An analysis of religious extremism discourse in the media
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Published:

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In recent years, the agenda of Albanian media has seen an increasing presence of stories, commentary or other informative materials dealing with developments that are related to phenomena such as extremism, radicalism or religious fundamentalism. An increased presence of such content in the mainstream media outlets or in the online media has been noticed particularly after the terrorist attacks in Paris in January and November 2015, as well as in the course of reporting about high-profile stories or tragic events and developments that are related to the so-called “holy war” of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. At the front of this war, there are also a relatively considerable number of mercenaries from Albania and other areas inhabited by Albanians.

Nevertheless, in spite of this increased presence of this kind of content in the media outlets, there is a lack of any kind of research study work about it. Analyses and research studies to date have focused mainly on aspects such as hate speech toward ethnic minorities or toward marginalized groups, etc. Meanwhile, the studies and research on religious extremism in the media discourse are almost missing. Taking into consideration this absence, it was proposed to undertake this research study, which seeks to observe and analyze the phenomenon by trying to
apply measurable instruments and indicators of empirical research that would facilitate analysis and the reaching of more well-grounded and verifiable conclusions.

It should be noted that extremism is not a new phenomenon in Albania. Nor has it always been associated solely with religion. For about half a century of dictatorship following World War II, the country saw one of the most extreme forms of the application of communism, both as a practice and as an ideology. Under the post-traumatic effect of the communist legacy, other forms of extremism, for instance political extremism, accompanied with a number of cases of violent political protests, have been present also throughout the period of the post-communist transition. This type of extremism, and harsh political communication charged with verbal violence in general during this period, have been influenced by the country’s leading elites: harsh excluding language, cultivated for a long time as a philosophy of control and the exercise of informal or formal power, at the local or central level.

Besides political extremism, the years of post-communist transition have seen the emergence also of a new type of extremism, one that is based on religion or religion manipulation. The object and subject of such extremism in Albania has been mainly the Islamic faith. It has appeared as a tendency to radicalize the Islamic faith, spreading some conservative schools or doctrines of the interpretation of Islam, such as Salafism and Wahhabism, which display a higher level of puritanism and intolerance compared to the Hanafi tradition of Albanian Islam. This radicalism has developed for the most part through discourse in some of the country’s mosques as well as through extensive print or online literature. Yet, aside from
discourse, some very disturbing and serious developments, such as the recruitment and participation of a number of Albanian citizens in ISIS ranks as well as the implication of some preachers of Islam in this process, have on the one hand certified the process of radicalization, and on the other hand shed light once again the presence of violent extremism in the country.

In reviewing this situation, this research study will strive to present the background of the emergence and development of religious extremism in Albania and to research and analyze the forms of the display of religious extremist discourse in the print and online media outlets.
1. Terminology and conceptual approach

The term “extremism” is an extensively debated term and different attempts at its definition have not escaped controversy. According to Alex Schmid, “since extremism is a relational concept, to answer the question: “what is extreme?” one needs a benchmark, something that is (more) “ordinary,” “centrist,” “mainstream,” or “normal” when compared with the (extreme) political fringe.¹ Peter Coleman and Andrea Bartoli, on the other hand, describe extremism as “…activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, strategies) of a character far removed from the ordinary.”²

As may be seen, the definition of the reference point from where to start and try to identify extremes is a key moment for the establishment of the concept of “extremism.” When the starting point is from different cultures, ideologies or eras, then definitions are different,

¹ Schmid, Alex P., Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?, ICCT Research Paper, May 2014
² Coleman, Peter T. and Bartoli, Andrea, Addressing Extremism, White Paper. New York: The International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, Colombia University, f. 1
and in some cases diametrically opposed. Thus, what is an “extreme” in a certain culture, ideology or era, may be “central” for another culture, ideology or era.

It is something similar to the definition of violence, which, according to Alan Fiske and Tage Rai, “in a culture or historical period may be moral, but in another culture or historical era may be immoral.”³ Orhan Pamuk illustrates this relativism of things in the most meaningful manner, “What in 1453 was celebrated in the East as the conquest of Istanbul, was lamented in the West as the fall of Constantinople,”⁴ he writes.

In the conditions of such relativism, it is indispensable to be very clear about the point of reference used in the standpoint and analysis of this research regarding the phenomenon called “extremism”. Alex Schmid stresses that extremism may be defined only by having a reference point and, in current situations, this reference point is the liberal-democratic constitutional model of western societies.⁵ It is precisely this model and the whole Western system of values that has served as the reference point for this research. Albania has already adopted the Western liberal-democratic model and it is reasonable that this model, massively embraced by Albanians, is selected as the point of reference. However, an important point of reference will also be the specific value system of the

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⁵ Schmid, Alex P., Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?, ICCT Research Paper, May 2014
Albanian society, such as inter-religious tolerance, the precedence of national identity over other identities, the respect for tradition, etc.

In speaking about religious extremism, Western researchers provide a number of concrete indicators to identify it. Thus, Charles Kimball identifies five warning signs of religious extremism, which are not exclusively applied to individuals, but in some cases may also be applicable to an entire group or theocratic regime. In his opinion, these signs are:

1. Absolute Truth Claims;
2. Blind Obedience;
3. Establishing the “Ideal” Time;
4. The End Justifies Any Means; and
5. Declaring Holy War.  

In many cases, both in the global discourse and in the Albanian one, the term extremism is used in connection with or interchangeably with the term radicalism. But, what is the difference between radicalism and extremism? According to Schmid, “a more accurate distinction between extremism and radicalism can be gained by looking at the history of ideas of these terms. From that point of view, extremists tend to be closed-minded supremacists and radicals tend to be open-minded egalitarians.”  

Albanian theologian Ermir Gjinishi provides a different viewpoint in

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7 Schmid, Alex P., *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*, ICCT Research Paper, May 2014
this debate: “Radicalism has to do with strict attitudes that do not take into consideration, or rather ignore specific conditions and circumstances; it is mainly discourse. Extremism is the surpassing of the limit and from discourse could move on to action.”

A research study by ICCT (International Centre for Counter-terrorism – The Hague) noted that radicals are not per se violent and while they might share certain characteristics (e.g. alienation from the state, anger about a country’s foreign policy, feelings of discrimination) with (violent) extremists, there are also important differences such as the willingness of radicals (at least those in the European political tradition) to see all human beings as equals while extremists (not only in the European political tradition) tend to be authoritarian.

Meanwhile, security institutions in the United States provide an approach that further completes the concept. “

Radicalization is the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change.”

One of the hottest points of the theoretical and media debate in recent years has been that of associating Islamic faith with phenomena such as extremism, radicalism, fundamentalism or terrorism. Adding to these terms the qualifier ‘Islamic’ in the course of media discourse or public communication, (“Islamic extremism,” “Islamic radicalism,” “Islamic fundamentalism,” or “Islamic

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8 Interview with theologian Ermir Gjinishi in the context of this research study. Interviewed by Laert Miraku
10 Definition by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security
terrorism”) has been opposed by numerous theologians, analysts and researchers not only in the East, but also in the West, because this juxtaposition presupposes some kind of correlation between these phenomena and Islam as a religion. In the current situation, the questions posed have been rather concrete: What relation does Islam have with terrorism? Could a religious faith be accused as a source or even support with ideas for extremism? Could religion be violent?

Many authors, Western but not only, draw a distinction between “Islam” as a religion and “political Islam” as a political ideology, otherwise called “Islamism.” For Jeffrey Bale Islamism is a supremacist variant of mainly Sunni “political Islam”. It is anti-secular, anti-infidel and anti-Western, seeking to establish a state (caliphate) whose puritanical features are meant to resemble the situation in early Islam.11

Ghaffar Hussain and Erin Marie Saltman use the equal sign between “Islamism” and “Islamist extremism.” In their opinion, Islamist extremism / Islamism derive from the view of Islam as a totalitarian political ideology. Islamism claims that political sovereignty belongs to God rather than the people. Islamists believe that their reading of Shariah should be state law, and that it is the religious duty of all Muslims to create and pledge allegiance to an Islamic state that reflects these principles.12

11 Bale, Jeffrey, Denying the Link between Islamist Ideology and Jihadist Terrorism, 2013, f.28
12 Hussain, Ghaffar dhe Saltman, Erin Marie, Jihad Trending: A Comprehensive Analysis of Online Extremism and How to Counter it, Quilliam, May 2014, f.6
In a reference he used at the Munich Security Conference on February 5, 2011, British Prime Minister David Cameron, speaking about the role and influence of Islamism in the undertaking of some terrorist acts in Europe, speaks very clearly about this debate:

“We have got to get to the root of the problem, and we need to be absolutely clear on where the origins of where these terrorist attacks lie. That is the existence of an ideology, Islamist extremism. We should be equally clear what we mean by this term, and we must distinguish it from Islam. Islam is a religion observed peacefully and devoutly by over a billion people. Islamist extremism is a political ideology supported by a minority. At the furthest end are those who back terrorism to promote their ultimate goal: an entire Islamist realm, governed by an interpretation of Sharia. Move along the spectrum, and you find people who may reject violence, but who accept various parts of the extremist worldview, including real hostility towards Western democracy and liberal values. ...We need to be clear: Islamist extremism and Islam are not the same thing.”

In the global academic, political or media debate of the last decade, it is widely accepted that Islamist extremism is not a derivation of Islam, but rather of its misinterpretation and misuse for needs of political interests.

It is precisely this conceptual approach to Islamist extremism elaborated above that this research study has applied. It also applies to the belief that adheres to the

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stance that, “Islamist extremism needs to be challenged and confronted rather than accommodated and tolerated by liberal democracies.”\(^\text{14}\)

When it comes to using relevant terms in the Albanian language, it is worth issuing an invitation to avoid the mistake of using the qualifier “Islamic” instead of “Islamist.” In Albanian, the word “Islamic” is used as an adjective of “Islam”, for instance in the word groups “Islamic bank,” “Islamic league,” “Islamic community, etc. From a semantic standpoint, this adjective is related directly with Islam as a religion. On the other hand, the qualifier “Islamist” semantically is related to the political ideology, that is Islamism. From this standpoint, it would be a not only a linguistic but also a conceptual mistake to use the adjective “Islamic” in the phrase “Islamic extremism;” instead, the qualifier “Islamist” should be used; in other words, it would be more accurate to say “Islamist extremism.”

\(^\text{14}\) Schmid, Alex P., \textit{Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?}, ICCT Research Paper, May 2014
2. The historical religious context in Albania

Historically, Albania has been a multi-religious country. Following the division of the Roman Empire into the West and the East, half the country remained under the empire of the West and the other half under Byzantium. This was also reflected in the religious structure: the north adopted the Christian Catholic faith and the south adopted the Christian Orthodox faith, thus pointing out also the role of foreign invasions in the country’s religious configuration. The Ottoman invasion in the 15th century and its continuation for almost five centuries led to the conversion of a large part of the population into the Islamic faith. At present, the country has four leading religious faiths: the Sunni Muslim faith, the Christian Orthodox faith, the Christian Catholic Faith, and the Bektashi Muslim faith. In the course of the transition, other faiths or religious fractions have also seen some level of spread such as the Evangelists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Bahai, etc.

