

SINAN GECI¹**Violent Religious Extremism in Kosovo: From a Religiously tolerant Society to an ISIS Contributor****Erőszakos vallási extrémizmus Koszovóban, avagy hogyan vált egy a vallásokat tisztelő társadalom az Iszlám Állam közreműködőjévé****Abstract**

The idea of religious extremism had not been anticipated after the Cold War to the magnitude that is today. Nowadays, this phenomenon has been a concern for the national security of many countries as well as it is considered a threat to global security. The author is analyzing the appearance of violent religious extremism in the Republic of Kosovo and explaining some possible reasons and influencing factors for the phenomenon why a religiously tolerant Society became to an ISIS Contributor.

Keywords: religion, extremism, Kosovo, reasons, influencing factors, aggression, ISIS

Absztrakt

A vallási szélsőségek napjainkban komoly biztonsági problémaként jelentkeznek állami (nemzetbiztonsági) területen csakúgy, mint a globális biztonság szintjén. A szerző a vallási szélsőségek megjelenését a Koszovói Köztársaság szemszögéből vizsgálja cikkében. arra keresve választ, hogy milyen okai, összetevői vannak/lehetnek annak a jelenségnek, amely szerint – az elmúlt években – jelentősen megnövekedett azok száma a vallásokat korábban toleráló államban, akik a vallási szélsőségek irányába növekvő szimpátiával fordulnak/fordultak.

Kulcsszavak: vallás, radikalizmus, Koszovó, okok, tényezők, erőszak, Iszlám Állam

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To prevailing paradigms of modernization and globalization, the secularization of many societies and political systems, religion has become a point of reference in today's world; it influences political decisions, public policies and public perceptions. As many other numerous countries, the Republic of Kosovo has been faced with an increase of violent extremism, particularly with extremism associated with religion. Having been considered as one of the most religiously tolerant societies, Kosovo has witnessed an unprecedented radicalization of its citizens and society where certain individuals are behaving in a religiously extreme custom. Indeed, the number of radicalized individuals has grown in strength since 2012 and their increased influence among the Muslim community is a concern as they are prone to conduct extreme actions in the name of Islam. From a Religiously tolerant society, Kosovo has seen that more than 300 of its citizens have joined the so called ISIS, a terrorist organization, which is considered as "the highest per capita ratio in Europe, along with nearby Bosnia"²

The recent religious radicalism associated with Islam is individual, as well as institutional in some parts of the world. Numerous individuals went to the Middle East countries and joined the so called ISIS and have died there, and many more have returned to their homeland or country of residence. What is more worrisome is the fact of the returnees who do not only bring back the idea of a radicalized Islam and efforts to influence and spread radical ideas, but they come back skilled to commit crimes and atrocities that may be to a scale of terrorism. More concerning is rather the institutionalized extremism as it is more dangerous due to its long term impact. The latter does not seem possible in Kosovo. Still, the question remains why in a religiously tolerant society such as Kosovo, radicalized Islam finds closure and sympathy for violent religious extremism?

The United States Assistance for International Development outlines on its 2011 Policy that violent extremism intertwined with political and security dynamics, yet violent extremism is intertwined with lack of development. In addition, "factors such as socioeconomic inequalities, repression, corruption, and poor governance often create an enabling environment for radicalization and violent extremism."³ In line with the US foreign policy, violent extremism means "advocating, engaging in, preparing or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic and political objectives."⁴

Many factors may have been a cause for radical religious activities in Kosovo; the most crucial ones would be the uncontrolled activities of religious organizations and aid with hidden agendas, in particular from the Middle East; as well as the frail Islamic Community

