



Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken



HCSS Security

# Countering and Preventing (Non) Violent Extremism: Research and Fieldwork Challenges

*Dr. Arlinda Rrustemi<sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Tara Görder, Dylan Browne-Wilkinson and Marek Baron for assisting in this paper, and Paul Sinning for his invaluable comments.

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Accessing Targeted Communities</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. Security Risks</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>4. Politicization of (Non) Violent Extremism</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>5. Collaboration with Local and International Actors</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>6. Work Life Balance and Trauma</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>27</b>

## I. Introduction

Research on countering and preventing (non) violent extremism (P/CVE) is frequently conducted by academics and practitioners. A recent study by Charlie Winter dealt more broadly with challenges arising from trauma, access and interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Other researchers have reported to have faced access challenges in the field. For example, a study focusing on North Macedonia pointed out that the main limitation of the research in the region is the lack of access to information given that researchers were unable to engage directly with violent extremists but could only rely on secondary sources.<sup>3</sup> However, there is a lack of academic and public engagement on the main challenges experienced during the research process, as well as on its impact on local and international communities, researchers, and research participants. Accessing primary sources for research pertaining to P\CVE during fieldwork raises challenges during both the fieldwork and the consecutive research process. Technology impacts these processes as well.

This paper fills this knowledge gap by outlining the main challenges encountered during the ‘Countering Radicalisation through Lifestories’ research project. The project lasted two and a half years and was conducted in the Western Balkans region. It resulted in a database of more than 300 interviews, utilizing the ‘lifestories’ interview technique. It consists of a lengthy conversation, sometimes more than three hours, taking place in two sittings. The interview consists of individuals lives’ “important events, experiences and feelings” and covers “the time from birth to the present or before and beyond”.<sup>4</sup> The main research challenges uncovered during this research project pertained to ensuring the safety of researchers and interviewees, achieving access to targeted communities, maintaining confidentiality and independence, managing donor and local relations, dealing with the politicization of VE, safeguarding work life balance, avoiding trauma and gender related challenges. These challenges are relevant not only to academics, but also to practitioners. Therefore, the report starts by discussing the (i) challenges arising from accessing targeted communities, then turns to (ii) security risks before delving into the (iii) politicization of (non)VE, (iv) collaboration issues with local and international partners and ends with a discussion on (v) work life balance and trauma (See Figure I below).

---

<sup>2</sup> Charlie Winter, “Researching Jihadist Propaganda: Access, Interpretation & Trauma” (RESOLVE Network, May 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski, “Extremism Research Forum | Macedonia Report” (British Council, April 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview* (SAGE Publications, Inc, 1998).



Figure 1: Main Challenges on (non) Violent Extremism Research

## 2. Accessing Targeted Communities

When applying in-depth qualitative research methods such as lifestory interviews, several preparatory steps must be taken prior to entering the field. Accessing targeted communities is the first and most important step. It is also one which is very difficult and time consuming for various reasons. These will be outlined below, alongside identified tools which can be used to increase access to local communities.

### Access Strategy

In order to increase the success rate when reaching out to participants - meaning to receive fewer rejections for interview requests - the lifestory interview technique and the snowball sampling technique have been employed. The lifestories approach, focusing on the individual level, aims to uncover systemic challenges on P/CVE from local perspectives, in particular from individuals directly affected by (non)VE. Lifestories are personal narratives describing the life from birth until now, including “important events, experiences and feelings”, relations with others and so on.<sup>5</sup> Lifestories are used to uncover voices that are excluded and/or silenced from official history records, which are usually told from the viewpoint of persons in positions of power (experts/winners). Lifestories have been used in history, transitional justice,

<sup>5</sup> Paul Atkinson et al., *Handbook of Ethnography* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019).

socio-legal research and migration studies, addressing sensitive topics such as dealing with the past,<sup>6</sup> gender, ethnicity,<sup>7</sup> victims of ethnic conflict, minority rights,<sup>8</sup> and hate speech among some studies.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it has been acknowledged that “IR [international relations] disconnected from biography (...) can never be more than anaemic”.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, lifestories hold the potential to deepen understanding of the voices of marginalized groups and offer a more nuanced viewpoint on them. Within the context of this study, lifestory interviews are conducted with vulnerable individuals who are directly affected by (non)VE such as family members, friends, community members, religious and ethnic officials.

