ONLINE EXTREMISM IN NORTH MACEDONIA

POLITICS, ETHNICITIES AND RELIGION

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report provides a baseline for the nature and scope of extremist, hateful and polarising narratives in the online ecosystem of North Macedonia. The report provides an overview of some of the most prominent extremist narratives across the political, ethnic and religious spectrum in the country. The report is intendent for national and local governments, civil society representatives, researchers and private sector stakeholders to better understand the online extremist landscape, inform policies and inspire further research.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The development and proliferation of mobile technology has created new access points for extremist groups to amplify their narratives and gain support for their political agendas. North Macedonia is no exception to this trend. Social media platforms have not only made it easier for people to connect to others, they have also made it easier for hateful voices to spread extremist ideologies. Online hate speech has been a major issue in North Macedonia reflecting cross-cutting cleavages experienced by the various communities. Political polarisation based on party affiliation and identity have metastasised with recent developments following the Prespa Agreement and the Colourful Revolution. Moreover, nationalism and ethnic-based hatred continue to foster distrust between the various ethnic groups that make up the societal fabric of the state.[1] Finally, religiously motivated extremist groups have mastered the use of the online space to disseminate their extremist ideologies and recruit sympathisers to their cause.

The government of North Macedonia and civil society organisations have been addressing online hate and extremism through a range of social cohesion, and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives for more than 20 years. Although the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism (NCCVECT) was established in 2017 to lead P/CVE policy and programming, the issue of online hate speech has been addressed by various government institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations in the country for years. As a part of this effort, the NCCVECT took within its mandate to strengthen stakeholder capacities to counter the threat of online radicalisation. Although there have been various online counter-narrative initiatives to stop terrorist recruitment in North Macedonia, there has been no in-depth mapping of hateful and extremist content and communities to date.
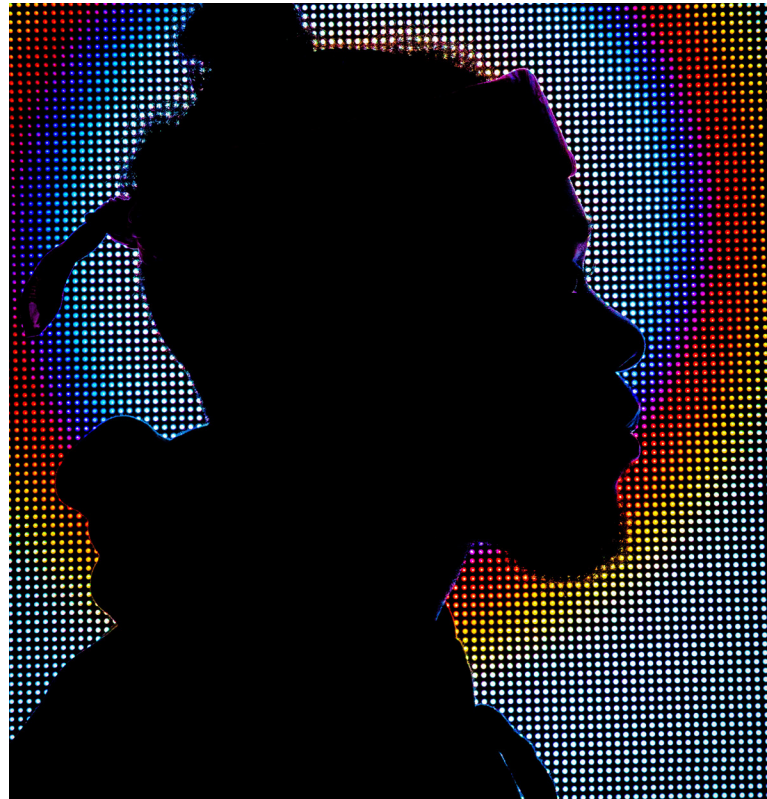
To address this gap, the *Strong Cities Network* (SCN) conducted an online mapping exercise to investigate the main extremist narratives deployed in North Macedonia. Using a mixed method of automated collection and expert manual qualitative online research, SCN identified the main narratives across political, ethnic and religiously inspired extremist and hate groups. On the basis of these findings, SCN provided a comprehensive set of recommendations for national government, local authorities, civil society and the private tech sector to help inform a more comprehensive response to these online harms. The findings from this study will also inform multi-agency work the network is carrying out with community action teams in North Macedonia.

KEY FINDINGS

01   **SCN researchers collected around 1,290,554 messages in Macedonian and Albanian; about 2% (20,670 pieces) were found to be polarising, hateful and extremist in nature.** Political polarising online narratives were the most prominent within the sample making up about 18,371 relevant pieces of content; 13,562 messages were in Macedonian and 4,809 were in Albanian. Almost half of the Macedonian language data was identified on Twitter (7,025) followed by Facebook (3,263) and web forums (2,596), while most of the Albanian language content came from web forums (4,598).

02   **The Prespa Agreement and the Colourful Revolution from 2016 were the two most prominent topics spurring on online polarisation within the Macedonian community.** The data shows that narratives constructed mostly around a binary 'patriot vs. traitor' dichotomy are widening unbridgeable gaps within the mainstream political spectrum and creating room for the emergence of far-right fringe movements, which pose a threat for long-term national and regional stability.

03   **Narratives propagating ethnic-based hate are also prominent online with almost 2,300 relevant pieces of content analysed.** This data was mostly collected from Twitter and online forums.

04   **Hate speech between the two biggest ethnic groups is flourishing on social media despite the lack of violence in the country since the conflict in 2001.** Much of the narratives prominent in the Macedonian language community revolve around the perceived threat of the 'Albanisation' of North Macedonia which is characterised by perceived double standards and discrimination of Macedonians. Additionally, they target groups and individuals who are perceived to work against the interests of the Macedonian people. The narratives show that the patriot vs. traitor dichotomy extends into the sphere of ethnic hate through the lens of 'anti-Macedonianism'. The rifts between the two ethnic groups are amplified online and more needs to be done in the virtual space to promote social cohesion.

05   **Salafi-jihadist material in Albanian language content from prominent imams associated with terrorist groups is still easily accessible on Facebook and YouTube.** One of the main reasons the content might not have been removed is that imams have started using language which does not explicitly call for violence. However, these imams still pose a risk because they comment on prevalent social and political issues, which could be construed as calls to arms.

06   **Explicitly extremist and hateful Salafi-jihadist content is also present in the Albanian language and disseminated through various groups.** For instance, SCN found two groups, Bejtul Muhaxhirin and Nasheedi im, which propagated ISIS-affiliated propaganda calling for jihad. Some of their content targeted Albanian imams and groups operating North Macedonia.

07   **SCN tracked the online presence of a nationalist group called Christian Brotherhood, which was threating opponents, launching political campaigns, sharing COVID-19 misinformation and conducting humanitarian events.** This nationalist group is using both religion and its political agenda create 'in' and 'out' groups resembles the same tactic of extremist Salafi-jihadist imams to blend religion and politics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

01 **The NCCVECT and the Ministry of Interior should enhance the understanding of the online extremist ecosystem in North Macedonia.** In addition to this study and other research focused on online hate speech and extremism in the country, more needs to be done to continuously monitor the evolving risks and threats. Without a proper evidence base and understanding of the nature of extremist content, the government of North Macedonia will not be able to build a robust and effective response strategy. Additionally, civil society online counter-narrative strategic communication programming will be unable to adequately support vulnerable groups and counter hateful ideologies effectively. As a result, more efforts need to be put into strengthening institutional and civil society capacities to monitor the online space for extremist content. Resources should be invested in research using automated collection and natural language processing tools to process more and better data.

02 **The government, civil society groups and researchers need to work with social media tech platforms to inform localised responses based on the language and cultural context of North Macedonia.** None of the bigger tech companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google (YouTube) have offices for the Western Balkans to facilitate a sustained partnership with government and non-governmental stakeholders in the region. The Cybercrime and Digital Forensic Department within the Ministry of Interior and the intelligence services need strengthened relations with these private sector entities in order to build joint effective responses in co-operation with experts and civil society organisations.

03 **Removing and censoring online extremist content and groups might disrupt malign activities, but will not solve the problem without improving social media algorithms.** Although social media companies have taken significant steps to moderate content on their platform, there is an increasing onus on them to improve their algorithms to stop users entering extremist rabbit holes through recommended content.

04 **Promote digital citizenship skills through civic educations programmes as this is key to countering extremist narratives and disinformation.** Giving individuals knowledge and critical thinking skills to assess content they read online is the most effective approach in countering extremist messaging. The North Macedonian government can work towards this goal by developing and upgrading curricula to reflect the need for digital resilience, civic engagement and inter-cultural co-existence, advanced teacher training programmes and extra-curricular activities.

05 **Introduce a whole of government and society approach to tackle this issue.** In addition to the private sector, the national government needs to identify and strengthen relations with civil society organisations, researchers, units of local self-government, religious organisations and youth groups to build robust and effective counter-narratives. The trust in public institutions is a major issue in North Macedonia, so resonant voices and messages from the non-governmental sector are important in engaging target audiences.[2]
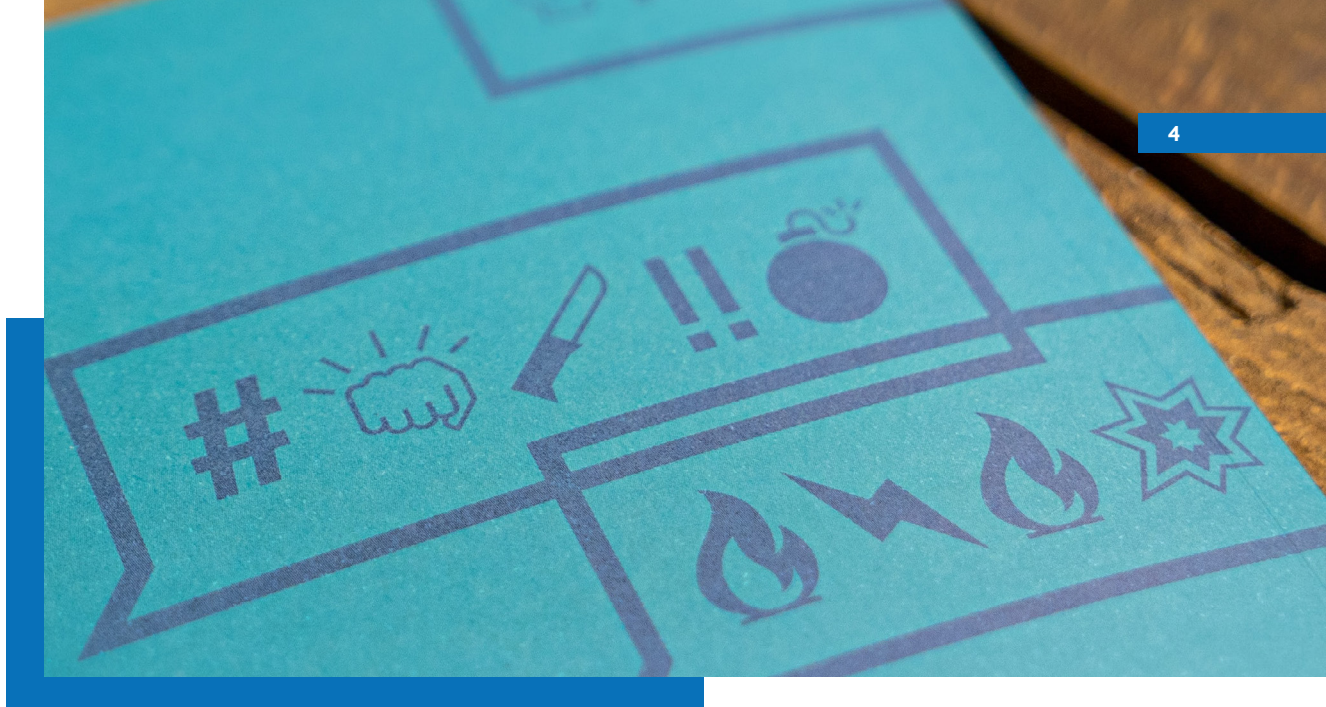
INTRODUCTION

The wars that dissolved the former socialist federal Yugoslav state and the challenging democratic transition period that followed have left people divided, distrustful of their governments and fearful for their future. As a result, irredentism continues to feed inter-ethnic tensions, religiously motivated extremist groups are penetrating formerly atheist communist societies,[3] and political elites have championed 'state capture'[4] to enrich themselves and networks at the expense of their citizens. This has contributed to extremism, hate and polarisation at regional, national and local levels.

North Macedonia is a particularly complex case for researching hateful ideologies and polarisation. Since its independence in 1991, the landlocked country has had a complicated history characterised with limited democratic governance, inter-ethnic armed tensions, and bilateral issues with its neighbours. all of which have contributed to fostering divisions and hate both internally and externally. Many of these manifestations of extremism and hate will be explored in more depth later in the policy brief.