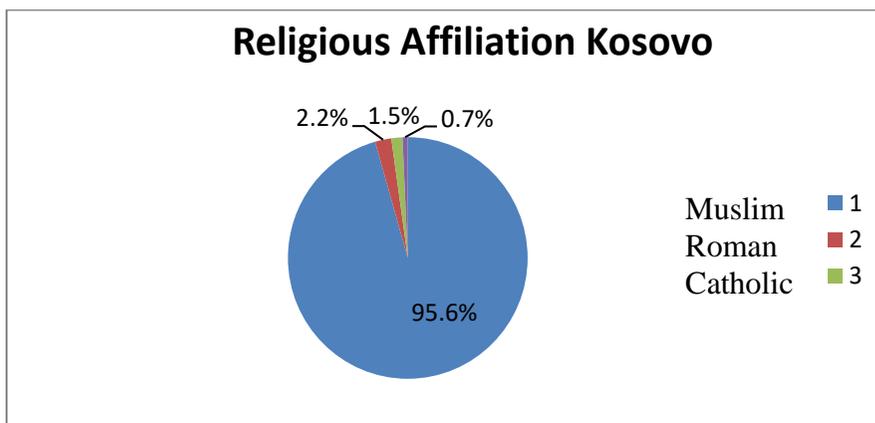
² Malm, Sara., "The lost generation: Desperate Parents Reveal Hundreds of Young Men and Women have Left Kosovo to Fight for ISIS in Syria." 1 February 2016 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3426369/The-lost-generation-Desperate-parents-reveal-hundreds-young-men-women-left-Kosovo-fight-ISIS-Syria.html>. (accessed: 20.04.2017).

³ "The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency Policy." USAID Policy. 2011. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pdacs400.pdf. (accessed: 10.04.2017).

⁴ Ibid.

of Kosovo, and the marginalization and lack of integration of the Kosovar people into the structures of Euro-Atlantic structures.

In the recent years, the above definitions of extreme and violent religious acts could be expanded by adding that violent religious extremism is also about furthering religious objectives as an ultimate goal to suppress, spread fear by targeting innocent people, which from the perspective of radicalized Muslims is a “Holy War” and “Us” versus the “Others.” The others in their case are not merely non-Muslims but everybody else including Muslims who does not align with their thinking and their way of life. The fact is that Muslims are the greatest in number of victims. According to the Voice of America, citing the Global Terrorism Database, over 75% of fatalities from the terrorist attacks occur in Muslim majority countries, which means that Muslims are victims of terrorism-related deaths⁵ by the so called Islamic affiliation of terrorist organizations. As a Muslim majority country, Kosovo is affected by radical and religious extremists because around ninety percent of the Kosovo population is affiliated - but do not practice - with the religion of Islam according to some sources; although no one knows for sure the percentage of Muslims in Kosovo because there is no correct data of the Muslim population, some external sources have, as the following figure illustrates, exaggerate the number of Muslims in the country.



Data gathered on CIA Fact Book 2011⁶ – Chart made by the author of this paper

⁵Farivar, Masood., “Most Terrorism Victims Are in Muslim Majority Countries.” Voice of America. Aug 2016. <https://www.voanews.com/a/most-terrorism-victims-are-in-muslim-majority-countires/3478905.html>. (accessed: 15.05.2017).

⁶“Kosovo” The World Factbook. CIA.2011. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>. (accessed: 20.06.2017).

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One might ask if certain Muslim individuals have been radicalized recently or has Kosovo had radical and extreme Muslims living among the community for decades. A decisive fact must be stated that neither “holy war” nor jihad was ever mentioned during the Kosovo war against the Serbian oppression and Slobodan Milosevic’s regime in 1997-1999; therefore, one has to ask how come Kosovo experienced a war and this struggle had no association with Islam whatsoever and not one liberator died for Kosovo calling the name of Allah and no Kosovar till recently has committed a crime or a terrorist act in the name of Islam; but after 2012 there have been hundreds of Kosovars that joined a foreign war fighting in the name of Islam.

After the war ended in 1999 with the help of NATO, Kosovo was devastated. The economy and properties were shattered and destroyed and high unemployment percentages followed the

Kosovars even to the present day. Although the gray economy dominates in Kosovo, based on some data, the unemployment in Kosovo is approximately thirty four percent.⁷ The highest unemployment in the Balkan region is in Kosovo - which has the highest per capita ratio in Europe involved in Iraq and Syria war alongside ISIS – and then is Bosnia which also happens to be the second from the region whose population is involved in ISIS. Moreover, corruption is another element that may contribute on the environment for violent extremism that as result a country may have weak and fragile institutions to effectively fight negative phenomena. According to the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2016, Kosovo’s score is 36.⁸ This means that Kosovo is perceived to have a high level of corruption. Consequently, this fits the profile and the definition that underdevelopment and the high level of corruption in a country is a contributing factor and correlates with the re rise of violent religious extremism.

