. 1137, dated on 16.12.2020 “On the adoption of the Counter Terrorism Intersectoral Strategy, 2021–2025, and its action plan 2021–2023” <https://cve.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/vendim-2020-12-16-1137.pdf>. pp. 46.

Legal framework of the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism

The Center has the main task of coordinating state institutions to implement the institutional obligations of the Strategy and, among other things, it has the task of developing programs, policies and processing/analyzing information to prevent VE and reduce the influence of extremist propaganda online. Given that the Strategy and its Action Plan have expired in 2020, the Center has started the process of drafting a new strategy against VE, in accordance with the legal framework and procedures for the drafting of policies and strategies. The new strategy will foresee specific objectives related to strategic communication.¹⁷ The Center has official communication channels with state institutions that are engaged in the implementation of the Strategy, through the contact points in each ministry, and with the institutional working groups that are engaged in the implementation of the action plans approved by each line-ministry, through orders of relevant ministers or officials delegated by them. These constitute a network of important contacts that send information in an official manner to their institutions.¹⁸

During the last two years, the Center has increased its activity by engaging international and local actors to support addressing the lack of development of the Strategic Communication priority. This commitment was driven by the cooperation with the European Strategic Communications Network (ESCN), a network supported by the EU, during which a report was prepared with concrete recommendations for the Center.¹⁹ The need to address the recommendations received from ESCN, led to the cooperation between the Center and CSDG,²⁰ through the implementation 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", financially supported by Hedayah.²¹ The project aimed to develop the capacities of the Center, to create and establish an effective strategy to enable the full implementation of measures 5 and 6 of the National Strategy, including four ministries, namely MES, MoI, MoI and MHSP. Among other things, the project prepared a research report, which highlighted the institutional needs in terms of increasing the knowledge and professional skills of employees involved in this field, at the same time paving the way to create communication platforms that deploy messages within a P/CVE communication strategy. The report has been made public on the official website of the Center, and it has been officially sent to the institutions involved in this process.

The importance of P/CVE strategic communication is initially defined in measure 5 of the National Strategy, where a creative and innovative communication strategy is proposed by creating a Working Group for Communication with different stakeholders. In this context, the Communication Strategy of the Center has been designed. Although this is an internal and non-public document, CSDG was able to obtain it and noted that it intends to:

¹⁷ Information derived from the Center.

¹⁸ Information derived from the Center.

¹⁹ ESCN experts held meetings with representatives of the Center in 2019, where they discussed how strategic communications can be used to understand and address the national VE challenge in Albania. In conclusion, ESCN has drafted a report with recommendations for the Center.

²⁰ <http://csdgalbania.org/sq>

²¹ <https://www.hedayahcenter.org/>.

- Deploy the message to the public that the Center is a professional and reliable public institution that exercises its role in the fight against radicalism and VE at the central, local and regional level;
- Inform and raise public awareness related to the activities carried out through the programs of preventing radicalism and VE;
- Identify and manage risks that can damage the image and reputation of the Center through fake news, information that can be distributed in different networks by providing unrealistic information, copying the logo and name of the Center;
- Maintaining and strengthening the reputation of the Center as a successful institution in developing and implementing the program for the repatriation and reintegration of returnees from Syria, through coordination and monitoring of the objectives of each institution;
- - Introducing the Center as an organization that is responsible for the multi-agency coordination of the first-line ministries in the fight against VE.²²

This communication strategy focuses on reaching primary, secondary and other audiences. The primary audience includes (i) the general public, to address the negative perception that the group of returnees is dangerous for society; (ii) state institutions, such as the government, line-ministries, institutions dependent on the government, or local government; (iii) religious communities; (iv) diplomats accredited in Albania; (v) organizations and agencies that cooperate with the Albanian government in this field. In secondary audiences, the communication strategy aims to reach media and similar organizations working in the sector. Other audiences that this strategy aims to take into account are more concrete, such as communication offices in the ministries that coordinate the process; municipalities in the areas where returnees will be located, organizations and individuals that cooperate with the Center; direct partners on the ground, such as Local Public Safety Councils, religious communities, as well as administrative units. The final goal of this document is to increase understanding of the necessity of a strategic communication needed to be implemented during the process of repatriating citizens from the camps in Syria and Iraq, as well as to present a communication structure that will be led by the Center, as the main coordinating institution in this regard, in cooperation with other institutions involved in this process. The document was still unofficial during the desk-research, although it was drafted in July 2020, and it was in the process of consultation with relevant structures in the Prime Minister's Office.

Another document in this regard is the new national cross-sector counter-terrorism strategy 2021-2025. This strategy, among other things, tasks the Center with developing programs, policies and information to prevent VE and reduce the influence of extremist propaganda online and recruitment, promoting alternative narratives and positive messages. This is an important document that defines obligations for the Center, as well as guides the design of intervention programs to prevent radicalism and VE through strategic communication, and the implementation of the whole-of-society approach. The tasks presented in this strategy need to

²² Information derived from the Center.

be implemented, through the design and implementation of adapted programs or policies, in accordance with the current needs for such interventions, for each sector that is involved. Therefore, the Center has been charged with the obligation to engage other structures, including those of security sector, to fulfill the obligations defined in this document, thus having a central role in this regard.

Despite being of secondary relevance, the National Strategy for Cyber Security is also related to the VE strategic communication online and it also defines tasks for the Center. One of the specific objectives of this strategy, approved in December 2020, is *improving information infrastructures to counter cybercrime, radicalization and violent extremism*. The Internet is a tool that, on the one hand, helps the development of society, facilitates the procedures and quick access to data, but on the other hand, it is a tool for individuals/criminal groups who commit cybercrimes or who try to radicalize individuals from vulnerable or marginalized groups with extremist goals and to commit acts that are punishable by society. Regarding this phenomenon, it is necessary to take a series of measures by public and private institutions to fight them and keep them under control until they are minimized. In order to achieve the above, it is important to set up mechanisms to regulate and provide secure internet in public areas. Cooperation with civil society organizations and businesses will also be aimed to identify and counter radical narratives online. Thus, two mechanisms will be established to monitor the above phenomena.²³ The Center is one of the institutions that is obliged by this strategy to monitor and prevent phenomena that promote radicalism and VE in cyberspace. For this, the Center has integrated on its official website a special space, in which different individuals can report cases that can be classified as such.

From what is noted above, there is a legal framework which attributes the Center with a main role for the design of programs or policies that will help reduce the impact of extremist propaganda online. Despite this, there are still no concrete initiatives undertaken in this direction, where different institutions or stakeholders will have to be involved. Some of the main factors identified by the research report "Exploring P/CVE strategic communication - a research-based approach" include the lack of a clear understanding of the role of VE narratives, the lack of identification or development of concrete measures needed to counter it, which has resulted in an underdeveloped practice and lack of expertise among the institutions responsible for implementing the obligations of the Strategy.²⁴ This study identified a lack of formalized or structured communication between ministries and other relevant institutions involved in the implementation of the Strategy.²⁵ This is also noticed by this research, which once again highlights the lack of legal, by-law or policy documents that could regulate the issue of strategic communication or guide the institutions involved in taking steps in this regard.

²³ https://cesk.gov.al/legjislacioni/2020/strategjia_kombetare_sigurise_kibernetike.pdf.

²⁴ <http://csdgalbania.org/sq/eksplorimi-i-zhvillimit-te-nje-komunikimi-strategjik-per-pkedh-ne-shqiperi/>

²⁵ Ibid.

Legal framework of the ministries and their subordinate institutions

State structures have the obligation and bear the main responsibility for preventing and countering radicalism and VE, as well as for the respect and protection of the basic human rights and freedoms of all those involved in these processes. This obligation is expressed in the commitment of several important ministries of the country, in the fulfillment of the obligations stipulated by the Strategy or other strategies in this field. The ministries involved in the implementation of the interventions foreseen in the sectoral action plans are MES, MHSP, MoJ, MoD, MoI, and MEFA. Not all subordinate institutions of these ministries have been described as relevant to P/CVE issues during the drafting phase of the ministerial plans, but only those institutions whose activity has a specific weight in relation to the effectiveness of the foreseen interventions. The subordinate institutions involved are listed below, according to their respective ministries, as well as the mechanisms involved for the implementation of the P/CVE action plans, for each of them.

As it was emphasized above, the Center is the main public institution coordinating the work that must be undertaken by public institutions that have an obligation from the Strategy to engage and undertake activities with the aim of preventing and countering VE. In order to realize this, the Center has engaged and coordinated the line-ministries, to detail the ministerial action plans, through the engagement of the relevant structures.

Ministry of Education and Sports, has engaged the structures under the Regional Directorates of Pre-university Education of Durrës, Lezha, Fier and Korça, through which all institutional educational activity is covered and, through it, also the activities carried out within the framework of the action plan for the education sector.²⁶ However, this action plan contains measures that only address strategic objectives 1 and 3 of the National Strategy. Likewise, the ministerial orders regarding the establishment of working groups, in support of the implementation of R&R programs for returnees, do not contain instructions/tasks for education structures in terms of communication with the public, or strategic communication in that matter.²⁷ The instructions given by the Center for the response that the education sector should have in relation to the communication with the public, as it pertains to the education programs offered to returned children, guide for increased caution with the media, up to not making statements without approval of the structures of the ministry and the Center.²⁸

Ministry of Health and Social Protection, has engaged its subordinate structures, such as the Regional Health Care Operators of Shkodër, Elbasan, Tirana and Vlorë, the State Agency for the Protection of Children and the State Social Service.²⁹ These institutions have subordinate structures throughout the country.³⁰ This ministry also has the action plan for P/CVE, which contains measures that only address strategic objectives 1 and 3 of the Strategy.³¹ The

²⁶ Information derived from the Center.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

ministerial orders regarding the establishment of working groups, in support of the implementation of R&R programs for returnees, do not contain instructions/tasks for the engaged structures, as regards to their communication with the public, or strategic communication in this matter.³²

Ministry of Interior has also engaged the State Police, through the Anti-Terror Directorate, the Community Policing, and the Agency for Support of Local Self-Government, as a connecting structure of the executive with local government bodies.³³ This ministry has also approved by order of the minister the P/CVE action plan, which has measures that address the fulfillment of strategic objectives 1 and 3 of the Strategy, without proposing interventions related to strategic communication on this issue.³⁴ The ministerial orders regarding the establishment of working groups, in support of the implementation of R&R programs for returnees, do not define instructions/tasks for the engaged structures regarding the approach that will be taken to inform the public through strategic communication.³⁵

Both of these ministries (MHSP and the MoI) are directly engaged in the repatriation and treatment of returnees, through the engagement of the Anti-Terror Directorate and the State Social Service, in implementation of the DCM no. 826, dated on 26.10.2020. These DCMs are classified as 'secret' due to their relevance in the security of the country, which indicates a very reserved approach in terms of communicating with the public on this issue.³⁶

Ministry of Justice is another ministry who has engaged its subordinate institutions, the General Directorate of Prisons, the General Directorate of the Probation Service, and the General Directorate of Legal Aid Guaranteed by the State.³⁷ The first two structures are included in the implementation of the action plan of this ministry, which foresees measures that address the strategic objectives 1 and 3.³⁸ The General Directorate of Legal Aid Guaranteed by the State has been added to the ministerial orders related to the R&R programs, but still without providing tasks that address the communication with the public.³⁹

An important strategic document is the Action Plan for the Development of the Prison System in Albania 2019-2022⁴⁰, whose eighth strategic objective is "Implementation of the national action plan for violent extremism, in the context of prisons and the probation service." It foresees measures and activities related to the prevention and countering of VE, however without addressing the issues of strategic communication as a valuable instrument in this regard. The document has not been published on the websites of the General Directorate of Prisons or the MoJ, but is accessible on the official website of the Council of Europe.⁴¹

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ See <https://drejtesia.gov.al/fjala-e-plote-e-ministres-gjonaj-ne-prezantimin-e-masterplanit-per-burgjet/> dhe <https://rm.coe.int/actionplan-prison-system/native/1680968ab1>

⁴¹ <https://www.coe.int/sq/web/tirana/-/action-plan-on-the-development-of-the-albanian-prison-system-launched>

It is also worth mentioning the inter-institutional relations established between the General Directorate of Prisons and the State Police through the signing of a cooperation agreement, which aims, among other things, to exchange information on P/CVE issues.⁴² The provisions of this agreement also include issues related to the prevention of radicalism and VE in prisons and in the broader society, however, they do not address the issues of strategic communication with the public, due to the "secret" nature of this cooperation, which implies national public security issues.

