GREASE
Religion, Diversity and Radicalisation

Country Report

Albania

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This Country Report offers a detailed assessment of religious diversity and violent religious radicalisation in the above-named state. It is part of a series covering 23 countries (listed below) on four continents. More basic information about religious affiliation and state-religion relations in these states is available in our Country Profiles series. This report was produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, secularism and religiously inspired radicalisation.

Countries covered in this series:
Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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The EU-Funded GREASE project looks to Asia for insights on governing religious diversity and preventing radicalisation.

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

While exploring religious governance models in other parts of the world, GREASE also attempts to unravel the European paradox of religious radicalisation despite growing secularisation. We consider the claim that migrant integration in Europe has failed because second generation youth have become marginalised and radicalised, with some turning to jihadist terrorism networks. The researchers aim to deliver innovative academic thinking on secularisation and radicalisation while offering insights for governance of religious diversity.

The project is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Mila Mancheva from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Racius from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia). GREASE is scheduled for completion in 2022.

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GREASE - Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives

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Introduction

The relationship between religion and the Albanian state has varied, ranging from total ban of religion by the state during Communism (1944 – 1990) to state recognition of the rights and freedoms of all religions in Albania presently. Currently, Albania is marked by diverse religious groups, four of which the state recognises as traditional religious communities: Sunni Muslims (56.7 %), Bektashis (2.09%), Orthodox Christians (6.75%), and Roman Catholic (10.3%) (Botomi, 2012). Contrary to other states in the Western Balkan region, Albania has not experienced religiously based conflict or religiously based tensions that threatened to ignite religious conflict. Although the state has favoured some religious communities more than others and even though there may be differences in religious tenets between some religious groups, an overall peaceful and harmonious understanding between religious groups exists in the country.

In relating to religious groups, the Albanian state has declared a no-official-religion policy and an equal standing of all religions. Religious communities have the legal status of non-governmental organizations having the freedom to sign agreements for cooperation with the state and receive financial aid from the government. Overall, the affairs of the state are independent from those of religion. Similarly, religion is autonomous from the state in that the state is neutral on questions of belief and religious conscience. Despite this two-way autonomy relationship (Modood & Sealy, 2019), the state exercises some control over religion by encouraging a collaborative state-religious community relationship in the fulfilment of common goals (such as the integration of Albania into the broader European community and countering radicalisation).

In terms of radical trends, Albania has faced religiously inspired radicalisation cases in the recent past. Between 2012-2017, Albanians have been radicalised and recruited by Al-Nusra and ISIS, and performed violent extremist activity in the Middle East. Although there was one suspected case of a planned terrorist attack by a radicalised suspect in Albania, no cases of violent religious extremism have occurred on the territory of the country so far. In response to cases of religiously inspired radicalisation, the state, religious institutions and non-governmental actors have taken measures to counter such trends.

This report contains four sections. Section 1 discusses the current composition of the Albanian population, the economic and cultural factors in Albania relevant to religion. The second section reviews the historical background of state-religion relations as well as analyses the legal and institutional structures regulating such relations. Section 3 discusses the violent religiously attributed radicalisation challenges, which Albania faces as well as factors contributing to religiously inspired radicalisation in the country. Finally, the report provides an overview of the international and domestic policies and practices addressing violent religiously inspired radicalisation in Albania.

Current composition of the population, economic and cultural factors

From an ethnic and religious perspective, .Albania is diverse. With a population of a little over 3 million people (3,057,220 million) (CIA Factbook, 2019), Albania is made up predominantly of ethnic Albanians (82.58%, 2,312,356). Compared to the majority of the population, the percentage of ethnic and cultural minorities is low - around 2% of the total population (Giakoumis, 2019). This percentage includes the following ethnic minority groups: Greeks (0.87%, 24,243), Macedonians (0.2 %, 5,512), Montenegrins (0.01%, 366), Aromanians (0.3%, 8,266), Romas (0.3%, 8,301), and Egyptians (0.12%, 3,368) (Botomi, 2012). In terms of language composition, Albania is marked by linguistic diversity which incorporates: Albanian (98.767%, 2,765,610), Greek (0.543%, 15,196), Macedonian (0.159%, 4,443), Romani (0.144%, 4,025), Aromanian (0.137%, 3,848), Turkish (0.025%, 714), Italian (0.019%, 523), Serbo-Croatian (0.002%, 66), and other (0.067%, 1,870) languages (Botomi, 2012)[1].

Table 1: Population by Ethnicity, 2012

Ethnic Affiliation	Total Number	Share
Albanians	2,312,356	82.58 %
Greeks	24, 243	0.87 %
Macedonians	5,512	0.2 %
Montenegrins	366	0,01 %
Aromanians	8,266	0,3 %
Romas	8,301	0.3 %
Egyptians	3,368	0.12 %

Source: Albania Population and Housing Census, 2011

Table 2: Population by Mother Tongue, 2012

Language Spoken	Total Number	Share
Albanian	2,765,610	98.767 %
Greek	15,196	0.543 %
Macedonian	4,443	0.159 %
Romani	4,025	0.144 %
Aromanian	3,848	0.137 %
Turkish	714	0.025 %
Italian	523	0.019 %
Serbo-Croatian	66	0.002 %
Other	1,870	0.067 %

Source: Albania Population and Housing Census, 2011

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[1] These numbers concern resident population by mother tongue (Botomi, 2012).