After the war, Kosovo was in necessity of establishing and developing institutions under the auspices of the international community. Unemployment was skyrocketed and corruption was extraordinary but they were not the only things Kosovo had to worry about, and certainly not the main contributing factor to the escalation of religious extremism. In the aftermath of war many international organizations and countries came to Kosovo with humanitarian aid in order to help the returnees and the refugees in Kosovo. Aid flew in from all over the world including from the Middle East. Most of the aid was based purely on humanitarian grounds whereas some aid provided had mid and long term agendas. The aid was not just food and the necessities for a war torn country, but the money from the Middle East, predominantly from the Saudi Arabia, was also distributed all over Kosovo in building new Mosques; out of 800 Mosques, 240 were built after the war. Many believe that the “Saudi money and influence have transformed this once-tolerant Muslim society at the hem

⁷ “Kosovo” CIA The World Factbook. 2017 <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kv.html>. (accessed: 05.05.2017).

⁸ “Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2016.” Transparency International 2016. https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016. (accessed: 17.04.2017).

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of Europe into a font of Islamic extremism and a pipeline for jihadists.⁹ Saudi Arabia and other like-minded regimes of Arab Gulf States used charities and individuals whom they trained and educated, including extremist clerics, to recruit and later on to join the terrorist groups. The radical influence grew in Kosovo although many moderate imams recognized the different programs mainly with young, vulnerable people who were being taught Wahhabi and Salafi literature. Over 200 Kosovars had taken scholarships and grants to study Islam in Saudi Arabia and when they returned they were indoctrinated with missionary fanaticism and with a lot of money enabling them to organize and teach summer religion courses.¹⁰ Traditionally, Kosovar Albanians followed a moderate Islam faith, but due to the living conditions after the war people did not question the source of the aid though “the charitable assistance often had conditions attached. Families were given monthly stipends on the condition that they attended sermons in the mosque and that women and girls wore the veil...¹¹ Slowly but surely the ‘investment’ had its return when time came for radicalized recruits to join the so called ISIS.

Since 2012 until early 2016, it was recorded that 314 Kosovars, among whom were 44 women and 28 children, had gone to Syria. At first they joined the opposition groups that opposed the regime of Bashar al-Assad and then found themselves fighting alongside extremists and terrorist groups, predominantly the ISIS. According to Kosovar authorities 110 of them have returned to Kosovo having been disappointed of what they had witnessed there.¹²

Kosovo had recognized the tendency of the radical Islam to spread its influence and had attempted to regulate and approach this concern legally by institutional means. Because Kosovo was under the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), it had no full authority to adopt laws in order to forestall the spread of violent religious extremism. In 2004, then prime minister of Kosovo, Dr. Bajram Rexhepi, initiated the idea to adopt a law to sanction extremist sects in Kosovo. According to him he was prevented by the European officials who told him that it would be against the freedom of religion that was guaranteed in Kosovo to all communities. The international presence in Kosovo also did not want to aggravate some Islamic countries either, according to then Prime Minister Rexhepi.¹³

Indeed, it took many more years and much more damage for Kosovo and its citizens to adopt a law to tackle religious extremism which is entitled “Law on Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory” in 2015. The main purpose is to protect state in-

⁹ Gall, Carlotta., “How Kosovo was Turned into Fertile Ground for ISIS.” May 2016.

<https://www.nytimes.com/>

2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html. (accessed: 05.06.2017).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “The returnee from Syria: I will Confess for Albanians who Fight There” (translated from Albanina). *Gazeta Express* Sep. 2016 <http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/i-kthyeri-nga-siria-ju-rrefej-per-shqiptaret-qe-luftojne-atje-258590/> (accessed: 12.06.2017).

¹³ Gall, Carlotta.

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terests and the national security determining a "criminal offence of joining or participating in a foreign army or police, in foreign paramilitary and parapolice formations, in organized groups or individually, in any form of armed conflict outside the territory of the Republic of Kosovo."¹⁴ This law also criminalizes those who organize, recruit, lead or train persons or group of persons with the aim against state interests and national security by joining or participating in armed conflicts outside Kosovo and could face imprisonment up to fifteen years.