The proliferation of mobile technologies and the internet have erased political borders and created new access points where this hateful sentiment and extremist ideologies can be spread and fostered freely.[5] The only barrier of access has become language, but since citizens of North Macedonia generally fall within two language families, Macedonian (within the South Slavic languages) and Albanian, online content targeted at Western Balkan audiences in the region and in the diaspora is easily consumed and shared. Malign groups benefit from this unprecedented access to audiences as there is 80% internet penetration in North Macedonia;[6] they exploit grievances by constructing extreme narratives to polarise society across particular demographic characteristics and/or political issues.[7]

This policy brief will preliminarily map key issues in North Macedonia connected to online extremism, hate and polarisation. It will not attempt to address every segment of online hate because the issues are too numerous; however, it will present some of the central extremist narratives and a bird's eye overview of polarising content.

METHODOLOGY
Collection

The research for this policy brief combined natural language processing and manual open source investigations to collect data between 1 January 2019 and 15 July 2021. It was conducted in the Macedonian and Albanian languages and used Cyrillic and Latin scripts to ensure data from all facets of society is included. The data collected aimed to answer the following research questions:

01 What are the key extremist narratives in North Macedonia across Macedonian and Albanian language groups?

How can the extremist narratives be categorised?

02 Which of the extremist narratives received most engagement?

03 What platforms are most prominent for extremist and hateful messaging?

Significant steps of this research included identifying relevant sources where individuals would post hateful content and key terms for online extremism in order to collect relevant data. Researchers used an over-inclusive list of sources to strengthen the quality of the findings:

Social media platforms

Twitter[8]
Facebook[9]
YouTube[10]

Forums[11]

News Outlets[12]

Following data collection, researchers employed **251 key terms** – 114 in Albanian and 137 in Macedonian (Cyrillic and Latin scripts) – to filter the most relevant data. The key terms were compiled internally based on staff expertise, desktop research and a 'surprising phrase detector', then classified and structured into three sub-categories of hateful content: political/ideological, ethno-national and religious.

The automated collection and assessment of data was conducted by the natural language processing tool Method52, designed by the Centre for Analysis of Social Media. A detailed description of how the data was processed and categorised is provided in the section 'Categorising the data', below. Manual research helped contextualise data and identify blind spots where Method52 could not easily access the application programming interface (API). The manual research was undertaken on the same platforms, and also included Telegram channels.

Conceptual considerations

This policy brief uses the following definition for extremism:

> Extremism is the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based 'in-group' over all 'out groups', and propagates a dehumanising 'othering' mind-set that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights. Hateful individuals and groups pursue and advocate a systemic political and societal change that reflects their world view. They may do this through non-violent and subtler means, as well as through violent or explicit means.

Each 'group' is unique as it provides members with a set of characteristics, such as ethnicity, religious belief, racial belonging or political affiliation, which define its identity. Equally important, the in-group depends on the identification of an out-group, which it sees as a threat to its identity, political objectives and general well-being. The (perceived) threat is usually combined with a sense of victimisation to strengthen the collective identity and fuel justifications for more condescending and hateful views and action. The dissemination of racist and xenophobic content through computer systems is punishable under the Macedonian Criminal Code, and its provisions on hate speech are in in line with the definition used for the purposes of this brief. [13]

Categorising the data

Using automated data collection software, SCN gathered 3,235,938 pieces of content across all of the targeted platforms, out of which 1,290,554 were collected using included relevant keywords. Most of this data was collected from web forums (1,573,000) and Twitter (1,486,139). Almost all of the content that included relevant keywords was collected from Twitter, with 1,092,339 data points, largely because Twitter offers greater access to its API than other platforms do.

While 40% of the content contained relevant key words, only 2% (20,670 pieces) pertained to polarisation, hate and extremism in North Macedonia. The data was filtered and classified using Method52's classifier function where the labelling of content as relevant or irrelevant was based on the SCN definition. This brief will focus on this content, as well as supplemental material gathered through manual research.

The data was classified using Method52 into four sub-categories:

01   **Albanian language political**

02   **Macedonian language Latin script political (Macedonian Latinate political)**

03   **Macedonian language Cyrillic script political (Macedonian Cyrillic political)**

04   **Macedonian language Cyrillic script ethnic (Macedonian Cyrillic ethnic).**

SCN faced some limitations in using automated data collection for this research. Method52 was not able to classify relevant content related to religious extremism because of technical limitations, but this does not mean religiously inspired extremism is not present online. To compensate for blind spots, SCN collected additional data manually. The section 'Religiously motivated extremism', towards the end of this report, provides a catalogue of manually collected and analysed data that offers a small insight into the online presence of religiously inspired extremist groups impacting North Macedonia.

Language had a notable impact on automated collection. Similarities in South Slavic languages across the region made it difficult to collect and filter Macedonian Latinate content. Likewise, Albanian is spoken by large populations in Albania and Kosovo, which made it more difficult to isolate content that was specific to North Macedonia. As a result, SCN was ultimately unable to process ethnic-based hateful content in Macedonian Latinate or Albanian using Method52, and these sub-categories have not been included in the automatic classification listed above.

Language also gave additional weight to Macedonian Cyrillic script content. Graph 1 below shows the count of content collected for each of the four sub-categories. The spike after 1 March 2020 reflects the inclusion of Twitter data which began in late March 2020. Graph 2 presents the data distributed by platform. As these graphs show, Macedonian Cyrillic script content was predominant, but this is largely because it was the easiest to collect, filter and classify since the script is unique to the country.
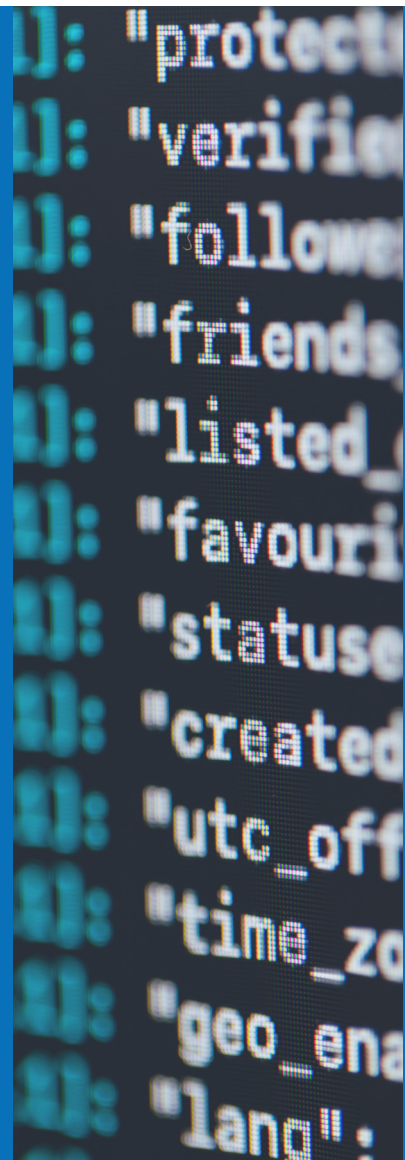
Graph 01 — Volume of data over time (VOT) from 1 January 2019 — 24 June 2020 from all four classes subcategorised by SCN

Legend:
- Count of Albanian political posts
- Count of Macedonian Latinate political posts
- Count of Macedonian Cyrillic ethnic posts
- Count of Macedonian Cyrillic political posts
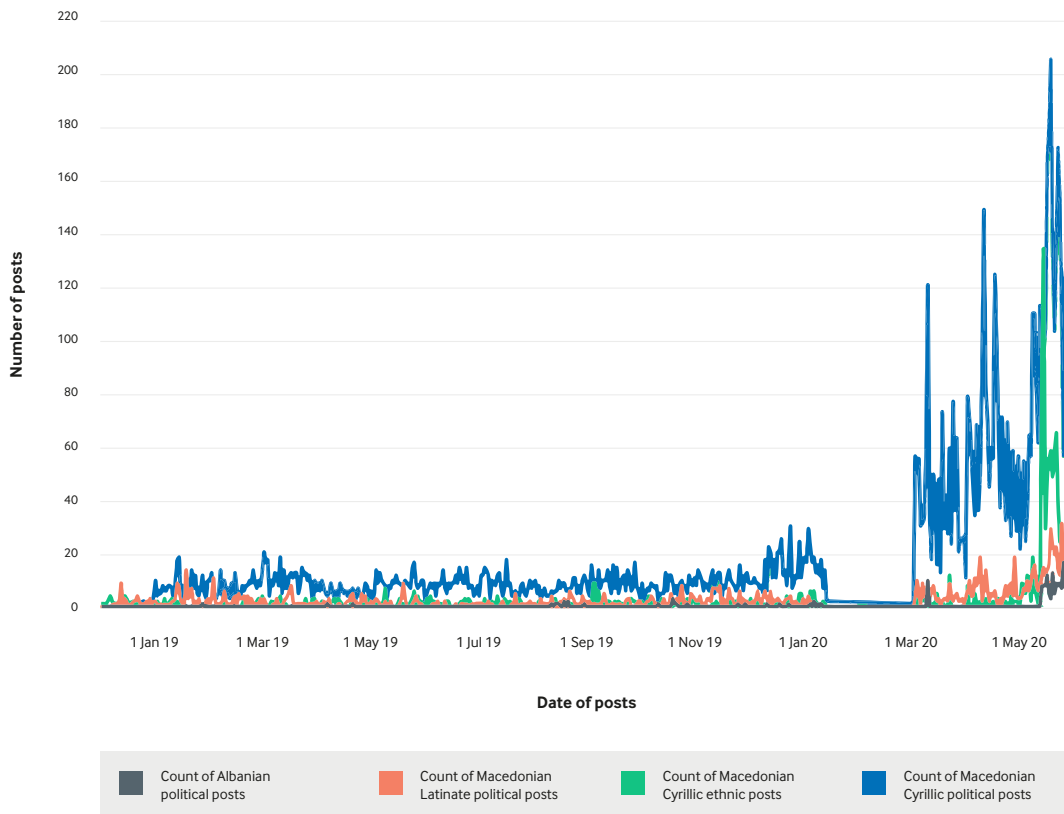
Graph 02 — Volume of data over time (VOT) from 1 January 2019 — 24 June 2020 from four sources of social media

Legend:
- Count of Twitter posts
- Count of Facebook posts
- Count of YouTube posts
- Count of web forum posts
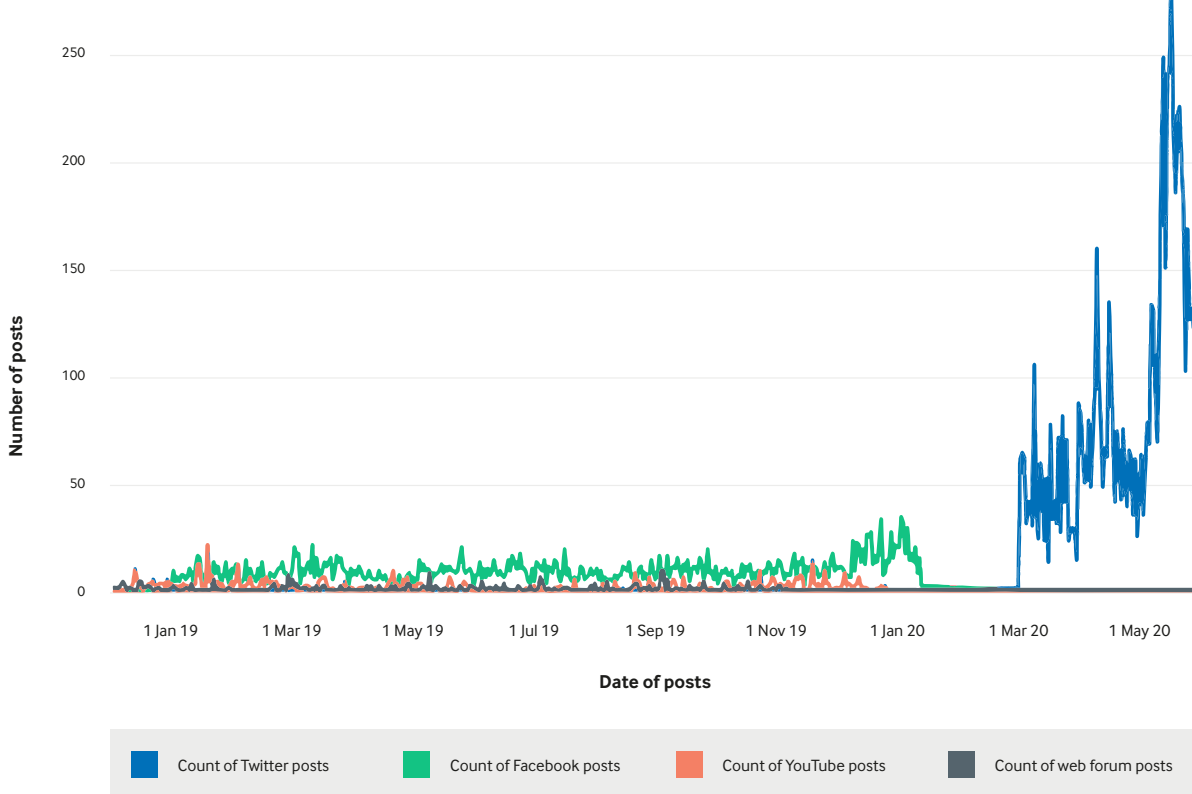
NARRATIVES
Political polarisation

Background

Hate speech and political polarisation have always been an alarming issue in North Macedonia. One of the main reasons for this is that political elites have nurtured a public administration system based on clientelism through which they employ party supporters to get votes during elections.[14] This system has politicised prominent elements of daily life and heightened the importance of political affiliation for many since these individuals depend existentially on their party. Political antagonism also comes from within the parties themselves, as each party promotes campaigns to demonise political opponents through divisive smear campaigns.[15] Political polarisation and hostility is so wide spread that the newly elected President Stevo Pendarovski has discussed the need for a processes of civic reconciliation.[16]

Internal political tensions have also been exacerbated by external political disputes with Greece and Bulgaria about key components of Macedonian identity – name, flag, language and history. These disputes have mainstreamed distrust and given rise to the polarising dichotomy of 'patriots vs. traitors'. This division extends to other political and social issues around the country, including political affiliation and its nepotistic system,[17] refugees,[18] the LGBTQ+ community[19] and EU (scepticism),[20] and seeped into debates defining what it means to be 'Macedonian' and what a Macedonian state should look like.