Table 3: Population by Religious Affiliation, 2012

Religious Affiliation	Total Number	Share
Muslim (Sunni)	1,587,608	56.7 %
Roman Catholic	280,921	10.03 %
Orthodox Christians	188,992	6.75 %
Bektashi	58,628	2.09 %
Evangelists	3,797	0.14 %
Other Christians	1,919	0.07 %

Source: Albania Population and Housing Census, 2011

Such diversity in the ethnic composition of the population corresponds to religious diversity which is alive today despite the total ban on religion during Albania's several decades of Communist rule. Currently, the majority of the population in Albania self-identifies as Muslim (Sunni, 56.7%, 1,587,608), followed by Roman Catholics (10.03%, 280,921), Orthodox Christians (6.75%, 188,992), Bektashi (2,09%, 58,628), Evangelists (0.14%, 3,797), and other Christians (0.07%, 1,919) (Botomi, 2012). Within some of these religious groups, such as Muslim and Evangelists, there are sub-groups and sects. Four of these religious communities are considered traditional: Sunni Muslims, Bektashis, Catholics and Christian Orthodox. However, despite this religious diversity, contrary to some of its neighbours, Albania has not experienced religion as a source of conflict between different groups. Apart from minor disagreements within single religious communities, Albania has generally been marked by intra-religious tolerance (Gjuraj, 2013). Furthermore, according to the latest census, present are also believers who do not affiliate with a specific denomination, meaning that they claim to believe in God, but do not follow denominational traditions (5.49%, 153,630). Non-believers, or atheists, comprise 2.5%, or 69,995, of the population (Botomi, 2012).

Little data are available on the economic factors and disparities between different ethnic and religious groups. In this regard, existing research on the topic has focused on the economic situation of ethnic Roma and Egyptians and reports of discrimination and marginalization against these ethnic groups when it comes to housing, employment, health care, education and social assistance. Difficulties among ethnic Roma and Egyptians in Albania have been indicated in the registration of childbirths due to illegally documented residence (Home Office, 2017). Macedonians have been clearly identified as one of the poorest minorities regardless of their religious affiliation. Eastern Orthodox ethnic Macedonians living in the Prespa Region and Muslim ethnic Macedonians living in the Golo Brdo region have been most affected by poverty (Home Office, 2017). Such economic struggles among Macedonians coincide with a current context in which the Albanian government has not allowed ethnic Macedonians to establish their own Orthodox Church in Albania (as opposed to the Albanian Orthodox Church which has different rules when it comes to its religious practice, such as its religious calendar) (OHCHR, 2017).

The plight of such ethnic groups should be analysed in the broader economic context of Albania. Albania is currently one of the poorest countries in Europe with slow economic growth, presence of an informal economy, weak energy and transportation structures, especially in the rural and suburban areas (The Heritage Foundation, 2019). Despite ongoing economic changes, there is still high unemployment in Albania (13.9 %), predominant reliance on the agricultural sector, and lack of economic opportunity causing substantial emigration (The Heritage Foundation, 2019). According to the latest census, around 500,000 Albanians emigrated from Albania between 2001-2011, seeking better life abroad (Botomi, 2012). In certain regions, such as the coastal and mountainous rural regions of the country, poverty has been the most severe. Such vulnerable regions are marked by insufficient state outreach and investment, unmet social-economic needs, greed, and the proliferation of illegal economic activity. As this paper argues later on, such economic alienation from the state has created vulnerability to radical religious ideology and violent extremism (Qirjazi & Shehu, 2018).

When it comes to the importance of religion in Albanian culture, the reality is not uniform. On the one hand, culturally speaking, religion is not a particularly strong identity marker among Albanians. Neither is it perceived as a strong basis for political mobilization (OHCHR, 2017), even though around 90% of Albanians claim to believe in God (Karaj, 2015). In the post-communist period, religion appears to be both central and marginal to Albanian identity. Faith has become more individualised, though it still remains an element representing a collective Albanian identity. Religious identity is also at times used to affirm more of a certain social-political status (e.g., Muslims convert to Christianity to seem closer to the Western world) than to affirm identity as religious per se. Relatedly, the majority of post-communist Albanians have a 'pick and choose' mode of religious practice. In reality, only 5% of Albanians attend religious service every week. Fifty percent of Albanians attend religious ceremony only during certain moments in life such as birth, marriage and death (Elbasani & Puto, 2017). Most Albanians also support institutional arrangements that limit religion strictly to the private realm. Other sources further support this observation.