To this day numerous investigations have been conducted. The Kosovar authorities have been rigorous in applying the law against Islamic radicals making Kosovo the leading nation fighting religious extremism not just in the region but beyond. Investigations were conducted and individuals have been sentenced to jail. As recent as December 2016 the Court of Appeal in Kosovo reaffirmed the court sentences for a famous Imam of the biggest mosque, El Kuddus, in the city of Gjilan. The Imam, Zekirja Qazimi, and six other supporters are in jail due to acts of terrorism. They were found guilty on charges of recruiting for reasons of terrorism in co-operation, organizing and participating in a terrorist group, inciting national, racial, religious or ethnic hatred, disunity, as well possession of unauthorized weapons.¹⁵ Since most of the recruitment was concentrated between 2012 and 2014 and less in 2015, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kosovo provides some data regarding the involvement of Kosovars in Syria and Iraq. Accordingly, fifty Kosovars were killed in Syria among whom some held another citizenship, but the authorities are not exact due to the unconfirmed and multiple sources. Out of over three hundred Kosovars involved in foreign fights, the State Prosecution's statistics reveal that for those that currently are in the country, thirty one are in custody, twenty one placed under house arrest and alternative measures and twenty two have been released from custody.¹⁶ In June 2017, it is reported that the notorious Kosovar terrorist, Lavdrim Muhaxheri, who happened to be the student of the Zekirja Qazimi, was killed. He was an Islamic State leader and recruiter of ethnic Albanians to join the fighting in Syria and Iraq. He is considered as having the most senior position from Balkans in ISIS and the man responsible for the 2016 plot to attack the Israeli national soccer team which was playing against the Albanian team for the 2018 World Cup qualifying football match. Fortunately, the incident was prevented by the Kosovar authoriti-

¹⁴ "Law on Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory." Assembly of Republic of Kosovo, 2015. https://www.mpb-ks.org/repository/docs/LAW_NO._05_L__002_ON_PROHIBITION_OF_JOINING_THE_ARMED_CONFLICTS_OUTSIDE_STATE_TERRITORYEMLJE.pdf. (accessed: 20.05.2017).

¹⁵ "Kosovo Seals imprisonment of Gjilan Imam and 6 Supporters: 'Are terrorists'" Dritare November 25, 2016. <http://www.dritare.net/2016/11/25/kosova-vulos-denimin-e-imamit-te-gjilanit-dhe-6-mbeshtetesve-jane-terroriste/1>. (accessed: 20.03.2017).

¹⁶ "Kosovars alongside ISIS: Here's how Many People have been Killed, how Many are being Investigated and how Many are Imprisoned.". Telegrafi. November 2015. <http://telegrafi.com/kosovaret-perkrah-isis-it-ja-sa-persona-jane-vrare-sa-po-hetohen-dhe-sa-jane-te-burgosur/>. (accessed: 25.05.2017).

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es in cooperation with the Albanian police and as a result 19 suspects were arrested of plotting the attack.¹⁷ If individuals like Lavdrim could make it back to Kosovo with all the combat training and skills they possess, combined with their radical views, they could be a risk not only for the national security but also for the regional security as well.

Kosovo has not done as plenty as it should have in order to fight radical Islam. It has not checked and monitored the international religious organizations. Only after an alarming number of Kosovars joined the unjust cause of ISIS, did the government close some of these organizations; after two years of ongoing investigations, in 2016, the police have charged dozens of people and 19 Muslim organizations were shot down for acting against the Constitution, stirring hatred and recruiting for terrorism in the name of religion.¹⁸ Although the government has organized interfaith conferences, due to the sensitivity of the issue it has not created a mechanism yet to control and monitor closely all the religious organizations, foreign but most importantly the domestic ones, such as Islamic Community of Kosovo (ICK).

The Islamic Community of Kosovo (ICK) has not responded firmly against the new and more radical preaching Imams all over Kosovo. Indeed, the ICK should be held accountable for most of the wrongdoings and the increase of the religious intolerance and extremism. The extremist preachers replaced the traditional Islam after the war in Kosovo. As early as 2003, when imam Naim Ternava was appointed as the ICK chief Islamic cleric, this organization has been a target of criticism. In 2011, Ternava intervened in the autonomy of the Faculty of Islamic Studies in the Public University firing seven well qualified and proficient professors making a profound turn towards radicalization of many individuals as they were replaced by radicals. Also the new members of the Islamic Studies were accused of holding fake degrees and credentials as their diplomas could not be verified and that they gain dual salaries from 1000 to 1,300 Euros per month from the ICK as well as by foreign organizations.¹⁹