Social media platforms have become an increasingly common forum where political elites and regular citizens contribute to these politically polarising issues. The online conversations are so heated that the leader of the opposition party Levica was summoned by the Public Prosecutor's Office of North Macedonia on charges for spreading hate speech on Facebook and Twitter.[21] While some of this content can easily be classified as hate speech, many problematic posts are not explicitly hateful and don't meet the threshold of violating the community guidelines of the platform to be removed. Regardless of the actual label, these divisions show serious polarisation and antagonism in North Macedonia and have the potential to culminate in violent events such as the storming of the Macedonian parliament in 2017.

General findings

SCN identified 18,371 relevant hateful pieces of content under the category political polarisation; 13,562 were in Macedonian and 4,809 were in the Albanian language. Almost half of the Macedonian language data was identified on Twitter (7,025) followed by Facebook (3,263) and web forums (2,596), while most of the Albanian language content came from web forums (4,598).

To understand the most prominent polarising and hateful types of narratives, SCN looked at the most used words and hashtags, and the most liked and shared posts. Table 1 shows the results for the Macedonian language in both scripts.

Count	Keyword	Count (continued)	Keyword	Count (continued)	Keyword
4744	Macedonia	665	DUI	564	Macedonians
2199	VMRO	765 + 197	SDS (+SDSM)	541	Grujo
1236	Sharenite	732	The people	509	Soros
1161	Traitors	654	The name	456	Never North
874	Severdzani	647	VMRO-DPMNE	388	The Albanians
807	Money	624	The Macedonians		
758 + 74	Zoran (+Zajko)	573	Zoran Zaev		
679	Elections	571	The state		

Table 01 A list of the top most used keywords in the Macedonian Cyrillic and Latinate political classifiers[22]

The data from Table 1 is presented as a word cloud in Image 1, together with less prominent terms.

Image 01 A word cloud of the top most used keywords in the Macedonian Cyrillic and Latinate political classifiers

Most of these words are not hateful. For example, the top two most used words are the name of the country and VMRO, which refers to the secret guerrilla Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation, which operated in the 19th and 20th centuries. The organisation has a mixed legacy and is claimed by both North Macedonia and Bulgaria. Presently, the term VMRO is used to refer to a centre-right party Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) in North Macedonia. However, the opinions expressed in relation to the listed words in the table show a picture of a divided society.

Never north, only Macedonia

North Macedonia is the third name associated with the small landlocked country in the centre of the Balkans. Although it declared independence as the Republic of Macedonia, the country was admitted in most multilateral organisations as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), a reference agreed between Macedonia and Greece for the state's name until a final settlement was reached.[23] Greece argues that the term 'Macedonia' is an inseparable part of its Hellenic historical and cultural heritage. As such its use by another country threatens Greece's identity and lays ground for territorial aspirations to a sizable geographic province to the north of the country.[24] Macedonia refutes Greece's argument of territorial claims and underscores the principle of self-determination and self-identification as paramount to its identity and country name.[25] Following a 27 year stalemate, the governments of the two countries reached a deal whereby the country was renamed to the Republic of North Macedonia, while its people continued to be known as Macedonians, and the language referred to as Macedonian.[26] Despite international plaudits for the settlement, many people were dissatisfied with the outcome. This was evident offline, with protests in major cities in the country, and online.

SCN's analysis found content indicating polarisation and hate between supporters and opponents of the name change. 'Северџани/Severdzani' (translated literally to 'Northistani') was identified 874 times, which is significant compared with the other keywords and considering its relatively recent birth. Moreover, '#северџани/#severdzani' was the most used hashtag on Twitter with 514 features during this research, as portrayed in the word cloud shown in Image 2.

Image 02   A word cloud of the top most used hashtags of the Macedonian Cyrillic and Latinate political classifiers
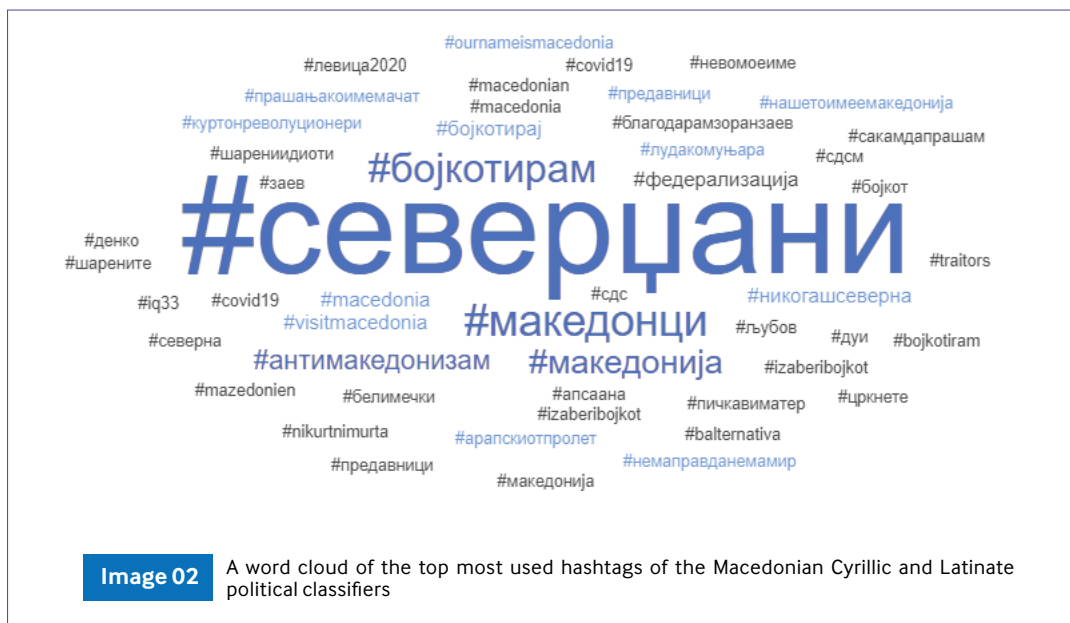
Opponents of the Prespa Agreement, the international convetion which formalised the name change, referred to supporters of the new name as 'Severdzani'. One explanation of this term's rising popularity is that it symbolises the birth of a perceived valueless and backwards state without an identity. The tweets shown in images 3 and 4 give a good indication of the sentiment towards Severdzani.

Северџани, немојте ни да ви текнало да славите на 2-ри август и 8-ми септември. Не се тие датуми на вашата Република Северна Македонија, тие се поголеми од тоа име. Тие датуми се на Република Македонија за која гинеле луѓе, а не со продавање име како во сегашно време.

Translate Tweet

10:45 AM · Jul 26, 2021 · Twitter for Android

40 Retweets   2 Quote Tweets   178 Likes

Image 03 Screenshot of post stating: "Severdzani, don't even think about celebrating 2 August and 8 September [Macedonian national holidays]. These are not dates of your Republic of North Macedonia; they are bigger than that name. These are dates of the Republic of Macedonian for which people have died, and not for those [who] have betrayed the name as in nowadays."
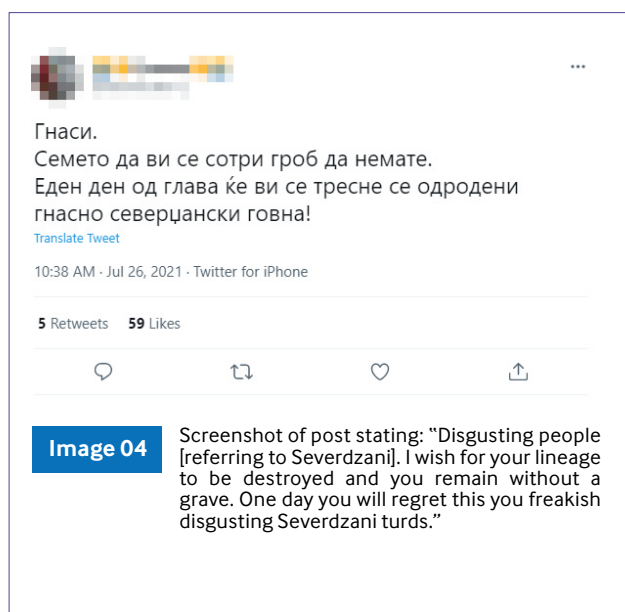

Гнаси.
Семето да ви се сотри гроб да немате.
Еден ден од глава ќе ви се тресне се одродени гнасно северџански говна!

Translate Tweet

10:38 AM · Jul 26, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

5 Retweets   59 Likes

Image 04 Screenshot of post stating: "Disgusting people [referring to Severdzani]. I wish for your lineage to be destroyed and you remain without a grave. One day you will regret this you freakish disgusting Severdzani turds."

While the hateful sentiment towards the 'Severdzani' is evident in these two examples, it is interesting that the Republic of North Macedonia is treated as a separate and artificial entity with no connection to the perceived 'true' Macedonia. However, despite these hateful posts and the clear indications that Severdzani is a polarising term, there are mixed opinions about whether the word itself can be considered hate speech. While some consider that Severdzani is a textbook example of a terms used to dehumanise a particular group, while other see it as an inconsequential term that reflects the social development around the name change.[27] Regardless, it is clear from the examples above that the term and the binary it creates between 'patriots' and 'traitors' is fuelling an unbridgeable divide within the Macedonian community. This will likely complicate efforts to normalise 'North Macedonia' as the constitutional name of the country and hamper stability in the long term.

The name change has given rise to other movements that criticise the process as obscuring the 'real' Macedonian identity. For example, the 'Bojkotiram' (Boycott) campaign aimed to get citizens to snub the 2018 name referendum. Although the referendum passed more than two years ago, the hashtag '#bojkotiram' featured 116 times on Twitter during the data collection period. This shows its ongoing use as the campaign's terminology has become a general expression for resistance to the Prespa Agreement and a rallying cry for boycotting the government's attempt to deliver a census in 2021, with demonstrators arguing that it is rigged. What began as decentralised campaign has morphed into the Bojkotiram Movement with its own webpage, blog and YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Telegram channels, which members use to disseminate its far-right-wing agenda (images 5 and 6). It is important to note that this group is not composed of the original leadership of the Bojkotiram campaign and has a much smaller grassroot support base.
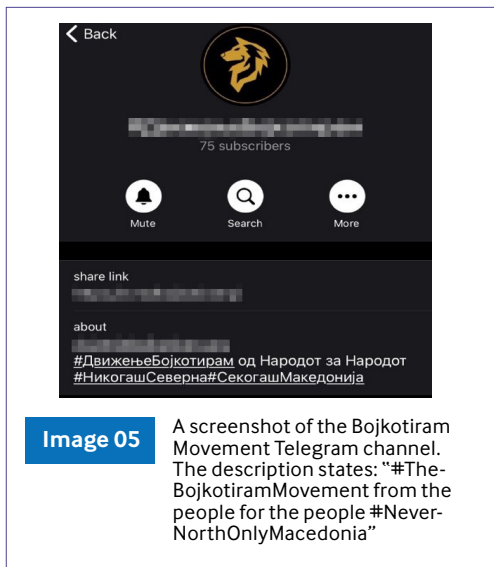
Image 05 — A screenshot of the Bojkotiram Movement Telegram channel. The description states: "#The-BojkotiramMovement from the people for the people #Never-NorthOnlyMacedonia"
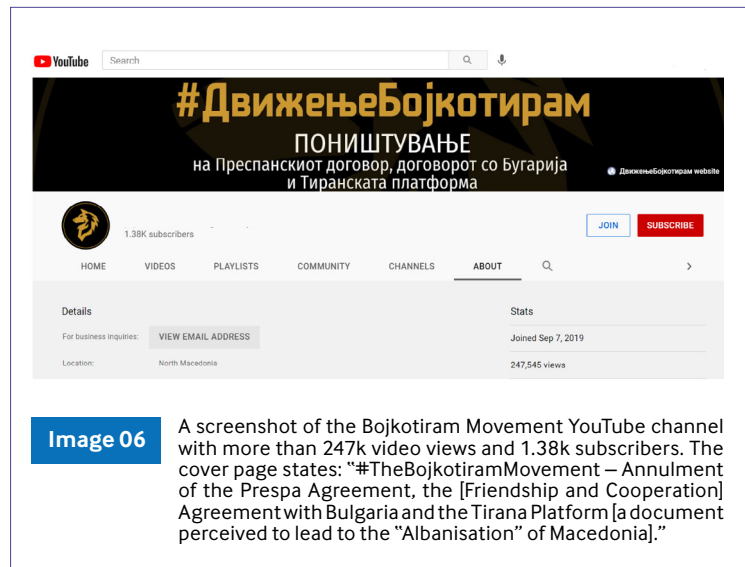

Image 06 — A screenshot of the Bojkotiram Movement YouTube channel with more than 247k video views and 1.38k subscribers. The cover page states: "#TheBojkotiramMovement – Annulment of the Prespa Agreement, the [Friendship and Cooperation] Agreement with Bulgaria and the Tirana Platform [a document perceived to lead to the "Albanisation" of Macedonia]."