Recent research shows that in present-day religious practice Albanians are not particularly religious (IDM, 2018). According to a 2018 study by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM), only about 2 in 10 Albanians do regular religious rituals and pray every day or week (IDM, 2018). Such a lack of deep ideological religiousness in Albania dates back to the religious status quo before the Ottoman conquest of Albania and the broad Islamization of its population after that. At the time, southern Albanians (Tosks) were Orthodox Christians ruled by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Conversely, Albanians in the north (Gegs) were Catholics ruled by the Holy Sea. Apart from their religious affiliation, the two territories were divided also by language, with the Geg language being close to Slavic languages and the Tosk language being closer to modern Greek. The rivalry between the two churches created ideological divisions, a lack of religious integrity of the Christian community in Albania, as well as religious indifference (Zhelyazkova, 2000). It was in this context that Muslim practices became attractive to the Albanian population. But even with the Islamization of the country, religion was still not a particularly strong religious marker. This was due to the

clan character of Albanian traditions and customs which rested on ideas of brotherhood, clan and kinship. Since these values took precedence over other ideologies, religious ideology has historically not found strong settlement in the consciousness of the Albanian people (Zhelyazkova, 2000).

On the other hand, Albanian culture lauds itself for the existing harmony and peaceful cohabitation between the four traditional religious communities (Sunni Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Bektashis). In this sense, the country has not been a site of religious conflict and religious struggles. Rather, inter-religious harmony exists at the level not only of religious leadership, but between regular citizens of different religions. Inter-religious marriages, for example, are considered something normal in Albania (Karaj, 2015). It is also normal that citizens convert from one religion to another or a third one throughout their lifetime (UNESCO, 2011). However, other sources report on tensions[2] existing between certain religious groups such as Sunni Muslims and Bektashis as Bektashism is perceived by some to have weakened the influence of Sunni Islam ideas (Clayer, 2003). In this regard, some facets of Bektashism go against Sunni Islam. For instance, Bektashis present themselves as democratic and defenders of human rights and gender equality (Doja, 2009), including values such as tolerance, love, heart and respect for all men and women regardless of race, religion, and nation. Bektashism also seems to offer a more lenient attitude towards the rights of women. Furthermore, some internal tensions in the Muslim community overall have been present as Muslims who were influenced by "Arab" Islam were at ideological odds with Turkish Muslims (Raxhimi, 2010). These tensions have not resulted in conflict, but mild disagreements in terms of issues such as prayer and marriage rituals (Raxhimi, 2010).

Some sources suggest that there could be possibilities for tensions between traditional religious communities and the state in the context of the resolution of restitution issues. Despite its promises the Albanian government has not processed the majority of requests for property restitutions of religious groups. Such delays have led to frustrations among religious communities as the properties seen as holy by these religious communities are currently being used in ways considered unholy by the communities. . There have been no actual conflict between these religious communities and the state, though (OHCHR, 2017; Rowland, 2017).

Historical background of state-organised religion relations

The nature of the relationship between the state and organised religion in Albania has differed throughout Albania's recent history, varying from total ban to absolute freedom in the practice of religion. This section of the paper reviews this relationship in its more recent history. The section also outlines the current institutional structure governing religion and religious diversity in the country.

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[2] Such tensions are related to the interpretation of Islam and some aspects of Islam by the two religious groups. Some religious leaders in Albania have portrayed Bektashism as a more "liberal" form of Islam whereas Sunnism has been portrayed as more "fanatical" (one example is the interpretation about the wearing of a veil by women – Bektashism has a more lenient perspective on Muslim women wearing a veil) (Clayer, 2011).

Post-Ottoman context

Albania became independent from Ottoman rule in 1912. In contrast to neighbouring states where the ambition was present for independence from the Ottoman Empire, the idea of independent Albania was "immature and fragmentary" among Albanians (Zhelyazkova, 2010, p. 23) and matured gradually. A great part of the population, vis-à-vis Muslim Albanians (around 70% of the population) were very loyal to the Ottoman Empire and/or were part of the Ottoman administrative and political apparatus. According to Zhelyazkova, the Albanian resistance and unification movement was almost entirely guided by the Albanian diaspora in Italy, Greece, Egypt, Bulgaria which led to a strengthening of the Catholic and Orthodox propaganda in Albania, but still not enhancing the role of religion as a motivator in actions towards independence. The independence efforts were not as insurrectionary as in neighbouring states (though there was an uprising as well), but primarily occurred through parliamentary means. Ideas for autonomy and independence were supported by the Ottoman political elite in Albania. For this reason, Albania became autonomous while still within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, any autonomy and independence actions were not as much against the Ottoman Empire as against the possibility that the Albanian territory would be claimed by neighbouring states. Notably, while the signatories of the Albanian Declaration of Independence were mostly Sunni Muslims, contributors to independence were also Bektashi Sufis, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians (Schwartz, 2012).

After Albania became independent from the Ottoman Empire, religious diversity appeared as a potential problem since it put into question the unity of a territory which was perceived as possibly too religiously diverse by the Western powers and not Western enough. Ideas about a kind of 'civil religion' would be propagated as a way to downplay the divisive role of religion and in this sense, religion took a secondary role for the sake of national unity. Popular in the political sphere would be the perception that the faith of Albanians is 'Albanianism' (Elbasani & Puto, 2017). The relationship between the emerging state and the religious constituencies was about the presence of a "supra-religious national consciousness," which was ultimately guided by the state (Elbasani & Puto, 2017, p. 56). Religion was much associated with the Ottoman legacy and thus state and religion had to be separated. This was particularly present during the rule of Wilhelm von Wied, the nominated German Protestant prince who would prepare the country for statehood.