Therefore, the lifestory interview technique was employed to ensure an optimal output in accessing communities. The applied access strategy increases the likelihood of building trust amongst researchers and participants. The length of the interview is crucial. Each participant is met for at least two to three hours and, if necessary, is followed up on during a second interview. Interview sessions are initiated with informal conversations to gain participants’ trust and explore his/her interests and concerns by asking general questions about origin, childhood, education, career, family, health, war, relationships and important life events. This allows space for reflections on P/CVE as well.

Additionally, during the initial sampling phase, the snowball sampling technique was employed. The snowball sampling is a technique developed specifically to identify individuals who are experiencing cultural, social or political oppression. It has been proven successful in sociology in the past. The technique is based on referrals from different individuals living in the targeted countries and is used to identify the ‘hard to reach populations’ while accommodating the sensitivity of the topic.<sup>11</sup> This technique is suitable to understand P/CVE further since it is a taboo topic within the affected communities. Therefore, this sampling method has the advantage of identifying individuals that are likely to participate in the research and disclose valuable information, which would be rather unlikely with a random sampling technique.

<sup>6</sup> S. Leydesdorff, “Oral Histories and Their Challenge to Collective Memory: The Case of Srebrenica,” *Bios: Zeitschrift Für Biographieforschung Und Oral History* 2007 (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Lawson, “Arguments with the Geography of Movement: The Theoretical Potential of Migrants’ Stories,” *Progress in Human Geography*, 2002, 173–189.

<sup>8</sup> David M. Engel and Frank Munger, “Rights of Inclusion: Law and Identity in the Life Stories of Americans with Disabilities,” *University of Chicago Press*, January 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Mari Matsuda, “Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim’s Story Legal Storytelling,” *Michigan Law Review*, 1989 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Mandaville, “Cosmography Recapitulates Biography,” in *Autobiographical International Relations*, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Georgia Robins Sadler and et al., “Recruiting Hard-to-Reach United States Population Sub-Groups via Adaptations of Snowball Sampling Strategy,” *Nursing and Health Sciences*, September 2010; Kath Browne, “Snowball Sampling: Using Social Networks to Research Non-Heterosexual Women,” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology: Theory & Practice*, 2005.

## Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

In most communities in the Western Balkans region, a high tendency not to speak up voluntarily about far-right or religious VE has been uncovered. The following section delves deeper into some aspects that contributed to participants' hesitation to participate in P/CVE research. The following challenges will be discussed along with the respective mitigation strategies regarding collaboration, the presence of taboo, the presence of state of fear and distrust, obstacles posed by state infrastructure and the international community, the presence of fatigue and former harm, gatekeepers' availability, time, prior relationships, gender, and measuring impact through quantitative tools (such as questionnaires).

Collaboration is essential to employ snowball sampling in the field, which ensures gaining access to participants. Acquaintances from civil society, universities, journalist networks, religious and far-right groups, government and municipal level, international organisations and bilateral representations are contacted with a request for interview referrals. Collaboration with previous and running projects and National P/CVE Coordinators is also necessary. Furthermore, local partners have multiple connections to introduce researchers to the interviewees. It is vital to understand the local context beforehand and tailor the snowball sampling strategy accordingly as in some countries some of the aforementioned groups may refrain from collaboration. While collaboration can be established informally via meetings, in the Western Balkans region challenges arise in making collaboration actionable. Usually researchers cannot offer monetary incentives to individuals or local organisations they are linked up with as it becomes expensive to offer money to be introduced for interviews, hence snowball sampling/referrals do not always constitute the most efficient way to ensure access to interviewees. Challenges arise as well due to the perceived competition among researchers as well as sexism in the Western Balkans impacting female researchers.<sup>12</sup> Other obstacles relate to local politics and personal motives which can make collaboration with states' National Coordinators difficult.<sup>13</sup> Hence, access to communities in the field is the most challenging task. However, reliable partners were gradually identified during the lengthy research, demonstrating a need for patience and commitment throughout the research process.