#NeverNorthOnlyMacedonia features prominently in the Bojkotiram Movement Telegram channel description signalling its opposition to the name change. This hashtag was widespread on Twitter at the time of this research and is included in the hashtag word cloud shown in Image 2. Opponents to the Prespa Agreement have also taken the phrase offline, using it as a chant during sports events and protests.

The Colourful Revolution

Another prominent term found during the data collection period was 'Шарените/Sharenite' ('The Colourful Ones'). This word dates back to the 2016 protests in North Macedonia, also known as the Colourful Revolution, which brought down the government led by the centre-right VMRO-DPMNE. Protestors, collectively known as the 'Sharenite', took to the streets following the now infamous wiretapping scandal in which it was revealed that the state had illegally surveilled more than 20,000 telephone numbers.[28] Many Macedonian nationalists believe the Sharenite to be either mercenaries and/or opportunists working on the behalf of foreign interests.

Although the protests occurred five years ago, researchers found 1,236 mentions of 'Sharenite'.

Image 07 — A screenshot of a post stating: "They sentenced the murderer of Martin Neshkovski to 14 years in prison. Despite this, the Sharenite and komunjarite [derogatory term for communists] burned Skopje down. Today the murderer of a 17-year old boy from Novo Lisice is sentenced to 3 years in prison. The same komunjari and shareni[te] are not speaking up. The mouths are shut with cash."

Although 'Sharenite' and 'Severdzani' originate in different contexts and refer to different groups, they are usually classed jointly as traitors. 'Sharenite' were responsible for the fall of the previous government and are currently blamed for real and perceived setbacks, including the name change, corruption and upcoming perceived federalisation. The tweets shown in images 7 to 9 exemplify how 'Sharenite' are targeted for having double standards in their responses to perceived scandals involving the current and former government. The posts seem to be orchestrated with a goal to delegitimise the 'Sharenite' and the outcome of the Colourful Revolution. One of the posts even draws parallels between the 'Sharenite' and 'Severdzani' as similar traitor groups.
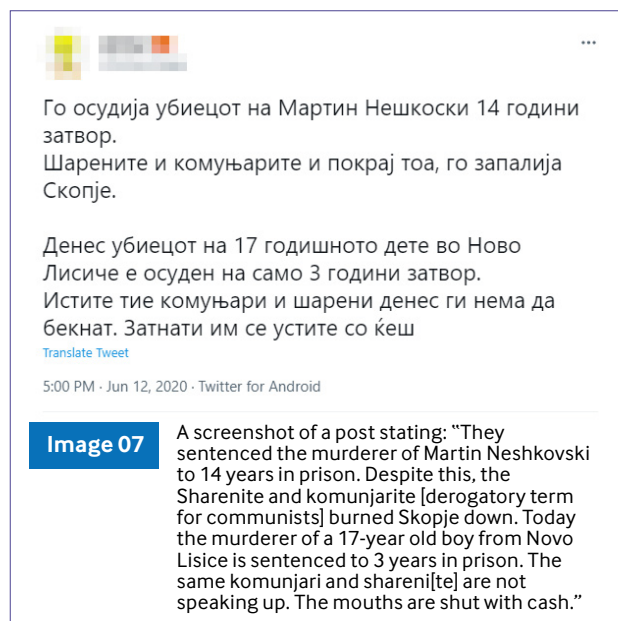
#Северџани #ШарениИдиоти
#КуртонРеволуционери Едно прашање до вас.
На колку години беше осуден Игор Спасов убиецот
на Мартин Нешковски, а на колку години е осуден
убиецот на кошаркарот на МЗТ во Ново Лисиче?
#ПичкаВиМатер затоа што сега ќутите, а пред 5
години го запаливте Скопје
Translate Tweet

7:58 PM · Jun 12, 2020 · Twitter for Android
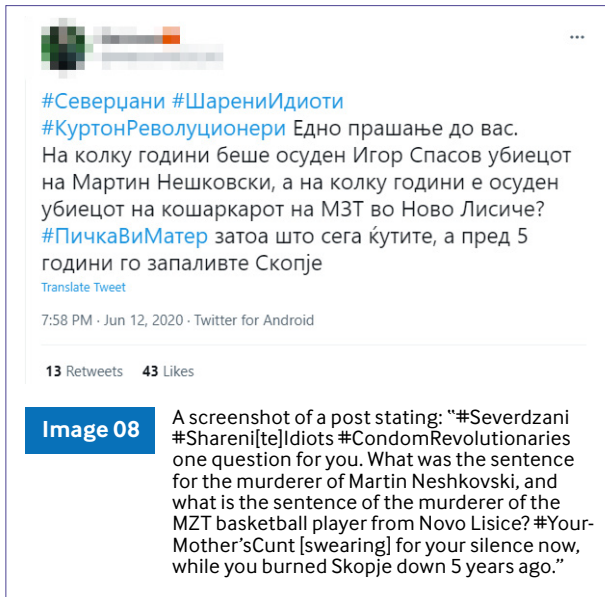
13 Retweets   43 Likes

Image 08 A screenshot of a post stating: "#Severdzani #Shareni[te]Idiots #CondomRevolutionaries one question for you. What was the sentence for the murderer of Martin Neshkovski, and what is the sentence of the murderer of the MZT basketball player from Novo Lisice? #Your-Mother'sCunt [swearing] for your silence now, while you burned Skopje down 5 years ago."
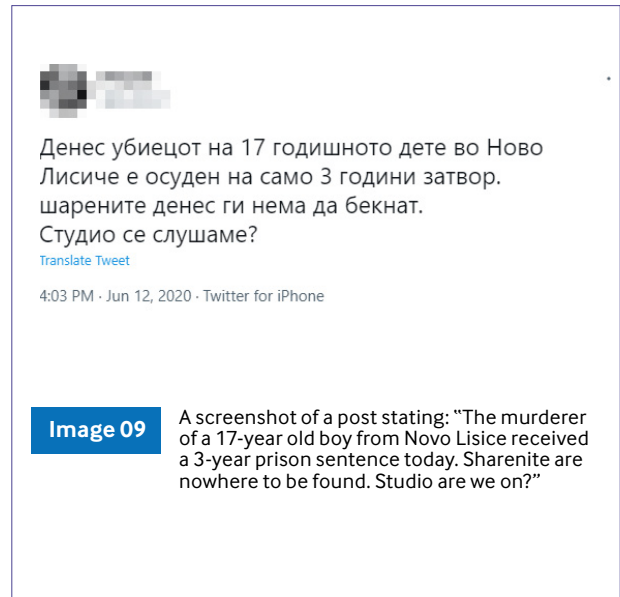
Денес убиецот на 17 годишното дете во Ново
Лисиче е осуден на само 3 години затвор.
шарените денес ги нема да бекнат.
Студио се слушаме?
Translate Tweet

4:03 PM · Jun 12, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

Image 09 A screenshot of a post stating: "The murderer of a 17-year old boy from Novo Lisice received a 3-year prison sentence today. Sharenite are nowhere to be found. Studio are we on?"

The person posting the tweet shown in Image 7 makes the accusation that the Sharenite were silenced by payments not to respond to perceived injustices. During the protests in 2016, they were implicated in a broader conspiracy against the state financed by philanthropist George Soros.[29] This connection is one explanation for why 'Soros' was identified 509 times as a relevant keyword. The individuals who were a part of Soros' plot were called Sorosoidi and are also a part of the broader traitor club. The legacy of the Soros conspiracy continues to live on through the terminology that many individuals use to label perceived traitors to the Macedonian community.

Albanian political discourse

SCN did not identify any politically polarising content in Albanian beyond differences between opposing political factions. This was likely due in large part to the data collection limitations that SCN faced gathering Albanian language content. Researchers were unable to filter political content from Albania and Kosovo that is not directly relevant to North Macedonia. As a result, SCN was unable to collect data points from outside web forums. Image 10 shows a word cloud of the most prevalent keywords in the Albanian political classifier.

Image 10   A word cloud of the top most used keywords in the Albanian political classifier

Ethnic hatred

Background

Ethnic tensions have recurred since North Macedonia's independence. This has been most visible among the two biggest ethnic groups in the country – Macedonians and Albanians. In the 1990s, tensions erupted into violent clashes between the Macedonian police and Albanian demonstrators, most notably with the Flea Market shooting in Skopje in 1992 and the unrest in Gostivar and Tetovo in 1997.[30] These events culminated with the 2001 conflict between the state security forces and the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA), which was settled through the Ohrid Framework Agreement.[31] Although violent hostilities have not reappeared between the two groups in the past 15 years, apart from a few isolated incidents, tensions and hate have not dissipated. One reason for the absence of violence is that members from the two ethnicities have been largely functioning within their communities and coexisting in parallel with limited interaction despite programmes to promote social cohesion. However, animosity and antagonism between the two groups is still rife online.

It is important to note that ethnic-based hate speech in the country is not exclusively between Macedonians and Albanians; it has affected all communities that make up North Macedonia's multicultural society, including Roma, Turks, Serbs, Bosniaks and others. Moreover, there is hate speech directed at neighbouring nationalities. Most recently, there has been an increase in anti-Bulgarian content online because of the ongoing bilateral issues between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. For instance, Bulgarian media identified a public Facebook group called 'Let's spit at Bulgarians and Bulgarian sympathisers' where members post hateful comments and advocate using physical violence against Bulgarian tourists and Bulgarophiles. [33]

General findings

SCN identified 2,299 relevant pieces of content related to ethnic hatred. All of the data SCN classified was in Macedonian Cyrillic script. SCN collected data in Albanian language and Macedonian Latinate script; however, it was not possible to classify it robustly mostly because of the limitations in automated collection mentioned previously. For example, SCN identified Albanian language posts directed at Serbs that were collected because the derogatory terms they used are the same as those used towards Macedonians. The uniqueness of Macedonian Cyrillic script made it possible to filter out all the ethnically polarising content that was irrelevant for North Macedonia. This does not mean that ethnically based hatred online is not present in North Macedonia in these scripts; rather, SCN decided not to present the Albanian language and Macedonian Latinate data because of the low precision of its classifiers.

Most of the relevant ethnic hatred posts were collected from Twitter (1,066) or web forums (932). Facebook has a higher penetration rate in North Macedonia than Twitter, but restrictions on access to its API made it more difficult for researchers to access data. Table 2 and Image 11 show the most prominent keywords from relevant posts featuring ethnically motivated hate.

Count	Keyword	Count (Cont.)	Keyword
685	Macedonia	94	Kosovo
539	UCK (NLA)	93	Money
430	Shiptar	91	Gypsy
260	Macedonian	90	State
199	Macedonians	79	Macedonian defenders
134	Gypsies	50	Greater Albania
111	Peoples	34	In 2001
108	The Albanians	34	Taking back our country
97	Balistite	28	For Prime Minister

Table 02   The top most used keywords in the Macedonian Cyrillic ethnic classifier