Once Albania became independent, it declared secularism. The 1922 Constitution which set the stage for political secularism in the country with the ideas that the state would not have an official religion, that all religions were free, but that they would not have a role in politics (Elbasani & Puto, 2017). In the spirit of the new constitution, under the short rule of king Ahmet Zogy (1924 – 1928), the ideals of unity, areligiosity and European modernity became the ideology of the state. The state started to impose strict control on the activity of religious groups to prevent them from challenging national unity. Since the state viewed religion as a divisive threat, the state had to control it while recognizing its presence (Elbasani & Puto, 2017).

Communist context

During Communism (1944 – 1990), under the leadership of Enver Hoxha, the Albanian state took the existing ideas of areligiosity and national unity to an extreme. The 1976 constitution officially endorsed atheism which repressed all forms of religious expression. With this action, the state set to eradicate the role of religion as a political, social and moral institution. It cut all its financial support for religious organizations, imposed censorship and took control over religious education. Members of the clergy would be depicted as enemies of the state and foreign agents. Religious buildings would be closed and transformed. Members of religious groups would be forced to publicly denounce their faith, some would be persecuted and arrested by the state, and some would be sentenced to execution for their religious convictions. There was also a total ban on the practice of religion in the private sphere.

Post-Communist context

After the end of Communism, the Albanian state reverted its communist policy towards religion and started practicing leniency towards religion. In the first post-Communist provisional constitution, Albania declared itself a secular state (Dyrmishi, 2016) and allowed for total freedom to religion without interfering in religious affairs. Thus, for most of the 1990s, there was little institutional arrangement to regulate the relationship between the state and religious communities. Members of religious communities (mostly Muslims) who suffered greatly during Communism gave active support to the new Democratic Party and took part in political life. A State Secretariat (SS) was created as the only state institution in charge of administering religious affairs, presided by a member of Albanian Muslim Community (AMC) – the official umbrella body of Muslims in Albania.. Despite the presence of SS, there was not much state control on religion. Indeed, the government had underground links with Muslim groups from abroad. As a result, missionary work of religious groups from Muslim countries in the Middle East started occurring in Albania. Since there was very little state supervision, by 1998, reports occurred that various Islamic organizations (so-called 'charities') from abroad had established political links in Albania to develop illegal activity and launch terrorist cells in the country. This time coincided with the installation of a Socialist Party government, which implemented security measures, incarcerated suspected terrorists, closed Arab foundations and Islamic 'charities,' and expelled related people from the country (Elbasani & Puto, 2017).

It was in this context that the current Constitution (written in 1998) took shape to set up broader provisions for the governance of religion and religions diversity in Albania. The 1998 Constitution used terminology such as "neutrality" and "no official religion." Apart from declaring state neutrality and the lack of official religion, the new constitution established principles such as religious freedom and collaboration between the state and religious institutions for a 'common good.' Even though the state announced that there would be no official state religion, the state declared respect for the equality of all religious communities and that the church and the state would be mutually independent. However, if necessary, the state would take action to safeguard religious rights. Table 1 outlines the main tenets that the 1998 Constitution put forward in regards to the governance of religion and religious diversity:

Table 4: Constitutional rules signifying state-religion relationship, 1998 Albania Constitution (OSCE – Albania, 1998).

Rule in Constitution	Article Number
"religious coexistence, and coexistence with, and understanding of Albanians for, minorities are the basis of this state, which has the duty of respecting and protecting them" (p. 1)	Article 3
Political parties which instigate racial, religious and ethnic hatred are prohibited by law	Article 9
"In the Republic of Albania there is no official religion" (p. 2)	Article 10
"The state is neutral on questions of belief and conscience and guarantees the freedom of their expression in public life" (p. 2)	Article 10
"State recognizes the equality of religious communities" (p. 2)	Article 10
"The state and the religious communities mutually respect the independence of one another and work together for the good of each and all" (p. 2)	Article 10
"Relations between the state and religious communities are regulated on the basis of agreements entered between their representative and the Council of Ministers" (p. 2)	Article 10
"Religious communities are juridical persons. They have independence in the administration of their properties according to their principles, rules and canons, to the extent that interests of third parties are not infringed" (p. 2)	Article 10
No one can be discriminated against on the basis of religion	Article 18
People have the right to freely express their religious belonging	Article 20
"Freedom of conscience and religion is guaranteed" (p. 5)	Article 24
"Everyone is free to choose or to change his religion or beliefs, as well as to express them individually or collectively, in public or private life, through cult, education, practices or the performance of rituals" (p. 5)	Article 24

"No one may be compelled or prohibited to take part in a religious community[3] or its practices or to make his beliefs or faith public" (p. 5)	Article 24

From a legal perspective, apart from implementing the 1998 Constitution, Albania also signed and ratified all nine of the core international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, European Convention on Human Rights and others (OHCHR, 2017), all of which are relevant to religious freedoms. In 2012, Albania also introduced the Law on Non-Discrimination which also protects freedom of religion and belief (OHCHR, 2017).