Overviewing the practice of communication against VE propaganda by Albanian institutions

The widespread use of online propaganda was one of the main methods of attracting foreign fighters to the Syrian conflict. Violent extremists have successfully used the internet and social media to further their goals, whether through engagement, propaganda, radicalization or recruitment.⁴³ Terrorist groups in the Syrian conflict, such as ISIS, have had a sophisticated public communication strategy in the Albanian language,⁴⁴ which aimed to recruit Albanians to fight in the conflict zones.

In this way, winning the *communication war* is an essential part of P/CVE, despite the fact that nowadays, most of the attention is given to restrictive measures to remove extreme content online, or to stop illegal narratives through banning and filtering. In Albania the *communication war* has not received enough attention and the main focus has been on restrictive measures, an approach which has not been successful, recognizing that Albanians were one of the groups where ISIS's online propaganda was focused during 2015-2017, which resulted effective in the radicalization and recruitment of about 500 Albanian fighters and their families from the countries of the Western Balkans and Europe.

An effective P/CVE communication strategy is needed to win this communication war, which addresses the full spectrum of target audiences vulnerable to VE propaganda and addresses the so-called *competitive system of meaning*.⁴⁵ which concentrates on *in group* and *out group* dynamics.⁴⁶ This *system of meaning* emphasizes the importance of an identity crisis for a community (in-group), a crisis that is caused by an identified community (out-group) and which can only be resolved by the in-group community. In the case of Albania, studies show that VE recruiters use similar narratives as ISIS and al-Qaeda, although their messages are adapted to

⁴² Information derived from the Center.

⁴³ United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorist Narratives https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wpcontent/uploads/2019/06/ctc_cted_fact_sheet_designed_cve_counter_narratives_december_2_018.pdf; UN System Contact point on PCVE <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/preventing-violent-extremism>.

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ A system of meaning is a set of relationships between a group of variables (such as words, behaviors, physical symbols, etc.) and the meanings attached to them.

⁴⁶ Haroro J. Ingram, "A 'Linkage-Based' Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (2016). "In group" and "out group" are two concepts used in this study. In sociology and psychology, the term "in group" refers to a social group in which a person psychologically identifies as a member. Whereas, the term "out-group" means a social group with which an individual does not identify.

the Albanian context.⁴⁷ These messages call for a war against the West, democracy and secularism, as well as against official religious communities. Extremist groups portray themselves as the only real Muslims that they are following the right path and that no one can be a true believer unless he/she supports and becomes a part of their cause. The solutions proposed by violent extremists regarding the "crisis" are violence against enemies, support for violent extremists, as well as the call for establishing sharia and fighting for this cause. (See Figure 1 for illustration).

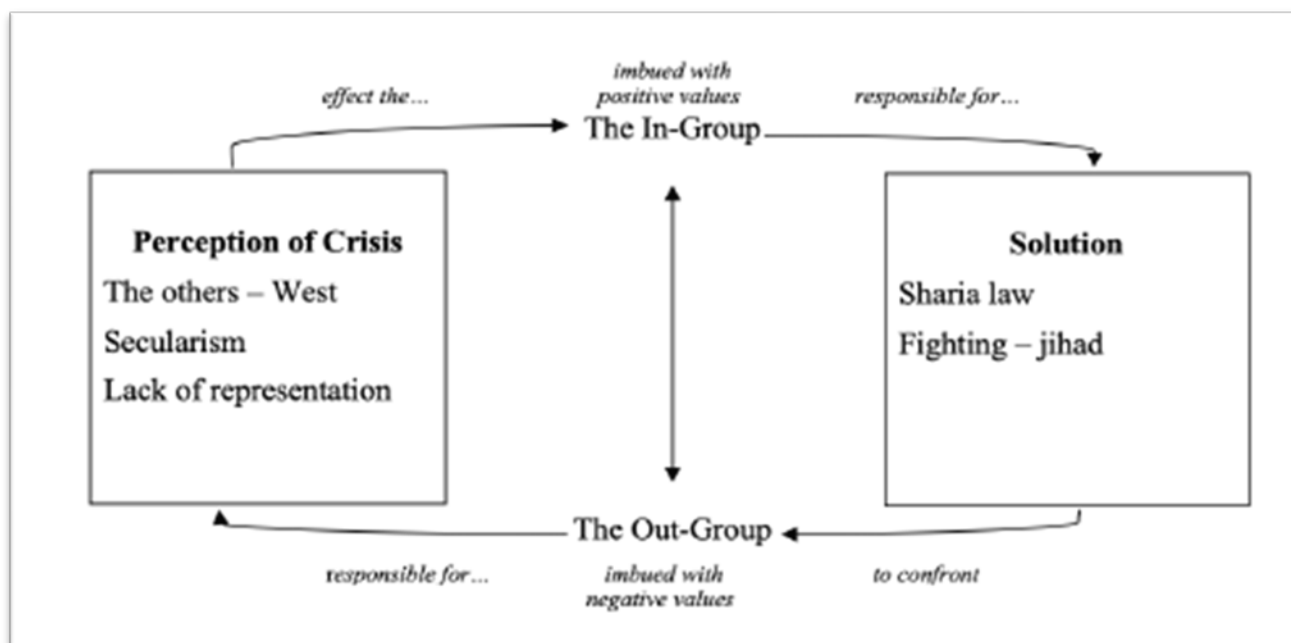


Figure 1: The messages that reinforce the system of meaning in the Albanian context. (Source: CSDG 2021, Exploring the development of a strategic communication on P/CVE in Albania: A Research Based Approach).

As noted above, an effective P/CVE communication strategy must address *the competitive system of meaning*, but on the other hand, this strategy should also address the full spectrum of target audiences vulnerable to VE propaganda. Haroro Ingram, who is one of the well-known researchers in the field, argues that target audiences⁴⁸ are divided in five categories: *antis*, those who are against VE groups; *curious*, those who consume VE propaganda; *engaged*, those who believe the *system of meaning* of VE groups and/or are engaged with violent extremists networks; *tacit supporters*, those who Express support for VE groups, share their messages and regularly engage with these networks; as well as *active supporters*: those who plan or have engaged in actions, including violent ones, to support VE groups. (To familiarize yourself with the distribution of audiences in Albania, see Figure 2).

⁴⁷ Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, 2021. Exploring the development of a strategic communication on P/CVE in Albania: A Research Based Approach. Available at <http://csdgalbania.org/sq/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Eksplorimi-i-komunikimit-strategjik-P-KEDH.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Ingram, H., 2016. A "Linkage- Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

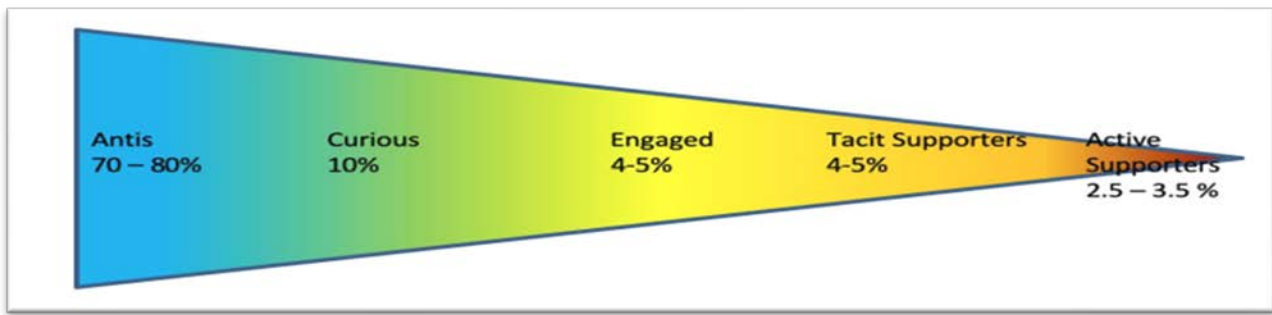


Figure 2: The distribution along the antis - active supporters' axis, based on interpretation of survey data. (Source: CSDG 2021, Exploring the development of a strategic communication on P/CVE in Albania: A Research Based Approach).

Developing P/CVE strategic communication based on the Ingram's model

Ingram argues that four main principles are needed to develop and deploy a communication campaign.⁴⁹ First, it is necessary to develop a diversity of messages that leverages pragmatic- and identity-choice appeals which are deployed both defensively and offensively. Next, it is necessary for all messages should cohere around core themes or, ideally, an overarching narrative. On the other hand, it is required to use a variety of mediums for communication to maximize the reach, timeliness and targeting of the message. At the end, in order to maximize the intended effects of strategic communications efforts and minimize inadvertent second and third order effects, messaging should be synchronized with “real world” initiatives (e.g. strategic-policy/politico-military efforts) and seek to nullify the effects of the adversary's activities.

Since an effective P/CVE communication strategy must address the competitive system of meaning, one of the most precise ways to do this is to attack the links that set their self-reinforcing cycle in motion using a two-tiered strategy.⁵⁰ The first level consists mainly of those who have not yet absorbed the VE system of meaning using a combination of negative messaging to dissolve the linkages violent extremists draw between themselves and solutions and their enemies and crisis, and positive messaging that is geared towards emphasizing the benefits of certain choices and boosting the appeal of oneself and/or allies by linking their actions to solutions.⁵¹ Tier 1 efforts address a broad spectrum of target audiences from “anti” to “engaged.” These types of messages should, as much as possible, be synchronized with supporting actions on the ground (e.g. CVE initiatives). If messages and actions are not coordinated (ie, turning words into actions), the credibility of both can be significantly damaged. The second tier targets

⁴⁹ Ingram, H., 2016. A “Linkage- Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

⁵⁰ H. J. Ingram, “Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda, Credibility and Behavioural Change” (2016), pp. 8-19.

⁵¹ According to the study *Linkage- Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners*, positive themes are five Absorb, Advise, Activate, Anchor, and Assure. Whereas the five negative themes are Divided, Disabused, Disillusioned, Directionless, and Discouraged.

those who are already in the cycle of extremists, for whom negative messages are used as a strategy to disengage them and disrupt the network. This tier also has two purposes. The first is the use of strategies to disrupt violent extremist networks online and offline. In the online context this includes shutting down the accounts of violent extremists. Offline, this requires officials to target violent extremist networks and their supporters using appropriate state tools. The second is the use of disengagement narratives through negative messages targeting tacit and active supporters of VE to induce behavioral changes and reduce their support for extremist groups.

For the so-called *anti* audience, the goal of the two-tiered strategy, as mentioned above, is to limit inadvertently undermining their counter-extremism efforts; provide support, particularly via supply of raw materials (e.g. footage, technical support); and this audience may be included in the effective messaging. For so-called *curious* and *engaged* audiences, there is a need to undermine violent extremist messaging and offer alternative narratives with a combination of negative and positive messaging to address varied audience motivations. For other audiences, *tacit and active supporters*, there is a need to concentrate on negative messaging as a disengagement strategy from violent extremist networks, as well as working to dismantle violent extremist networks..

The most used social networks in Albania are Facebook and Instagram, which would also be communication channels that reach wider audiences. Research data show that Albanians believe that the most credible actors to deliver messages against radicalization are: (1) people with high popularity who can deliver messages to a wider audience (65%), (2) culture personalities (63%) and representatives of official religious institutions (57%).⁵² On the other hand, political personalities or state representatives have the lowest number of responses (23% agree).⁵³

The Albanian institutions' P/CVE communication

This part analyzes the P/CVE communication used from 2018 to August 2021 by the relevant institutions in Albania, such as the Prime Minister's Office, the Center, MoJ, MES, MHSP, and MoI.

Prime Minister's Office had a total of 12 posts about VE, five posts on Facebook and seven on YouTube. The Prime Minister's posts related to VE, have been part of the speeches held at events against VE organized by various foreign actors - where the main content has been the promotion of religious tolerance in Albania; appreciation of the reforms undertaken by the Albanian institutions against VE; as well as the work developed for the repatriation of Albanian citizens from the war camps in Syria and Iraq. The latter has had a special attention from the highest institutions of the country's executive power, especially after the media coverage of the case of a minor stuck in the Syrian camp. This case was initially made public by an Italian investigative media, given that the child's father was an Albanian immigrant in Italy, and further, after the direct engagement of the highest leaders of the country's security institutions, the case received

⁵² Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, 2021. Exploring the development of a strategic communication on P/CVE in Albania: A Research Based Approach. Available at <http://csdgalbania.org/sq/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Eksplorimi-i-komunikimit-strategjik-P-KEDH.pdf>.

⁵³ Ibid.

widespread coverage in Albania as well.⁵⁴ One of the most used instruments of communication with the public, as far as information on the repatriation processes of citizens from camps in Syria and Iraq is concerned, has been the communication through media chronicles or press conferences broadcast by various media or national televisions. The Prime Minister of Albania was directly involved in these repatriation operations, personally participating in two repatriation cases, namely in October 2020 and August 2021.⁵⁵ Regarding the frequency of communication, starting with the first repatriation in October 2020 until the moment of preparing this report, there have been about 6 posts in the form of informative chronicles, press conferences or interviews of the Prime Minister to inform the public about these repatriation operations, reflected in the Prime Minister's channels on social media.