Statistics about the religious structure of the population until recently have reiterated results that are similar to those of the 1938 census, according to which 70 percent
of the population belonged to the Muslim faith (Sunni and Bektashi), 20 percent belonged to the Christian Orthodox faith, and 10 percent to the Christian Catholic faith.\textsuperscript{15} These figures have been conveyed and considered until recently without any controversy, until the time when after decades, the first census was organized in Albania in 2011 that included the question about religious affiliation. This was also the first census contested by almost all religious communities. The census produced the following results:

\begin{itemize}
\item Muslim – 56.70 \% of the population living in Albania
\item Catholic – 10.03 \% “ “ “
\item Orthodox – 6.75 \% “ “ “
\item Bektashi – 2.09 \% “ “ “
\end{itemize}

These figures have also been published by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.\textsuperscript{16}

One is struck by the large percentage of those inhabitants who chose to not respond (13.79 \%) as well as the not-so-minor number of inhabitants who consider themselves to be believers, but who do not wish to identify their religious affiliation (5.49 \%).\textsuperscript{17}

Albania’s multi-religious nature and the specifics of the co-existence of religious communities for a long time have drawn the attention of the world of letters. Foreign researchers or travelers who visited Albania during the

\textsuperscript{15} Vickers, Miranda, \textit{Islam in Albania}, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 2008
\textsuperscript{17} http://www.instat.gov.al/media/177354/main_results_population_and_housing_census_2011.pdf
previous century and others, who dealt with researching the Albanian religious tradition, have pointed out the centuries-long existence of a spirit of religious tolerance and the precedence of national identity over religious identity. Edith Durham who visited Albania and stayed for a long time at the start of the twentieth century, when the country was still under Ottoman rule, wrote:

“The Albanian is always an Albanian. The Muslim Serb and the Muslim Bulgarian have all sense of nationality swept away by the mighty power of Islam. With the Albanian it is otherwise. He is Albanian first. His religion comes afterwards...In the face of a common foe, Muslim and Christian Albanians unite. Some nations have a genius for religion. The Albanians, as a race, are singularly devoid of it. Their Mohammedanism and their Christianity sits but lightly upon them...”\(^\text{18}\)

The analysis of the nation/religion rapport points to the “essence of nationalism as the priority identity of every Albanian, independently from religious faith. In order to not go against nationalism, religious communities and believers left conflicts aside and turn to lost unity.”\(^\text{19}\)

Miranda Vickers strengthens this argument even further. “Historically, the Albanians are the only Balkan people whose national consciousness has not been shaped or identified by their religious affiliation. Instead, Albanians have defined their national identity through language.”


\(^{19}\) Moroco dela Roka, Roberto, *Kombi dhe feja në Shqipëri 1920-1944*, SHB Elena Gjika, Tiranë
Vickers sees this also as the result of the existence of a traditional form of tolerant Islam practiced by Albanians.\textsuperscript{20}

The Hanafi tradition of Albanian Sunni Islam has been conceived with a spirit of acceptance instead of exclusion and a lack or scarcity of indicators of supremacy, anti-secularism or totalitarianism, which are clear indicators of religious extremism. On the other hand, according to Roberto Moroco della Roka, the religious syncretism of the Bektashi, some of their similarities with Christianity, their compassionate tolerance toward other religions based on the principle of the existence of a single god that is equally accepted by the different faiths, have helped create a connection of the different religious communities of this small Balkan country.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} Vickers, Miranda, \textit{Islam in Albania}, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 2008

\textsuperscript{21} Moroco dela Roka, Roberto, \textit{Kombi dhe feja në Shqipëri 1920-1944}, SHB Elena Gjika, Tiranë
3. On the presence and degree of spread of religious extremism in Albania

Although religion in Albania, including all religious beliefs, could be evaluated as having one of the most tolerant religious approaches in the world, for about 50 years, the worst known violence and intolerance have been exercised toward it. During the period of communism, religion took an extreme blow, unimagined and unseen in any other country. Most of the religious sites were destroyed, religious literature was burned and preachers were killed or imprisoned, thus claiming the emergence of the first atheist country on the world map. “We had 1667 mosques until 1967 and only 20 or 30 of them, those declared monuments of culture, escaped destruction,” Ermir Gjinishi says.\textsuperscript{22}

As a result, in the beginning of the 1990s, after the fall of the communist dictatorship and the recognition of the right to religious faith, the country found itself in the

\textsuperscript{22} Interview with theologian Ermir Gjinishi in the context of this research study. Interviewed by Laert Miraku
conditions of a major lack of physical and spiritual religious infrastructure. Religious sites were missing; preachers were missing; religious literature was missing and, above all, the financial resources needed to practically lead to a rebirth of religion were missing.

A number of domestic and foreign authors, when analyzing the conditions and factors that led to the emergence of Islamist orientation in Albania, list among them also some developments that took place in the ‘90s and that an indirect or a direct impact on this process. Thus, a decision of the President of the Republic of December 1992 to seek the membership of Albania with full rights in the Organization of the Islamic Conference was one of the developments that produced, for the first time on the public agenda, the debate about the country’s orientation toward an international alliance that only one element – the religious one – connected Albanians with.

“The decision had been made hurriedly without consulting parliament and many Albanians were worried that the move would align Albania closer to the Islamic world,” writes Miranda Vickers. Only a few months after Albanians had voted “to make Albania like the rest of Europe,” as had been the slogan of the protests of students against dictatorship, a proposal came to the fore that oriented the country – not just geographically – in a direction opposite to Europe. Another concern derived from the fact that a geo-political alliance or decision-making was being proposed, which was based on the criterion of religious affiliation.

“Thus began the involvement of Arab-Islam in Albania. In the months that followed an Arab-Albanian Islamic Bank was established in Tirana, and around 20 Arab Islamic Foundations were opened throughout the country. Foreign Islamic organizations began a country-wide mosque construction program and even funded the expenses of those Albanians wishing to travel to Mecca for the annual Hajj pilgrimage.”

Foundations from the Middle East helped a lot with the construction of religious sites, which did not exist in the early ‘90s. They also carried out charity activity and provided assistance to poor groups of the society. However, these foundations “drew attention for some negative developments. Their presence in Albania and their activity within the Muslim community, with their capillary spread, represented a threat in three main ways: i) in religious practices that were previously unknown; ii) in the dangerous ideas that these foundations brought to the country; iii) in hiding inside them extremist and terrorist elements. In particular, the spread of Salafism and Wahhabism was displayed as an illustration of the fundamentalist nature of these organizations, thus creating the premises for the radicalization of Albanian Islam and for violent extremism.”

In parallel with the construction of religious sites, the Albanian Muslim Community of Albania (AMC) also had to

24 Vickers, Miranda, Islam in Albania, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 2008
meet the needs for clerics. Given that the country had no higher education theological institution, new Imams were trained abroad, in Turkey, the Arab countries, and even as far as Malaysia and Indonesia. Two were the problems related to the creation of this corps of clerics: first, a large part of them were not sent by the AMC, but directly by foreign foundations or through personal connections and acquaintances; second, a considerable part of them pursued religious faith schools of Islam that were different from and more radical compared to the Hanafi school that predominates in the Balkans and that is the traditional religion for Albanian Sunni Muslims.

“These foreign educated students now dominate several mosques, madrasas and other Islamic institutions in Albania. There is little doubt that these young men have a stronger sense of Islamic identity than older Albanian Muslims, who are in general less educated in Koranic studies and general Islamic issues, and also feel more of an historic connection with less stringent Ottoman traditions than with Arab Islam.”

As a result of these developments, according to Vickers, in recent years, a new conflict has emerged between the older supporters of the Hanafi school and the younger men who have returned from religious training in radical Islamic environments and who are supporters of the Salafi Islamic school, which is more radical and much less tolerant.

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Initially, the concern about developments among the community of Sunni Muslims – which also was displayed in the media – was related to the radical discourse in some mosques in the country and the preaching in them of religious schools that provided a foreign intolerant interpretation of Islam. However, the discovery by security structures at the end of the ‘90s of connections or financing of part of the foreign Islamic foundations by terrorist organizations shed light on another dark and unknown side of the problem: that of the association of religious activity with not just radicalism, but also with violent Islamist extremism.

The ISIS war in Syria and Iraq brought to the surface the presence of such extremism in the country, also discovering the existence of Islamist religious mercenarism. According to a report by the State Intelligence Service (SHISH), cited in some of the leading media outlets, at present, a total of about 140 citizens of Albania are involved in ISIS ranks – a considerable number as seen against the total population number.\textsuperscript{28} The arrest in March 2014 of nine persons, among them the Imams of two Tirana mosques that were outside the control of AMC, was reported as the discovery of a recruitment scheme of Albanians dispatched to fight in Syria, with preachers of the Islamic faith accused of being involved in this scheme. The interest and objective of ISIS leaders toward Albania and the Albanian-speaking population may be seen also in the fact that Albanian is one of the languages that this terrorist organization uses in its mass communication.

\textsuperscript{28} Shqip newspaper, dated November 14, 2015, page 5
Another disturbing problem displayed in the media is the existence of a considerable number of mosques that are beyond AMC control. In the beginning of 2015, the intelligence service said that there are 89 mosques outside such control; meanwhile, AMC itself declares that there are only 9 such. Yet, there are even voices that talk about a much higher level of lack of control “In reality, it is not possible that there are only 89 mosques outside the community. In reality, the community is not checking, not doing its duties, not functioning. I too am convinced that there are not 89, but rather 200, and in one year half of all of them will be so, and in three years, all mosques will be beyond the control of the AMC. And, what will happen in this country after that?” – says theologian Ermir Gjinishi, former deputy Chair of the AMC, in an interview for the purposes of this research study.

Some research studies that have been conducted in Albania recently about radicalism and violent extremism, such as the study “Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania” (IDM, 2015) or the other research study “Emergency of a new radical influence and religious extremism in Albania” (AIIS, 2015) see the situation as “a phenomenon in its early”, “embryonal” phase or as a “development in an initial phase.” Yet, at the same time, these studies see the developments as a threat to national,

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29 *Panorama* newspaper, dated November 26, 2015, page 2  
30 Interview with theologian Ermir Gjinishi in the context of this research. Interviewed by Laert Miraku  
31 Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania, IDM, 2015, p. 34  
32 Emergence of a new radical influence and religious extremism in Albania,” AIIS, 2015, p. 4
regional and international security, which also bears the threat of harming religious harmony, which would be fatal for the security, stability, and even the future of the country.\textsuperscript{33}

However, in spite of the earliness of the phenomenon or the limited or isolated spread thereof, what is very serious has to do with the fact that while until 2000, Islamist violent extremism was mainly identified with foreign individuals or organizations, today it is also identified with local individuals or religious structures. In other words, the phenomenon is no longer just a phenomenon imported to Albania by foreigners, but also a local phenomenon and product. It also presents itself in its most extreme forms. In the case of the arrest of the Imams, the media, based on statements by the police and the prosecutor’s office, talk about a presence and discovery of “terrorist cells” and about ties to organized crime.\textsuperscript{34}

Providing a general overview of the degree of development of violent extremism in the country, our interviewee Ermir Gjinishi concludes, “At present, we have moved to the last degree, that of terrorism. We are a country that produces terrorism and we should say this openly: we have produced terrorism.”\textsuperscript{35}

Meanwhile, the situation in the online space in the Albanian language, which features a large number of websites that promote all sorts of foreign schools of the interpretation of Islam, from the most moderate to those

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid
\textsuperscript{34} War in Syria, terrorist cell discovered in Tirana, link: http://www.shekulli.com.al/p.php?id=42332
\textsuperscript{35} Interview with theologian Ermir Gjinishi in the context of this research. Interviewed by Laert Miraku
of the farthest extreme, creates the impression that the mercenarism of the word is also developing aside from the mercenarism of weapons. Considerable amounts of money are spent to maintain hundreds of websites and also hundreds of persons are paid to write and especially to translate into Albanian and spread among Albanians religious schools and doctrines that are far from their Hanafi tradition. As a result, while hot bombing is thought of as a potential remote threat for Albania, the bombing by words is already happening and keeps intensifying with each passing day.