The 1998 Constitution does not use the term *laïcité* to describe the character of state-religion relations. However, some scholars argue that at present, Albania has a specific form of *laïcité* which adapts the French version to the particular Albanian context (Elbasani & Puto, 2017). This form of Albanian *laïcité* takes into account Albania's ethno-religious pluralistic makeup, as well as the historical aspirations of the country towards modernity and European integration. In this regard, Albania's choice of its specific relationship with religion is highly influenced by how the state has treated religion historically, particularly at the time when the country became independent from the Ottoman Empire. As the state considered that a strong emphasis on Albania as a religious country would be problematic and would divert Albania from Europe, religion had to take a back seat in politics and be presented as a cultural asset/tool that would support the state in its aspirations towards European integration (Elbasani & Puto, 2017).

In this sense, Albania's *laïcité* moves away from total separation between church and state, but secures close state supervision of religion by maintaining close state-religion partnership and cooperation. To achieve this, the state keeps tight collaboration with major religious denominations for the shared goal of the common good, i.e. peace, harmony and European integration. The Muslim community, through the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC) takes primary role in supporting such state supervision. As the only Muslim authority granted permission to negotiate with state institutions (Elbasani & Puto, 2010), the AMC[4] acts as an intermediary between the state and Muslims and as a safeguard from reformist radical versions of Islam, thus supporting the state in ensuring that Albania remains peaceful and more ready to be integrated into Europe. Similarly, the state has established close ties with the other four current major religious denominations in the country – the Bektashis, Catholics, Orthodox Christians,

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[3]It is not clear how the Albanian Constitution defines the term "religious community" and to what extent it views a strict separation between the Albanian government and religious communities (obviously, government members may also self-identify as belonging to a particular religion and identify with one or another religious community). However, the Constitution establishes that these communities have the status of a legal person and can enjoy the rights and legal obligations of any other legal person. Religious communities are currently registered as non-governmental organizations to obtain the status of a legal person. Thus, it is possible that when the Constitution uses the term "religious community" it refers to religious groups registered as non-governmental organizations with religious purpose.

[4] A group of imams first created the AMC in 1923. The AMC is tightly centralized with an AMC Head and an Executive Board close to him. The central structure of the AMC controls a network of local branches organized according to administrative divisions (Elbasani & Puto, 2017).

and Evangelicals – and given them special privileges in negotiating their relationship with the government, such as recognition, property restitution (though, still mostly not completed by state), direct financial support from the government and tax exemptions. As with the AMC, the overarching goal of the state is to have supervision over these religious communities, but in ways such that these communities support the state in its political goals of securing peace, respect for religious plurality, and integration into the EU. A testament to this approach can also be observed in a 2018 official joint statement and appeal to EU institutions by the leaders of the five current major religious communities in support of Albania's EU accession (Sir Agenzia D'Informazione, 2018). Thus, the Albanian version of *laïcité* is a balanced two-way autonomy approach which adapts the French model of separation between church and state to the particular necessities and goals of Albania (Elbasani & Puto, 2017).

Institutional structure for governing religion and religious diversity

From an institutional perspective, the relationship between the state and religious groups is regulated through the Albanian Council of Ministers and then ratified by the Albanian National Assembly (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour, 2016). For this purpose, the government established the State Committee of Cults (SCC), a committee under the jurisdiction of the Office of the Prime Minister. The committee was created in 1999 and composed of 5members one of whom serves as a chair (Majko, 1999). This committee was the successor of the former SS and is chaired by a neutral civil servant who represents the state[5]. The task of the SCC is to regulate relations between the government and religious groups, protect freedom of religion, and promote interfaith dialogue. It is the structure which serves as an intermediary between the state and religious communities by supporting them in negotiating agreements between the Council of Ministers and the representatives of religious communities. Furthermore, the SCC cooperates with religious communities in drafting laws and regulations, advises the Ministry of Education on the teaching programs and number of schools that provide religious education, as well as advises the Ministry of Finances on the import of goods of religious nature into Albania (Dyrmishi, 2016). The SCC is also responsible for the registration of new religious organizations and granting them the status of "judicial personality." As of 2015, the State Committee of Cults reported around 230 religious organizations, foundations and educational institutions in Albania (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour, 2016).

From an international relations perspective, the SCC keeps records of foreign religious groups which request government assistance and grants permission to these groups in obtaining permits for residency in Albania.

When it comes to the relationship between the government and religious communities, the relationship has been marked by cooperation, but religious communities have also been disappointed with aspects of their relationship with the government related to

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[5] We could not locate data on what ensures that this servant is neutral in practice and not favoring one religious group at the expense of another. The legal document establishing the SCC does not indicate whether the members of the SCC should belong to a particular religious community.

financial aid and property distribution. The government has signed agreements with the legal representation (who are clerics) of the Sunni Muslim community, the Bektashi community, the Catholic and Orthodox communities, and the Evangelicals. The Constitution stipulates that such legal agreements would typically obligate the government to provide financial support to these communities. However, sources report that the Evangelicals have complained that that the government is indifferent to them compared to other religious communities and does not provide them with financial support. Furthermore, members from different religious communities have reported that they have had issues acquiring land to construct places of worship (Evangelicals), obtaining ownership of existing places of worship (Orthodox Christians), or defending the title of certain properties (Bektashi, Sunni Muslims) (United States Department of State, 2018)[6].

