

## **A summary of the study**

# **“Religious extremism in the media”**

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During the last decade Europe and the Balkans have been exposed to a wave of religious radicalism and extremism which was revived following the so-called “holy war” by ISIS in the territories of Syria and Iraq. The armed violence of ISIS has been accompanied by a massive propaganda machine and manipulative recruiting operations in countries outside the conflict area, with an aim at expanding and enlarging its ranks and its support base to serve this extremist cause. Reflections and consequences of this propaganda and recruiting operations have been felt in Albania and other Albanian-speaking territories in the Balkans as well, where alongside the encouraging and resurfacing of fundamentalist theories, opinions and practices, have been confirmed cases of religious mercenarism. According to Albanian official reports as many as 114 mercenaries from Albania fight for ISIS. Another source of information puts this number at 150. A similar situation is reported from Kosovo as well.

Religious recruiting and mercenarism were preceded and accompanied by a propagandistic and manipulative campaign which was carried out mainly indoors among tight knit groups and in the premises of certain religious institutions outside of the influence and control of mainstream religious authorities. However an intensive propaganda campaign is still under way in the online world.

The most widespread and the most active form of religious discourse in Albania, according to the results of the research carried out for the purpose of this study, is the Islamist extremist discourse. In the Albanian context, religious radicalism and extremism, even though it is still in its embryonic stage, may create a fertile ground for the surfacing of religious tensions and conflicts, by threatening one of the main pillars of the Albanian society: religious tolerance and harmony.

This situation and these developments call among other things for more studies and scientific research to shed some light on the scope of this phenomenon and assist in reaching some meaningful conclusions and ultimately to guide us in the taking of steps and measures to prevent or minimize the problem. This study also serves this most important aim.

This study focuses especially on the religious discourse carried out in the media. The object of this study has been the press and the online media, including news portals and websites, as well as social media. However, in cases of events of special importance the monitoring was extended to several news programs in the main television stations. The empirical research and the monitoring of the media aimed at identifying and categorizing of the themes and subjects, and events reported in the media, as well as issues and problems related to this reporting. This study also carried out an analysis of media content to identify main lines and keywords of extremist religious discourse in the Albanian media. During the course of this study, some interviews have been conducted with leaders and representatives of religious communities and authorities, to include their point of view on issues that were in the focus of this research.

In general the religious history and tradition in Albania has been marked by the lack of conflicts and large scale clashes on religious grounds, and by mutual respect, acceptance and tolerance of different religious beliefs, as well as the lack of a fundamentalist approach to religion. An important role in this regard was played by the traditional tolerant form of Islam practiced by Muslim community in Albania. Also, researchers noted the precedence of national identity over religious or other identities.

However, the penetration of some religious associations and foundations coming from the Middle East during the 1990s, introduced for the first time in Albania some radical schools of Islam, which marked a deviation from the Hanafi school of Albanian Islam, as well as paving the way for the emergence of Islamic radicalism and extremism in the country. Alongside radical preaching in some mosques, the extremist discourse has been noticed in the media as well. The intensive Islamist discourse under way in some websites in Albanian language is a source of concern, as they promote all kinds of interpretations of Islam, ranging from the moderate ones to the most extreme schools of Islam. Among these different schools, Salafism appears to have more followers in Albania and Kosovo.

The monitoring carried out for the purpose of this study has also identified isolated cases of two other forms of extremism other than the Islamic extremism: anti-Islamic extremism and atheistic extremism. However, other religious communities have been affected by religious extremism, not only Islam, but these other communities have been affected to a much smaller extent.

Several studies carried out in Albania have characterized religious extremism in the country 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, 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

Most of the information on religion in Albania is relayed by the main channels of information and communication: the traditional and online media. These include the media operated by religious communities and authorities, as well as by organizations or individuals involved in religious communications.

In the meantime, very important channels of communication are sermons inside religious institutions, as well as interpersonal communication among the faithful. The latter is considered very effective with regards to the spreading of fundamentalist and extremist views. However, there have been cases of extremist propaganda during sermons in certain mosques that are not under the control and the supervision of the Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH).

The monitoring and the analysis carried out for the purpose of this study found out that the media and the institutional channels of mass communication of religious communities have behaved correctly while carrying out their duties, and have established a climate of communication that emits and fosters mutual respect among the faithful, tolerance and harmony that have prevailed the Albanian religious tradition.

On the other hand, alongside media institutions of religious communities or organizations operating in the country, the Albanian online world has been infiltrated by a relatively large number of websites which appear to have been created and operated by Islamic religious organizations based in Turkey or other countries in the Middle East. Some of these websites promote schools of Islam that do not match the tradition of the Albanian Islam, and provide a more radical interpretation of the Islamic doctrine. Especially problematic are some websites that promote in Albanian the schools of Salafism and Wahhabism as well as other extremist schools or sects.