The reaction of the leading actors in the country toward Islamist extremism has been strong and diverse. In some extreme cases, online comments, but even one or two articles in daily newspapers, the reaction has also highlighted the existence in different individuals of two other forms of extremism: anti-Islam extremism and atheistic extremism. We need to make clear that both anti-Islam extremism and atheistic extremism are in no instance demonstrated as part of the editorial policies of the leading media outlets. At the same time, there are no indicators of any organized movement and are not related to the activity or discourse of religious institutions. Anti-Islam extremism appears mainly as an influence of political ideologies of the right-wing extreme, which have absolutely minimal and almost inexistent terrain in the country. Meanwhile, atheistic extremism appears as an influence of political ideologies of the left-wing extreme, mainly as a reminiscence of ideological remnants or legacy from the country’s recent communist past.
4. Methodologies and instruments for measuring religious extremism in the media

As has been noted above, this research study focuses mainly on the exploration and analysis of extremist religious discourse in the media. Normative discourse or what is considered “politically correct” discourse is not part of this research. The target of the research includes the print media in Albania and online media in the Albanian language. The main research methods include monitoring and content analysis. However, for the needs of the research, we also conducted a series of interviews with representatives of religious communities in the country or experts of the area.

We selected the newspapers “Panorama,” “Shqip” and “Tema,” which were monitored for a four-month period: from August 1 until November 30, 2015. The criteria applied for the selection of these newspapers were: 1. Presence in the studied sample of the top circulation daily in the country (Panorama); 2. Presence in the studied sample of a newspaper that provides considerable room for the specific content (Shqip); and 3. Presence in the studied sample of a newspaper with a popular profile (Tema).
With regard to online media, the research was structured along two pillars: 1. Research based on the problems related to extremism, i.e. a research based on the relevant topic and its key words; and 2. Research based on the main events related to the subject of the research.

In the topical research, the main keywords used for searching were: religion in Albania, religious identity, national identity, religious tolerance, extremism, radicalism, fundamentalism, terrorism, Islamism, political Islam, Islamist extremism, Islamophobia, anti-Islam extremism, atheistic extremism, etc.

The research by events focused on main developments, such as: the arrest of two Imams and seven other individuals in Tirana, the visit of the Pope in Albania, terrorist acts in the newsroom of the “Charlie Hebdo” magazine, the demolition of the church in Dhërmi, the terrorist acts of November 13 in Paris, the ISIS war and the participation of Albanians therein, as well as some other developments of a lower profile that took place during the period 2014-2015.

The monitoring of online media included both media websites and religious institutional websites, but also social media. Online research was not territorially localized, but it was localized by language, i.e. in the online space using Albanian language, also because of the fact that many websites do not declare the place they were founded in or where they carry out their activities; also, often times, it is not possible to distinguish websites created in Albania from those created in Kosovo or in other countries.

A closer/frequent monitoring of other media and websites online was conducted in the case of the terrorist
acts in Paris, on November 13, 2015. This monitoring lasted for two weeks.

The main research questions were:

- How frequent is religious extremist discourse in the Albanian print or online media and what forms does it appear in?

- Has the media been an actor, factor or tool of propagating, encouraging or mobilizing individuals in the service of extremist religious doctrines?

One of the difficulties of this research has to do with the relativity of the concept “extremism” and the risk of a subjective interpretation of it. In order to minimize relativism and subjectivism, it was deemed fitting to apply a more systematic approach, based on clearer criteria and indicators, as well as on some instruments that enable the identification of indicators and their indexing.

A good starting point in this context was the instrument “Twenty indicators for monitoring extremism” (Extremism Monitoring Instrument: EMI-20) compiled by a group of authors and presented in full by researcher Alex Schmid. This instrument provides detailed indicators for identifying extremism and extremists and therefore it is being presented in full below. According to EMI-20, from a liberal-democratic perspective considered “centrist” or “mainstream”, extremists tend to:

1. Situate themselves outside the mainstream and reject the existing social, political or world order;

2. Seek to overthrow, with the help of a revolutionary vanguard, the political system in order to (re-)establish what they consider the natural order in society – whether this envisaged order be based
on race, class, faith, ethnic superiority, or alleged tradition;
3. Are usually in possession of an ideological program or action plan aimed at taking and holding communal or state power;
4. Reject or, when in power, subvert the liberal-democratic conception of the rule of law; use the political space provided by it to advance their cause in efforts to take state power;
5. Reject universal human rights and show a lack of empathy and disregard for rights of other than their own people;
6. Reject democratic principles based on popular sovereignty;
7. Reject equal rights for all, especially those of women and minorities;
8. Reject diversity and pluralism in favor of their preferred mono-culture society, e.g. a worldwide Islamic state;
9. Adhere to a (good-) ends-justify (-any)-means philosophy to achieve their goals;
10. Actively endorse and glorify the use of violence to fight what they consider “evil” and to reach their political objectives (e.g. in the form of jihad);
11. Show a propensity to engage in mass violence against actual and potential enemies when in power or when enjoying impunity;
12. Are single-minded, black-or-white thinkers who want to purify the world and demonize, debase and dehumanize their enemies in hate speech,
characterizing them as “inferior” and earmarking them, implicitly or explicitly, as expendable;

13. Subordinate individual freedoms to collective goals;

14. Refuse to engage in genuine (as opposed to tactical and temporal) compromises with the other side and ultimately seek to subdue or eliminate the enemy;

15. Exhibit intolerance to all views other than their own dogmatic one and express this in anger, aggressive behavior and hate speech;

16. Exhibit fanaticism, portray themselves as threatened and embrace conspiracy theories without necessarily being irrational in their strategic choices;

17. Exhibit authoritarian, dictatorial or totalitarian traits;

18. Are unwilling to accept criticism and intimidate and threaten dissenters, heretics and critics with death;

19. Expect obedience to their demands and commands rather than allowing to subject their views and policies to discussion even within their own group; and

20. Have fixed ideas and closed minds and believe there is only one truth – theirs. In its pursuit, they are often willing to face punishment or even death and sometimes actively seek martyrdom.\footnote{Schmid, Alex P., \textit{Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?}, ICCT Research Paper, May 2014}

This system of indicators covers a broad spectrum of the term and of extremist ideologies. However, it is particularly helpful for distinguishing between Islamist extremism from other forms of political speech and
behavior, from mere dissent and protest, from forms of activism and radicalism that might be non-conformist and critical of the existing socio-political order but do not pose a fundamental threat to liberal democracy the way Islamist extremism does. There is a need for an instrument that allows the identification of extremist tendencies in individuals and groups challenging open democratic societies.  

Besides instruments for identifying extremism in general, for this research it was also important to find and apply methodological mechanisms that particularly identify extremism in the media discourse. Such a mechanism is the “Extremist media index” proposed by Donald Holbrook. We applied it in the context of this research study for indexing extremist content in Albanian media. Based on this Index, extremist content is divided into three categories:

1. Moderate content
2. Fringe content
3. Extreme content.

This last one is divided further into some sub-categories: extreme material level 1, extreme material level 2, extreme material level 3, and extreme material level 3b.

The following table presents in a detailed manner Holbrook’s index with the pertinent categories and the description for each category or sub-category.

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37 Ibid
38 Holbrook, Donald, *Designing and Applying an “Extremist Media Index”,* Perspectives on Terrorism Volume 9, Issue 5, 2015
## Table of extremism media index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary grading category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 – Moderate</td>
<td>General religious, political, philosophical or historical material and news commentary containing no endorsement of violence or hatred towards identified communities with generally moderate content along the lines found in mainstream religious/political texts and news media output.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - Fringe</td>
<td>Content is religiously or ideologically conservative and isolationist, politically radical and confrontational, but without any justifications conveyed for violence in present-day scenarios. Anger and hostility might be expressed towards a given group of people, such as the ‘kuffar’ (unbelievers) or immigrants, without the added assumption that these people are somehow ‘subhuman’ and legitimate targets of violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - Extreme</td>
<td>Material that legitimizes and/or glorifies the use of violence, especially serious and potentially fatal violence, to achieve particular goals, as well as the fighters and martyrs who die for the cause, with some allusion to the view that such prescriptions continue to be relevant for contemporary activists. Also included within this category is material that focuses on dehumanizing particular communities, citing issues of race, sexuality, origin or other aspects that render such people ‘sub-human,’ thus undermining their right to life. This category thus captures both publications advocating ‘jihadi’ violence against combatants or civilians, as well</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
some works of the extreme right-wing, for instance, that can be more opaque in terms of references to violence but with a focus on presenting people such as Jews and non-whites as sub-human in the context of an imagined or envisaged confrontation with these groups of people.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary grading category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extreme level 1</td>
<td>Serious violence (i.e. potentially fatal) is only justified / promoted /welcomed with reference to combatants or is vague, without any detail, e.g. talk about the virtues of collective violence, glorification of insurgency warfare.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme level 2</td>
<td>Serious violence (i.e. potentially fatal) clearly justified/promoted/welcomed against non-combatants, but without any detail, e.g. “murder Muslims”, “kill the kuffar”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme level 3</td>
<td>Serious violence (i.e. potentially fatal) justified/promoted/ welcomed against non-combatants and with some detail regarding facilitation, scope or direction: i.e. “do suicide attacks” (against non-combatants), “target the economy”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme level 3b</td>
<td>Same as ‘3’ but specific and directly applicable details offered, e.g. bomb-making recipes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Below is a graphic and summarized display of the index.

**Extremist media index**

1. **Moderate material**
   - No endorsement of violence or expressions of hatred/animosity towards people.

2. **Fringe material**
   - Isolationism, hostility towards out-group without referencing violence.

3. **Extreme material**
   - Endorsement/glorification of violence in contemporary context and/or stark dehumanization.

**PHASE 1**

**Extreme material: Level 1**
- References to violence are vague or limited to combatants.

**Extreme material: Level 2**
- Violence against civilians clearly justified/glorified.

**Extreme material: Level 3**
- Violence against civilians justified/glorified and specific facilitating details offered for indiscriminate attacks.

**Extreme material: Level 3b**
- Facilitating details of ‘Level 3’ titles can be directly followed to cause harm (e.g. bomb-making recipes).

**PHASE 2**
Indexing of materials according to this sample required profound knowledge of their content and the classification of each material in this index. Combined with the Extremism Monitoring Index – 20, the Holbrook index creates the possibility of a quantitative approach to the monitored content and, at the same time, facilitates the identification of elements from a qualitative standpoint, thus helping explore the most debated terms of the discourse, precisely those that convey extremist semantics and represent the most debated issues in the Albanian public opinion in the context being studied.
5. Extremist religious discourse in Albanian media – quantitative approach

The quantitative analysis conducted in the context of this research study uses the mechanism provided by Holbrook’s Index as a “measuring unit.” The identification of materials during the monitoring and the classification and their placement on the Holbrook Index was not an easy job. As the author of the Index himself says, it is unavoidably difficult to find objective parameters for such a controversial thing as religious or ideological discourse. Therefore, the process cannot avoid subjectivism. Among the different categories there are grey areas where the border is hard to determine, particularly in the area that divides fringe materials from extreme level 1 materials, where it is possible for the categories to overlap. Nevertheless, the criteria provided by the Index claim to minimize the degree of subjectivity.

The monitoring of the three newspapers mentioned above, and of the online sphere in the Albanian language,

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39 Holbrook, Donald, *Designing and Applying an “Extremist Media Index*”, Perspectives on Terrorism Volume 9, Issue 5, 2015
we identified 284 materials that belong to the entire spectrum of the index, starting from moderate material to extreme material. A total of 201 materials were identified in online media and 83 materials were identified in the newspapers.

Extremist discourse took place also on online comments, under the articles published in different websites, but because these comments are anonymous, excessively vulgar and far from being a fact of scientific research, they have not been included in the object of this research.

After indexing the identified material, there is a predominance of material whose content falls under the “moderate” category and meet Holbrook’s criteria for this category because they are “general religious, political, philosophical and historical material and comments that do not display an approving approach toward violence or any hatred toward the identified communities; they generally have moderate content until the end and it may be found in religious/political texts as well as in the products of the news media.”

In the group of “fringe” materials, we identified and included those materials which, according to Holbrook, had a content that from a religious or ideological standpoint is conservative and isolationist, politically radical and confrontational, but that does not go as far as legitimizing violence in the actual settings. These materials may include an expression of anger or hostility toward a given group of people, but without reaching the conclusion that they are sub-human beings and a logical objective of violence.