Violent religious radicalisation challenges

State of play of religious radicalisation

Religiously attributed radicalisation became a hot topic in Albania after the end of Communism, with the liberalisation of religion and opening of the country to Muslim missionaries from Arab countries. These missionaries brought alternative interpretations of Islam which convinced some Albanian citizens to embrace Salafi or Wahhabi ideas and join terrorist organizations in Middle Eastern countries (Dyrmishi, 2016). Foreign influences from the Arab world led to proliferation of all sorts of Islamic ideas and agendas including extremist ones (e.g., through foundations such as Mercy International, Kuwait Joint Relief, Zekat House, Mirësia, by countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates).

Even though in the late 1990s Albania shifted its religious governance policy and established some government supervision over religion, tendencies for religiously inspired radicalisation did not fully disappear. A Pew Research Survey conducted between 2011 and 2012 indicated that 12% of Albanian Muslims supported making sharia the official law of their country and 6% of them justified suicide bombing in defence of Islam (Dyrmishi, 2016). Currently, one in ten Albanians claim that in their area there are people who want to instigate religious extremism, who support violent religious extremism or who try to convince religious believers into joining extremist initiatives (IDM, 2018). This observation can be considered in the context of recent radicalisation recruitments occurring in Albania. In 2016, Albanian authorities arrested 19 people suspected of planning a terrorist attack during a FIFA World Cup qualifying match between Albania and Israel (the plot was coordinated by two Kosovo-Albanians who were members of ISIS) (Rowland, 2017). Between 2012 and 2017, 144 Albanians left the country for Iraq and Syria to join ISIS (Vrugtman, 2019). In 2016, 24 locals from three villages in southeast Albania (Lesthnica, Zagoracan, Rremenj) left for Syria to do violent extremist activity for ISIS (Bogdani, 2016a). Since that time, around 45 fighters

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[6] We could not locate data on how the current legal framework of state-religion relations in Albania ensures that there is representation of religious communities in politics and whether there is intentional favoritism of one religious community over another because of government officials' religious affiliation.

have returned to Albania raising the question with authorities about how they would be de-radicalised and reintegrated into society (Vrugtman, 2019). Twenty-six among the foreign fighters have died and 73 of them (18 fighters and 55 family members) have remained at war in the field (IDM, 2018). Alarming has also been the fact that returnees of violent extremist activities in Syria and Iraq have an easy time using social media to recruit more fighters, document their experiences and offer logistical details on how to travel to Syria (AIIS, 2015).

Notably, all cases of successfully radicalised Albanian fighters have conducted violent extremist activities out of Albania. In 2016, though, there was an unsuccessful attack suspected to be the first case of domestic attack (though unsuccessful). A man from Kosovo attacked people in the Albanian coastal city of Vlora trying to kidnap them and shouting "Allahu Akbar." This has happened in a context of recent reduction of the number of Albanians leaving the country to join ISIS or other radical groups in Syria and Iraq (Mejdini, 2016a). Apart from the nearly 150 recruits reported between 2012 – 2017, no other recruits have been announced since 2017, largely due to the measures taken by various actors to counter radicalisation (read more on this below).

Factors prompting religious radicalisation

There have been a number of factors promoting religiously inspired radicalisation in Albania in the recent past including political, socio-economic, cultural, educational. This section discusses two of these factors that appear more notable: political and socio-economic. Importantly, while some factors appear more salient in the promotion of radicalisation, they all work in unison to contribute to the religiously inspired radicalisation environment in Albania.

Political factors

As already noted above, the way the state governed religion in Albania in the immediate post-Communist environment set the stage for religious radicalism. The then mode of governance of religion of Albania which has been largely based on societal self-regulation and a reduced role of public authority has created opportunities for the advancement of religiously attributed radicalisation and Islamist ideology (Dyrmishi, 2016). Even though the state established the State Committee on Cults (SCC), the Committee has remained weak in capacities and performance, especially at the local level where most of the radicalised Albanians were recruited (Dyrmishi, 2016).

Another political factor contributing to the religiously inspired radicalisation trends in the recent past relates to the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC). Although the Albanian Constitution allows for freedom of all religious groups, in the context of Islam, the AMC has practical monopoly over Islam in the country and does not include all Muslim groups in Albania within it. Such monopoly inspires a sense of exclusion and marginalisation among the broader Muslim community in Albania which provokes alternative and unrecognized Muslim groups to feel left out and espouse alternative radical interpretations of Islam. In this regard, the AMC has also been unable to exert proper control over all mosques in the country. Since there were some mosques that were built

"illegally" by non-AMC Muslim groups without the supervision of the AMC, these mosques easily became venues for radicalisation and terrorist recruitment (Dyrmishi, 2016). Furthermore, the AMC did not implement checks, together with the Muftiates and the Department of Education, to ensure that religious education, where it was allowed, would not be used for radicalisation and extremist purposes (Dyrmishi, 2016).