Meanwhile, the monitoring of the mainstream print and broadcast media in Albania, revealed that they report on religion and activities of religious background mainly during religious festivities, on cases of religiously-motivated clashes or conflicts, on controversial statements regarding religion, its history and religious cohabitation in Albania, as well as cases of scandal and controversy among the ranks of religious authorities.

This study found out that the reporting of the mainstream media on ceremonies and activities carried out during the main religious festivities is in general correct and fair for all the main religions in the country. However, most of the mainstream media would pay a disproportionate attention to the participation and statements made during these ceremonies by high rank politicians and government officials.

Another problem identified by researchers, scholars, and representatives of religious institutions is the shallow level of reporting and the lack of professionalism in reporting on religion.

There is also some debate on the agenda and the priorities of the media when it comes to religion, as some accusations have been leveled against the media for reporting extensively on religion only during cases of scandal and controversy. There is no special programming to provide religious information or any show focusing exclusively on religion, or issues and problems related to religion. When it comes to media investigations on religious extremism in the country, the results of this study show a poor level of media involvement, very sporadic and insufficient efforts.

One of the research questions put forth by this study was the following: From a **quantity** point of view, how much space does the religious extremism discourse take up in the Albanian media?

A monitoring carried out by the Albanian Media Institute on the online media in Albanian, and several newspapers including Panorama, Shqip and Tema, over a four-month period, identified as many as 284 articles and news stories on religion, ranging from moderate to extreme and radical approaches. As many as 201 of them were published in the online media, while 83 were published in newspapers. Out of a total of 284 stories, 194 fall into the moderate category, as many as 82 belong to the fringe category, and only eight of them are categorized as extreme.

Another research question was: From **the quality point of view**, which are the main lines of extremist discourse in the Albanian media?

One of the main lines of extremist religious discourse is the one **considering one's religious identity as more important than the national identity, or other personal identities**. Historically and traditionally in Albania, the national identity has prevailed over all other identities, as it was considered a source of unifying all Albanians, regardless of their religious backgrounds. But, according to the Salafist extremist interpretation the religious identity trumps one's national identity. By using a religious yardstick to measure the national unit, the aim of the Islamist discourse is to promote the establishment of a society in which the national identity should bow down to religious identity. Such a point of view would be divisive and would annihilate any peaceful cohabitation in the Albanian multi-religious society. For this reason any point of view that challenges and seeks to overthrow this ratio of national/religious identity to favor the latter, is considered as a tendency or display of extremism in the Albanian society.

During this last decade, as part of the religious extremist discourse, a new approach has surfaced which aims at a **re-interpretation of history and viewing it through the lenses of religion**.

One of the most common endeavors in the Albanian society is the debate which aims at revising and rewriting the history of Albania during the rule of the Ottoman Empire. The adulation by some extremist individuals of the Ottoman Empire reflects the adoration for a society not bounded by borders of national identity, in which Islam would be the dominant religion and the religious identity would overshadow the national identity. This nostalgia of the Ottoman era reflects a nostalgia for one of the early attempts to establish some sort of a Caliphate, as was the case of the Ottoman Empire. In the present situation this nostalgia echoes the Islamist political campaign to establish a global kingdom ruled by Sharia law.

This interpretation of history from an Islamist point of view has also challenged the position of Scanderbeg and Mother Teresa, because according to this extremist discourse they result to have contributed to divide the nation rather than unify it, by arguing that their actions and their life's work was devoted or related to the Christian faith. In reality, Albanians have admired and praised Scanderbeg and Mother Teresa for their Albanian origin not their religious backgrounds. Their contributions were a source of pride and national belonging and not a source of religious pride or belonging.

Such a re-interpretation of our national history and emblematic personalities is clearly extremist in nature and aims at sowing the seeds of hate against other non-Muslim religions, and carries the risk of a deep national divide. It is a source of concern the fact that this rhetoric has been illustrated by some mainstream media, which have conducted extensive interviews with some of the main representatives of this new extremist movement, by giving them the opportunity to spread their message to a wider public. Such an editorial policy should be the focus of discussions and reviews by media institutions, as it runs contrary to the vital interests of the wider public, which stands against any form of religious extremism and wishes religious tolerance and harmony.

Some media reports have also raised concerns about the opening and the promotion of several radical schools in the Albanian religious landscape, such as Salafism, and its portrayal as a viable alternative to the Hanafī tradition of tolerance of the Albanian Islam.