During the quantitative analysis of this research, we also encountered materials of the “extreme” category in the monitored media outlets, however such materials were
not numerous and mainly appeared in online media. The print media mostly features reporting or denunciations of such discourse and, although some of these reports include the full extreme texts that have been verified in online media, this research study does not consider them to be part of the agenda of the print media itself.

We would like to explain here that the materials of the “extreme” category in the online environment mainly circulate in the form of confidential interpersonal communication, conducted through the social networks or chats, where the monitoring mechanism would find it impossible to enter. Therefore, our research has mainly focused on those materials and platforms that were possible to access and monitor.

In the midst of online materials that belong to the “Extreme” category, we verified materials that contain an endorsement and glorification of violence in contemporary contexts and dehumanization of others, for instance, the declaration of an extremist legitimizing the horrible execution of the Jordanian Air Force pilot by ISIS forces, the display of sympathy for known Albanian terrorists in ISIS ranks, the call for igniting a Jihad in Russia and kill Russian soldiers, the threatening video in the Albanian language that threatens Albanians with explosives, the other video that calls on Albanians in Macedonia to take up arms for holy war; the call of an imam to move on to the third Intifada against Jews and stab them with knives, the article promoting murder as punishment for homosexuals, etc.

A total indexing of all identified materials shows that in the case of the print media, discourse goes as far as the “fringe” level and there were no cases of the “Extreme”
discourse. On the other hand, in online media, extremist discourse goes as far as the “Extreme 3” level.

Below is a graphic presentation of the scope of the spectrum for the two groups of the monitored media outlets 1. Newspapers, 2. Online media:

*Scope of the spectrum of extremism for the two groups of monitored media outlets*

![Graph showing the scope of extremism for print media and online media]

In more concrete terms, the division of materials by category is presented in the following table and graphic:

*Table of the division of materials by category of the Index*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media category/ type of materials</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Fringe</th>
<th>Extreme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Print media</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online media</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As may be seen from the above table and graphic, the largest number of total materials was found in online media outlets. This was the case for several reasons: first, because online media have fewer gatekeepers; second, because online media, especially those of a religious character, have been founded by foreign organizations based in countries where religious extremism is relatively high, and therefore, extremist discourse in them is more frequent; third, because the number of monitored online media is much greater than of the print media; and fourth, because the monitoring period for the online media outlets was longer.

Meanwhile, the proportional ratio between materials of the “Moderate” category and those in the “fringe” category, in the case of the print and online media, is close.

It should be said that part of the materials in general were identified in religious websites, mainly those of the Islamic faith, which appear to be in very large numbers in the Albanian language compared to the number of the population and contain a conservative literature and
approach from almost all schools and trends of Islam currently developing in the world. The deputy chair of the Albanian Muslim Community says in his interview that the Community only has three websites that are its own: the institutional website (http://www.kmsh.al/) as well as the two websites of the community Drita Islame (Islamic Light) and Zani i Naltë (Higher Voice). On the other hand, the monitoring conducted in the context of this research study encountered the existence of some hundreds of religious Islamic websites in the Albanian language. This shows that in the case of the physical territory, only a minority is out of AMC’s control, while in the case of the virtual “territory” of the Albanian Islamic faith, its absolute majority is out of the control or attention of AMC.

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40 Interview with Bujar Spahiu, Deputy Chairman of the Albanian Muslim Community, conducted in the context of this research study. Interviewed by Laert Miraku
6. Extremist religious discourse in Albanian media – a qualitative approach

At present, the most widespread and active form of extremist religious discourse in the Albanian print and online media, as noted by the monitoring, is the Islamist extremist discourse. This discourse takes place at the same time in two contexts: in the global context as well as in the local context. In the global context, the discourse seeks to promote and encourage the spread of political Islam, presenting it as the sole and the right model for the organization of the human society, which goes beyond borders and nations and is served as a universal model that will challenge and the replace the model of modern liberal-democratic societies, a model that is considered “in crisis.” In the local Albanian context, this discourse seeks to challenge those features and those specific values of the Albanian society that are seen as obstacles for the social model of political Islam.

Below we are presenting the main forms and topics of this discourse featured in the print media in Albania and in online media in the Albanian language.
Religious identity versus national identity

In a multi-religious society like the Albanian one, it is impossible for religion, whichever faith it is, to serve as a unifying and integrating entity for the entire society. Being aware of that, the country’s elites, from the time of the Renaissance, provided and promoted national identity as the unifying and integrating entity. In the name of social peace and harmony, this identity has been valued and accepted generally as primary vis-à-vis religious identity and other identities.

Thus, there has always been a clear response for the religious identity/national identity dilemma and this has been formulated in the well-known saying by Pashko Vasa “the religion of Albanians is Albanianism.” With massive popular support, the primacy of national identity over religious identity may be considered not only as one of the precious values but also as a model feature of the construction and functioning of the Albanian society. Therefore, from the standpoint of this research, any view that challenges or seeks to overturn the rapport national identity/religious identity in favor of the latter is considered a tendency or display of extremism.

Albanian national identity has encountered various challenges throughout history, but the most open and the most threatening challenge to it has been displayed only in recent years and it comes from the Islamist extremist discourse, which has been also covered or reported in the media. A typical expression of this discourse is the statement, “First I am Muslim, then I am Albanian,” made by an interviewee on TV Klan’s “Opinion” show.
and extensively reported in almost all Albanian media. Another character, also interviewed by the media, uses the occasion to express personal pride for the fact that religion is his first choice over his national identity: “For me religion comes first and I say that proudly and do not hide it. Whoever hides this has no connection with Islam.” Aside from personal statements, the media also reports organized forms such as the movement “Proud to be Muslim,” which is articulated as juxtaposed to known slogans with a nationalistic background such as “Proud to be Albanian,” “How good to be Albanian,” etc. It is clear that these developments, compared to the postulate of Pashko Vasa and the century-old reality of the domination of national identity, mark an evident shift toward the extreme.

In an analysis published in the media, Veton Surroi considers this challenge to national identity the greatest threat that Albanians are exposed to today: “The danger of Wahhabism and Salafism may be measured with the violence of ISIS and here, no doubt, there are cities and nations that are more threatened than Albanians. But, beyond terrorism, Albanians are the most jeopardized nation in Europe because ISIS, i.e. Wahhabism and Salafism, touch upon its essence. Being a nation that is founded by integrating religions inside it and not built under the umbrella of a certain religion, the Albanian national identity does not allow one religion to develop any rule

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41 http://www.gazetatema.net/web/2015/11/20/me-se-pari-jam-mysliman-pastaj-shqiptar-skenderbeu-nuk-eshte-heroi-im/
42 http://www.oranews.tv/vendi/gerti-pashaj-nje-nga-muslimanet-ne-kerkim-per-terrorizem-nga-turqia-jam-i-pafajshem/
43 http://koha.net/?id=27&l=58096
over another. In the Wahhabi and Salafi interpretation, the Muslim is part of an ummah (a Muslim World) that stays above nations. So, therefore, with this interpretation, the religious identity of the Albanian Muslim is above his national identity.”

There are a number of factors that considerably increase the level of this threat. First, we have to do with a discourse imported from other realities and contexts that are imposed on the Albanian reality through a fundamentalist and radicalizing campaign. “We have a radical discourse in Albania that is born and refers to events taking place outside of Albania. And it is here that a great religious misunderstanding begins. You can’t carry from other countries religious phenomena on the basis of which religious adjudications or stances are articulated in an environment such as ours where they do not exist,” says theologian Ermir Gjinishi.

The approach that places religion above any other kind of identity is an approach imported mainly from the Middle East, where a number of mono-religious Islamic countries are organized, and even governed, on the basis of religious dogma. Yet, for a multi-religious country like Albania, such an approach infringes upon the vital equilibria of society, among which pluralism and religious harmony as well as secularism that is desired and accepted by all stand out.

Second, the degree of risk increases also because of the fact that the discourse underestimating the nation and

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44 Surroi, Veton; Terrorizmi/ Pse ne jemi më të rrezikuarit? Link: http://www.lapsi.al/ide/2015/11/27/terrorizmi-pse-ne-jemi-m%C3%AB-t%C3%AB-rrezikuarit
45 Interview with theologian Ermir Gjinishi in the context of this research study. Interviewed by Laert Miraku
national identity is being presented as an approach of the Islamic faith and is being developed and spread by local preachers and theologians of this religion as well as by the offline or online media in the Albanian language. In one of the interviews mentioned above, the interviewee further says: “Islam as a religion does not accept the concept of the nation state because national love and national hatred are loathed in Islam. That is why the prophet Mohammed has said that there is no primacy of the white over the black, of the black over the white and normally there is no primacy of the Arab over the non-Arab; Islam has not recognized the nation state even during the Ottoman empire and if you have noticed, many nations existed inside that empire although it was a single state.”

The article titled “Religion or nation: How Islamic Faith views this issue?” brings other arguments in favor of a preference for religion: “It should be known once and for good that religion comes before all, and it is from the standpoint of religion, i.e. the Islamic faith, that the nation is viewed as well... The creation of the nation was presented a lot later while religion existed a long, long time before the nation.”

Naturally, it takes no profound theological knowledge to notice that this is not a religious viewpoint, but a pure political discourse, influenced and inspired by the discourse of Islamist political ideology.

Third, the level of alarm and risk is increased by some attacks in recent years against known symbols or figures

46 http://www.oranews.tv/vendi/gerti-pashaj-nje-nga-muslimanet-ne-kerkim-per-terrorizem-nga-turqia-jam-i-pafajshem/
of national pride, such as Gjergj Kastrioti – Scanderbeg, Mother Teresa, etc. The situation becomes even more disturbing when one notices that the denigrating campaign against these symbols stems from and is developed by known individuals of the Muslim community.

One of the supporters of political Islam in Kosovo says in an interview: “since Scanderbeg shed the blood of Albanians for religious motives, I cannot consider him a national hero.” He then continues to argue: “According to authentic history books and according to historians and analysts from Tirana, a number of things became clear. That Scanderbeg had not raised the red and black flag in Krujë but rather the Byzantium flag; that the Covenant of Lezhë was not an Albanian Covenant, but a Covenant of different nations of the Christian faith to fight against the Ottoman Empire. In other words, the Covenant was organized on a religious basis and not on a national basis, because in the early medieval times, the nations had not been born yet and it did not matter at all what language you spoke when the religious interest came to the fore. According to history, Scanderbeg, upon returning to Krujë, told Albanian Muslims to choose between Christianity or death; most of them refused to abandon the Islamic faith and he slaughtered them without mercy.”

It is no coincidence that after Scanderbeg, the target, with the same syntax of discourse, is Mother Teresa: “Before reading Rousseau of the Tower, the Muslim learns

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the letters of Albanian in the ABC with Mother Teresa, the purest example of denationalization in the name of religious vocation.” Throughout the course of their history, Albanians have adored and glorified Scanderbeg, Mother Teresa or other idols for their Albanian origin and not for their religious origin and their contributions have been seen as part of national pride and affiliation and not part of any religious pride or affiliation.

Extremist discourse follows the opposite direction. In order to invalidate these symbols nationally, it tries to “compromise” them religiously. This discourse seeks to prove that everything non-Muslim in Albania is at the same time also un-national. And, as a result, only that that is Muslim is also national. This has been the discourse that has inspired even violent extremists to undertake acts of vandalism toward the busts of Scanderbeg or others who make calls for “the urgent removal of her bust (of Mother Teresa – author’s note) from all of Albania’s squares because she carries a cross in all of these busts.”

By using the religious meter to determine a national unit, the intent of Islamist discourse is to promote the creation of a society in which national identity should be subdued before religious identity. According to this discourse, it is not national symbols but rather “mosque

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49 Albanian Muslism in the face of “laic” extremism, Link: http://www.e-zani.com/2015/12/14/myslimanet-shqiptare-perballe-eks-tremizmit-laik/

50 http://www.gazetatema.net/web/2014/02/19/foto-lajmgjendet-i-perdhosur-busti-i-skenderbeut-esh-te-gjysme-cjap-gjysme-njeri-madje-ka-bisht/

minarets that are the real signs of distinguishing between us and Slavic-Orthodox enemies.”