Many imams have held accountable particularly the ICK for not putting a halt to the extremist Muslim preachers in mosques around Kosovo; Imams are appointed by ICK, which means that controversial Imams were appointed and despite their radical preaching they were able to hold on to their positions. According to moderate Imams, these radical Imams spread Wahhabism challenging the moderate and tolerant school of "Hanafi" which cultivated tolerance amongst people for centuries, and the new paradigm of Islamism has targeted grand issues of Albanian nation.²⁰

¹⁷ Moore, Jack., "Who is Lavdrim Muhaxheri? ISIS Balkans Commander, Architect of Israel World Cup Plot, Now Dead." Newsweek June 2017 <http://www.newsweek.com/who-lavdrim-muhaxheri-isis-balkans-commander-architect-israel-world-cup-plot-623101>. (accessed: 20.05.2017).

¹⁸ Gall, Carlotta.

¹⁹ Schwartz, Stephen., "Kosovo Islam in Crisis." Huffington Post. Aug. 2011 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-schwartz/kosovo-islam-in-crisis_b_881221.html. (accessed: 28.06.2017).

²⁰ Muhaxheri, Alban., "Imams Contributors to Religious Extremism in Kosovo." October 2015.

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The media has reported regularly on the issue and raised their voice against ICK. Likewise, the security experts condemn the ICK behavior and negligence in addressing the religious radicalism. The head of ICK, Mufti Tërnava, has rebutted these allegations. He accuses foreign organizations for introducing religious extremism to the Muslim community in Kosovo. According to him, in the last thirteen years the ICK has asked the Kosovo authorities to control and monitor who operates in the country and their activities. Nonetheless, he stated that the irresponsibility and negligence of Kosovo security institutions has paved the path for religious activities despite the opposition from the ICK.²¹ However, the role of the head of ICK is suspicious as well. The fact that many have voiced their opinion that due to circumstances and the financing from abroad, the head of ICK is being pressured to declare voluntarily his finances. The head of ICK is one affluent men whose kids live a luxury life and driving luxury cars. Nonetheless, he has never declared his finances and wealth under the pretext that he is not obliged by law as he is not paid by the consolidated budget of Kosovo.²² His influence in the Muslim community is not great as his credibility and legitimacy has been questioned many times. Scholars on Islam have gone so far as recommending that the dismissal of the chief of ICK, Tërnava, is a prerequisite for addressing problems within the Islamic Community of Kosovo, and abroad, in fighting extreme influences in Albanian Islam, which traditionally has been moderate and tolerant, and an example for the whole world. To make matters worse, the chief of ICK also arbitrarily changed the ICK Constitution in order to stay in his position for a third mandate.²³

Despite the public calling of Mufti Tërnava for Kosovars not to join foreign fights in the name of Islam. Instead of condemning the so called ISIS, his son - who is a devoted Muslim - thinks otherwise. The ICK and Mufti Tërnava was further discredited when his son in 2013 publically called for Muslims to go to Syria and fight proclaiming that he personally is willing to fight and die in the name of Allah.²⁴

It is acknowledged that Kosovo has internal issues and hitches dealing with religious extremism, but the lack of perspective towards the Euro-Atlantic integration is not helping. Kosovars are the only nationals from the Balkan region who cannot travel visa free to the Euro zone. This deprivation of free movement for Kosovars - EU considers free movement a value - has perhaps encouraged Kosovars to look for alternatives and travel to countries where there is no visa regimes, such as to Turkey, and from there to Syria and Iraq. Visa regime does not mean encouragement for Kosovars to have gone to Iraq and Syria, but the

<http://zeri.info/aktuale/58663/imamet-kontribuues-te-ekstremizmit-fetar-ne-kosove/>. (accessed: 18.04.2017).

²¹ "Extremism in Kosovo is Brought by Foreign Organizations." Bota Sot. May 2017.

<http://telegrafi.com/ekstremizmin-ne-kosove-e-sollen-organizatat-e-huaja/>. (accessed: 30.05.2017).

²² "How Much is the Wealth of Naim Tërnava?" Bota Sot. October 2015.

<http://www.botasot.info/lajme/461990/sa-eshte-pasuria-e-naim-ternaves/>. (accessed: 20.06.2017).

²³ Schwartz, Stephen. "Tërnava is a dictator." *Interview Koha Ditore*. September 2013

<http://www.islamicpluralism.org/documents/2289.pdf>. (accessed: 08.05.2017).