The information delivered by these communication channels has reflected the progress of the repatriation operations, as well as a chronology of the work carried out by the security structures, in negotiation with the supporting partners, starting from the flight to Lebanon/Syria and their return to Albania. This was the first source of information delivered to the general public, which was also distributed in other public and national media. The messages delivered through these communications have shown to the public a humanitarian character of the operations, which took precedence over the security in the country. This also constitutes positive messages that emphasize possible solutions to crises beyond violent extremists.

The Center has a total of 18 posts related to VE, 17 on Twitter and 1 awareness video on YouTube. The content of the tweets has been focused on the promotion of projects that are developed against VE, such as the strengthening of inter-institutional relations and the cooperative approach between the Center and other actors involved. The latter comes as a result of fulfilling the primary role that the Center has as a coordinator of the activities undertaken by other state institutions or other actors within the framework of the prevention of VE, in accordance with the obligations of the Strategy. In addition, the Center continuously undertakes informational or awareness-raising activities with state and non-state structures, to increase their and the general public's awareness of the phenomenon of radicalism and VE. However, these working practices of the Center do not cover P/CVE strategic communication issues, because the strategic objective that covers these issues has not been developed by the Center and the relevant institutions. Another aspect to be noted in this regard is the fact that the Center has guided the involvement of the employees from relevant ministries or agencies to agree, by signing a confidentiality statement, not to transmit to the public information related to personal data of individuals returned from conflict zones, who are being treated through R&R programs.

As it was emphasized earlier in this document, another task of the Center is the strategic communication with the public, state institutions or various actors of society. In fulfillment of this task, in coordination and with the approval of the Cabinet of the Prime Minister or the press office of the latter, representatives of the institution have participated in television shows or

⁵⁴ <https://tiranatoday.al/detaje-nga-operacioni-i-shpetimit-te-alvin-berishes-lleshaj-akoma-ne-siri/>

⁵⁵ ERTV <https://it-it.facebook.com/edirama.al/posts/ertv-live/10156480421176523/>; You Tube [Edi Rama - YouTube](#); Twitter <https://twitter.com/ediramaal?lang=en>;

given various interviews, delivering relevant information on the relevant issues.⁵⁶ Also, the Center has communication channels with the general public, such as:

Official webpage www.kedh.gov.al, which provides information on the activities that the institution carries out, in fulfillment of the strategic objectives of the Strategy, as well as in the implementation of the Rehabilitation and Reintegration interventions that are being undertaken;

You Tube channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/>, in which there are awareness videos on the prevention of radicalism and VE, and it contain information on the identification of possible cases that fall into the spectrum of VE, as well as information on the activity undertaken by the institution for preventing and countering this issue.

Twitter account <https://twitter.com/centerKEDH?lang=en>, launched in September 2020, which has about 370 publications and 195 followers. A large number of publications are retweets from other pages of high officials of the country who are related to the field, including the Prime Minister, the Minister of the Interior, or the Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs, as well as reflections of the activities carried out by the Center or participation in relevant events where the institution has been invited.

LinkedIn profile: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/centerKEDH/> with 184 followers, opened in September 2020, in which there is information on the activities of the director of the institution, participating in official meetings, various activities or events. Most of the information reflected there can also be found on other official communication channels of the institution.

From what is observed in the examination of the practice that is followed by the Center in terms of communication with the public (public information), it follows the flow of information that reflects the activities carried out by the institution, and it also reflects activities relevant to the field, especially those that are published from the senior leaders of the security institutions involved in the repatriation operations of Albanian citizens, women and children, from the camps in Syria and Iraq. The information reflected in the official platforms mostly presents in chronological order the specific activities carried out with the state institutions, the partners of the Center or other parties relevant to the field. As identified by the findings of the research report "Exploring P/CVE strategic communication - a research-based approach", the lack of specific initiatives on strategic communication, which could further promote the understanding of the phenomenon and the effects of preventing or opposing it through strategic communication, is a hindering factor in this regard.

The messages delivered by the communications published on the institution's official website, or in the interviews given on different television channels, mainly emphasize; (i) the commitment and activity of the institution, to include many front-line actors from relevant state and civil society sectors or supporting partners, to prevent radicalism and VE. So as a whole, they

⁵⁶<https://www.rtsh.al/lajme/unicef-dhe-KEDH-nenshkruajne-marveshje-bashkepunimi/HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=RPKDTMROOX0>
<https://www.oranews.tv/article/problematikat-aktuale-globale-diskutim-i-hapur-me-nxenesit-e-ismail-qemalit>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpG88oNEYy4&feature=emb_logo&ab_channel=A2CNNAffiliate
[youtube.com/watch?v=GZ_W1toN5KE&feature=emb_logo&ab_channel=RTSH-RadioTelevizioniShqiptar](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZ_W1toN5KE&feature=emb_logo&ab_channel=RTSH-RadioTelevizioniShqiptar)

present the work of the Center, carried out with state and non-state institutions; (ii) informing and raising public awareness about the basic concepts of the field, as well as about the potential signs of an individual who is being radicalized. The aim here is to provide information on the push and pull factors that influence the individual towards radicalization; (iii) information on the undertaking of rehabilitation and reintegration programs in society for persons who have returned from conflict areas, thus fulfilling the Government's commitment for the repatriation and support of women and children, who are seen as victims of the war.

While the employees who deliver messages through the official channels are mainly managers or employees of the Center (in the interviews given on the television channels), and in the awareness video, several front-line actors from different sectors have been selected.

In general, it is noted that the Center has a limited understanding of the use of strategic communication, as one of the most effective instruments for the prevention of radicalism and VE. The lack of initiatives undertaken regarding strategic communication, as well as the 'poor' form and content of the messages delivered to the public, are another indicator that this should be considered as an institutional need for further development.

During the reviewed information, it is noted that the **Ministry of Interior** is the institution with the highest communication against VE. More concretely, this ministry had 52 posts (39 posts on Facebook, 5 on YouTube and 4 on Twitter). The content of these posts is focused on promoting the measures taken by Albanian institutions against this phenomenon, as well as strengthening inter-institutional and multi-stakeholder cooperation in this field. The main part of the posts are the speeches given by the representatives of the ministry in the events against VE organized by various actors as well as the public communications related to the operations of the repatriation of Albanian citizens from the camps in Syria.

Ministry of Justice has a total of 4 posts related to VE, 2 on Facebook and 2 on its webpage. The content of the posts focuses on the reflection of the measures taken by the Albanian institutions against VE and the promotion of inter-institutional cooperation.

Ministry of Education and Sports has a total of 4 posts related to VE, 1 on Facebook and 3 on its webpage. The content of the posts focuses on informing the involved actors in educational institutions about their role in the fight against VE, as well as the general role of the ministry in this context. Unlike the above institutions, the **Ministry of Health and Social Protection** does not have any posts regarding the efforts against VE.

There is an imbalance in the communication of the institutions that engage in P/CVE activities, weighing on the side of the security institutions. MoI has the highest number of posts, followed by the MoJ and then MES. MHSP has no posts, despite the fact that it is the main institution engaged in the reception and treatment of citizens repatriated from Syria or Iraq. This may be a consequence of considering the VE issue as directly related to the security sector, where the most important aspect is the involvement of the country's law-enforcement institutions that 'ensure' security; but the lack of a legal framework that guides the institutions in this regard can also have a direct impact here.

If we evaluate the posts of Albanian institutions against VE according to Ingram's model, we notice that the current method has a lot of room for improvement. As mentioned above, Ingram suggests that in order to develop and deploy a communication campaign, four main principles are needed, the first of which is the design of a diverse range of messages that address pragmatic and identity choices that are placed in an offensive and defensive manner. From the examined messages, we notice that there is a lack of a variety of messages that address pragmatic and identity reasons in an offensive and defensive manner. The only messages in this framework are the emphasis on the measures taken by the Albanian institutions and the punishments against violent extremists, which are included in the messages dealing with the pragmatic approach since they are based on a rational cost-benefit calculation for their actions; and on the other hand, the emphasis on religious harmony in Albania, which emphasizes the reasons for identity, where the audience takes into account considerations of identity.

The next part that Ingram emphasizes is the need for all messages to be accompanied by core themes or ideally, an overarching narrative. In this regard, from the examination of the information of the publications, it is observed that the content of the posts of the Albanian institutions is focused on the promotion of religious harmony as the dominant narrative, the promotion of the work of the state institutions, as well as the promotion of the measures undertaken in general and the promotion of a multi-agency approach. These aspects are not sufficient as they do not address the VE system of meaning, and do not attack the linkages that set their self-reinforcing cycle in motion. The third principle according to Ingram is the need to use a variety of communication tools to maximize the reach, timeliness and targeting of the message. Albanian institutions have not used a variety of communication tools, but have been based mainly on Facebook and to a lesser extent on YouTube, but there is a lack of communication on Instagram, which is the second most used social network in Albania.. The Center has communicated almost exclusively on Twitter, a very little used social network in Albania. It is worth noting that the messages posted do not follow a continuous flow but are sporadic. Due to these aspects, from the reviewed information, it is estimated that the performance is weak, therefore the scope and target of the message is also evaluated as such. Ingram suggests that ultimately, to maximize the intended effects of strategic communication efforts and minimize unintended second- and third-order effects, messages must be synchronized with "real-world" initiatives and seek to cancel out the effects of adversary activities. For this, the institutions are evaluated positively to some extent as they have repeatedly emphasized the importance of the involvement of different actors in the actions against VE.

As noted earlier, an effective P/CVE communication strategy must address the *competitive system of meaning*, where in the case of Albania, research indicates that VE recruiters call for war against the West, democracy, secularism, and official religious communities. Further, extremist groups portray themselves as the only true Muslims who are following the right path, and the solutions proposed by violent extremists are violence against "enemies" and support for violent extremists, as well as calls for establishing sharia and to fight for this cause. The messages published by the institutions do not match the VE system of meaning in Albania. We note from the posts that they do not attack the linkages that set in motion the self-reinforcing cycle of extremists using the two-tiered strategy suggested by Ingram..

The messages lack a combination of negative messages that attack the links between violent extremists and their proposed solutions, with positive messages that emphasize possible solutions to crises beyond violent extremists. The only exception here is the drama reflected during the evacuation of some returnees and their families from the camps, where state institutions coordinated their repatriation process to Albania. In terms of audiences, the messages posted by the institutions do not seem to have taken such a division into account. This is because the messages have been in the same line, that is, the evaluation of the state measures, the promotion of religious harmony and the multi-stakeholder approach; and on the other hand, the messages did not attack the linkages of the self-reinforcing cycle of VE by delivering alternative narratives with a combination of negative and positive messages to address the different motivations of the audience.

Conclusions and recommendations

The lack of developing the second priority of the Strategy "The fight against VE propaganda and promotion of democratic values", specifically measures 5 and 6, by the Center and the institutions charged for this purpose, has affected all the institutional approach of such strategic interventions. This situation has led to the lack of undertaking the necessary initiatives, at the right time, which would address the preventing and countering of VE through strategic communication. As a result, the Center and the institutions involved have not further developed their professional knowledge in this direction, which constitutes another deficiency that has led to a lack of results in this regard. In order to address this deficiency, a clear strategic vision needs to be presented, on the issues of strategic communication as an effective tool used for the prevention of radicalism and VE.

The research also highlighted that there is no legal/sub-legal framework or an officially approved and functional policy document that addresses the issue of strategic communication for preventing and countering VE. In its absence, the state structures involved in the implementation of the Strategy do not have clear guidance on the obligations and scope of action that each of them has to undertake in this field. As a result, there is a need to have a clear policy framework and institutional structure for the design of such interventions, where the decision-making levels and the responsibilities and commitment of relevant institutions are clearly defined.

There is a limited understanding of the institutions involved in the implementation of the measures of the Strategy and its Action Plan. Employees at management and technical levels needed to improve the understanding and importance of strategic communication in developing and deploying messages against VE, as well as the leading role of the Center in this regard. State institutions did not tend to engage in strategic communication issues without receiving a clear guidance from the Center. The fact that none of the institutions involved had developed a strategic communication approach or related messages within a specific strategic structure of public communication, proves their passive approach in this regard.

In conditions where the challenge of dealing with extremist propaganda is becoming more and more difficult to be addressed, given the widespread technology and the increase in its use

especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the escalation of religious divisions and the spread of extremist groups, it is becoming more and more necessary to effectively select the instruments that should be used to deliver the right messages to the public. The research highlights that the communication channels used by state institutions are the ones that are less frequented by groups at risk of being radicalized, such as young people, who prefer to use, for example, Facebook and Instagram rather than Twitter.