In the efforts for the denationalization of the society and its unification into one single religion, extremist thesis approach the border of the absurd, propagating that where the Albanians are placed today, there were no Albanians until recently and that Turkey brought them here, or propagating that “Islam arrived in Albanian lands long before the Ottomans.”

In the face of this panorama of an anti-national discourse, it is natural that the question be asked in the context of this research: What has been the role of the media in all this? Our monitoring indicates that this discourse has mostly been denounced rather than promoted by the media itself. Yet again, the presence in agendas and opening of the media to extremist characters, as in the case of some interviews in newspapers and television stations, may become the basis for planting or strengthening extremist theses.

**Religious tolerance and its “entirely different reading”**

After the acceptance of national identity as a primary identity vis-à-vis the religious one, a vital challenge for the Albanian society in the context of fulfilling its social pact

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54 Muhamed Sytari: Islam arrived in Albanian lands long before the Ottomans, Mapo newspaper, 15 August 2015
has been to find the best possible formula for religious co-existence. This formula, implemented and tested often through the waves of history, has usually been labeled “religious tolerance” or “religious harmony.” It should be said that religious tolerance in Albania has been and continue to be a crucial part of the existing social order in the country. It is not a social hypothesis, but a social fact. Taking into consideration the fact that one of the signs of extremism is the challenge to an existing social order or social pact, in the approach of this research study, any attempt that challenges or infringes upon religious tolerance is classified as extremism, because it represents a position that is distanced from the mainstream situation. Particularly serious in the Albanian case are especially those approaches challenging religious tolerance that are inspired by the typical intolerance of some of the extremist doctrines, such as Islamism and atheism.

In the discourse of Albanian media, the challenge to religious tolerance appears in different forms. However, the form that is most present in the midst of articles of this category is the one providing “an entirely different reading of the tolerance between religions,” as a known analyst labels his analysis. This standpoint of reading the phenomenon is dominated by the controversial debate, which deals with the analysis of terms and supposed factors and raises question marks and doubts that are often unnecessary with regard to the existence of religious tolerance in Albania.

55 An entirely different reading of the tolerance between religions, Shqip newspaper, September 29, 2015
In the context of this “debate for a debate,” there are authors who try to prove that a real fact, such as religious tolerance, is just a “fake myth,” a “façade,” “an excessive simplification of history,” an “artifice,” etc. The author of the story “Religious tolerance in Albania, façade or true?” from his standpoint, does not see tolerance in this process: “Unfortunately, I think we have to do with a religious co-existence (helped by religious indifference) that should not necessarily contain tolerance inside it.”

Along the same lines, another author places religious harmony in brackets and he does not see signs of tolerance either: “The historical truth is that there were two ideologies of power in the XIX – XX centuries: nationalism, which was built by placing Albanianism above religious faiths and God and the communism of Enver Hoxha, who added atheism to this nationalism, which then caused religious “harmony,” making them indifferent toward religions, but not for the same reason also tolerant toward one-another and others. On the contrary, precisely the suppression in the name of national and class hatred of universal moral principles such as those of love of man for man, of mercy and sacrifice for the other, of pardon and repentance, which religions have conveyed through the centuries, has made them more violent and intolerant.”

In an approach with an atheistic background, another author writes: “There is one thing that should be made

\footnotesize{http://www.respublica.al/arkiv-opinion/toleranca-fe-tare-n%C3%AB-shqip%C3%ABri-fasad%C3%AB-apo-e-v%C3%ABrtet%C3%AB}

\footnotesize{http://perpjekja.blogspot.al/2014/09/qe-papa-francesku-te-mos-keqperdoret.html}
clear to Albanians all day every day. You want to keep this nation alive? Ok, don’t take religions too seriously. You want to undermine the nation? Become zealous believers.\textsuperscript{58}

Such a standpoint equates the devoted believer with the extremist. But, as David Cameron noted, “This is profoundly wrong. Someone can be a devout Muslim and not be an extremist. We need to be clear: Islamist extremism and Islam are not the same thing.”\textsuperscript{59}

It should be said that in the majority of the above articles, the denial of or doubts about tolerance are being used as a tool or way to state and affirm that tolerance. These analyses do not support or promote intolerance; on the contrary, the entire discourse is oriented toward achieving a religious tolerance that is as true and as complete as possible. That is the reason why many of the articles identified above may be classified as belonging to the moderate content category.

However, opening up in the media a debate that questions religious tolerance at a time when the bells of intolerance and extremist violence are ringing in the country and the entire world may be considered a wrong agenda at a wrong moment for the media and for some of the analysts in Albania. In an indirect way, this may favor or provide an argument to Islamist discourse of religious exclusivity and the refusal of tolerance and pluralism.

In the Albanian social pact, religious tolerance is considered by all as “sacred” and vital for ensuring social

\textsuperscript{58} An entirely different reading of tolerance between religions, Shqip newspaper, September 29, 2015

peace. Otherwise, religious intolerance might blow up the nation itself and light the flames of an endless civil war, as has taken place in those countries where religious intolerance has dominated.

**Islamic faith in transition – Salafi instead of Hanafi?**

The eradication of religious sites and the prohibition of religious rituals during the period of communism in the country gave a serious blow to religious thought, such that some theologians or heads of religious communities question whether any religious tradition had been left or whether it had died out because of the numerous years of oppression, “With such a long of atheism, we did not enjoy any kind of tradition any more. Tradition here was just a historical fact of the past. In the Albanian reality, all the elements, factors and features that create a tradition had been lost”—points out theologian Gjinishi. One of the heads of the Muslim Community stresses: “After the ‘90s, new religious institutions were rebuilt as physical sites, but most importantly, faith began to be built back up (the spiritual infrastructure).”

From this point, we can get to the rationale that in the circumstances of a lack of tradition, one might consider its re-foundation along or instead of a rebirth thereof. This is a thesis that leaves a lot of room for debate and it would complicate things considerably if it were to be part of any

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60 Interview with theologian Ermir Gjinishi, in the context of this research study. Interviewed by Laert Miraku

61 Interview with Bujar Spahiun, Deputy Chairman of the Albanian Muslim Community, conducted in the context of this research study. Interviewed by Laert Miraku
strategy or of the vision for the reconstruction of religious thought in the beginning of the ‘90s.

Whether it is a strategy or not, in the case of the Islamic faith in Albania, in parallel with its rebirth there was also its re-foundation, through new foreign schools and doctrines, which are now present in many areas of the country. As a result, the community of Sunni Muslims of Albania, as noted by Vickers, is divided into two groups: the Salafi fraction, which is a puritan anti-modernistic school that promotes a strict interpretation of the doctrine of Islam and the Hanafi school of the Albanian tradition, which evokes a more liberal traditional interpretation of Islam.\(^\text{62}\)

There have been organized displays of discontent toward this division. In the end of December 2015, almost all media outlets reported a protest by a number of believers and clerics of the Muslim faith in Librazhd toward the dividing spirit that the representatives of new trends of the interpretation of Islam were bringing to the community. The statement of representatives of the Muslim clerics, a statement that was read at the rally of this group, read, “Today, we are witnesses to a situation that has caused clashes with traditional Islam. The traditional trend of the Islamic faith in Albania is being attacked.”\(^\text{63}\)

Meanwhile, the leading media outlets in the country also consider the situation very serious: “Now there are efforts, by a small minority, for the traditional form of Islam

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\(^{63}\) *Imams and mullahs of Librazhd: Mufti Taulant Bica should go, he’s dividing believers*, Link: http://www.balkanweb.com/site/imame-e-hoxhallare-te-librazhdit-te-ike-myftiu-taulant-bica-po-per-can-besimtaret/
to change, and deep down to its roots. When we have to do with a tradition that is hundreds of years old, it is clear that it is not possible for it to transform so quickly. The only form of fast transformation is violence, combined with the pressure of money, and unfortunately this is happening. Today, there are attempts for the Albanian interpretation of Islam to be subjected to the political interests of Islamic groups or even of countries sponsoring it.”

It should be said that the reaction of AMC toward this situation has been lukewarm. With regard to the events inside the community of Sunni Muslims, the head of the Albanian Muslim Community, in an interview for the media says: “Sometimes, we misinterpret even Islamic terminology. It does not mean that this division we make of the different trends, whether Halafi, or Salafi, defines the entire community. In other words, not all Salafis are problematic.” This, however, does mean that there are also problematic ones among the Salafi.

A research of the European Parliament points out that Salafism, which Islamist fundamentalism also derives from “Islamic fundamentalism stems from Salafism, a socio-political movement that emerged in Egypt in the 19th century within Sunni Islam, which opposed integration into main-stream Western European societies. Salafists believe that Muslims must return to the path of the Prophet and adhere literally to the Koran. Given their conservative religious lifestyle, all Salafists can be considered fundamentalists, but not all violent militants. Only Salafist

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64 Our societies attacked by Political Islam, Shqip newspaper, August 30, 2015

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Jihadism focuses on the use of violence to bring about radical change. The jihadists advocate the use of violence to create a new caliphate and win back territories once ruled by Muslims. Following their teachings, the jihadists reject religious pluralism and aspire to dominance of political Islam in the whole world."\(^{65}\)

In spite of this profile of Salafism, this theological trend managed to penetrate into the Albanian society and today we are in front of a fait accompli. Salafism today has its own sites (within and beyond the control of AC), its own preachers, and the support of extensive offline literature in the Albanian language. Particularly in the online environment, infrastructure appears more complete; there are many websites that are devoted to the teaching of Islam according to the interpretation of this school or other approximate schools. In order to better understand the messages that these websites convey, one may read the article called “May Allah reward the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with the best reward, for the implementation of the Sheriatic punishment of anyone who deserves it,”\(^{66}\) which deals with the punishment issued just a few days ago against some clerics in Saudi Arabia.

Some Islamic religious websites also feature articles that require that extremism is not seen as an exclusivity of Salafists and that a difference be made between Salafism

\(^{65}\) *Religious fundamentalism and radicalisation*, Parlamenti Europian, European Parliamentary Research Service, Autore: Anita Orav, Mars 2015, f.3

and Takfirism. In the article “Don’t blame the Salafis for ISIS,” the author argues that the ideology that inspires ISIS is not Salafism, but rather Takfirism. “One of the issues that helps us understand this violence is the ideology of Takfirism; or the act of expulsing other Muslims; declaring them as outlaws of Islam. This dangerous practice provides them with the opportunity to attack other Muslim without any problem. Although some Salafis, contemporary or past, may have used the Takfiri, this is not an problem exclusively of Salafis.”

Another comment about the article “Jihadism: a generational and nihilistic revolt,” underscores: “Mistaking Salafism with Takfirism is just as dangerous as mistaking Islam with terrorism. All the characteristics that the author has mentioned fit perfectly the persons with Takfiri ideas, or mostly those who consider themselves ‘Salafist Jihadists,’ who are in fact more Takfiri than Salafi.”

Anyway, in spite of some kind of care to separate Salafism from violent extremism and ISIS the other terms of the discourse on religious websites of these new trends are typically fundamentalist, featuring among others even intolerance toward “nonbelievers,” a term that in the Salafi meaning includes the believers of other faiths. As an example, we may mention the story “Imani and Kufri,” published on a religious website that says:

“Kufri (nonbelieving – author’s note) does not consist only of the denial of the fundamental principles of akide. There are also some acts that, if committed, represent Kufri.

67 http://observer.al/mos-fajesoni-selefjte-per-isis-in/
They may be summarized in one expression: “Adoring others other than Allah.” Adoring is a right only of Allah and directing adoration toward anyone or anything other than Allah is shirk (polytheism), just as praying (bowing) to someone else other than Allah. Man may become Kaffir (nonbeliever) by saying offending words for the Creator, the Praised and the Heightened or for Islam, for Prophet, or saying words that make fun of Islam or supporting words for wrong ideologies such as Judaism or Christianity or suing Islam for imperfection, backwardness, etc.”