Concerns about the introduction and the presence of Salafism in the Albanian religious landscape are not just related to the introduction of yet another school of interpretation of Islam. By taking advantage of the fact that this school is part of the Sunny Islam, which includes that Hanafi school which is prevalent in Albania, imams preaching Salafism are “occupying” one mosque after another, even those under the direct supervision of the Albanian Muslim Community, and are aggressively infiltrating the upper ranks of the leadership of the sunny Muslim communities in Albania and Kosovo.

Alongside this expansion of their influence and control, the Salafists are using channel of mass communication **to promote their model of a Caliphate society**. The Caliphate has become part of the rhetoric of extreme Albanian individuals that enjoy some access in the media. Since Islamist religious extremism is anti-western from its very conception it follows a policy of rejection of the western liberal-democratic model of organizing the society. The online media in Albanian presently offer Muslim believers a wide range of literature and preaching on the Islamist ideas on the way of living and their perception of the world. Even though Albanians in Albania, Kosovo and elsewhere in the Balkans live in secular states, where the rule of law is in effect and where liberal-democratic lifestyles are prevalent, these websites offer them another alternative view on life and social interactions through Sharia law.

In Albania and elsewhere where Albanians live the stricter rules of the radical Islam haven't been in effect. Radical interpretations are applicable to monoreligious countries renowned for their adoption of radical Islam which bears no relation to the Albanian context, with its very tolerant form of Islam. Furthermore the Albanian Muslim tradition has none, or very little, of the anti-secular, totalitarian or anti-western tendencies which take center stage in the radical Islam and the school of Salafism. Taking all this under consideration, any propaganda or approach that incites or encourages the adoption or the enforcement of strict rules and the introduction of a radical form of Islam in Albania, can only be characterized as extremist propaganda.

The monitoring of the media in Albania also identified **the presence of a type of discourse which is related to islamophobia**. The discourse on Islamophobia is relatively new for the Albanian public. It comes up as part of the wider religious, political and media discourse. The discussion on this issue starts with the question on whether there is any Islamophobia in Albania. In mainstream media and mass communication outlets are found two opposing approaches on this matter:

One side flatly refuses to acknowledge the existence of such a phenomenon in the country, while the other side claims that Islamophobia in Albania and Kosovo is a “dominant” state. There is also talk about excessive Islamophobia applied by different media and fed by social media or allegations on islamophobic pressure being present in the media. Within this discourse there are two smaller formations: One group uses its fight against Islamophobia as a way to denounce all cases of discrimination or hate speech against Islam and Muslims. There is yet another group that uses the fight against Islamophobia as an alibi to conceal or support extremist propaganda and activities.

A main source of concern for Albania is this exploitation of Islamophobia as an alibi and as part of a strategy that serves the extremist Islamist discourse.

During the monitoring of the media in the course of this study are also identified **elements of anti-western and anti-American discourse**. This discourse seems to draw inspiration and is generated by religious extremism and is a phenomenon that surfaced during these last two decades, exactly at the very moment when schools of radical Islam infiltrated Albania, and radical Islamic ideas and propaganda followed. An analysis of the content of some of these reports and articles in the newspapers and online media reveals the presence of such a discourse in the public mass communication process in Albania.

Within this discourse one can identify efforts and tendencies by some extremist authors or individuals to blame the West and the USA for all conflicts, wars and even the creation of ISIS, and all terrorist acts all over the world.

In some cases the terms of hate and blaming of the West are of the same intensity as the terms used by extremists in the Middle East, or echo some of the main thesis of the ISIS propaganda, confirming the infiltration of this propaganda in the Albanian society.

The anti-western and anti-American discourse also appears as a reflection or extension of left wing extremism, which continue to be present in the country, even though it has been more than a quarter of a century since the collapse of communism.

There is also identified a general anti-war discourse in the media, which focuses its criticism against western military intervention in conflicts generated by ISIS. The anti-western discourse also includes articles featuring or addressing suppositions or conspiracy theories, according to which most terrorist acts may have been organized by western intelligence agencies to incite hatred against Islam and Muslims.

Another thesis that is often encountered in extremist anti-Western discourse is that of double standards. According to this thesis, western societies and media employ double standards when reporting on terrorist acts taking place in Europe and those taking place in the Middle East or other parts of the world other than the West, and “it is these double standards that are destroying the world.”

In the framework of the extremist discourse it is very problematic the rationale that seeks to justify, glorify and promote extreme violence. It must be noted that this kind of discourse has often come under criticism and has been denounced by the Albanian media, and has often been marginalized. It is however a very limited phenomenon.

In conclusion we must say that alongside reporting and denouncing of the religious extremism the media should apply an editorial policy that should further exclude the extremist discourse



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from the mainstream media and provide more room to promoting of religious tolerance and harmony.