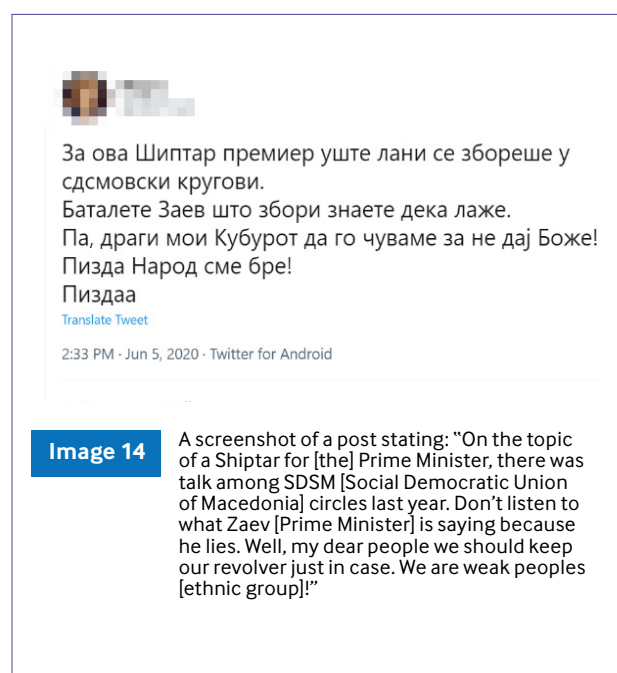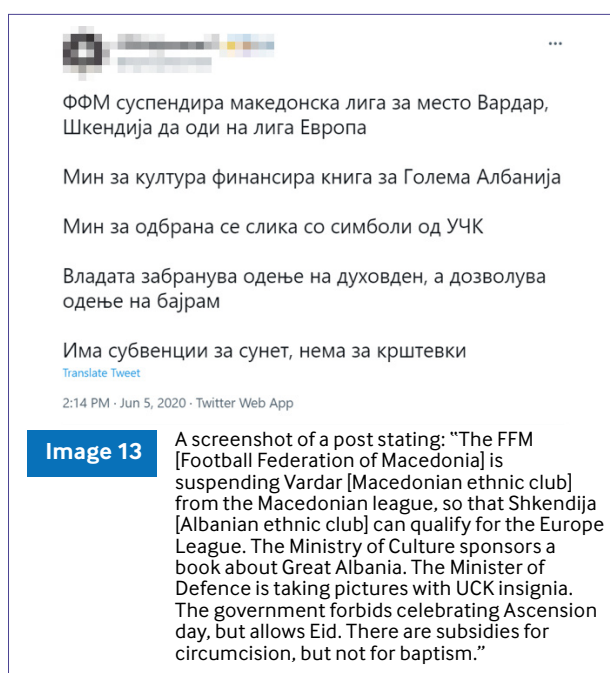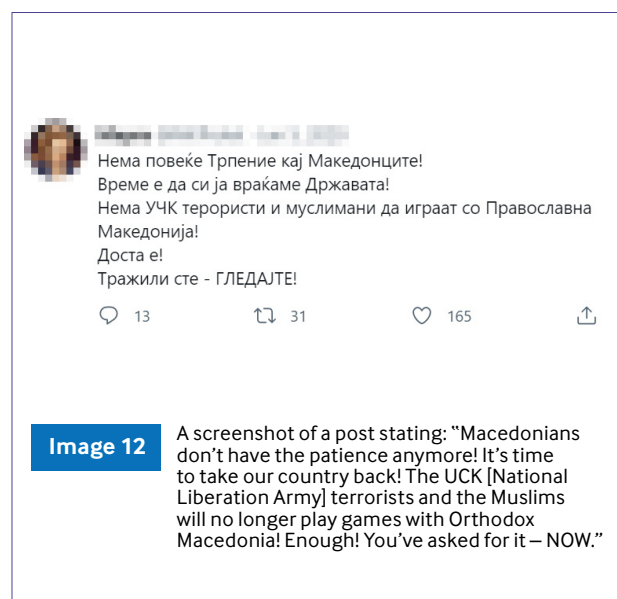**Image 11**   A word cloud of the most used keywords from the Macedonian Cyrillic political classifier

The top five words in the list include three references to Macedonia and its citizens, as well as a derogatory term for Albanians ('Shiptar') and the Albanian acronym for the National Liberation Army (UCK). The list also contains another derogatory term for Albanians (Balistite) and references to Greater Albania, an important perceived threat among some members of the Macedonian ethnic group. In addition to hateful keywords targeted at Albanians, the list contains the word Gypsy (and Gypsies), commonly used to deride the Roma community. Interestingly, derogatory terms aimed at other ethnic groups like Bulgarians, Serbs, Bosniaks and Turks did not make the list, even though there have been registered cases of hate speech against these groups as well.

It is important to note that the data presented here is taken from a small sample of hateful content collected and classified through automation and in no way represents the broader online ecosystem of ethnic hate.
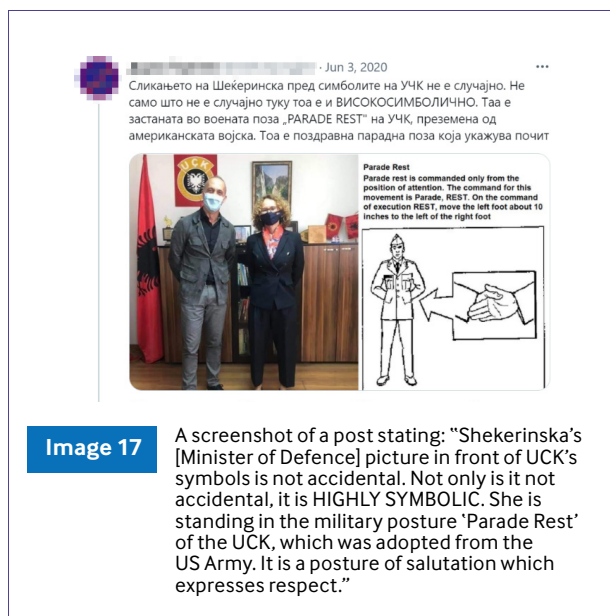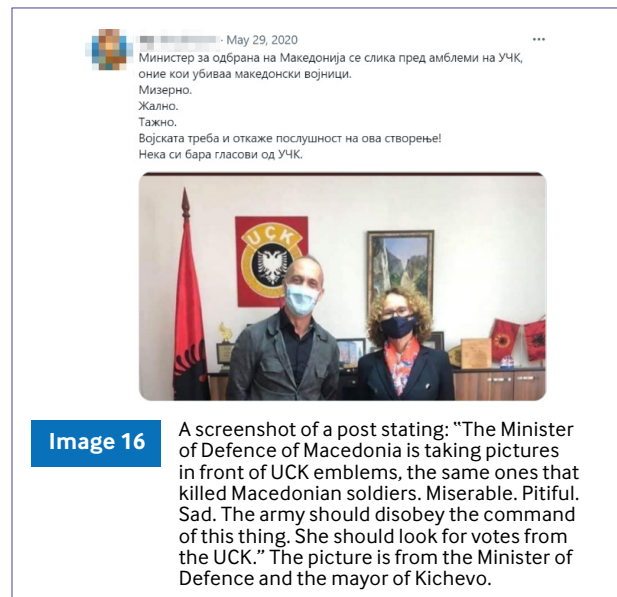
'Anti-Macedonianism'

SCN's research found that most ethnic-based hate is rooted from a perceived threat to the Macedonian state and people. The threat is seen to manifest in different ways; for example, double standards for ethnic Macedonians and other groups in the country, privileges for non-Macedonians – particularly groups that have turned on the state, and an increased presence of perceived non-Macedonian elements in mainstream society. Extreme segments within the ethnic Macedonian community perceive Albanians to be the main threat to the state. There are many narratives espoused by those segments which are meant to foster further antagonism towards Albanians. The two most prominent ones are the creation of a so-called Greater Albania, which is seen as a direct threat to the territorial integrity of North Macedonia, and the implementation of the Tirana Platform, which is seen as a vehicle for the federalisation and 'Albanisation' of North Macedonia. The terms 'Greater Albania' featured 50 times in the relevant sample, while the term 'Taking back our country' and the hashtag '#federalisation' appeared 34 and 25 times, respectively. [34]

There are two additional cleavages that build rifts and distrust between the two ethnic groups. The Macedonian and Albanian languages are completely different and while a majority of Albanians can understand and speak Macedonian, the majority of Macedonians cannot understand the Albanian language. The adoption of Albanian as the second official language on the entire territory of North Macedonia was seen as another step towards the 'Albanisation' of the country and was met with protests.[35] Moreover, there are religious differences between Macedonians and Albanians. Most Macedonians are Orthodox Christians while most Albanians are Muslim.[36] The Albanian Muslims' identity is seen as another issue threatening Macedonian Christian values. Some of the most liked and shared tweets shown in images 12 to 14 demonstrate this antagonism in practice.

Image 12 A screenshot of a post stating: "Macedonians don't have the patience anymore! It's time to take our country back! The UCK [National Liberation Army] terrorists and the Muslims will no longer play games with Orthodox Macedonia! Enough! You've asked for it – NOW."

Image 13 A screenshot of a post stating: "The FFM [Football Federation of Macedonia] is suspending Vardar [Macedonian ethnic club] from the Macedonian league, so that Shkendija [Albanian ethnic club] can qualify for the Europe League. The Ministry of Culture sponsors a book about Great Albania. The Minister of Defence is taking pictures with UCK insignia. The government forbids celebrating Ascension day, but allows Eid. There are subsidies for circumcision, but not for baptism."

Image 14 A screenshot of a post stating: "On the topic of a Shiptar for [the] Prime Minister, there was talk among SDSM [Social Democratic Union of Macedonia] circles last year. Don't listen to what Zaev [Prime Minister] is saying because he lies. Well, my dear people we should keep our revolver just in case. We are weak peoples [ethnic group]!"

However, a substantial portion of the data SCN analysed targeted 'traitors' from the Macedonian political leadership who are perceived to further Albanian interests, which are considered by default anti-Macedonian. For instance, SCN found a cluster of abusive tweets that were aimed at the Minister of Defence. The hateful content was in response to a picture she took with the mayor of Kichevo, a town in western Macedonia, in which the UCK (NLA) logo was displayed in the back of the mayor's cabinet.

Image 15 — A screenshot of a post stating: "After taking your pictures with UCK insignia, remember that some people are still crying about losing their children in the battles with the then paramilitary UCK unit during the crisis of 2001."

Image 16 — A screenshot of a post stating: "The Minister of Defence of Macedonia is taking pictures in front of UCK emblems, the same ones that killed Macedonian soldiers. Miserable. Pitiful. Sad. The army should disobey the command of this thing. She should look for votes from the UCK." The picture is from the Minister of Defence and the mayor of Kichevo.

Image 17 — A screenshot of a post stating: "Shekerinska's [Minister of Defence] picture in front of UCK's symbols is not accidental. Not only is it not accidental, it is HIGHLY SYMBOLIC. She is standing in the military posture 'Parade Rest' of the UCK, which was adopted from the US Army. It is a posture of salutation which expresses respect."

The civil conflict in 2001 left many portions of the population, both Macedonian and Albanian, devastated and traumatised and was accompanied with a lengthy transitional justice and reconciliation process, which lasts to this day. While for some Albanians the UCK is a symbol of resistance and freedom, for some Macedonians it is still viewed as a terrorist para-military group which rebelled against the state. Hence, the reactions to the picture are not surprising having in mind the controversial UCK insignia present in the cabinet of the Kichevo mayor and the lack of reconciliation around the armed struggle of 2001 (see images 15 to 17). The online cloud of this events shows two important things: the patriot vs. traitor dichotomy extends into the sphere of ethnic hate through the lens of 'anti-Macedonianism', and the rifts between the two ethnic groups are amplified online and more needs to be done in the virtual space to promote social cohesion.

ONLINE EXTREMISM IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Religiously motivated extremism

Background

North Macedonia is a multidenominational state and has experienced many instances of religiously based hate and extremism over the years. Religion has played a significant role throughout the history of the region, helping shape the societal fabric of its various communities. Even when the country was a part of the Yugoslav Socialist Federation,[37] religion played an important part in strengthening the Macedonian identity through the creation of a separate Macedonian Orthodox Church in 1967, whose autocephality is challenged to this day.[38]

Following the collapse of Yugoslavia, the region experienced a revival in religiosity and spirituality. This phenomenon manifested itself in different ways and the lack of a strategic government response opened the door for malign religious groups to take hold across the region. North Macedonia was no exception to this trend, which was characterised by the emergence of Salafi-jihadi networks on one side and the synergy of Christian ethno-nationalists on the other side.