With regard to the stance that should be taken toward non-believers, the author says: “The Muslim should consider non-believers enemies and should hate them because of their Kufri, just has he hates their Kufri (non-believing).”

Using excluding and denying optics toward other religions, the author of another article titled “For my Christian friends!” writes: “It is time to think to yourself about who you’re adoring. Your belief that Jesus is ‘Lord,’ runs against Bible lessons. ...The Bible today is no longer the word of God, but just a story written by man’s mind and imagination.”

To give a general evaluation, we could say that religious online media outlets in the Albanian language that are inspired by Salafism and other extremist trends are characterized by a radicalizing platform, which contains all the terms of religious fundamentalism, which may be summarized in the following requirements:

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69 Imani dhe Kufri, Link: http://www.tezkije.com/artikulli/95

70 For my Christian friends!, Link:http://radio-pendimi.com/web-faqe/per-miqet-e-mi-te-krishtere/

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Believers should go back to absolute and unchangeable rules founded in the past.
These rules only allow one interpretation among believers, and
Religious rules should prevail over secular ones.\textsuperscript{71}

We would hereby make clear that these terms are no unique only to Islamic fundamentalism; in fact, the term religious fundamentalism was originally used for the Protestant resurrective movement in the beginning of the 1900s in the United States, and refers to similar movements within Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism.\textsuperscript{72} Given that these other forms of fundamentalism are almost inexistent in Albania, the main attention today is focused on Islamic fundamentalism, which is now present and problematic in the Albanian reality.

\textit{Sharia or the rule of law of liberal democracy? Caliphate in the horizon...}

Sharia instead of the rule of law? Whether we believe it or not, this debate is taking place in Albania. Although peripheral and isolated, it does reflect the depth of the penetration of Islamist doctrines in those segments of the society affected by them and under the influence of ISIS propaganda in the country. The debate appears both on the theoretical, political or ideological level, conducted

\textsuperscript{71} Religious fundamentalism and radicalisation, Parlamenti Europian, European Parliamentary Research Service, Autore: Anita Orav, Mars 2015, f.3

\textsuperscript{72} Koopmans,Ruud, Religious fundamentalism and hostility against out-groups: a comparison of Muslims and Christians in Western Europe, në Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 41:1, 2014, f. 33-57
mainly on online religious websites, and on the concrete front, as a motto or part of the creed and practical action of Albanian Islamists related to violent extremism.

Islamist doctrines are known for their anti-secularism and for refusing liberal democracy and the rule of law. They promote state-forming structures based on and confined by religion, where the body of religious rules, otherwise known as the Sharia, governs instead of the law.

The story entitled “Is the study of law school for a Muslim believer?” stresses that “one of the main pillars of the faith of a Muslim is the belief that only the Allah carries the absolute judgment and He alone is worthy as a lawmaker (El Hakimije). The Magnificent Lord in the noble Kur’an says: “The decision (judgment) is only up to Allah. He alone can proclaim the truth and He is the best Judge.” (Enam, 57) Since the school of law teaches laws made by men and these are in contravention of those coming down from the Magnificent Lord, then by learning this knowledge, the believer is faced with the dilemma of agreeing with them, or to work with them by leaving the laws of the Lord aside, or to give priority to those laws that are instead of the laws of the Lord and there is no doubt that all these could lead the Muslim toward Kufri (non-believing).”

At a more general level, Islamist discourse propagates “the end of the nation-state and liberal democracy” or the “crisis of modernism” on the one hand and the “emergence

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73 Is the study of the field of law allowed for a Muslim believer? Link: http://radio-pendimi.com/webfaqe/a-lejohet-studimi-i-drejtim-it-te-juridikut-per-nje-besimtar-musliman/  
74 http://www.profetimuhamed.info/islami-dhe-kriza-e-modern-izmit/
of a new Islamic civilization”\textsuperscript{75} on the other. The story “Resonance of Islam and the rebirth of the days of ‘cultural invasion’ alludes that ‘the days of the invasion of idea for the superiority of liberal democracy and its immunity to challenges from other systems are over.’\textsuperscript{76} Another story “Islamic Revival: A Western perspective of the problem” talks about “an Islamic identity on universal rise,” or about “Global Muslim Identity” and the revival of Islam is seen as an exchange of places with the westernizing approach, something ordinary in governments of the beginning of the XX century.”\textsuperscript{77} “Modern circumstances freed the pendulum of this unsustainable oscillation and pushed the gravity center, ultimately and for good, away from the pluralistic, hierarchical, organizational, Durkheimian type and toward higher Islam”\textsuperscript{78}–says another story.

In more specific terms, some Islamic religious websites express rejection toward the values of Western democracy, such as for instance the freedom of speech or human rights. “Muslims do not believe in the concept of freedom of speech and their actions are determined through the

\textsuperscript{75} http://www.mediaelire.net/lajm/4018/bota-muslim-me-duhet-te-shkoje-drejt-krijimit-te-qyteterimit-te-ri-islamik/
\textsuperscript{76} Resonance of Islam and the rebirth of the days of cultural “revolution,” Link: http://www.rtvbesa.com/rezonanca-e-islamit-dhe-rilindja-e-diteve-te-pushtimit-kulturor/
\textsuperscript{77} Islamic Revival: A western perspective of the problem, Link: http://www.e-zani.com/2015/10/21/rigjallerimi-islam-nje-perspektive-perendimore-e-problemit/
holy revelation and not on the basis of men’s desires” – a Muslim cleric representative says in the media.

In the debate of human rights, Islamists deny both the recognition of universal human rights and the principle of equal rights for all, especially for women. It is a known fact that in Albania, women enjoy a number of rights and on many fronts, she does not differ from women in Western societies. However, in recent years, although in very small numbers, there have been cases of the limitation of women’s activity solely within house chores or cases of their exclusion from public activity. The propagation and imposition by male members of the family of the way of life according to the Salafist conservative concept has had an impact on this.

The story “Women’s employment according to the standpoint of the Islamic Sharia” presents the entire code of rules of the Sharia on women’s engagement in labor, although this code is in contravention of the Constitution and other laws and makes no sense to propose in a country like Albania. Thus, this code comes as an alternative to replace the law and as a challenge to the very liberal-democratic society and to its positioning vis-à-vis women. Besides limitations with regard to work, the code also presents other limitations for women, for instance:

“There should not be any getting together or alone with strange males, because this mixture has a negative impact on the aspects of moral. This is so because the Dispatched s.a.w.s. drew attention by saying: “The male should not be alone with a strange woman because the devil is the third between them.”

She should not display her beauty. This means that the woman who is engaged should make sure as to not display her beauty and not encourage others. She should be decorated in a devoted manner to the Lofty Allah, because when she is devoted she preserves herself from evils and does not encourage others toward evil.

She should be covered with the Islamic veil, without displaying before others anything other than what is permitted. “Tell believers to stop looks (from haram), preserve the shameful parts of the body as this is cleaner for them. Allah is knowledgeable in detail about what they do.”

The treatment of marginalized groups such as LGBT ones by analysts of Islamist websites appears in an open and complete contravention of the concept of freedom and human rights that exists in Western societies. Thus, the article “Judgment of homosexuals in Islam” provides an extremist and violent approach to the issue. “Scholars have demonstrated disagreements about the punishment for homosexuals. The most accurate view is that he is killed, no matter what kind of killing, both of the active and the passive individual, if both did it in lust (not with violence) and the one who has not reached puberty is punished. Then, the homosexual himself is tested with illnesses that can’t be cured, as has happened in America with the AIDS (HIV) disease.”

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As was noted above, besides the debate at the theoretical political or ideological front, the Sharia appears also as a precondition or part of the creed and action by Albanian Islamists connected to violent extremism. Thus, one of the individuals arrested and charged with recruitment of persons to serve ISIS, refuses to be adjudicated by the laws of the Albanian state and prefers to be adjudicated by the laws of Allah alone.”

By fully refusing the model of the rule of law and liberal democracy, Islamist extremists propose the Caliphate as an alternative. In an interview in the media, another individual accused of ties to ISIS, states: “The Caliphate is a good place to live if you are a Muslim believer.” The Imam of one of the mosques in Tirana that is out of AMC control speaks out along the same lines: “Every real Muslim likes to live where he can be judged by Islamic law. Every sincere Muslim would want to live with the Islamic law in the Caliphate,” – he says.

In online Islamist media, the alternative of the Caliphate is not presented only as a desire or dream of a devoted Muslim believer; it is also articulated as a global political project whose final goal it is to build the so-called “last state” or the “state of divine justice.” An article by a foreign
author and translated into Albanian, published in online media outlets, maintains that “the Muslim community has not fulfilled its final goal: building the State of Divine Justice!” However, “According to a noted hadith, from Shiite sources, Imam Xhafer Sadiku (a.s.) has said: “The state built by Imam Mehdiu (a.s.) will be the last state on the face of the earth!” The Muslim community believes that Imam Mehdiu will build the state of divine justice, under whose leadership all of the societies and peoples of the world will unite under a single flag.”

Such theses of Political Islam have never been articulated in the Albanian language before and have not been offered to Albanians as an alternative throughout the existence of traditional Islam. However, new extremist trends are planting these theses with each passing day and the above statements of sympathy by some Albanian extremists toward the Caliphate are an indicator of the fact that the foreign seeds planted during the last two decades have given birth to its own seedlings even in a European place like Albania. The display of these theses in the current contexts of the ISIS war, which is inspired precisely by the idea of the creation of a state of divine justice, is very dangerous and a serious threat to the Albanian society and its European future.

**Anti-Western and anti-American discourse and the thesis of double standards**

Extremist anti-Western and anti-American discourse is present not only in online media but also in *mainstream media* outlets. It assumes different forms, among which the most widely used is the type of discourse that poses the question: “Who causes terrorism” and whose response finds the cause in the West and the United States. For the most part, this kind of discourse blames military interventions of the West in the Middle East and Afghanistan and the policy pursued by the West toward these countries. An outburst of this kind of discourse was noticed especially after the terrorist attacks of November 2015 in Paris.

An article with the title “We mourn the victims of Paris: our wars, not Islam, are the cause,” citing a German journalist who was allowed to enter inside ISIS territory says, “Islam is not the reason for ISIS terror, the wars of the West are. Above all, it is the Iraq war of George Bush who, from October 2003, was leading the founding of ISIS.”

In this case, one notices the attempt to create a West/Islam collision and to find the guilty party in this collision.

The same Western journalist, on another religious website, is quoted as saying, “There are 45 Muslim states in the world. None of them in the last 200 years ever attacked any Western country. We were always the ones who were attacked militarily. The bloody wars of the

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86 *We mourn the victims of Paris: our wars, not Islam, are the cause*, Link: http://www.asabija.com/vajtojme-viktimat-e-parisit-shkaku-jane-lufterat-tona-jo-islami/
crusades, colonization, the First and the Second World War, the terrible massive annihilation by Chinese and Soviet communists, the holocaust of Jews in Europe – all these crimes were not committed by Muslims.”

An analysis published in one of Albania’s daily newspapers states, “It was the governments of these countries that opened Pandora’s box with Syria, with geo-oil policies in the Persian Gulf, with the cold observation of ISIS, and that’s why they (terrorists – author’s note) chose precisely the spectators of a rock concert in Bataclan and removed from this life about 100 youths.”

To enhance their anti-Western and anti-American discourse, some religious websites keep translating even articles or speeches by authors or leaders from the Middle East. Thus, these websites featured a translated version of a call by the Supreme leader of Iran Ayatollah Khomeini to youths in Western countries after the November terrorist attacks in Paris.