The lack of inter-institutional exchange of information was also another obstacle in terms of taking steps to build an effective communication strategy. One of the difficulties was the lack of information delivered to the public on the R&R programs that are being implemented in general with identified individuals, or even with returnees from conflict zones. This information was often not shared between different institutions (security and civilian), between different sectors of the same institution, neither with the different civil society actors working in this regard.

Aiming to improve the work of relevant institutions on P/CVE strategic communication, the relevant institutions were trained and instructed to follow Ingram's model for strategic communication. The messages communicated were suggested to be diverse and to address pragmatic and identity choices both offensively and defensively. The dominant narrative of the institutions must be aligned with the VE system of meaning in Albania, attacking the linkages that set in motion the self-reinforcing cycle of extremism. It is also necessary to use a variety of communication tools to maximize the reach, timeliness and targeting of the message. The messages delivered by the institutions should also take into account the division of the audiences, in order to adapt the messages to each of them. The need for a higher understanding by state structures on how to communicate strategically to deliver the right messages, with the right tools, and to the right audiences was also highlighted.

The first phase of training needs assessment



During the first phase of this project "Examining the shortcomings of P/CVE strategic communication in Albania" the legal, sub-legal, institutional and political framework was analyzed in order to evaluate the commitment of the institutions responsible for the development and deployment of this communication. Following this examination, field research was also developed with the aim of collecting data through interviews and group discussions to prove the adequacy of the existing framework and the needs of employees to effectively implement P/CVE strategic communication in Albania. The field research was conducted with a dual purpose. Initially, it aimed to assess the importance that the relevant institutions attach to strategic communication. On the other hand, it aimed to explore their perspective on the achievements and problems of implementation, cooperation and multi-agency programming, as well as information sharing and communication with the public. This activity (field research) took place in two phases. The first phase took place at the beginning of the project implementation, and helped with the initial assessment, while the second phase took place in the middle of the project, in order to help with the final assessment. The division into two phases allows researchers to observe possible changes in the knowledge and capacities of the representatives of the respective institutions.

The examination of the legal framework (first phase) - which assessed the shortcomings of the legal and political framework - as well as the field research (second phase), which assesses the needs of the representatives of the relevant institutions, intend to complete the picture of aspects that need to be addressed through training. This Training Needs Assessment (TNA) was intended to contribute to the identification of gaps or inconsistencies between the skills possessed by managers/employees and the skills required to carry out an effective P/CVE strategic communication. Furthermore, this document aimed to generate data for assessment as well as to serve as a guiding material to develop a successful training program, which also served during the design of interventions in the second phase of the project.

Methodology

In cooperation with the Center, the project working group identified key institutions and contact points who would be the main target group of the Training Needs Assessment.

The institutions involved were grouped into i) line ministries and ii) relevant subordinate institutions as presented below:

- Ministry of Justice (General Directorate of Prisons, General Directorate of Probation Service, Center for Juvenile and Youth Crime Prevention);
- Ministry of Interior (General Directorate of the State Police, the Agency for Support of Local Self-Government);
- Ministry of Education and Sports (General Directorate of Pre-University Education);
- Ministry of Health and Social Protection (Regional Directorates of State Social Service);
- Ministry of Defense;
- Ministry of Finance and Economy.

Some of the institutions listed above have a more specific weight in relation to the effectiveness of interventions in P/CVE issues. As part of the line ministries, in addition to the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Justice, there are also the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Finance and Economy, the Ministry of Education and Sports, as well as the Ministry of Health and Social Protection.⁵⁷

Although the implementation of the methodology and the conduct of the Training Needs Assessment was carried out in close cooperation with the Center, among the **main limitations** that the project working group encountered were the lack of involvement of a number of important institutions in the implementation of the Strategy to answer the questionnaires of this report. In this context, the findings addressed in this report are limited only to the information, suggestions and recommendations of the institutions that took part in the assessment questionnaires.

The Training Needs Assessment was carried out in **4 main phases**. During the month of December 2021, the project working group in coordination with the Center designed and finalized the methodology regarding the development of activities (focus groups/interviews) within the framework of conducting the Training Needs Assessment (TNA).

Following and implementing these steps, on December 16, 2021, the Center through an official email asked the relevant institutions and contact points (Table below) to confirm their availability regarding the possibility of meetings (group discussions and interviews) within the framework of the Training Needs Assessment (TNA).

Based on the availability and confirmation of the relevant institutions, the working group drew up a calendar on the basis of which a part of the focus groups and interviews foreseen within this Training Needs Assessment (TNA) were conducted.

⁵⁷ Counter Terrorism Intersectoral Strategy, 2021–2025, and its Action plan 2021–2023.

<i>Ministry of Justice</i>	
JK@drejtesia.gov.al
JM@drejtesia.gov.al
DhI@drejtesia.gov.al
<i>Ministry of Interior and State Police</i>	
MV@mb.gov.al
ZF@asp.gov.al
AN@asp.gov.al
SLI@ceshtjetvendore.gov.al
<i>Ministry of Education and Sports</i>	
AF@arsimi.gov.al
NC@arsimi.gov.al
<i>Ministry of Health and Social Protection</i>	
ET@shendetesia.gov.al
XhP@shendetesia.gov.al
<i>Ministry of Defence</i>	
FK@mod.gov.al
<i>Ministry of Finance and Economy</i>	
XhP@financa.gov.al

Table 1: List of contact points to conduct focus groups/interviews within the Training Needs Assessment, sent by the Center (The list has been anonymized to ensure the privacy of the participants)

During the period December 23, 2021 – February 15, 2022, the project working group conducted four group discussions and five interviews according to the calendar below (Table 2), in accordance with the commitment and confirmation of the relevant institutions. A representative from the Center was also present at the planned meetings, given that it is the main public institution coordinating the work with the public institutions mentioned above, which are tasked by the Strategy.

<i>No. of interview / group discussion</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Institution</i>
<i>Group discussion 1</i>	23 December 2021	Ministry of Justice
<i>Interview 1</i>	19 January 2022	Center for Juvenile and Youth Crime Prevention
<i>Interview 2</i>	19 January 2022	General Directorate of Probation Service
<i>Interview 3</i>	19 January 2022	Ministry of Justice
<i>Group discussion 2</i>	25 January 2022	Ministry of Interior
<i>Interview 4</i>	7 February 2022	General Directorate of Prisons
<i>Group discussion 3</i>	7 February 2022	Ministry of Education and Sports
<i>Group discussion 4</i>	8 February 2022	Ministry of Health and Social Protection
<i>Interview 5</i>	15 February 2022	Ministry of Finance and Economy

Table 2: *Calendar of activities (focus groups/interviews) within the Training Needs Assessment*

Semi-structured interviews were used to conduct group discussions and interviews with line ministries and other subordinate institutions. The project team responsible for conducting them has collected and organized the relevant materials and notes, for the analysis of which the main topics/issues that are the main object of this Training Needs Assessment have been identified. The relevant issues identified from this process have been combined in order to develop and further elaborate the main findings to more clearly define the institutional, structural or individual needs for staff training and development.

This report, prepared in the framework of the Training Needs Assessment, was shared in advance with the Center, in order to serve as a valuable product in addressing the shortcomings and needs at the institutional level and human resources in terms of strategic communication as an important instrument in the prevention and fight against violent extremism.

Data presentation

This section presents the main findings, which were evidenced during the group discussions and interviews with the employees of the relevant institutions. These findings focus on highlighting the skills and knowledge of representatives of line ministries and their subordinate institutions, assessing existing capacities and needs. Similar to the 2021 study,⁵⁸ findings from interviews and group discussions within this report suggest that there is a lack of formalized or structured communication between ministries and other relevant institutions involved in the implementation of the Strategy and its Action Plan. There was a lack of knowledge about strategic communication but also about violent extremism itself. A further problem, which was not mentioned in the 2021 study,⁵⁹ is the staff rotation of the P/CVE contact points in line ministries and relevant institutions, which not only affects the loss of knowledge and information related to this phenomenon, but also makes inter-institutional coordination difficult. Moreover, the representatives of the ministries were not clear about the role of their ministry in this aspect, considering their role as not direct, a perception which also brings a lack of engagement in this context. This was worrying given that the successful implementation of the fight against violent extremism in general and strategic communication in particular is deeply dependent on effective multi-agency cooperation and coordination. Even in the 2021 study,⁶⁰ the interviewees emphasized the need for a more comprehensive and active commitment since not all institutions display the same level of commitment.

Needs assessment of the Ministry of Justice

The meetings held at the Ministry of Justice were held with the participation of the working group and responsible persons involved in the drafting of the new strategy against violent extremism.⁶¹

The role of line ministries was generally considered indirect rather than direct. In this line, the Ministry of Justice begins to intervene after the action has been carried out and looks at this phenomenon focused on the activity of its two main institutions such as the General Directorate of Prisons and the Probation Service. The responsible employees who follow the obligations arising from the Strategy are the contact points and the employees included in the working group in this framework. However, their training is considered necessary as there is a lack of knowledge on strategic communication, but also on violent extremism itself. When asked about the strategic communication practices of their institutions and subordinate institutions, it turns out that certain practices have not been identified.

The discussions with the representatives of the General Directorate of Probation Service (GDPS), found that this institution has further training needs, which are suggested to be focused on the

⁵⁸ Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, 2021. Exploring the development of a strategic communication on P/CVE in Albania: A Research Based Approach. Available at: <http://csdgalbania.org/sq/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Eksplorimi-i-komunikimit-strategjik-P-KEDH.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Due to the structural changes that the institution of the Ministry of Justice had gone through, other employees were assigned to the working group for the drafting of the new strategy against violent extremism.

level of specialists in the Probation Service Offices. During the discussions, it was emphasized that it is important that the training include not only the Local Office of the Probation Service in Tirana, but also the local offices of the districts, as the latter are even more problematic. Based on the lack of concrete cases, but also the current level of knowledge of employees on strategic communication and violent extremism, the participants in the discussions suggested that the level of training should be of basic level. The participants in field work estimated that an important component of the training should also be the knowledge related to the identification of signs (prevention) of violent extremism.

On the other hand, discussions with the representatives of the Center for Juvenile and Youth Crime Prevention (CJYCP) argued that being a new institution (established in March 2021) it is necessary to train all the staff of this institution, both on strategic communication, but also on violent extremism. In these circumstances, the training needed to focus at a basic level on strategic communication and violent extremism, since the experience and practice in this regard has been lacking. As an institution that has an educational profile, the participants considered the interaction with other institutions, especially with the Ministry of Education and Sports, to be important.

The representatives of the General Directorate of Prisons stated that this institution has developed a series of trainings related to radicalism and violent extremism. The feature of these trainings was that they were very specific and with a psycho-social perspective. Following this, the representatives expressed interest and need for some employees of this institution to be trained in strategic communication for violent extremism, in order to increase their capacities in this field.

Needs assessment of the Ministry of Interior

As identified in the review of the legal, political and institutional framework, this ministry has engaged the State Police (Anti-Terror Directorate and Community Policing), as well as the Agency for Support of Local Self-Government, as a connecting institution of the executive with the local government in the fight against violent extremism. The Ministry has approved the P/CVE action plan by ministerial order, which has measures that address the fulfillment of strategic objectives 1 and 3 of the Strategy, despite the fact that there are no interventions related to strategic communication. The ministerial orders regarding the establishment of working groups, in support of the implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) programs for returnees, do not define instructions/tasks for the involved institutions about the approach that will be maintained for informing the public through strategic communication. The findings from the discussion with the representatives of this institution suggest that the role of this ministry is considered indirect, rather than direct, in this framework, where the main weight is assigned to the State Police. Training needs are considered important as there is a lack of knowledge about both strategic communication and violent extremism. No strategic communication pattern has been identified in their past communications.

In the discussions with the representatives of the General Directorate of the State Police, the needs for training in this institution were considered necessary. These trainings were suggested to include:

- Management staff of the General Directorates;
- Chief of sector in the General Directorates;
- Assistant Specialists of Community Policing (SCP);
- Deputy directors in the Local Directorates of the Police;

Even in this institution, the level of training about strategic communication for violent extremism was requested to be basic, summarized and adapted to concrete cases, since in general even high-level management staff have challenges in dealing with such cases. For this, participants in field work take note from the sheltering of around 2000 Afghan citizens during the month of September 2021 in the area of Shengjin in Lezhë, a situation which, according to them, constitutes a challenge in terms of communication with the community. The participants in the discussion added that in order to be more productive and to strengthen cooperation, it would be quite efficient to conduct joint trainings, even with other subordinate institutions of the Ministry of Interior. In addition to the development of trainings, the representatives of this institution stated that since the Security Academy of the State Police is the place where young police officers are also trained, it would be valuable for the modules on strategic communication and violent extremism to be included in the curriculum of this academy, because this institution did not have subjects with such content. On the other hand, the representatives of the Agency for the Support of Local Self-Government involved in the field work stressed the needs for training in the Local Government Units to be extended to these levels:

- Deputy Mayor or Municipal representative
- Regional Directorates of State Social Service

As in the case of the police and local government units, the level of training needed to be basic, by providing concrete cases.