²⁴ "Naim Tërnava's Son Ready to Die for Syria." Telegrafi. August 2013. <http://telegrafi.com/djali-i-naim-ternaves-i-gatshem-te-vdes-per-sirine-fotovideo/>. (accessed: 24.05.2017).

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point is that the young people should not be able to travel easier to conflicts and join terrorist groups instead of going to European countries for study, conduct business and work. Kosovars feel not only deprived but also discriminated against and radicals have used this as a tool that EU discriminates against Muslims and Muslim majority countries.

In fact, the whole Western Balkans, but particularly Kosovo, have been neglected by the NATO and the European Union; the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, according to the local media recently stated that EU is not employing its full potential and possibilities of influence in the Western Balkans, raising the concern that if

not EU others are keen to do just that.²⁵

It is crucial mentioning that Kosovars are the only people in the region who do not enjoy visa liberalization with EU, which has marginalized them and minimized their Euro-Atlantic perspective. Therefore, isolation and marginalization has created a favorite environment for extreme, violent, and the spread of non-western ideas and ideologies. The non-enlargement policy and the negative attitude established in the EU in the last couple of years has stagnated the reforms in the Western Balkans and particularly in Kosovo. Without the European Union integration as an incentive, Kosovo may also stagnate and fall behind in terms of democratic reforms and strengthening of a secular state which is recognized by constitution. Certainly, leaders from EU countries, as Foreign Minister of Austria Sebastian Kurz, have warned EU that "West Balkan countries must not face a blocked road to the EU because some of them, like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, are in danger of steering away from Europe and towards radical Islamist group, like we have in the middle of Europe"²⁶ claiming that the European outlook must be provided to the region and work together to tackle the threats.

In conclusion, there are many drivers to radical religious extremism in Kosovo. The main factors could be unemployment and corruption, but religious organizations from the Middle East and the influence from that region combined with weak and distrustful Islamic community in Kosovo has created an irreversible damage to the security of the state and the image of Kosovo in the world in addition to falling behind in the path towards Euro-Atlantic integration. It is problematic to identify and reach a consensus of what drives the religious extremism and terrorist acts associated with religion, as different factors can act in concert leading to confusion and to more difficulties to defend against and fight radicalized Islamists.

²⁵ "Mogherini: If the EU does not Focus on the Western Balkans, then Someone Else Will. Gazeta Express." 22 June 2017. <http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/mogherini-nese-be-nuk-e-ka-fokus-ballkanin-perendimor-atehere-e-ben-dikush-tjeter-392850/>. (accessed: 25.06.2017).

²⁶ "Kurz: Without a EU Perspective, Bosnia and Kosovo are in Danger of Islamic Extremism" META., August 2015. <http://meta.mk/en/kurts-bez-eu-perspektivi-bih-i-kosovo-mozhe-da-se-svrtat-kon-radikalnot-islam/>. (accessed: 29.06.2017).

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Many young people from Kosovo who traveled to Syria and joined the anti-Assad forces found themselves within the ISIS terrorist organization almost by default. At that point of time the European countries and the United States were also against Assad's regime and criticized the triggering of the armed conflict and the suffering of the civilians in Syria. Thus, many young people thought they were part of a noble cause and joining these anti-Assad forces was not a crime at that time, therefore not punishable by the Kosovar laws. But the fact remains that the Republic of Kosovo had not played a proactive role in targeting religious extremism and the international community have not helped and in some cases have been an obstruction for the Kosovo institutions pretending that it is an infringement to religious freedoms. The near term threat for Kosovo from the return of the ones who are part of ISIS is the skills and the extreme views they have obtained. They might find sympathy among families and friends as well as the Islamic community. Preemptive measures must be taken as early as possible to put them before the justice system and rehabilitate them while involve the Islamic communities in Kosovo to organize awareness campaigns all over Kosovo.

Despite the good legal infrastructure, Kosovo will need to amend existing laws or adopt a new one that is more hard-hitting on the source of income for the ICK members and Imams, and the source of money the foreign organizations bring to Kosovo and through Kosovo elsewhere. This will assist in preventing the spread of radical Islam and the increase of terrorism by cutting their source of income and establishing a systematic monitoring system knowing who is who and where their sources come from and for what purpose.

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