“And today, there are few people who are informed about the role of the United States of America in the foundation, supply and arming of Al Qaeda, Taliban and the ghastly followers” – the call says – “Besides this direct support, the open and known supporters of Takfist terrorism, although they have the most backward political systems, they have always been aligned among allies of the West, at a time when the most shining and advanced ideas deriving from progressive democracies in the region have been

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88 In the eye of the plague, Tema newspaper, November 15, 2015
crushed in a merciless manner. The West’s double-faced stance toward the wave of awakening in the Islamic World is a clear example of contradictions in Western policies. This contradiction is clearly seen in the West’s support for the state terrorism of Israel.”

Some other articles feature a general anti-war discourse, for instance the article “No to war, with war!” that asks: “Can war be resolved by war? Can terror be resolved by terror?” – which in essence is against the military intervention of the West in the conflict created by ISIS.

As may be seen in the monitoring that we conducted, most of the anti-Western and anti-American discourse is found in websites of the Islamic faith and in some cases it is placed even at the service of the Islamist discourse. Thus, the story with the title “Resonance of Islam and the rebirth of the cultural ‘invasion,’” after listing a long list of typical Islamist accusations against the West, reaches the conclusion that these accusations “dismantle the thesis about the superiority of liberal democracy and legitimize with each passing day the call for a fair system, for a real cultural rebirth, even if it is called an invasion by others, that would avoid these discrepancies and serious cracks that are present in all fields. This is seen increasingly with each passing day as a positive approach of Western inhabitants toward Islam and issues related to Muslims.”


Another group of articles in the context of anti-Western discourse are those publishing or addressing suppositions and conspiracy theories with regard to terrorist acts or the creation of ISIS. One of these articles refers again to a Western individual, namely to political analyst from the United States of America Paul Craig Roberts, who is quoted as having said that “the attack in Paris where over 100 French citizens lost their lives was a well-organized operation by specialized secret services of France and that the action had no connection with terrorism from Islamic countries.”

An article published in a daily newspaper with the sensational title “Discovered! This is who is behind ISIS” maintains that, “Al Jazeera’ through British newspaper “Daily Mail” published the story that the American Media Institute managed to access a copy of a secret document, which proves that Israeli intelligence stands behind the Islamic State of Sham and Iraq).”

In another newspaper, the author of the story goes even deeper into his conspiracy rhetoric:

“Although there has been and there is an intensive prejudicial and manipulating propaganda, it is very likely that ISIS is a secret multinational ‘laboratory creature’ than of a ‘normal pregnancy’ of the Islamic faith itself. Generally, the ISIS terrorist acts, especially those in London, Paris, Tunis (March 18, 2015), Beirut, etc., have shown that we have to do with scenarios prepared by experienced ‘directors’ and ‘actors.’ Naturally, the question arises: Where did they learn and assimilate the art of terror? In

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91 French secret services committed the attack in Paris, Link: http://www.mediaelire.net/lajm/3785/sulmin-ne-paris-e-kryen-sherbimet-sekrete-franceze/
desert schools or mosque schools? From Eastern-Arab Imams, generally with beards, but without any titles or intellectual work or from Israeli, Turkish, Arab, American-Western, British and other ‘professors’ with an abundance of ‘works,’ in the area of secret services, military, terrorist and anti-terrorist operations, for the elimination of dangerous individuals or who knew secrets, which they should take to their graves, for overthrowing of dictators and regimes?”

It is common knowledge that the presence of conspiracy approaches in the agenda of media outlets does not help inform readers accurately; to the contrary, it creates even more confusion in them, as has happened in the case of the above articles, which have dubious or made up sources. Besides, such approaches, just as the rest of the above discourse, may be placed in the service of encouraging anti-Western, anti-Semite, or anti-American hatred.

Another thesis that is often encountered in the extremist anti-Western discourse is the thesis of double standards. According to this thesis, Western societies and media treat terrorists acts committed in Europe and those committed in the Middle East or other non-Western countries of the world with double standards and “precisely this double standard is destroying the world.”

92 ISIS, “the devil” that has come out of the bottle, Shqip newspaper, November 20, 2015
94 The attacks in France and our hypocritic solidarity, Link: http://www.lapsi.al/ide/2015/11/16/sulmet-n%C3%AB-franc%C3%AB-dhe-solidariteti-yn%C3%AB-hipokrit#.Vm_ZsflViko
as “Why are killers considered terrorists only when they are Muslim?”

The article of a Western author called “The Paris tragedy pointed out our hidden racism,” translated on a religious website, reads: “We mourn the deaths in Paris, but we do not notice those who were killed in Lebanon the day before, most certainly by the same fanatics who committed the attacks in Paris.”

The media is also accused of a double standard: “Like always, the media coverage of this incident (of the terrorist acts in Paris – author’s note) has been disproportionate, leaving aside the terrorist attacks in Lebanon by the same terrorist, who killed about 50 people and injured 250 others in Lebanon’s capital, Beirut.”

Meanwhile, some of the main media outlets provide another opposition approach to the thesis of double standards. “All those who attempt to play down this risk (the risk of political Islam – author’s note), act like interesting types, stressing the mistakes of the West, drawing irrelevant parallels between terrorist acts, between terrorist factions, between Beirut or Damascus and what happened in Paris, or others who pretend that the terror of ISIS is replacing their powerlessness or apathy toward corrupt governments in the region, are really the dangerous allies of this ideology.” – says an article of Tema newspaper.

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96 We should defend Paris in Tirana, Tema newspaper, November 15 2015
A reaction to the thesis of double standards was also published in the newspaper *Panorama*: “Alongside the endless messages of solidarity there was no shortage of rhetorical questions: ‘Why isn’t the same solidarity as with the victims in France demonstrated with those in Syria or Iraq?’ This rhetoric only aggravates the alarm of the situation. Anyone questioning and accusing of the lack of solidarity with every life lost in Syria in fact is just waiting for the moment to jump against. ... Whoever who raises the pseudo-issue of inequality of the values of human life in Paris and Baghdad, in fact, seeks revenge... Anyone alluding that the Paris massacre is a response to what is happening in Syria is equaling the Syrian people with a terrorist organization.”

*In extremis – Legitimizing, glorifying and promoting extreme violence*

Aside from moderate theoretical discourse that goes as far as the fringe category, the online environment in the Albanian language appears time after time also features a discourse that legitimizes, glorifies or promotes extreme violence, whether directed at military troops or toward different non-military groups or communities. This discourse, displayed especially in recent years, although rare and isolated, often resonates with violence in current contexts, such as the one carried out by ISIS.

The sources of this discourse have been mainly some online media outlets or segments of them controlled by ISIS or other extremist Islamist groups. However, displays

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97 *Encore La France*, Panorama newspaper, November 17, 2015
of the discourse in the form of denouncing it are also noted in media reports about cases of violent extremism by Islamist or extremist individuals.

In some of the violent extreme materials, we noticed a legitimization or promotion of violence toward military troops that are considered enemy ones. Thus, during an interview in the media, a person suspected of ties to ISIS, legitimizes the execution of the Jordanian Air Force pilot, who was burned alive inside a cage in the beginning of 2015, adding further that, “the pilot was not throwing candy.”  

Another material reported by the media talks about a call by ISIS and al-Nusra to spark off the Jihad in Russia. “If the Russian army kills people of Syria, then kill its people. If they kill our soldiers, you kill their soldiers,”  

This kind of discourse also features cases when preachers of the Islamic faith in Albania are involved. One of them legitimizes beheadings as a punishment applied by ISIS: “The biggest crimes in Syria have been committed by Assad and after Assad comes the anti-ISIS coalition that throws the majority of bombs on the people. That head in the hands of Lavdërim Muhaxheri reminded me of a French postal stamp featuring the cut off heads of Algerians” – he says in an interview for the media.  

98 http://www.reporter.al/toleranca-ne-prove-shqiperia-perbal-le-sfides-se-radikalizmit/
99 IS, al-Nusra: Light a ‘jihad’ in Russia, Tema newspaper, October 16, 2015
100 New Ring Road mosque imam: French are no better than Lavdrim Muhaxheri, Tema newspaper, November 21, 2015
Another material features sympathy for those fallen in the “holy war” of ISIS. “It was a beautiful story that Diamant’s mother thanked God for her son falling a shahid. I had respect also for his father because he was proud of the death of his son. It would be a pleasure to meet that special man”\textsuperscript{101} – says one of those accused of recruitments to serve ISIS during the trial hearing.

Media also report about a video by an extremist Imam from the Middle East calling for the murder of Hebrews in the name of Allah. “Stab them on the neck with a knife... It is not you killing them: it is Allah striking them,” the Imam appeals. He even recalls the example of Mohamed in 627, at the gates of Medina, who personally took part in the slaughter of 800 Jews. In his opinion, “what was called the ‘First Intifada’ began in December 1987 with attacks with rocks. The second Intifada began in September 2000 with AK47 attacks. The third Intifada, which has just begun, is the one by knife, with Muslim believers invited to stab Jews with knives.”\textsuperscript{102}

Albanian public opinion has received with indignation and concern some video messages produced by ISIS, in which Jihadists from Albania or Kosovo who are part of active ISIS troops, threaten all those who do not believe in Allah in Albania. The goal is to create panic and hesitation in the face of violent extremism. This is what one of these videos says: “I swear dark days will come for you. I swear you will be afraid to walk the streets. You will be afraid to

\textsuperscript{101} Imams of recruitments in Syria, trial ‘armored,’ Panorama newspaper, November 25, 2015
\textsuperscript{102} “Kill Jews in the name of Allah,” Imam ‘lectures’ with knife in hand in a mosque, Tema newspaper; October 12, 2015
work in your offices. You will be afraid and will be terrified and will be saddened in your homes. You will be afraid and will be terrified and will be saddened even in your dreams, even when you are asleep. We will overcome you, Allah permitting. We will strangle you, Allah permitting. We will come to you with explosives.”

Another video that is currently on YouTube again features an Albanian Jihadist of ISIS who makes an appeal for “eradicating, overcoming, and crushing the Kufri” (non-believer – author’s note).

In a reaction of ISIS toward some developments in Macedonia, there is an open call for war and terror. “The hour is coming, Albanians get ready for war! Tighten your palms, unite, become a fortification and do not be afraid if you die successfully! Terrorize the cross-holders and those who have abandoned faith (Taghuts and their helpers) wherever you catch them! So, grab your arms, grab your arms and fight to the last drop of blood, you knights of the Hilafet in Albania!” – says the message of ISIS sent to the newsroom of JavaNews.al.

As may be seen from all of the above examples, the extreme discourse coming mainly from online media appears in all the forms of violent discourse: As a discourse legitimizing or glorifying the use of violence against military personnel, but also against civilians who do not believe in Allah; as a discourse glorifying the war of ISIS and the fighters and martyrs dying for the Islamist cause, for the purpose of encouraging current militants; as
a discourse that features hatred toward specific groups or communities, and the call for violence toward them, etc.

Although materials containing such discourse are not numerous, they do present a high level of threat because they plant panic and hesitation in public and, on the other hand, may motivate certain individuals to engage in such violent acts. For that reason, one effective solution on the part of the media, but also on the part of security bodies would be the deterrence of such messages or materials so that they do not manage to get to the Albanian public. It would also be fruitful to promote and convey messages that denounce the real intentions and consequences of violent extremist propaganda.
7. Executive summary

The purpose of this research study was to explore and analyze, from a quantitative and qualitative standpoint, the religious extremist discourse in Albanian print and online media. To fulfill that goal, we first thought it reasonable to present the conceptual approach that the research would be based upon and to define an efficient methodology about the research and analysis that was undertaken. After that, we took a look along general lines at the historical religious context in Albania, with the confidence that highlighting this context would help provide to greater cohesion of the research study. In this framework is also reviewed the presence and spread of religious extremism in Albania during the years of the transition. After that, we moved on to the quantitative analysis of extremist discourse in the Albanian media, and then continued with its qualitative analysis, which looks at the more specific and acute terms of this discourse in the Albanian case.