Needs assessment of the Ministry of other ministries

Under the coordination and facilitation of the contact points provided by the Center, the project team also contacted the Ministry of Education and Sports, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Finance. Despite continuous contacts, as well as the coordination of the Center, the contact points of the Ministry of Defense, as well as the Ministry of Finance and Economy, either did not respond to our successive invitations or canceled the meeting after the agreement. A partial exception is made only by the Ministry of Finance and Economy, as the representative of this institution who participated during the field research suggested that the employees of this ministry be trained in identifying the signs of violent extremism in foreign citizens who intend to enter Albania. These officials, according to

the representative, should be part of the referral mechanism in the Ministry of Interior, in a way that when faced with such cases, they have the opportunity to refer them. Unfortunately the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Finance and Economy were not available for the interview and further involvement in the project.

As suggested in the report on strategic communication in Albania,⁶² the involvement of various institutions and actors, as well as the strengthening of cooperation with the Center, but also of communication within the Center in this process, constitute two essential components for the implementation of a communication strategy against VE. In order to implement a successful communication strategy, it is necessary to first create a multi-agency cooperation of the main actors in this process. The lack of such cooperation, as pointed out by this report, makes it difficult for such a communication strategy to work. Identical to the 2021 report,⁶³ the work for this report also emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive and active commitment, since not all institutions demonstrate the same level of commitment. These aspects had an important place during the development of the trainings, where it was reflected both the roles of each, but also the forms of communication and cooperation between the participants.

Despite the lack of will of some ministries to participate during the field work of this report, based on the findings from the research of the legal framework as well as the report "Exploring the development of P/CVE strategic communication in Albania", the data are similar for all ministries - and in this line the trainings are also focused on enabling the participants to better recognize the phenomenon of violent extremism, acquiring knowledge about strategic communication, as well as strengthening multi-agency cooperation under the coordination of the Center.

Conclusions

Strategic communication means the systematic planning and realization of information flow, communication, media development and image care in the long term. It sends tailored messages to specific audiences, to achieve the intended long-term result. Communication management is a combination of processes that balances three factors: messages, media channels and audiences.

The analysis of the legal, institutional and political framework, which took place in September 2021, concluded that although Albania has a legal framework with institutions responsible for the implementation of the Strategy, the country does not have a legal basis dedicated to strategic communication, which guides the institutions on the roles and tasks they have on fulfilling the obligations of the Strategy. Due to its absence, the state institutions involved in the implementation of the Strategy did not have explicit guidance on their obligations and scope and on the initiatives they were supposed to undertake in this regard. As a consequence of this, there is a need to have a clear framework of policies and institutional structure for the design of such

⁶² Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, 2021. Exploring the development of a strategic communication on P/CVE in Albania: A Research Based Approach. Available at: <http://csdgalbania.org/sq/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Eksplorimi-i-komunikimit-strategjik-P-KEDH.pdf>.

⁶³ Ibid.

interventions, where the decision-making levels and the responsibilities and commitment of each institution is clearly defined. The lack of useful cooperation between the responsible institutions was evident. In addition to the need to strengthen this cooperation, it was important to describe the procedures in a clear and well-defined manner for this cooperation. In the same line, the research in the field has identified the lack of knowledge and skills of the representatives of the line ministries and relevant institutions about P/CVE strategic communication. In addition, the employees were unclear about the roles of their institutions in this context. Given that strategic communication is one of the main objectives of the Strategy, the identified problems were addressed during the trainings.

As the main institution responsible for developing and sending narratives against VE, the Center works to reduce the impact of extremist propaganda on social networks and online recruitment, using social media as communication channels to promote alternative narratives and positive messages. Despite this, the non-fulfillment of obligations by other responsible institutions has deteriorated the progress in this aspect. The involvement of various institutions and actors, as well as the strengthening of their cooperation with the Center, but also of communication within this institution itself, constitute two essential components for the implementation of a communication strategy against VE. The field work identified the lack of formalized or structured communication between ministries and other relevant institutions involved in the implementation of the Strategy. The participants in field work suggested there is a limited understanding of the institutions involved in the implementation of the measures of the Strategy. Employees at management and technical levels needed to improve their understanding on strategic communication in developing and deploying messages against VE, as well as the leading role of the Center in this regard. For this reason, the aforementioned employees were included in the training. The fact that none of the institutions involved had developed an approach to strategic communication or related messages within a certain strategic structure of communication with the public, also confirms their passive approach in this regard.

In conditions where the challenge of dealing with extremist propaganda is becoming more and more difficult to address given the widespread technology and the increase in its use especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the escalation of religious divisions and the spread of extremist groups, it is becoming more and more necessary to effectively select the instruments that should be used to deliver the right messages to the public. During the trainings, the participants were trained about how to select the right instruments and messages for the public.

In order to improve the work of the relevant institutions for P/CVE strategic communication, it was important that the training participants familiarize themselves with the Ingram model⁶⁴ for strategic communication, as well as to encourage them to absorb it. During the trainings, the experts emphasized the need for the diverse use of communicated messages, which address pragmatic and identity choices in an offensive and defensive manner (according to Ingram's model). Training participants were introduced to the importance of aligning the overarching theme of institutions with the VE system of meaning in Albania, attacking the linkages that set in motion the self-reinforcing cycle of extremism. Also, during the trainings the participants were

⁶⁴ Haroro J. Ingram, "A 'Linkage-Based' Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (2016).

made aware of (i) the need for a variety of communication tools to maximize the reach, timeliness and targeting of the message; (ii) that the messages posted by the institutions should also take into account the division of the audiences, in order to adapt the messages to each of them; and (iii) understand the importance that state institutions have in relation to the strategic communication method to deliver the right messages, with the right tools, and to the right audiences.

Identified needs for conducting training

Following the general situation, the problems identified during the first phase of the needs assessment, and the suggestions from the representatives of the institutions, it was assessed as necessary to develop (i) basic level trainings to better understand the field of inter-institutional communication and the strategic communication; and (ii) basic level training to familiarize participants with the components of strategic communication on the fight against violent extremism, as presented by the Ingram model.⁶⁵ The following elements were included in the inter-institutional and strategic communication trainings; a) **vertical and horizontal communication** in the institution; b) **internal and external communication** in the institution; c) **identification and analysis of audiences**: identification and understanding of different audiences through the collection and interpretation of written and visual information or data; d) **defining measurable goals and objectives** related to strategic communication: identifying and defining the main objectives of an institution in order to achieve the intended goal; e) **development of strategic messages**: this aspect is included when the institution or organization uses communication in a deliberate manner towards individuals inside and outside it, in order to achieve its objectives; f) **defining communication channels**: identification of instruments/tools, which will be used for communication. This step also includes defining the form and manner in which the communication will be delivered; and g) **measurement, analysis and evaluation**: this constitutes an important process which aims to identify criteria that will be used to evaluate whether a communication strategy is effective or needs to be improved, as well as to evaluate the extent to which the defined objectives have been achieved. As for the training on P/CVE strategic communication, the following elements were included; a) **definitions of the terms related to violent extremism** (extremism, radicalism, tolerance, resilience, etc.); b) **factors of violent extremism**; c) **radicalization process**; d) **forms of violent extremism**; e) **understanding the ideology**: the first step to oppose a violent ideology is to understand the basic motivating factors of this ideology; f) **system of meaning**: this part emphasizes the importance of an identity crisis for a community (in-group), which is caused by an identified community (out-group) and which can only be resolved by the community within the group. In-group members are portrayed as morally superior, and propagate a zero-sum game through three types of narratives of violent extremism: values, dichotomy, and reinforcement of the extremist cycle. In the case of Albania, the messages of violent extremists call for war against the West, democracy and secularism, as well as against official religious communities. Extremist groups portray themselves as the only true Muslims who are following

⁶⁵ Haroro J. Ingram, "A 'Linkage-Based' Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (2016).

the right path and that no one can be a true believer unless they support and become part of their cause. The solutions proposed by violent extremists to the "crisis" are violence against "enemies" and support for violent extremists, as well as calling for establishing sharia and fighting for this cause; g) **target audiences**: these audiences are divided into five categories: antis, those who are against VE groups; the curious, those who consume VE propaganda; the engaged, those who believe the system of meaning of VE groups and/or who are engaged with violent extremist networks; tacit supporters, those who express support for VE groups, spread their messages and regularly engage with these networks; as well as active supporters: those who plan or have engaged in actions, including violent ones, to support VE groups; h) **communication process**: this is a simple communication process which involves sending a message from the sender to the receiver. Strategic communication has another purpose and function that necessarily requires planning, synchronizing and monitoring the delivery of messages from the sender to the receiver. It is structured to deliver messages aimed at changing the behavior of audiences. To achieve this, strategic communication in the field of violent extremism must compete with violent extremism itself, whose propaganda has a wide reach; i) **communication channels**: this aspect is needed to implement a communication campaign using a variety of communication tools to maximize the reach, timeliness and targeting of the message. For this, it is essential to identify the most influential tools in the country, in order to reach the target audience. The most used social networks in Albania are Facebook and Instagram, which would also be communication channels that reach wider audiences; and j) **developing messages**: to develop and deploy a successful communication campaign, some key principles are suggested, of which: design a variety of messages that address pragmatic and identity choices that are placed in an offensive and defensive manner. Also, all messages must be accompanied by core themes or, ideally, an overarching narrative.

The first phase of training relevant institutions



In the framework of the implementation of the project "Support the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism to deliver P/CVE strategic communications through capacity building and research", on March 23, 24, 25 and 28, 2022, 4 training sessions were held, titled as "Strengthening inter-institutional cooperation and strategic communication mechanisms for Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)".

A total of 47 employees participated in the training sessions, in the capacity of representatives from the Ministry of Justice, General Directorate of Prisons, Probation Service, Center for Juvenile and Youth Crime Prevention, Ministry of Interior, State Police, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, State Social Service (Regional Directorates) and Health Care Services Operator - Central Directorate (Local Units).

The training aimed to contribute in:

- increasing cooperation and strengthening the capacities of the institutions involved in the implementation of the Strategy;
- improving the process and practices related to the design and communication of strategic messages to counter and prevent violent extremism;
- understanding the P/CVE strategic communication and its role in countering violent extremist propaganda;
- raising capacities to consolidate P/CVE strategic communications based on an effective inter-institutional interaction;
- raising capacities on strategic communication.

The training was comprised of three modules, adopted to the tasks and specifics of each institution that is involved in the process. More concretely, the modules of the workshop addressed the following:

1) The communication in institutions/organizations and inter-institutional communication

In this module the expert introduced the ways of developing official institutional and inter-institutional communication, as well as the legal basis regarding the well-functioning of communication. Several successful models of inter-institutional communication were shared with the participants within the practices and requirements arising from the European integration process.

2) The concept of strategic communication

In this module the expert introduced the strategic communication from a philosophical and academic point of view, focusing on the distinguishing features of communication as a practical notion, as well as on the innovations it has brought as a new discipline.

3) *Effective strategic communication on P/CVE*

In this module the expert introduced the Ingram's model for strategic communication, and it also explained how the dominant narrative of institutions should match the VE system of meaning in Albania. The module focused on communication tools to maximize the reach, timeliness and targeting of the message.

Part of the training program was promoting an interactive communication with participants, which helped to identify and address the specific needs and problems of the respective institutions. A facilitation technique called "Fishing Net" was also used. The use of this technique was aimed at evaluating achievements/lessons learned and issues/problems that require further solutions. Participants reflected on the issues they had successfully learned and those they still saw as challenging or problematic.

Training evaluation

At the end of each session, participants were invited to fill in a training evaluation form, as well as to provide suggestions. According to the evaluations, participants considered the training as useful, clear and related to their needs. The training content and materials have been assessed as appropriate and valuable. Also, trainers were evaluated as effective in delivering knowledge.

Data presentation

Participants were asked if they have previously had the opportunity to participate in a training about violent extremism. 30% of them did not have the opportunity to train on this topic before, whereas 70% of them stated they have had such an experience. The same question was asked about the training on strategic communication. 50% of participants stated they never had the opportunity to be trained on strategic communication before, while the rest of the 50% confirmed they have had such experience.