Salafi-jihadi community overview

Muslims in the territory of North Macedonia have historically subscribed to the traditional Hanafi school, dating back to the rule of the Ottomans when Islam was introduced to the region. Nonetheless, variations of Salafism and Wahhabism started spreading in the country following its independence supported by an illicit inflow of funds from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.[39] With this, the influence of militant Salafi-jihadi groups grew prominently as well. For instance, a mujahidin unit called Imran Elezi was actively involved in the 2001 conflict, an extremist group actively harassed Shi'a and Bekteshi communities, and radical preachers started taking over control of mosques from the Islamic religious community, the independent religious organisation of Muslims led by the country's Reis-ul-ulema.[40] Equally important, Salafi-jihadi imams were also actively recruiting members to join recognised terrorist groups including Al-Qaeda and its affiliates and the Islamic State. It is estimated that more than 150 citizens of North Macedonia, mostly men, left to join the ranks of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its affiliates in Syria and Iraq.[41] Abdul Jashari, a Skopje-born ethnic Albanian, rose to prominence in the military hierarchy of Jabhat al-Nusra (currently HTS), which led the United States Treasury Department to put him on its sanctions list for terrorism.[42] It is speculated that he currently leads a division of Albanian snipers called Xhemati Alban, which operates in Idlib, Syria, under the umbrella of HTS.[43]

SCN had less success in collecting and analysing data connected to Salafi-jihadi content through the natural language processing tools than in collecting data on the other two topics assessed above. Most of the data collected included non-violent theological discourse and reporting on the conflict in Syria and Iraq. There are a few possible reasons for this outcome: provision of non-specific keywords and sources; extremist propagators and groups from North Macedonia were taken down from online media platforms; extremist propagators and groups have moved their communications to closed encrypted groups as a result of more thorough surveillance measures by authorities; or extremist propagators have refined their messaging so that it does not constitute hate speech and avoids online monitors.
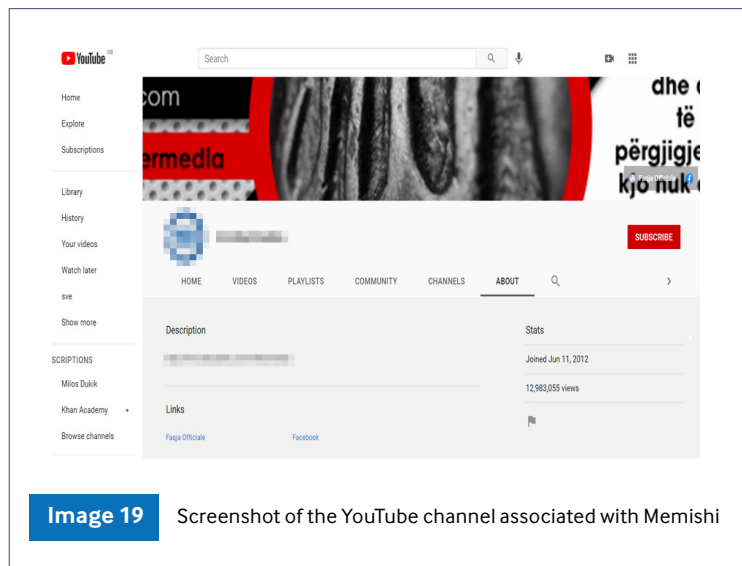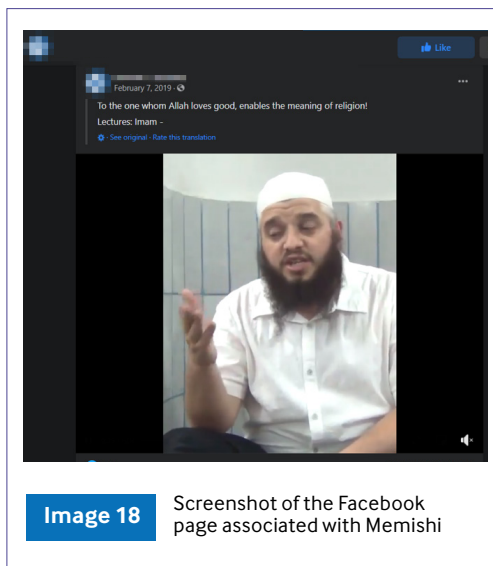
Since the automated crawls were not able to provide a significant amount of useful relevant data, SCN conducted manual open source investigations for religiously inspired extremist content.

Extremist imams

This research found that there are traces of extremist related content publicly available online, but most of the groups are currently inactive. Despite their inactivity, the data connected to known extremist preachers is a Google search away for anyone interested in this content. SCN found a dormant Facebook and YouTube account associated with the extremist imam Rexhep Memishi. He received a seven-year jail sentence as part of the 'Cell 1' police case in 2016 for recruiting individuals to take part in foreign wars and/or (para)military units.[44] The Facebook page 'Minberi i Teuhidit' (translated to 'The Pupil of Tawhid' from Albanian) associated with the radical imam has 50,147 likes and 49,622 followers (Image 18). The public page has been inactive since 7 February 2019 when there was a post of a video of Memishi delivering a lecture on the importance of loving Allah in order to achieve meaning. The YouTube equivalent of the page titled 'Minberimedia' has been live since June 2012 and has accumulated almost 13 million views from 382 videos, mostly in the Albanian language (Image 19). Similar to the Facebook page, the channel has not released new content since January 2018. It is important to note that these accounts were active at the start of Memeshi's prison sentence, which began in 2017.

In 2016, Analytica, a think-tank from Skopje, identified several problematic videos where Memishi calls for martyrdom in defending the borders of a State of Islam (not referring to the caliphate) and encouraging believers to move to Syria.[45] During this research, SCN identified two additional videos on this platform where Memishi labels Muslims in North Macedonia who follow the traditional Hanafi practices as kafir (disbelievers). Five years later, the videos are still online.

On the surface, Memishi's content merely encourages devotion to Islam, seeking education and living modestly, while videos containing explicitly extremist content were rare. For example, the most watched video on the YouTube page associated with him — with more than 11 million views — was a song about protecting and embracing orphans as part of the Muslim umma. However, upon closer inspection, his content serves as propaganda that defines in groups and out groups and builds towards a narrative of extremist Islam that was critical to his recruitment efforts. As a result, his content is difficult to label explicitly as 'extremist' and is therefore more difficult to remove. This may explain why it is still publicly available despite his conviction for terrorist recruitment. However, despite its moderate character, this platform should be taken down from social media because it is associated with an extremist cleric who is serving time for recruiting individuals to join ISIS and Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups.

Image 18 Screenshot of the Facebook page associated with Memishi

Image 19 Screenshot of the YouTube channel associated with Memishi

This research identified other alleged radical imams with a notable social media presence. Bekir Halimi is an imam with suspected ties to Salafi-jihadi terrorist organisations.[46] Trained in Jordan, he was head of a charity called Bamiresija, which was under investigation for money laundering and financing terrorism. According to US diplomatic cables obtained through Wikileaks, Halimi's organisation received funds from two Middle Eastern NGOs: Saudi al-Waqf al-Islamiya and the Kuwaiti Revival of Islamic Heritage Society. The latter organisation has offices in Afghanistan and Pakistan that were on the UN 1267 Sanctions Committee's list in 2002 for their affiliation with Al-Qaeda.[47] Halimi is also affiliated with other Salafi-jihadi preachers from the Balkans. Guy van Vlierden, a journalist specialised in terrorism and extremism, reported that Halimi participated in at least two Islamic seminars in Belgium organised by Islamsko Romani Dawetsko Organizacija, a Muslim Roma organisation, together with Bilal Bosnic who has been sentenced by the Bosnian authorities for recruiting foreign terrorist fighters for ISIS (Image 20). [48]

Image 20   A poster from an event in Belgium attended by Halimi and Bosnic in 2013

Halimi's social media presence has dwindled in the last two years. For instance, the Twitter account associated with him was active from 2013 until at least July 2019, at which point it had more than 22,100 posts. The account is no longer active in autumn 2021, but its content is accessible through internet archives. Browsing through his posts manually, SCN found that most were religious and political but did not contain explicit hatred or calls for violence.

On Facebook, there is a closed group associated with Halimi with more than 11,700 members whose administrator posts on average twice per day. SCN was unable to get access to the closed group, but Facebook data confirms that the group is active. On YouTube, SCN did not find an account that could be associated with Halimi; however, researchers did identify two channels – 'audionur' and 'Audionur Shkurt'[50]– that host sermons from Halimi and other ethnic Albanian imams. The similarity in name and avatar branding suggests that the accounts are owned by the same entity. The channels have 19,700 and 71,100 subscribers, and more than 8.3 million and 59.7 million views, respectively. The first channel features at least 630 videos of Halimi, while the second offers at least 500, all of which have been uploaded over the course of the past nine years. SCN researchers conducted a short review of a number of videos that highlighted Halimi discussing various political topics in his sermons. For example, one video targeted the leader of the Albanian political party Democratic Union for Integration, criticising them for corrupt practices and anti-Muslim activities. In another video, he classified the Kumanovo attacks in 2015 as staged.[51] The videos might be considered controversial by some; however, they do not reach the threshold of extremist and hateful content under SCN's definitions in the methodology sections. On the contrary, some of Halimi's sermons and quotes have been shared by very moderate voices. For example, several sermons led by Halimi have been shared by Adem Ramadani, a prominent Albanian singer with more than 680,000 followers on Facebook.[52] The complex case of Bekim Halimi is particularly problematic because of his ability to influence followers on social and political issues. Despite not being overtly extremist in his limited public posts, Bekir Halimi's extremist background, network and activity make his online presence a risk for vulnerable communities because the material could be a gateway to more extreme material. The privacy associated with some of his social media accounts is also a sign of concern that the content posted on those profiles could be more extremist.
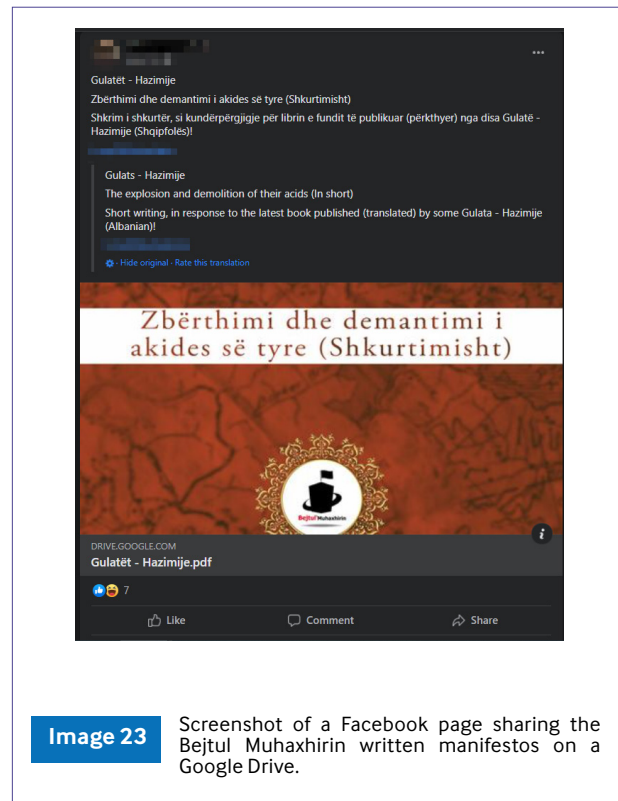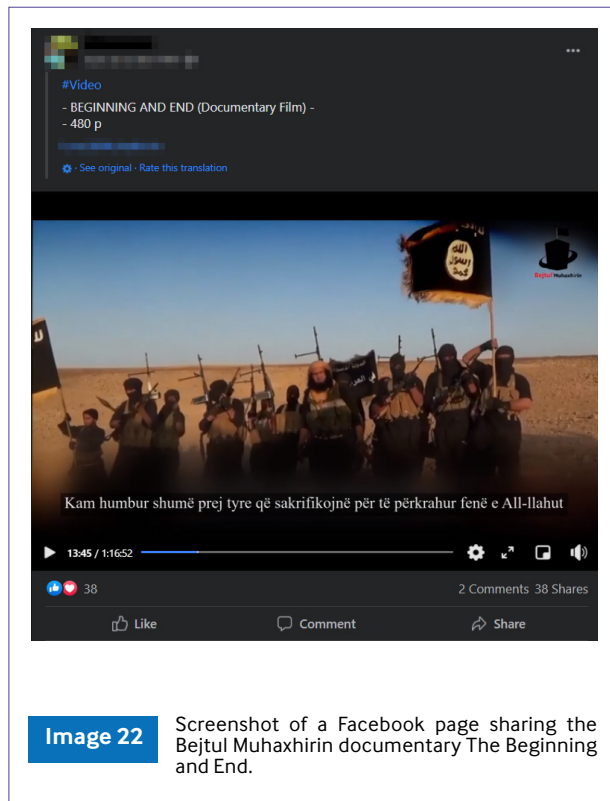
Another imam with a notable social media presence is Sadulla (Sadullah) Bajrami. Born in Kumanovo and educated in Egypt, he is suspected to have ties to Islamic extremists. A report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team drafted pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2368 (2017) lists Bajrami as having had strong links to Al-Qaeda.[53] Moreover, Bajrami is associated with the Islamic organisation Thirrja Islame (Voice of Islam), which has been particularly active in the greater Skopje area. Their work includes youth outreach that seeks to educate high schoolers about the right ways to pray and discourage them from celebrating New Year's Eve.[54] In June 2020, Bajrami registered a religious group called Bashkesia e Ehli Sunetit dhe Xhematit, headquartered in Kumanovo, which operates independently from the Islamic Religious Community.[55] Sadulla Bajrami has an active and robust online presence on multiple social media channels (Image 21). On Facebook, there is a public page associated with Bajrami which has more than 60,100 likes with new content published daily, including videos, pictures and status updates.[56] The corresponding YouTube channel had more than 2,800 subscribers and 174 videos in autumn 2021.[57] Through a random sample of posts on both social media accounts, SCN was not able to identify content that was associated with terrorist organisations or that explicitly called for violence, but did find posts that presented conservative interpretations of Islam. Bajrami's content was visible on other pages on Facebook as well. For example, Thirrja Islame's social media managers (on Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, Twitter and Instagram) regularly post content connected to the imam.[58] Bajrami has gone a step further than the imams mentioned above and launched an Albanian language digital religious channel streaming content around Islam 24/7.[59] Bajrami poses a separate set of challenges because of his attempts to legitimise his activities under the umbrella of a state-recognised religious group and his efforts to expand his online media presence in innovative ways and with seemingly moderate content.