Political drivers such as the widespread dissatisfaction with governance, corruption and the rule of law have also been used as narratives by violent extremists to attract supporters (IDM, 2018). However, research shows that such political drivers may not have a strong tie to religion (IDM, 2018). For instance, a study by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (2018) reveals that most respondents consider that the political system in Albania is "equally unfair for everyone, regardless of religious background" (p. 63). The same study reveals that abusive behavior by law enforcement institutions on the grounds of religion is generally low with higher perceived levels in the municipalities of Kukes, Vlore and Kruje, where well-educated respondents, in particular, believe that law enforcement institutions are harsher with Muslims. A 2018 study by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation also points out that about 20% of respondents agree that they have the right to take things in their hands (including violence) when the state does not respect their rights and freedoms.

Socio-economic factors

Socio-economic conditions of religious Albanians, many of whom live in very poor areas, inspire them to seek refuge in violent extremist ideas. Although poverty is not considered a dominant reason for radicalisation, high levels of unemployment in under-developed areas could be manipulated as a reason to pursue religious extremism (IDM, 2018). The following socio-economic factors appear as salient socio-economic drivers of violent extremism, especially among Albanian youth: (1) perceptions of social exclusion & marginality (weakening of traditional family ties), (2) presence of social networks and group dynamics that radicalise, (3) societal discrimination (this one is especially relevant to Muslim minorities which live in areas where Islam and Muslims may be disrespected, provoking religiously inspired radicalisation), (4) frustrated expectations & relative deprivation (especially in terms of finding employment); (5) unmet social and economic needs (social exclusion), (6) greed or the proliferation of illegal economic activities. A question coming up in this regard relates to why religiously attributed radicalisation becomes a route of addressing socio-economic ills instead of organised criminal activities. Although we cannot offer a clear explanation about this, research suggests that in some instances turning to radical extremist interpretations of a religion may be a way for radicals to "make up" for a criminal lifestyle they already have and a sense of redemption in front of God (IDM, 2015).Furthermore, research shows that the illegal activities offered by recruiting organisations can offer easy and ready income to those recruited (IDM, 2018) – something that may not always be the case with regular criminal activity. However, research shows that regular criminal activity and violent extremist activity in Albania have a mutually beneficial relationship in that violent extremist organising and regular illegal economic activity provide each other with revenue, practices in concealment and ideas that legitimise illegal trends (IDM, 2018).

When it comes to societal discrimination, it should be noted that even though some Albanian Muslims may claim that they are disrespected for their religion, the dominant religious mood even among Muslims, in Albania is that of tolerance which is perceived to be real and a value in Albanian society. Socio-economic challenges have not been associated with discriminatory practices against a particular religious group (IDM, 2018). Indeed a recent survey by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation on the potentials for violent extremism in Albania shows that most survey respondents believe that their religious community is well-represented in politics and in state institutions and not treated discriminatively (IDM, 2018). Concerns over religious discrimination and Islamophobia as reasons for violent extremism have been limited (IDM, 2018).

Policies and practices addressing religious radicalisation

To address religiously inspired radicalisation, Albania has taken part in international and domestic efforts. Overall, these efforts have proven successful as no new cases of religiously inspired radicalisation and recruitment of foreign fighters from Albania have been reported since 2017. It is important to note, though, that there has been an overall decrease of foreign travel to Syria and Iraq to join violent extremist activity – possibly another contributing factor to the reduction of fighters from Albania.

International efforts and measures

Internationally, Albania has been active in multi-lateral cooperation and participation in international legal frameworks aiming to tackle religiously inspired radicalisation. In this regard, Albania became a signatory to conventions enacted by the UN, OSCE, Council of Europe treaties and initiatives against terrorism (e.g., the Police Cooperation Declaration with partner states such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro, Austria) (AIIS, 2015). Albania also signed bilateral cooperation agreements against terrorism with Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lithuania, Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, and Romania. Furthermore, Albania hosted a Balkans Regional Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in May 2015. Present at this summit were: ministers from Western Balkan countries and senior officials from partner countries and organizations, including the EU, OSCE, Regional Cooperation Centre, UN, representatives of local governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector. During the event, participants discussed strategies, concrete programs and initiatives to counter violent extremism (Balkans Regional Summit, 2015).

Domestic efforts and measures

From a domestic perspective, Albania espoused a strategic framework, policy and legal measures, as well as non-governmental approaches to counter violent religiously inspired radicalisation. From a strategic standpoint, the government set up an entire framework to tackle the radicalisation threat that emerged in the early 2010s. The government declared terrorism as a threat in its 2014 National Security Strategy and defined terrorism not only as an external, but also an internal threat (AIIS, 2015). In this

regard, the government designed the National Strategy against Terrorism (2011 – 2015) and the Strategy against Organized Crime, Illegal Trafficking and Terrorism (2013 – 2020).

From a policy and legal perspective, the government undertook a number of measures that turned out to be effective in addressing the recruitment of Albanians as foreign extremist fighters. One of these measures included the criminalisation of all foreign violent extremist activity, which involves the arrest and trial of individuals suspected of recruiting and funding the training of Albanian citizens to travel to Syria and Iraq (Bogdani, 2016b). The Ministry of Internal Affairs commenced operations against any groups suspected of intending to commit terrorist acts, as well as arrests of individuals who have committed such acts. The Ministry created a new special police force within its structures to minimise the risk of terrorism in Albania and coordinate actions taken by the intelligence service (AIIS, 2015).