The overall training was evaluated as 'very good' by 80% of the participants and as 'good' by 20% of participants.

Participants were asked to evaluate how much they think they have expanded their knowledge on violent extremism compared to their previous knowledge. The evaluations are as follows:

Percentage of participants	Evaluation criteria
30%	Very good
39%	Good
25%	Sufficient
6%	Little

Participants were also asked to rate how much they think they have expanded their knowledge on strategic communication compared to their previous knowledge. The evaluations are as follows:

Percentage of participants	Evaluation criteria
38%	Very good
30%	Good
24%	Sufficient
4%	Little
4%	Not at all

A total of 80% of participants considered the importance of such trainings for the institution in which they work as ‘very important’, whereas another 20% considered it as ‘important’.

Participants were asked which were the main and most interesting topics learned from this training. They listed the stages and objectives of administrative communication, cases from inter-institutional communication practices, types of institutional communication, functions of communication, legal framework of institutional communication, innovations of institutional communication, strategic communication, P/CVE strategic communication, the drivers of VE in Albania, the radicalization process.

Participants were also asked how this training could be further improved. They recommended more interactive exercises and less theoretical concepts; practical examples on management, administration and written practices for information exchange in all relevant actors; to have more participants; more knowledge on effective P/CVE strategic communication and the methodology used for the prevention of violent extremism; to combine theoretical knowledge with concrete examples, and training to be continuous.

In general participants think that the developed training was fruitful, it will help them in designing the communication strategy, performing their work and that they will share this knowledge with other colleagues. This training has given them a different approach to organize their work.

Conclusions

At the conclusion of the evaluations about the knowledge obtained from the training, it is evident that the development of inter-institutional administrative communication, the stages and objectives of administrative communication, as well as the legal framework for its regulation, were considered by the trainees as the most important and interesting points learned in this training.

The training had a positive impact on expanding their knowledge on strategic communication and effective P/CVE strategic communication. However, it is evident that the materials for these two topics need to be repeated. In order to increase the level of knowledge and their understanding, it is necessary to present practical/concrete cases related to the identification of violent extremism cases, as well as the formulation and communication of strategic messages to counter and prevent violent extremism.

The first phase of tabletop exercise with relevant institutions



In May 18, 2022 the next training took place, with a focus on organizing a tabletop exercise. This activity consisted of simulating a situation based on real life, which involved key personnel of several institutions, analyzing a scenario in an informal setting.

A total of 16 employees participated in this activity in their institutional capacity as representatives of the Center, the Ministry of Education and Sports, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the General Directorate of the State Police, the Institution for the Execution of Criminal Decisions "Mine Peza", Regional Directorate of Education in Tirana, Probation Service, Ministry of Justice, Center for Juvenile and Youth Crime Prevention, as well as the Agency for the Support of Local Self-Government.

The tabletop exercise aimed to contribute to:

- identify information exchange mechanisms and inter-institutional cooperation in relation to strategic communication;
- raise the capacities of participants on the proper management of incidents related to violent extremism;
- analyze policies, plans and protocols for responding to violent extremism incidents and identifying possible shortcomings;
- improve institutional responses to violent extremism incidents;
- expand and improve existing knowledge on P/CVE strategic communication.

The tabletop exercise was developed by an opening scenario, and three additional scenarios, which were added at different stages of the group work. Participants were assigned a role in accordance with relevant responsibilities and expertise, a role they maintained throughout the whole exercise. Participants addressed the issue according to their predetermined role and by interacting with each other.

The exercise was based on a fictional scenario with the following parts:

Opening scenario: Repatriation and rehabilitation of returnees from conflict areas

The exercise started with the opening scenario, which provided an overview of the repatriation and rehabilitation process of a family of six. Participants identified concrete steps and procedures to be undertaken based on the given information. Participants also discussed how they would coordinate their actions in an inter-institutions approach.

First additional scenario: The start of the reintegration process of the returnees in their immediate community

During the discussion of the first additional scenario, the participants identified the problems that were encountered, the steps and the concrete procedures that should be undertaken and

the way of coordinating actions between them in order to reintegrate returnees in their immediate community. Participants also discussed about taking measures to avoid the recurrence of the incident in order to avoid further consequences.

Second additional scenario: Reintegration of returnees in the broader community

In this session, participants discussed about the ways of approaching to returnees with the aim of reintegrating them into the wider community, as well as the messages that would be delivered to the public. Participants identified the need for new institutions to intervene (in contrast to previous scenarios) and discussed the way of strategic communication between institutions.

Third additional scenario: Challenges of the reintegration of returnees vs. the spread of radical views

The last scenario discussed the challenges faced by the returnees and the community versus elements supporting radical views. Participants discussed the coordination of measures to be taken by the relevant institutions, as well as the way of developing strategic communication between them. They also discussed about the measures that should be taken against the perpetrators of violent acts on religious grounds.

At the end of the four scenarios, the exercise resulted in:

- raising awareness and a better understanding of threats;
- assessing general preparedness for incidents as well as assessing existing capacities and resources;
- identifying shortcomings of the institutional plan of strategic communication and management of violent extremism incidents, including technical, planning and procedural aspects;
- understanding of roles and responsibilities during an incident;
- identifying the right mechanisms to address cases related to VE.

Training evaluation

At the end of the tabletop exercise, participants were invited to fill in a training evaluation form, as well as to provide potential suggestions. The evaluations indicate that participants considered the exercise as very well-structured and organized and the scenario as potential and realistic. Participation in the exercise was considered relevant for their work, and they also believed that the level of participants and the mix between institutions was the right one.

Data presentation

Participants were encouraged to identify necessary interventions throughout their work process. They suggested that the main areas that need to be improved are specifically:

- Internal and external institutional coordination;
- Official electronic communication;
- Inter-institutional communication and cooperation;
- Timely identification of extremist behavior;
- Timely address and realistic assessment of cases;
- The functioning of all Local Public Safety Councils;
- The quality of social services.

In order to address the issues identified above, participants have evaluated some steps that need to be taken with high priority. Concretely:

- Increasing the financing of institutions;
- Continuous training of employees;
- Raising community awareness;
- Explicit division of roles and responsibilities;
- Cooperation with civil society;
- Uniform distribution of information.

Participants have identified contact points and heads of institutions as responsible for the functioning of institutional coordination.

Participants were invited to list policies, plans, and procedures that need to be reviewed, amended, or developed, and to rate the priority level for each of them. Surprisingly, the majority of participants (63%) did not answer this question. This indicator can be interpreted as a lack of in-depth knowledge by the employees, or no knowledge at all about the policies, plans, and procedures in force. 37% of participants stated that the legal acts are generally good, and it is only necessary to have a more efficient implementation. Meanwhile, one of the participants suggested the improvement of educational policies, specifically, to have a clear definition of the class school in which each returned children should be placed.

Participants suggested that their identity remains anonymous when filling out the evaluation forms.

During the implementation of the exercise and group discussions, it was noticed that some of the employees were not aware of the roles and responsibilities of some of the state institutions, as well as of the mechanisms that are set in motion during a violent extremism incident. This phenomenon comes as a result of the lack of inter-institutional communication and strategic communication. The trainees emphasized the need for comprehensive engagement, as well as increased communication and inter-institutional cooperation as a necessary tool for avoiding radical behavior and terrorist acts. In addition, the need to improve the chain of communication and coordination was emphasized so that all institutions involved in the fight against violent extremism can be informed about the work of partner institutions.

Participants concluded that the Local Public Safety Councils are very important mechanisms for the early identification of VE cases, as well as being the best and fastest mechanism for solving community problems.

Teachers voiced their concern that they are often not aware of concrete action plans and programs for reintegrating children. Proactive and effective approach, with the right tools and at the right time, would avoid worsening the situation in case of incidents.

Conclusions

In conclusion of the evaluations of the table exercise, it is identified that:

- teachers, psychologists, community policing specialists and other members of Local Public Safety Councils need to be continuously trained;
- employees of institutions should be informed about the role and responsibilities of all institutional actors involved in the prevention and fight against violent extremism;
- awareness campaigns about violent extremism and its dangers should be further intensified in all schools;
- awareness campaigns on the legal education of children up to the age of 16 should be further intensified;
- tabletop exercises should be repeated, also more in-depth training should be developed to better understand strategic communication (as a tool for preventing and countering violent extremism) and forms of violent extremism;
- in order to strengthen strategic communication, representatives of religious institutions should be also included in the training;

The tabletop exercise has had a positive impact on developing effective P/CVE strategic communication. Nevertheless, there is a need for such exercises to be repeated in order to increase the level of knowledge and understanding of the involved actors. The exercise should include more actors, such as members of LPSCs, especially religious institutions, by analyzing practical/concrete cases related to the identification of violent extremism.

The second phase of training needs assessment



During the first phase of this project "Examining the shortcomings of P/CVE strategic communication in Albania" the legal, sub-legal, institutional and political framework was analyzed in order to evaluate the commitment of the institutions responsible for the development and deployment of this communication. Following this examination, field research was also developed with the aim of collecting data through interviews and group discussions to prove the adequacy of the existing framework and the needs of employees to effectively implement P/CVE strategic communication in Albania. The field research was conducted with a dual purpose. Initially, it aimed to assess the importance that the relevant institutions attach to strategic communication. On the other hand, it aimed to explore their perspective on the achievements and problems of implementation, cooperation and multi-agency programming, as well as information sharing and communication with the public. This activity (field research) took place in two phases. The first phase took place at the beginning of the project implementation, and helped with the initial assessment.

As part of the implementation process of the project, another field research was conducted with the aim of collecting data through interviews and group discussions to assess the level of knowledge absorption of knowledge from the first phase of trainings, as well as to identify potential needs in the knowledge and capacities of the representatives of the respective institutions.

This assessment served as the guiding material to design and develop a successful training program during the second phase of the project.

Methodology

With the support of the Center, the project team contacted the employees who were trained during the first phase of the project.

The involved institutions were grouped into i) line ministries and ii) relevant subordinate institutions as presented below:

- Ministry of Justice (General Directorate of Prisons, General Directorate of Probation Service, Center for Juvenile and Youth Crime Prevention);
- Ministry of Interior (General Directorate of State Police, Agency for Support of Local Self-Government);
- Ministry of Education and Sports (General Directorate of Pre-University Education/Teachers from primary schools);
- Ministry of Health and Social Protection (Regional Directorates of State Social Service, Tirana/Psychologists of education institutions);

Some of the institutions that are listed above have a more specific weight in relation to the effectiveness of interventions in P/CVE issues.

Among the main limitations encountered by the project team was the start of the summer break, which was made it impossible to hold all meetings physically. In such circumstances, a series of meetings were held online through "zoom". The findings that are addressed in this report reflect and are limited to the information, suggestions and recommendations of the representatives of the institutions with which the trainings were conducted in the first phase of the project.

The preparatory process for Training Needs Assessment began in June 2022.

The project team sent official emails and asked the relevant institutions and contact points (Table 1) to confirm the possibility of meetings within the framework of the Training Needs Assessment (TNA).

<i>Ministry of Justice</i>	
MLI	...@drejtesia.gov.al
AM	...@drejtesia.gov.al
EH	...@drejtesia.gov.al
AH	...@drejtesia.gov.al
LG	...@drejtesia.gov.al
IM	...@drejtesia.gov.al
BM	...@drejtesia.gov.al
EM	...@drejtesia.gov.al
JD	...@drejtesia.gov.al
NJ	...@drejtesia.gov.al
<i>Ministry of Interior (Agency for Support of Local Self-Government & State Police)</i>	
RA	...@asp.gov.al
SR	...@asp.gov.al
AN	...@asp.gov.al
II	...@asp.gov.al
<i>Ministry of Education and Sports</i>	
BS	...@gmail.com
SB	...@gmail.com

EQ ...@yahoo.comBRr ...@yahoo.com

Table 3: List of contact points to conduct focus groups/interviews within the Training Needs Assessment (The list has been anonymized to ensure the privacy of the participants)

During the period June-July 2022, the project team conducted six group discussions according to the calendar below (Table 2), determined in accordance with the engagement and confirmation of contact points.

No. of meetings	Date	Institution
Group discussion 1	16 June 2022	Ministry of Justice and the Center for Juvenile and Youth Crime Prevention
Group discussion 2	21 June 2022	General Directorate of Probation Service
Group discussion 3	22 June 2022	The Agency for Support of Local Self-Government & State Police
Group discussion 4	23 June 2022	General Directorate of Prisons
Group discussion 5	28 June 2022	Ministry of Health and Social Protection
Group discussion 6	1 July 2022	Ministry of Education and Sports

Table 4: Calendar of conducted activities List of contact points to conduct focus groups/interviews within the Training Needs Assessment

The project team has collected and organized the relevant materials and notes, for the analysis of which the main subjects/issues of this Training Needs Assessment have been identified. The relevant issues identified from this process have been combined in order to develop and further elaborate the main findings to define in a clearer way the institutional, structural or individual needs for staff training and development.