"Alb Muslim TV është vendi ku mund të gjeni ligjërata, emisione dhe dokumantare me tematika të ndryshme Islame"

muslim

Sadullah Bajrami,
Ligjërues në MuslimTV

Image 21   A screenshot from Sadulla's online digital channel
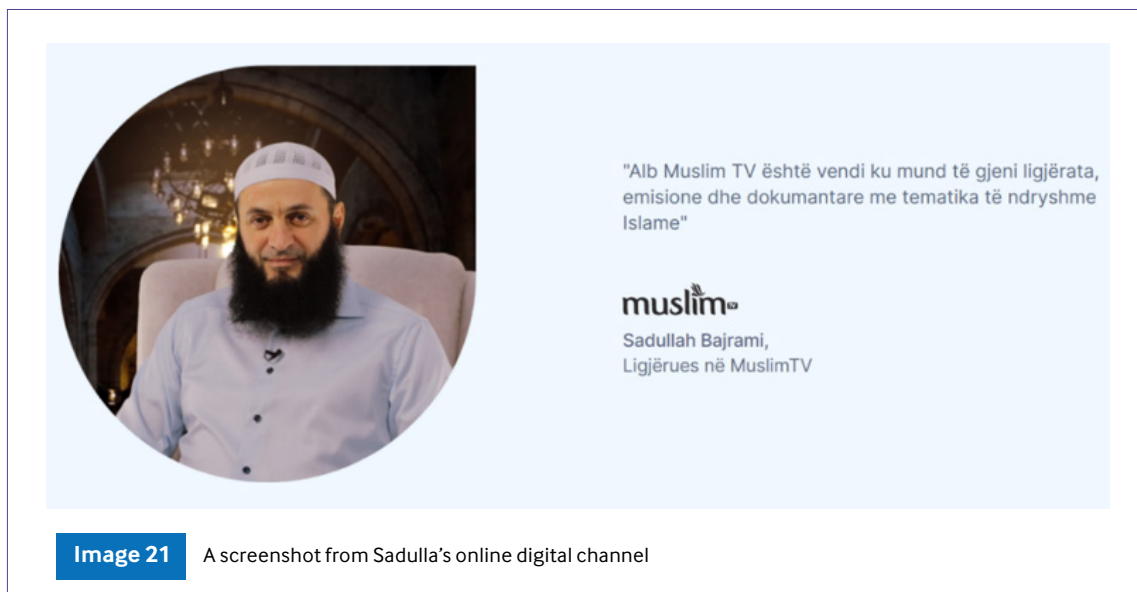
Groups posting ISIS content

SCN identified explicit ISIS-related content on Facebook and Telegram. The extremist content on Facebook was usually posted via public profiles, which made automated collection difficult owing to the platform's privacy regulations.[60] However, since the material with regional and global implications was shared in the Albanian language and was accessible to Albanian speakers in North Macedonia, it was relevant to this study.

By browsing through Facebook profiles, SCN identified two Albanian language extremist groups. One of the groups was Bejtul Muhaxhirin (House of Migrants/Refugees), which SCN had previously encountered in the ISIS Fuouaris Upload Network on Facebook.[61] Although the group has its own public fan page on Facebook[62] with 597 likes, some of its branded content was shared through different private accounts. For example, SCN found an account which was set up to only publicly share Bejtul Muhaxhirin branded videos with links to ISIS, including a documentary called The Beginning and End (Image 22). Another profile, which was much more publicly active, shared status updates, photos, videos and even documents uploaded via Google Drive (Image 23).

| **Image 22** | Screenshot of a Facebook page sharing the Bejtul Muhaxhirin documentary The Beginning and End. |

| **Image 23** | Screenshot of a Facebook page sharing the Bejtul Muhaxhirin written manifestos on a Google Drive. |

The group also had substantive presence on other platforms, most notably Telegram (images 24 to 26). The Telegram Bejtul Muhaxhirin chatroom was shared extensively on Facebook posts related to the group. SCN accessed the public Telegram channel with 861 subscribers in autumn 2021, posting daily. Many of the messages were forwarded to the channel from another private channel closed to the public.

Image 24 Screenshot from the B. Muhaxhirin Telegram group with a picture stating: "Media is half of jihad."
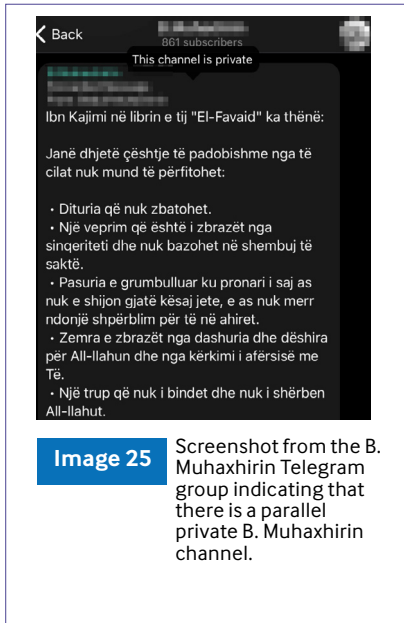

Image 25 Screenshot from the B. Muhaxhirin Telegram group indicating that there is a parallel private B. Muhaxhirin channel.
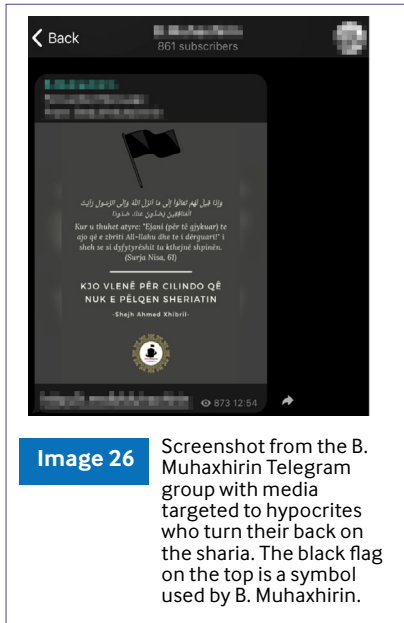
Image 26 Screenshot from the B. Muhaxhirin Telegram group with media targeted to hypocrites who turn their back on the sharia. The black flag on the top is a symbol used by B. Muhaxhirin.

Additionally, SCN found that the Bejtul Muhaxhirin Facebook page was sharing a link to a channel on TamTam, a Russian messaging platform, which researchers were unable to access because they were either taken down or set to private. Finally, SCN found an entire Bejtul Muhaxhirin archive page with 46 uploads: 32 documents, 13 videos and 1 audio file (Image 27). The Albanian language material included biographies, texts and sermons from known Salafi-jihadists, such as Anwar al-Awlaki, Nasir al-Fahd, Ahmad Musa Jibril, Faris al-Zahrani and Turki al-Binali. Al-Awlaki and al-Binali were killed by drone airstrikes, while al-Fahd is currently in a Saudi prison because he supported attacks in the US.
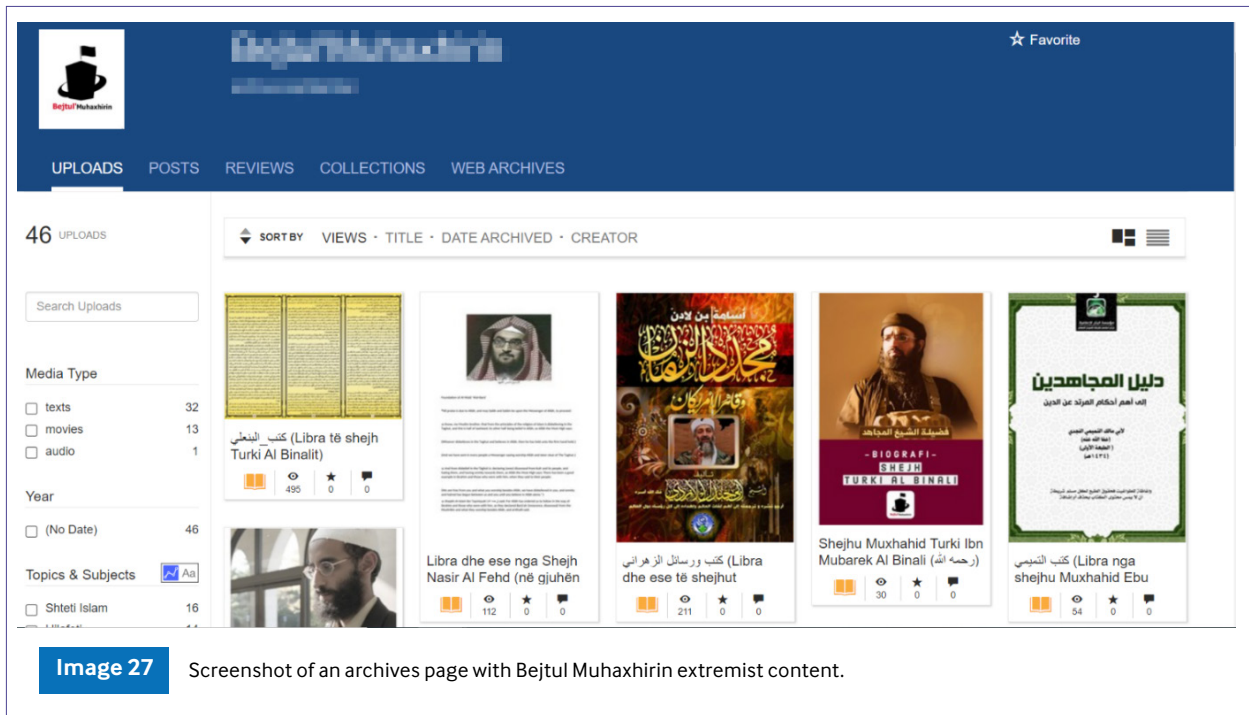
Image 27 Screenshot of an archives page with Bejtul Muhaxhirin extremist content.

ONLINE EXTREMISM IN NORTH MACEDONIA

SCN identified other Salafi-jihadist content online on Facebook and Telegram. On Telegram, researchers found another ISIS-affiliated Albanian language channel where many nasheeds (Muslim hymns) together with photo and video material were shared with 320 subscribers (images 28 to 30). The channel contains a substantial amont of ISIS material, some of it forwarded from another Telegram channel titled Margaritarë të urtësisë, which hosts simialar ISIS-related content for 418 subsribers. It is interesting to note that the Telegram channel contained a video featuring Sadullah Bajrami in which he is discredited as an imam not true to his faith. This might indicate that within the Albanian Salafi-jihadist community there are internal conflicts and disagreements.

Image 28 Screenshot from the Nasheedi im Telegram group containing a short video with the ISIS flag and text which states: "When they call you a terrorist, this is proof that your faith is persistent."
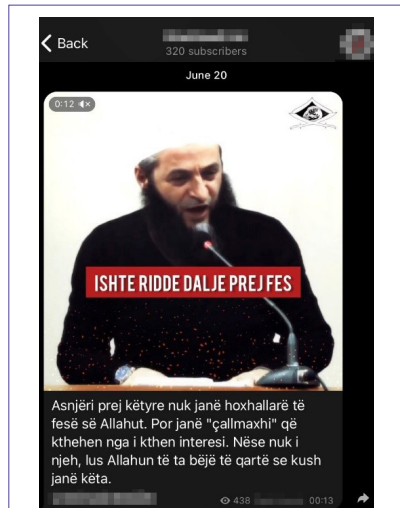
Image 29 Screenshot from the Nasheedi im Telegram group containing content which discredits Sadulla Bajrami as an imam not true to his faith.

Image 30 Screenshot from the Margaritarë të urtësisë Telegram group sharing posts from Nasheedi im.

On Facebook, SCN identified more than a dozen personal accounts using the Albanian language with content that suggested support and/or connection to the Salafi-jihadist community. It is beyond the scope of this paper to map out a network of these accounts; however, images 31 to 33 show examples of the type of profiles that are connected to some of the individuals and groups mentioned above.
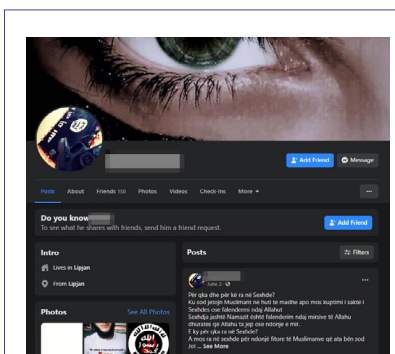

Image 31 Screenshot from a Facebook account with ISIS imagery including the Nasheedi im logo in its uploaded photos.
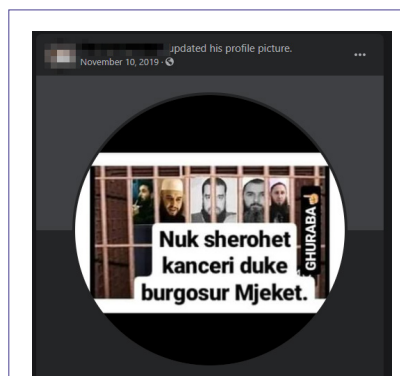