The undertaking of this discourse was influenced also by some emerging developments that pointed to the presence in the country of one of the most disturbing forms of extremism at present, Islamist extremism.
The study makes a clear distinction between Islamist extremism as a political ideology and Islam as a religion, arguing that Islam is a faith that is followed peacefully and devotedly by over one billion people, while Islamist extremism is a political ideology that has the support of a minority. In the conceptual approach of this study, Islamist extremism is not a result of Islam, but of its misinterpretation and misuse for needs of political interests. On the other hand, the research stands by the position that Islamist extremism needs to be challenged and confronted rather than accommodated or tolerated by liberal democracies.

In the analysis of the presence and degree of the spread of Islamist extremism in Albania, the research study reaches the conclusion that this extremism has emerged as the result of the penetration in the country of some foreign trends of Sunni Islam such as Salafism, which renders a puritanistic and conservative interpretation of Islam and appears as a serious challenge to the Hanafi liberal school, which is the tradition of Albanian Sunni Muslims. Until the end of the '90s, extremism appeared mainly in radical preaching in some mosques in the country. The discovery of the activity of some terrorist Islamist organizations in the country and reports about the existence of Islamist religious mercenarism (ISIS military ranks include about 140 citizens of Albania) shed light about another dark and unknown side of the problem: that of the association of religious activity not only with radicalism but also with violent Islamist extremism.

Meanwhile, the situation in the online space, which features hundreds of websites of extremist interpretation schools of Islam, creates the impression that besides the
mercenarism of the gun, the mercenarism of the word is also developing. As a result, while hot bombardment is seen as a remote potential threat to Albania, the bombardment by words is already happening and intensifying with each passing day.

In its approach to extremism, this research had as a reference point the liberal-democratic constitutional model of Western societies, already adopted by Albania, as well as the specific system of values of the Albanian society, such as interreligious tolerance, the precedence of national identity versus other identities, respect for tradition, etc.

From a methodology standpoint, in order to minimize relativism and subjectivism in the course of work for the identification and indexing of extremism, the research was based on methodological instruments and mechanisms, such as the Extremism Monitoring Instrument EMI-20, or the Extremist Media Index proposed by Daniel Holbrook.

Most part of the research study is devoted to exploring and analyzing extremist discourse in the media. Normative discourse or what is considered to be “politically correct” was not part of this research. The target of the research included print media in Albania and online media in the Albanian language. The main research methods were monitoring and content analysis. For purposes of the research, we also conducted a series of interviews with representatives of religious communities in the country or experts of the area.

We selected the newspapers “Panorama,” “Shqip” and “Tema” from the print media. They were monitored for a four-month period from August 1 until November 30, 2015.
The monitoring of online media included media websites but also institutional or individual religious websites as well as social media. Online research was not localized from a territory standpoint but rather by language, meaning the online environment in the Albanian language. This was the case also because many websites do not declare the place of their founding or the location of their activity and it is often not possible to separate websites created in Albania from websites created in Kosovo or other countries.

Based on the monitoring of the three newspapers mentioned above and the online environment in the Albanian language, we identified a total of 284 materials that belong to the entire spectrum of the extremist index, starting from moderate material to extreme material. A total of 201 materials were identified in the online media and 83 were identified in the print media.

Indexing the monitored material points to the fact that among identified materials, there is a domination of materials whose content belongs to the category “Moderate.” However, there was a relatively considerable number of materials belonging to the category “Fringe,” whose content from a religious or ideological standpoint appears conservative, isolationist and politically radical and confrontational, but that does not legitimize violence in current scenarios.

During the quantitative analysis of this research in the monitored media we encountered material belonging to the “Extreme,” category, but these materials were not numerous and mainly appear in online media. Nevertheless, although scarce, they contain endorsement and glorification of violence in contemporary contexts and a dehumanization of others.
The general indexing of all identified materials indicates that in the case of the print media, discourse goes as far as the “Fringe” level and there are no cases of “Extreme” discourse. In online media, extremist discourse goes as far as the “Extreme 3” level.

The qualitative analysis undertaken in the context of this research study focused on the main terms of extremist discourse appearing in the print media in Albania and in online media in the Albanian language.

One of the topics of extremist religious discourse in Albanian media has been the underestimation of national identity and its submission to religious identity. The most open and most dangerous challenge to national identity appearing in recent years is the one coming from extremist Islamist discourse, presented or reported also in the media. According to Salafi extremist interpretation, religious identity is above national identity. By using the religious meter to determine national entity, the purpose of Islamist discourse is to promote the creation of a society in which national identity should be subdued to religious identity. But, in a multi-religious country like Albania, this approach harms the vital equilibria of the society, among which stand out the primacy of national identity over the religious one, as well as the pluralism and secularism that is desired and accepted by all.

Religious tolerance has also fallen prey to the extremist discourse of media. The challenge to religious tolerance appears in different forms, but the most frequent form in the writings of this category is the one providing for “an entirely different reading of tolerance between faiths.” This reading of the phenomenon is dominated by the controversial debate that deals with the analysis of terms
and supposed factors and raises questions and suspicions, often unnecessary, with regard to the existence of religious tolerance in Albania. In the context of this “debate for the sake of debate,” there are authors who attempt to prove that a real fact, such as religious tolerance, is just a “false myth,” a “façade,” “excessive simplification of history,” an “artifice,” etc.

Opening up in the media a debate that questions religious tolerance, at a time when in the country and throughout the world the bells of intolerance and extremist violence are tolling, may be considered a wrong agenda at a wrong moment for the media and for some analysts in Albania. In an indirect manner, this debate might favor or provide arguments to the Islamist discourse of religious exclusivity and the refusal of tolerance and pluralism. In the Albanian social pact, religious tolerance is considered by all “sacred” and vital for ensuring social peace. Otherwise, religious intolerance may blow up the nation itself and light up in the country the flames of a civil war without end, as has happened in those countries where religious intolerance has prevailed.

Extremist discourse in the media appears also through the terms of Salafi discourse that mainly takes place in the online media. Salafism is a socio-political movement born in Egypt in the 19th century among Sunni Islam ranks and that went against integration with the main European-Western societies. Considering their religious conservative way of life, all Salafists may be considered fundamentalists, but not all are violent militants. Only Salafist Jihadism focuses on the use of violence for generating social change. Jihadists evoke the use of violence for the creation of a new Caliphate and for getting hold of territories that once were
ruled by Muslims. Pursuing their lessons, Jihadists refuse religious pluralism and aspire the rule of political Islam throughout the world.

In spite of this profile of Salafism, this theological trend managed to penetrate the Albanian society and now we are in front of a fait accompli. Salafism has its own religious sites (whether under or outside AMC control), its own preachers, and it supported by extensive literature offline and online in the Albanian language. Particularly in the online environment, the infrastructure appears quite complete with the existence of numerous websites devoted to teachings of the Islamic faith according to the interpretation of this school or of other similar schools.

The terms of Salafist discourse appearing in Albanian media are typically fundamentalist, featuring among others intolerance toward “non-believers” and the excluding and denying stance toward other religions; it requires from believers to go back to the absolute and inalienable rules founded in the past, allowing only one interpretation among believers and ensuring that religious rules prevail over secular ones.

In the context of extremist discourse in the media, a debate has appeared about, “Sharia or rule of law of liberal democracy?” Although peripheral and isolated, the debate reflects the depth of penetration of Islamist doctrines in those segments of the society affected by them and the influence of ISIS propaganda in the country. The debate appears both on the theoretical political or ideological plane, mainly taking place in online religious websites, and on the concrete plane, as a motto or part of the creed and practical actions of Albanian Islamists linked with violent extremism.
On a more general plane, Islamist discourse propagates the “end of the nation-state and of liberal democracy” or “the crisis of modernism” on the one hand, and the “emergence of a new Islamic civilization” on the other. In more specific terms, some Islamic religious sites express a rejection of the values of Western democracy, for instance freedom of speech or human rights.

In the debate on human rights, Islamists refuse to acknowledge both universal human rights and the principle of equal rights for all, especially women. Also, in an open and complete contravention of the concept of human freedom and human rights existing in Western societies, there is also the treatment of marginalized groups, such as LGBT ones, by analysts of Islamist websites.

Aside from the debate on the theoretical political or ideological plane, the Sharia also appears as a motto or part of the creed and actions of Albanian Islamists linked with violent extremism. Thus, one of the individuals arrested and accused for recruiting others to serve ISIS refuses to be adjudicated by the laws of the Albanian state and prefers to be adjudicated solely by the laws of Allah. By completely ignoring the model of the rule of law and liberal democracy, Islamist extremists propose as an alternative the Caliphate, presenting it as a global political project whose final goal is the establishment of the “final state” or the “state of divine justice.” Such theses of Political Islam have never been articulated in the Albanian language and have not been served to Albanians as an alternative throughout the existence of traditional Islam. However, the new extremist trends are planting them day by day. The display of these theses in the current contexts of the ISIS war, which is inspired precisely by the idea of the creation
of a state of divine justice, is very dangerous and a serious threat to the Albanian society and its European future.

With regard to extremist anti-Western and anti-American discourse, it is present not only in online media, but also in mainstream media outlets. It takes various forms, the most widely used among which is the type of discourse that poses the question: “Who causes terrorism” and the response finds the cause on the side of the West and the United States. In this kind of discourse, military interventions of the West in the Middle East and Afghanistan, as well as the policy pursued by the West toward these countries are to blame.

In order to enhance their anti-Western and anti-American discourse, some religious websites keep translating even articles or speeches of authors or leaders from the Middle East. Thus, these websites included the translated publication of an appeal by the supreme leader of Iran Ayatollah Khomeini directed to youths in Western countries following the terrorist attacks of November 2015 in Paris.

Some other writings feature a general anti-war discourse, which, in essence, is against the military intervention of the West in the conflict created by ISIS.

As may be seen from the monitoring that we conducted, the majority of anti-Western and anti-American discourse is to be found in the websites of the Islamic faith and in some cases it is also placed at the service of Islamist discourse.

Another group of writings in the context of anti-Western discourse are those featuring or addressing suppositions or conspiracy theories with regard to terrorist acts or the creation of ISIS. It is common knowledge that the presence
of conspiracy approaches in the agenda of the media does not help to inform readers correctly; on the contrary, it creates even more confusion, as has happened in the cases of the above articles, which often have dubious or fabricated sources.

Another thesis that is often encountered in extremist anti-Western discourse is that of double standards. According to this thesis, Western societies and media use double standards toward terrorist acts committed in Europe and those in the Middle East or in other non-Western countries and precisely this “double standard is destroying the world.” Meanwhile, some of the main media outlets provide another opposing approach to the thesis of double standards.

In its most extreme forms, the above discourse is placed at the service of inciting anti-Western, anti-Semite, or anti-American hate.

Besides moderate theoretical discourse that goes as far as the fringe category, the online environment in the Albanian language features from time to time a discourse that legitimizes, glorifies and promotes extreme violence, whether directed at military troops or the groups of different non-military communities. This discourse, displayed especially in the last years, although appearing rarely and isolated, often resonates with violence in current contexts, such as that of ISIS.

The sources of this discourse have mainly been some online media outlets or sections of them controlled by ISIS or other extremist Islamist groups. However, there are also displays of the discourse in the form of denouncing it in media reports about cases of extremist violent speeches by Islamist or extremist individuals.
The discourse of the “Extreme” category appears in all the forms of violent discourse: as a discourse that legitimizes or glorifies the use of violence toward military personnel, but also toward civilians who do not believe in Allah; as a discourse that glorifies ISIS war and the fighters and martyrs dying for the Islamist cause, in order to encourage current militants; as a discourse that features hate toward specific groups or communities and appeals for violence toward them, etc.

Although materials containing such discourse are scarce, they do pose a high level of threat because they plant panic and hesitation in the public and, on the other hand, may motivate certain individuals to engage in such violent acts. Therefore, an effective solution on the part of the media, but also by security bodies would be the deterrence of such messages or materials, in order to cut them off from reaching the Albanian public. It would also be fruitful to promote and convey messages that denounce the real goals and consequences of violent extremist propaganda.
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