Data presentation

The findings from the group discussions within this report highlighted the need for a more in-depth delivery of the knowledge about strategic communication but also about violent extremism. A problem which continued to remain relevant was the rotation of staff (contact

points) responsible for P/CVE in line ministries and relevant institutions, which not only affects the loss of knowledge and information related to this phenomenon, but also makes inter-institutional coordination more difficult.

Following the discussions with the representatives of all the institutions involved in this process, it was concluded that the knowledge related to the concept of strategic communication and types of inter-institutional communication have been absorbed. This fact was identified in the concrete cases that were brought by some of the respondents, based on their personal/professional experiences for the development of the work process. It was also estimated that the organization of the tabletop exercise helped familiarize the trainees with the existence of other institutions involved in P/CVE.

As a result of the lack of experience/referred cases of radicalized young people, representatives of the **Center for the Prevention of Juvenile and Youth Crimes**, brought to attention the need to be familiar with the behaviors and distinctive signs of persons with deviant tendencies. The same request was made by **psychologists and teachers** in primary schools, by emphasizing the importance of receiving information on identifying the distinguishing signs of violent extremism among young people.

The representatives of the **General Directorate of Prisons, the State Police, the Agency for the Support of Local Self-Government** and the **General Directorate of the Probation Service** voiced their interest and the need to be trained in a more in-depth manner in the second phase of the training about P/CVE strategic communication. The level of training on strategic communication on violent extremism was required to be in-depth, concise and tailored based on concrete cases.

The discussions with the representatives of the **Ministry of Justice, the General Directorate of the Probation Service, teachers and psychologists**, emphasized their need for a comprehensive introduction of the roles of the institutions involved in the P/CVE process and the functions that the employees have in them, since they were not aware.

The information is similar for all ministries – training needed to focus on helping participants to better recognize the phenomenon of violent extremism and increase their knowledge about strategic communication in the context of violent extremism.

Conclusions

The field work identified a clear understanding of the concept of strategic communication and types of inter-institutional communication. Participants argued that the understanding of the institutions involved in the implementation of the measures of the Strategy and its action plan remained limited. Employees at management and technical levels expressed the need to improve understanding and the importance of strategic communication in the preparation and dissemination of counter-narratives. The fact that none of the institutions involved had developed an approach to strategic communication or related messages within a specific

strategic structure of communication with the public, confirmed their passive approach in this regard.

In order to improve the work in the relevant institutions for P/CVE strategic communication, it was important for the participants of these institutions to better familiarize themselves with the Ingram model⁶⁶ on strategic communication.

Identified needs for conducting training

Following the general situation, the problems identified by this report, and the suggestions from the representatives of the institutions themselves, it was assessed as necessary to develop (i) in-depth training to become familiar with the components of P/CVE strategic communication, as presented in Ingram's model, (ii) on the role and responsibilities of all institutional actors involved in the prevention and fight against violent extremism; (iii) as well as the signs/behaviors that are displayed by persons involved in radicalism and violent extremism.

⁶⁶ Haroro J. Ingram, "A 'Linkage-Based' Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (2016).

The second phase of training relevant institutions



In August 30-31 and September 1, 2022 3 training sessions were held under the title "Strengthening inter-institutional cooperation and strategic communication mechanisms for Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)".

A total of 38 employees participated in the training sessions, in the capacity of representatives from the Ministry of Justice, General Directorate of Prisons, Probation Service, Center for Juvenile and Youth Crime Prevention, Ministry of Interior, State Police, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, and the Ministry of Education and Sports. New representatives of the aforementioned institutions also participated in this training.

The training aimed to contribute to:

- raise the capacities of participants in information exchange and inter-institutional cooperation in relation to strategic communication;
- improve the mutual decision-making process;
- familiarize participants with the main principles to develop and deploy an efficient communication campaign for preventing and countering violent extremism;
- identify the shortcomings in the strategic communication plan and the management of P/CVE incidents, including technical, planning and procedural aspects.

Based on the assessment of training needs after the first phase of training, this training was developed in 3 modules, adapted in accordance with the tasks and specifics of each of the involved institutions. The modules that were specifically included in the training sessions were:

1) Strategic communication and inter-institutional communication

In this module the expert introduced an overview of the strategic concept, focusing on the distinguishing features of communication as a practical notion, as well as the innovations it has brought as a new discipline. In an interactive way, the expert introduced the process of developing official institutional and inter-institutional communication, with a focus on addressing the difficulties encountered by the participants and the discussion about the ways in which they could be resolved. Different models of inter-institutional communication were discussed during the training, along with the personal practices of the participants, as well as referring to appropriate and successful models for an effective strategic communication. This module also summarized information about violent extremism focusing on definitions, drivers, radicalization process and types of violent extremism.

2) Developing an effective P/CVE strategy

In this module the expert introduced the ways of developing an effective communication strategy in order to prevent and fight against violent extremism. Information about violent extremism was also presented, focusing on definitions, drivers, radicalization process and types of violent extremism. Participants were introduced to key principles to develop and implement a successful P/CVE communication campaign. The expert also provided an in depth explanation on how the dominant narrative of the institutions should be aligned with the VE system of meaning in Albania. The module was also focused on communication tools to maximize the reach, timeliness and targeting of the message.

3) The 5As of Positive Messaging and the 5Ds of Negative Messaging

In this module the expert introduced the content of the main positive and negative messages, the communication channels, as well as the use of "credible voices". Divided into groups, participants were engaged in designing and combining positive and negative messages in order to implement a successful communication campaign for preventing and countering violent extremism.

Some of the messages that were designed by the working groups were:

- *Life is granted and taken by Allah. Do not join those who want to take his credit!*
- *If we use violence as the right path for justice, then we have lost faith!*
- *Showing kindness to humanity is the path to paradise. Never join those who lead you astray.*
- *Despite the efforts of foreigners to divide the Albanians, they have historically remained united by blood, language and homeland!*
- *Extremist groups portray themselves as the only true Muslims, but this is actually hypocrisy as most of their victims are Muslims!*
- *Surround yourself with inner love and don't enter labyrinths from which you cannot get out.*

Training evaluation

Participants were invited to fill out a training evaluation form as well as to provide suggestions. The evaluation form revealed that the participants unanimously evaluated the training had an appropriate content, valuable materials and effective trainers. All participants considered the training directly related to their professional needs.

Data presentation

Participants were asked if they had the opportunity in the past to participate in a training about violent extremism. 36% of them stated they did not have the opportunity to get such training in the past, whereas 64% of them stated they had participated in such training. The same question was asked about strategic communication. 31% of participants stated that did not have the opportunity to participate in a training about strategic communication in the past, whereas the rest 69% of participants stated they did not have such previous experience.

Most of participants (73%) evaluated the overall training as very good, whereas 27% of them evaluated it as good.

Participants were asked to rate how much they think they have expanded their knowledge of violent extremism compared to their previous knowledge. The assessments are specifically as follows:

Percentage of participants	Evaluation criteria
51%	Very good
35%	Good
14%	Sufficient

In contrast to the results of the first phase of the training, this second evaluation noticed a significant increase in positive results. More specifically, the "very good" evaluation for knowledge expansion has increased by 21%, the "good" rating has decreased by 4%, and the "sufficient" rating has decreased by 11%. None of the participants stated they had "not at all" or "a little" knowledge expansion compared to their previous knowledge.

The analysis of the above indicators indicates a highly effective transfer of knowledge to participants about violent extremism.

As regards to the evaluation of how much participants' knowledge on strategic communication has expanded compared to their previous knowledge, participants expressed themselves as below:

Percentage of participants	Evaluation criteria
47%	Very good
30%	Good
23%	Sufficient

In contrast to the results of the first training phase, an increase in positive results is observed in this question as well. Specifically, the "very good" rating for knowledge expansion has increased

by 9%, the "good" rating has decreased by 7%, and the "sufficient" rating has decreased by 1%. None of the participants stated they had "not at all" or "a little" knowledge expansion compared to their previous knowledge.

The analysis of the above indicators indicates a highly effective transfer of knowledge to participants about strategic communication.

When asked about the importance of such trainings for the institution in which they work, 82% of the participants consider it as very important, 12% consider it as important. Only 2% of the participants consider it as slightly important.

When asked about the main and most interesting topics learned from this training, participants listed the following:

- recognizing the warning signs of radicalized persons;
- the analysis and recognition of how strategic communication works, and what are its effects;
- raising capacities in distinguishing and designing positive and negative messages;
- the importance of the proper delivery of the message and its decoding by the receiver;
- the general goals of strategic communication and identification of the target audience;
- the methods of addressing complex social situations;
- well-structured knowledge of key issues related to effective communication;
- recognizing the importance and delivering positive/negative messages against violent extremism.

Regarding the suggestions of the participants on how this training could be further improved, they stated that more concrete examples from real practices are needed. Also, participants have suggested to conduct more exercises to encourage and further improve their ability to design positive and negative messages for a more efficient strategic communication.

In general, participants think that the training was valuable for the identification of the cases that are encountered during their work, as well as it will help them to achieve a more effective communication within the institution. The fact that the training provided information on a topic that was not previously covered, was widely considered by participants as an added value, as it helps them better understand and analyze the violent extremism phenomenon. According to participants, the training has motivated them to correctly develop the P/CVE strategic communication.

Conclusions

Participants have evaluated the following topics covered in the training as the most effective for their work: the analysis and knowledge of the functioning of strategic communication, the ability to distinguish and design positive and negative messages, the identification of the target audience, as well as the way of developing strategic communication. The training has had a positive impact on the expansion of knowledge on effective P/CVE strategic communication.

Recommendations

In the context of the sustainability and continuity of the positive effect brought by these training sessions, participants delivered these recommendations:

- similar trainings to be organized more often;
- to have broader participation of management levels;
- to deliver information on the concrete management of cases carried out by the Center, as the institution that deals with the management, preventing and countering of radicalism and violent extremism.

The second phase of tabletop exercise with relevant institutions



In September 20, 2022 the second tabletop exercise was conducted. A total of 12 employees attended in this exercise, in the capacity of representatives from the Ministry of Education and Sports, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, General Directorate of State Police, Probation Service, Ministry of Justice, Center for Juvenile and Youth Crime Prevention, as well as the Agency for Support for Local Self-Government.

The tabletop exercise aimed to contribute to the following:

- coordinate institutional communication on violent extremism incidents, and raising staff capacities on the proper management of such incidents;
- expand existing knowledge on P/CVE strategic communication;
- encourage inter-institutional cooperation;
- identify and analyzing the information exchange mechanisms;
- identify potential shortcomings of strategic communication;

The tabletop exercise was designed on an opening scenario and three additional scenarios, which were delivered at different stages of group work. Participants were assigned a role in accordance with relevant responsibilities and expertise, a role they acted and maintained throughout the whole exercise. Participants dealt with the issue according to their predetermined role, by interacting with each other.

The exercise was based on a fictional scenario as per the parts below:

Opening scenario: Repatriation and rehabilitation of returnees from conflict areas

The exercise started with the opening scenario, which provided an overview of the case of repatriation and rehabilitation of 2 children whose parents had lost their lives in an explosion in Syria. Participants identified concrete steps and procedures to be undertaken based on the information that was provided. Participants also discussed how they would coordinate the actions between the institutions they represented.

First additional scenario: The beginning of the reintegration process of the returnees in their immediate community

During the discussion of the first additional scenario, participants identified the problems that were encountered, the concrete steps and procedures that should be taken and the way of coordinating the actions between institutions in order to reintegrate the young people returned to their immediate community. They also discussed about taking measures to avoid the recurrence of the incident in order to avoid further consequences.

Second additional scenario: Reintegration of returnees in their broader community

This session explored the ways of approaching the returnees, aiming to facilitate their reintegration into the wider community, and the messages that would be delivered to the public. Participants identified the need for new institutions to intervene (in contrast to the previous scenarios) and discussed the way of strategic communication between institutions.

Third additional scenario: Barriers to the reintegration of returnees vs. the spread of radical views

The last scenario included the challenges faced by the young returnees and the community versus individuals supporting radical views. Participants discussed the coordination of measures to be taken by the relevant institutions, as well as the way of developing strategic communication between them. The measures that should be taken against the perpetrators of violent on religious grounds was also discussed.