Image 32 Screenshot from a Facebook account with a picture of Memishi and other imprisoned Albanian imams, stating: "You cannot cure cancer by imprisoning doctors."
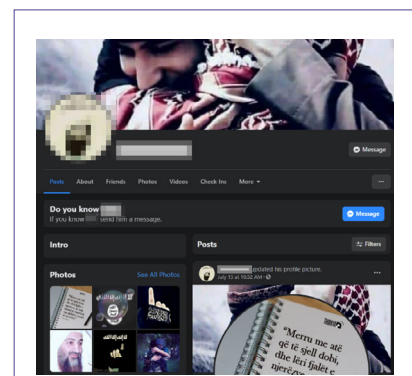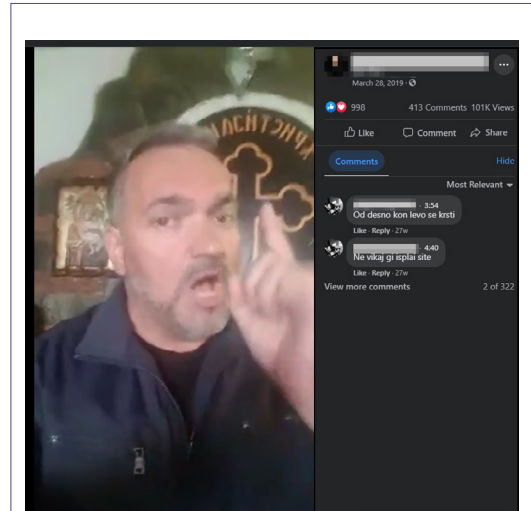

Image 33 Screenshot from a Facebook account with ISIS imagery including a post with Thirrja Islame branding.
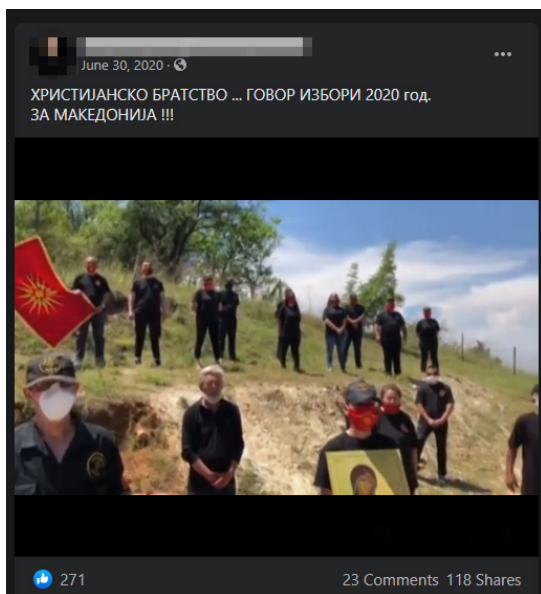
Christian Brotherhood

Although most of the religiously inspired extremist content SCN found online was connected to Salafi-jihadist groups, it is important to note the presence of the group Christian Brotherhood on social media. While it identifies itself as an apolitical, humanitarian, patriotic and religious organisation, it is, in essence, an ethno-nationalist group that draws on the Christian Orthodox identity as one of the key 'in-group' identifiers. The group's public social media presence is confined to Facebook and YouTube.

The group has not shied away from posting threats and making demands through its online channels. For instance, SCN tracked an infamous live video posted by Zharko Grozdanovski, the leader of Christian Brotherhood, in which he threatens the Prime Minister of North Macedonia with violence should he prosecute a member of the group (Image 34). The video was posted on 29 March 2019, but one can still access it easily on Facebook and in the past two years it has received more than 101,000 views. The leader explains in the video that he allegedly had two opportunities 'to get' the Prime Minister, but did not because he took an oath not to take up arms against Macedonians.
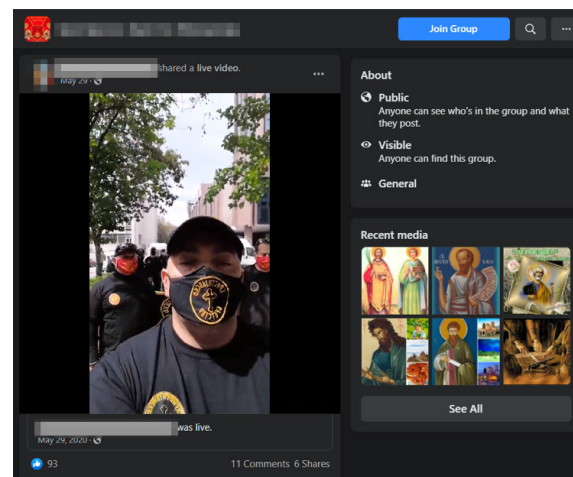

Image 34 Screenshot from a Facebook video where Zharko Grozdanovski, the leader of Christian Brotherhood, issues a threat against the Prime Minister.

Throughout its research, SCN did not identify any content posted on these accounts that explicitly uses Christian dogma to incite hatred and call for violence. Even though this group is primarily nationalist, its political agenda and the use of religion to create 'in' and 'out' groups is problematic and slightly resembles the tactic of extremist Salafi-jihadist imams mentioned above to blend religion and politics.
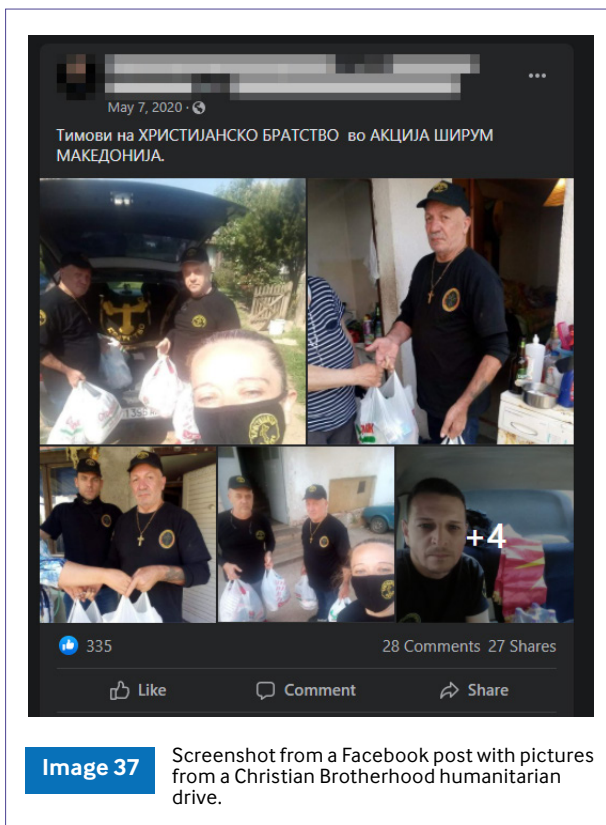

Image 35 Screenshot from a Facebook video from a Christian Brotherhood political rally in preparation for the parliamentary elections of 2020.
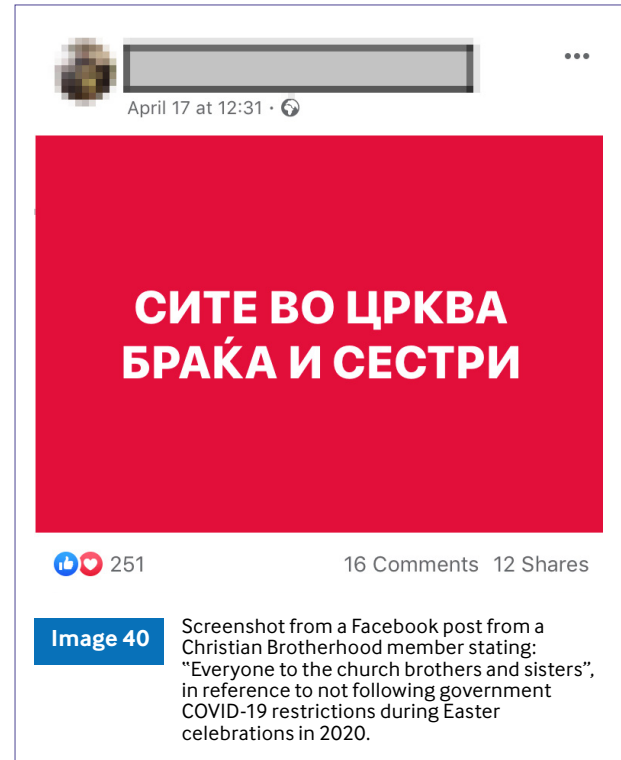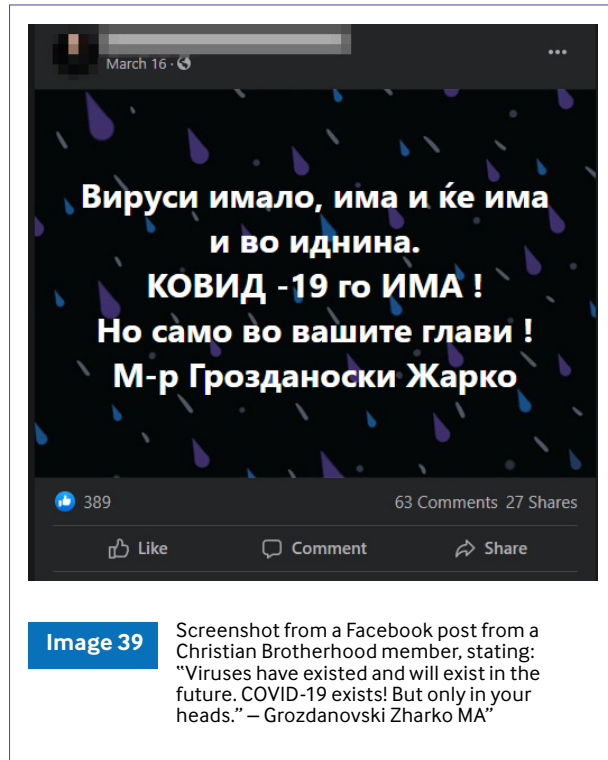

Image 36 Screenshot from a Facebook live video from a protest in support of the "defenders of the constitution" who were imprisoned for entering parliament.

Christian Brotherhood has labelled the two biggest Macedonian parties and their leadership as traitors for not defending the interests and the threatened identity of the Macedonian people. Hence, they have encouraged mobilisation and been a part of anti-government protests, most recently in May 2021 (Image 35). They have been demanding justice for the prosecuted 'defenders of the constitution' who violently entered parliament in 2017 (Image 36). Their leader used a live Facebook broadcast during the protest to voice their views and demands. The support of indicted persons from the storming of parliament in 2017 online is very problematic and indirectly encourages acts of violence so long as they are perceived legitimate for achieving political goals. This group follows a pattern comparable to far-right groups in the US, which have supported the people who stormed the Capitol on 6 January 2021. Similar narratives have been used on both accounts where the 'patriots' were 'defending democracy' and 'taking back their country'.

In addition to political messaging, Christian Brotherhood related accounts have also advertised the group's humanitarian work (images 37 and 38). Affiliated accounts either post calls for anyone willing to help a particular person in need, or share some of the ongoing humanitarian drives of the group. Humanitarian campaigns are used by Christian Brotherhood, and other far-right groups, to rebut any claims against them that they are a violent organisation and strengthen their credibility.

Image 37   Screenshot from a Facebook post with pictures from a Christian Brotherhood humanitarian drive.

Image 38   Screenshot from a Facebook post with a picture from a Christian Brotherhood meeting.

Members of Christian Brotherhood have also amplified conspiracy theories around Covid-19. One year into the pandemic, the leader is still posting that the virus "only exists in your heads" (Image 39). Moreover, other Christian Brotherhood affiliated profiles have been encouraging people to visit churches during the period of increased government restrictions around congregations on religious holidays (Image 40).

Image 39 Screenshot from a Facebook post from a Christian Brotherhood member, stating: "Viruses have existed and will exist in the future. COVID-19 exists! But only in your heads." – Grozdanovski Zharko MA"

Image 40 Screenshot from a Facebook post from a Christian Brotherhood member stating: "Everyone to the church brothers and sisters", in reference to not following government COVID-19 restrictions during Easter celebrations in 2020.

CONCLUSION

The study examined three sub-categories of polarising, hateful and extremist material focusing on political polarisation, ethnic hate and religiously inspired extremism. It explored content in both the Macedonian and Albanian languages to get a full representation of the online extremist narratives pertaining to North Macedonia.

SCN identified more than 20,000 extremist posts which can be classified as either politically and/ or ethnically hateful. The research highlights a deeply divided digital Macedonian community. Most of the hateful content targeted two groups of people, the 'Severdzani' and 'Sharenite', deemed traitors because of their role in supporting the Prespa Agreement and overthrowing the previous government, which was perceived to have a stronger stance on protecting the 'Macedonian state'. The consequences stemming from this polarisation result in the formation of fringe far-right nationalist movements, which foster further hate and distrust within Macedonia that could eventually lead to more violence.

On religiously inspired extremism, SCN identified data which could not be collected automatically. Looking at Salafi-jihadist content associated with terrorist organisations, researchers found fact that radical imams associated with ISIS and Al-Qaeda are actively on social media platforms and post content which on its surface is moderate. SCN also identified more openly extremist groups that are operating on Facebook and Telegram and post ISIS-related content and call for violence. In addition to the Salafi-jihadist content, SCN also assessed content connected to a Macedonian Christian ethno-nationalist group. Even through the group does not use Christian texts to incite violence, they blur the lines between politics and religion.

The findings and recommendations of the SCN-led research come at an important point for North Macedonia following the results of the municipal elections in October 2021.[63] The learnings from this report can benefit the security sector in monitoring extremist content online, while supporting institutions aiming to strengthen social cohesion to target online vulnerabilities. Moreover, the research findings offer an initial baseline in North Macedonia for research seeking to understand online hateful and extremist content.

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