The government also introduced harsher sentences to those who were found to support, fund, and participate in terrorist activities. For instance, in 2016, the Albanian Serious Crimes Court sentenced nine Albanian foreign fighters and collaborators to a total of 126 years of imprisonment (IDM, 2018). The state also took legal action to try in court imams who propagated violent religiously inspired radicalisation among Albanians (the cases of Genci Balla, Bujar Hysa and Almir Daci). In this sense, Albania also introduced a legal mechanism to fight terrorism and violent extremism in the Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania and adopted Resolutions No. 1267 and 1373 of the UN Security Council dealing with countering terrorism (AIIS, 2015). A regional centre to combat violent extremism was also established.

Apart from such legal actions, the state took measures related to the specific ways in which it governs religion. The state has tried to use the reality that the top resilience factor against violent religious extremism in Albania is the country's culture and tradition of religious tolerance (IDM, 2018). To further emphasize religious tolerance the government took measures particularly in the education system. For example, the state proposed a pilot government education program to prevent radicalisation and promote religious tolerance which consists in training teachers to prevent radicalisation in education (Mejdini, 2016b). The government will also introduce education about the history of various religions as part of civic education in schools so as to reinforce interfaith harmony and peaceful co-existence (OHCHR, 2017).

In coming up with specific measures to counter violent religiously attributed radicalisation, the government has also taken into consideration the fact that the public views religious institutions as the most important institutions responsible for the prevention of religiously inspired radicalisation (IDM, 2018). Thus, it paid special attention to illegal mosques where most Albania recruits became radicalised. In 2016, the state Agency for the Legalisation, Urbanisation and Integration of Informal Areas, with the support of the Albanian Muslim Community, started legalizing and registering illegal mosques, including mosques which in the past have been places where Albanians

would be radicalised (Mejdini, 2016c). As a result, though with still some need for improvement in the capacity of clerics, religious institutions have received more trust from the public – from 44% in 2014 to 76% in 2017 (IDM, 2018).

Finally, the non-governmental sector in Albania has contributed to countering violent religious extremism. There have been various education initiatives in communities by local (e.g., the Shoqata Internacionane per Solidaretetin) and foreign (e.g., the Albanian branch of the Helsinki Committee) NGOs, as well as NGOs which have a strong research focus. The work of the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM), for instance, has particularly focused on research and prevention policy against religiously attributed radicalisation. Some of the activities of the IDM on the topic involve: (1) multi-stakeholder forums in the communities of Pgradec, Elbasan, and Kukes to prevent religiously attributed radicalisation among youth (with presence of local state and non-state actors), (2) information sessions about religiously attributed radicalisation among education institution representatives from the municipalities of Pogradec, Cërrik, Përrenjas, Librazhd, Bulqizë and Kukës, (3) information and discussion sessions on religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania among central government institutions (Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth, National Centre for Stocktaking the Cultural Treasure, Institute of Cultural Monuments, Ministry of Economic Development, Tourism, Trade and Enterprise, State Committee on Cults, Ministry of Urban Development, Ministry for Local Issues, Ministry of Interior, State Police, Parliamentary Commission on National Security, Ministry of Defense, State Intelligence Service, General Prosecutor Office, Presidents' office) (IDM, 2019).

Concluding Remarks

The current form of state-religion relations in Albania is marked by a two-way autonomy (Modood & Sealy, 2019) in which the state and the church are independent from each other while the state exerts control over religion by treating it as its ally on important matters such as inter-religious peace, anti-radicalisation efforts, etc. The state does not officially favour one religion over another even though in practice, some religious communities (such as the Evangelists) claim that the state favours the other four major religious communities more so than the rest in some respects. The state clearly propounds a non-discrimination policy on the grounds or religion and prides itself on religious tolerance and peace between religions. Similar to religious communities more broadly, the state sees such tolerance as a great advantage in accomplishing its goal for more integration of Albania into Europe. In this regard, the state utilises religion as a tool to achieve its international political agenda. The collaborative dynamic in the state-religion relationship is specific to the current political context and Albania's EU aspirations.

Religion, however, has also posed certain challenges. The immediate post-Communist setup of the political system as well as the nature of the governance of religion after the end of Communism has created conditions for the spread of radical religious ideas related to "heterodox" interpretations of Islam (Hellyer & Grossman, 2019). Despite a change in these dynamics with the change of government in the late 1990s,

radicalisation challenges have remained and ended up with hundreds of Albanians radicalising and taking on violent extremist activity in the Middle East. In response, the state has espoused a number of legal and policy domestic and international measures. Although such measures have proven somewhat effective in the context of an overall decrease of recruitment of radicalised fighters for the Middle East, the Albanian government needs to continue to practice caution. Main factors associated with vulnerability to violent religiously inspired radicalisation, such as political and socio-economic ones, remain largely existent continuing to pose intersectional conditions for radicalisation (Hellyer & Grossman, 2019). The task for Albania is to foster communities resilient to religiously inspired radicalisation through education, community empowerment and engagement, further democratic and economic build-up of individual communities and the country more broadly (IDM, 2018).

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