At the end of the analysis and discussion of the four scenarios, the exercise resulted in:

- analyzing the shortcomings in the institutional plan of strategic communication;
- managing incidents of violent extremism, including technical, planning and procedural aspects;
- dividing responsibilities during an incident;
- increasing awareness and improving the understanding of threats;
- identifying the appropriate mechanisms for dealing with violent extremism issues.

Training evaluation

At the end of the tabletop exercise, participants were invited to fill in a training evaluation form, as well as to provide potential suggestions. The evaluations indicate that the participants considered the exercise as very well structured and organized and the scenario as potential and realistic. Participation in the exercise was considered relevant for their work, and they also believed that the level of participants and the mix between institutions was the right one.

Data presentation

Participants were encouraged to provide recommendations and suggest needed interventions for improving their work process. Specifically, they suggested that the main areas that need to be improved are:

- connecting the concrete measures necessary for each sector, within the framework of strategic communication, with the major strategic objectives;

- cooperation of inter-institutional mechanisms;
- improving the impact of programs for the prevention of violent extremism;
- improving inter-religious dialogue;
- capacity building for teachers and leaders of religious communities in identifying and supporting persons vulnerable to radicalization;
- capacity building of media in the delivery of messages;
- the trinomial: communication-cooperation-implementation.

In order to address the issues identified above, participants suggested the steps that need to be taken with high priority. Concretely:

- presenting the results and following them rigorously, in order to identify the deficiencies and find the immediate solution;
- involvement in strategic planning to support program development and implementation;
- consultation of analyzes and studies;
- comprehensive discussion of strategic documents with all actors;
- exchange of experiences, meetings between institutions;
- frequent meetings with people who work directly in the field;
- improving legislation;
- increasing the financing of institutions;
- continuous training of employees;

Participants were invited to list policies, plans, and procedures that need to be reviewed, amended, or developed, and to rate the level of priority for each. It is noted that 33% of the participants did not answer this question, while **19%** provided irrelevant answers. This indicator can be interpreted that the employees have little or no knowledge about the policies, plans, and procedures in force. **48%** of the participants stated that some of the policies that need to be reviewed are social assistance, education and interventions at a strategic level.

Participants emphasized the need for comprehensive engagement, as well as increased communication and inter-institutional cooperation as a necessary tool for avoiding radical behavior and terrorist acts. In addition, the need to improve the chain of communication and coordination was emphasized in order for all institutions involved in the fight against violent extremism to be informed about the work of other partner institutions.

Conclusions

In conclusion of the evaluations of the table exercise, it is identified that:

- The Center should play a coordinating and managing role with all public institutions. The Center will need to take proactive steps in coordinating P/CVE strategic communication;
- Based on the Strategy and policies in the fight against violent extremism, it is necessary to have greater logistical and economic support to the relevant institutions;
- Teachers, psychologists or other relevant actors need to raise the awareness of children/minors who have a tendency to be radicalized;
- Increase the inter-institutional cooperation as well as interaction with civil society on the development of a strategic approach in communication with returnees;
- To have specified trainings with teachers, psychologists and/or other employees in pre-university education on the rights and freedoms of belief and the distinction between the exercise of religion against the religious-based radicalization and extremism;
- Increasing institutional capacities by conducting training for the top management level of institutions that have responsibilities in the prevention and fight against violent extremism.

The tabletop exercise has had a positive impact on raising the capacities on the development of effective p/CVE strategic communication. In order to increase the level of knowledge and their comprehensibility, it is suggested that this exercise should be repeated and include participants from top management levels, from religious institutions, the Center, etc., by analyzing concrete cases related to the identification of situations of violent extremism.

Concluding remarks on the complete project implementation



During the 16-month implementation, the project managed to carry out assessments of the needs of the relevant institutions in addressing violent extremism in Albania, assessment of the capacities of the employees of these institutions, and the increase of the knowledge and capacities of the employees of these institutions.

At the conclusion of the overall evaluation of the absorbed knowledge, it is evident that the implemented activities have had a positive impact on the expansion of knowledge on inter-institutional communication and P/CVE strategic communication.

Participants have identified some of the main areas which need improvement, such as: internal and external institutional coordination, timely identification of extremist behavior, timely address and real assessment of issues, quality of social services, improving the impact of programs for the prevention of violent extremism, etc. Some of the steps that need to be taken are: increased financing of state institutions, clear division of roles and responsibilities, equal distribution of information, etc.

The fact that information was delivered on a topic not previously covered so extensively, was considered as an added value by participants, because it was helping them to better understand and analyze the phenomenon of violent extremism. Furthermore, the trainings motivated them to develop in the right way P/CVE strategic communication.

Participants consider the following as the most effective useful issues of their work process: the analysis and understanding of strategic communication, the ability to distinguish and design positive and negative messages, the identification of the target audience, as well as the way of developing strategic communication. Referring to the analysis of the evaluations, participants unanimously assessed the training sessions as having the appropriate content, with valuable materials and effective trainers. Cumulative data indicators clearly show that the cycle of successive trainings has had a positive impact on deepening the knowledge of the trainees. The combination of theoretical and practical knowledge has contributed to the capacity building and training of public administration employees in the dissemination of P/CVE strategic communication, by reaching the level of drafting narratives against violent extremism, which address pragmatic and identity choice appeals both offensively and defensively.

Through its implementation, the project achieved the following results:

- Identifying problems of strategic communication in Albania;
- Improving the overall understanding of strategic communication to counter violent extremism by government institutions involved in the implementation of the Strategy;
- Improving knowledge and expertise to develop and deliver messages for P/CVE purposes by the four line ministries and their subordinate institutions;
- Developing communication practices and dissemination of P/CVE strategic messages by the Center, line ministries and their subordinate institutions who serve as first-line responders.

- Identification of needs to effectively develop and deliver P/CVE messages and communications;

Recommendations



In the framework of the sustainability and continuity of the positive effect that all the project activities brought, some recommendations are provided below:

- Drafting an officially approved and functional legal/sub-legal framework or policy document that addresses the issue of strategic communication for preventing and countering VE, with a clear definition of roles, responsibilities and commitment of each institution involved;
- Establishing a working group with members from institutions responsible against VE, to implement strategic communication in practice;
- Periodic monitoring of strategic communication implementation to ensure accountability and delivery of actions. Establishing mechanisms to address the unintended consequences of this communication;
- Conducting trainings with those responsible against VE continuously, not only with the participation of low and middle level staff but also high level management;
- Increasing cooperation and institutional interaction with civil society on the development of a strategic approach in communication with returnees;
- Engaging and coordinating strategic communication with representatives of religious institutions;
- Capacity building of teachers, psychologists, child support workers and community policing on the religious rights and freedoms, as well as the identification of signs that may lead to violent extremism;
- The overarching theme of the institutions must be aligned with the VE system of meaning in Albania, attacking the linkages that set in motion the self-reinforcing cycle of extremism;
- There needs to be a diversity of communication tools to maximize the reach, timeliness and targeting of the message. The messages delivered by the institutions should also take into account the division of the audiences, in order to adapt the messages to each of them;
- Further strengthening the capacities of the Center to implement the priorities related to strategic communication through comprehensive approaches.

ANNEX I: Training needs assessment - questionnaire for interviews



PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

1. Institution/Department (Directorate)/Sector.....

2. Gender:

- Male
- Female

3. Age:

- 18 to 25
- 26 to 35
- 36 to 45
- 46 to 55
- over 56

4. Education/Occupation.....

5. How long have you been working in this institution?

6. How long have you been working in this position?

7. What is your job position?

.....
.....

What are the three main responsibilities that you have in your current position and are related to violent extremism? (VE)?

- (1).....
- (2).....
- (3).....

PART II: TRAININGS

8. To your knowledge, is there a training plan for employees in the institution where you work?

- YES
- NO
- Don't know

9. Are you satisfied with the existing training opportunities?

- YES
- NO

If NO, please explain.....

10. Have you participated in communication-related training in recent years?

- YES (Please specify the type/topic of the training)
(1).....
(2).....
(3).....
- NO

What would you consider as the main obstacle in the quality of trainings?

(You may select more than one option)

- costs of trainings
- lack of programs for quality training
- lack of experts who conduct quality trainings
- the lack of practical relevance of the trainings
- the wrong way to conduct trainings
- the lack of a mechanism for assessing training needs
- the lack of time to participate in trainings
- the lack of staff motivation to participate in trainings
- the lack of staff information to participate in trainings
- other.....

11. Please specify three key areas that need training, which would help improve the performance of the department/sector where you work in relation to VE?

- (1).....
- (2).....
- (3).....

12. Do you think that training should also include those at high levels of management? (sector/directorate)?

- YES
- NO

13. In your opinion, how long should a training session last?

- 1 day
- 2 days
- 5 days
- more than 5 days

14. In what format would you prefer the training?

- Workshop
- Lectures
- Case Studies
- Counselling/Seminar
- Training at work
- Other, please specify.....

15. Are you aware of any Training Needs Assessments that your institution has previously conducted?

- YES
- NO

16. Are you aware of how your institution assesses staff training needs?

- YES (Please explain briefly)
(1).....
(2).....
(3).....
- NO

PART III: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION COMPONENTS

17. Identification and analysis of audiences

How often have you encountered the application of this communication component in your work?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely

Never

How would you rate your level of knowledge and skills on this component?

- Insufficient
- Partly sufficient
- Sufficient

- Advanced

18. Defining Measurable Goals and Objectives

How often have you encountered the application of this communication component in your work?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

How would you rate your level of knowledge and skills on this component?

- Insufficient
- Partly sufficient
- Sufficient
- Advanced

19. Developing Strategic Messages

How often have you encountered the application of this communication component in your work?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

How would you rate your level of knowledge and skills on this component?

- Insufficient
- Partly sufficient
- Sufficient
- Advanced

20. Defining Communication Channels

How often have you encountered the application of this communication component in your work?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

How would you rate your level of knowledge and skills on this component?

- Insufficient
- Partly sufficient
- Sufficient
- Advanced

21. Measure, Analysis and Evaluation

How often have you encountered the application of this communication component in your work?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

How would you rate your level of knowledge and skills on this component?

- Insufficient
- Partly sufficient
- Sufficient
- Advanced

PART IV: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND VIOLENT EXREMISM

22. Understanding the ideology

How would you rate your level of knowledge and skills regarding the main factors enabling VE?

- Insufficient
- Partly sufficient
- Sufficient
- Advanced

23. System of meaning

Are you aware of the violent extremism system of meaning in Albania?

- YES
- NO

24. Target audiences

Are you aware of the division of audiences from "antis to engaged" in Albania?

- YES
- NO

25. Communication process

How would you rate your level of knowledge and skills related to planning, synchronizing and monitoring strategic communication as a preventive and countering tool to VE?

- Insufficient
- Partly sufficient
- Sufficient
- Advanced

26. Communication channels

What do you think are some of the most effective communication channels today that can reach large audiences?

- (1).....
- (2).....
- (3).....

27. Developing messages

Are you aware of the existence of core themes or the overarching narrative of the strategic communication of Albanian institutions against violent extremism?

- YES
- NO



ANNEX II: Training needs assessment - questionnaire for focus group discussions



1. What are the main functions (tasks) of the department or sector where you work in relation to VE?

→ **Focus 1:** Identification of the main and additional functions/tasks related to VE

→ **Focus 2:** Identification of the three most important challenges/issues in the implementation of tasks

- Distinguishing between internal and external challenges
- The difference between the specific challenges of the department/sector and the general challenges for the entire institution.

Outputs:

- a) listing the main functions/tasks of the department/sector in relation to VE;
- b) listing the main challenges (internal/external);
- c) listing specific challenges for the department/sector;
- d) identification of responsible persons in relation to communication against VE.

2. Based on the main functions/tasks and taking into consideration the level of knowledge and skills of the staff, the performance of which of the VE-related functions do you think could be improved through quality training?

→ **Focus 1:** Assessment of functions/tasks most needed/least needed for training

→ **Focus 2:** Listing of functions for which more/less training has been carried out so far

Outputs:

- a) Reaching a consensus regarding the listing of functions that can be improved by training;
- b) Identification of current trainings, if any.

3. Based on the main functions, what topics/main issues for training related to VE will you suggest for the staff?

→ **Focus 1:** Designing trainings that directly address the capacity gaps identified above:

- Listing the necessary topics for training from basic to advanced;
- Identification of responsible employees for whom training is more immediate and necessary;

- **Focus 2:** Identification of training needs for employees under supervision;
- **Focus 3:** Identification of topics/areas outside the defined functions, for which employees need to be trained;
- **Focus 4:** Identification of employees who need training;

Outputs:

- a) Identification of priority topics within the sector/department and assessing their level of training (basic or advanced);
- b) Selection of employees who need immediate training;
- c) Selecting the most important issues and topics that need training.