Another element that contributes to the lack of access is that the topic is considered a taboo within communities in the Western Balkans region. Some associate the topic with the trauma resulting from the war and past suffering, especially from the far-right but also from religious VE.<sup>14</sup> Interviewees expressed that they prefer to stay away from reopening discussions on the 90's war as they are related to contemporary ethnic and

---

<sup>12</sup> Fieldwork Notes, Western Balkans, 2017-2019.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

far-right struggles.<sup>15</sup> They contend that they would prefer forgetting and moving on. Other interviewees consider it a part of their culture not to speak up as they do not want to stigmatize another group or individual. Others view the topic as very dangerous given the complexity and high number of actors involved, and hence prefer not to be involved (as even giving an anonymous interview may pose risks). In some communities, a high resistance to recognise VE as a challenge to them has been uncovered as what occurred on a community level was generally not perceived as threatening. There are two main reasons for this: to refrain from portraying their localities as areas affected by VE - and consequently get stigmatized - as well as to attempt to hide existing challenges.

Moreover, interviewees cited the state of fear and distrust within their communities (i.e. in Kosovo there is a perception that everyone is a collaborator). Other participants questioned the researchers' motives potentially representing state/intelligence interests rather than independent research-driven interests. To illustrate this kind of mistrust, an interviewee asked "but why do you want to know? Only the state agents are interested in this topic".<sup>16</sup> As directly affected individuals often perceived state representatives as intimidating, extending their anxiety to perceiving researchers as state representatives, this rendered interviewees hesitant as to participation in the research. Whilst other interviewees feared that researchers would potentially serve the role of messengers between the disengaged and violent extremist organisations, some considered researchers as individuals working solely for financial incentives. Other participants feared legal consequences from participating in the research, as for instance being indicted or imprisoned based on the interview, or misrepresentation of their views. In particular in Northern Macedonia, a high perception of fear was present amongst the participants regarding legal consequences that could potentially arise (i.e. imprisonment). Given that in the past Albanians were imprisoned without evidence, such fears were justified. To illustrate this point, in the case of Sopot, 12 Albanians were imprisoned in 2010 based on the suspicion that they placed a mine that killed two NATO officials and a Macedonian citizen, but in 2018, all charges were dropped. Their lawyers insisted on the innocence of the Albanians living in North Macedonia for 14 years.<sup>17</sup>

To mitigate the aforementioned access challenges, during the research process, researchers were transparent in explaining the study's aim when meeting interviewees for the first time. Furthermore, researchers tried to understand participants' lifestories and individual patterns of violence that could provide insights on how to counter and prevent these from an independent perspective. Moreover, to show the researchers' independence, each researcher took time to explain their background and reasons for

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous Interview, Journalist, Kosovo, Spring 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Sinisa Marusic, "Prokuroria e Maqedonisë Heq Dorë Nga Ndjekja e Shqiptarëve Në Rastin 'Sopot,'" *KALLXO.Com*, March 19, 2018.

working on the study. This provided clarity to participants that their interview may serve to potentially modify the country's VE policies and benefit them in the long term. This rendered interviews significant for both the research but also participants. Researchers were mainly local individuals working on democracy and human rights advancement through local organisations or international think tanks. Some of them were based in the Western Balkan countries and some abroad.

This study also revealed that fieldwork periods must be lengthy. If researchers are based abroad, it is beneficial to relocate fully for fieldwork of one up to two months. This enables researchers to engage with the topic in depth and facilitates the finalisation of interviews. Recurring field trips of two weeks are not advisable since contact with gatekeepers and local networks may be hampered by the breaks between such short field trips.

Field access is complex also due to obstacles posed by state infrastructures, mainly information control and potentially corruption. Some interviewees hesitated to participate in the research as they feared reprisal or similar consequences from states across the Western Balkans region. In fact, Serbia's government rejected to collaborate on the project on 'Countering Radicalisation through Lifestories' referring to the mismatch of timing "at this moment",<sup>18</sup> which postponed data collection in Serbia as well as the delivery of final results. Some other countries have advised violent extremists and former-violent extremists to refrain from collaboration with researchers, which indicates a certain degree of information control regarding VE. In fact, an interview revealed that the representatives of the Kosovo government had advised them to request money in exchange for participating in interviews. This may be viewed as aiding and abetting VE and thus makes researchers less inclined to interview violent extremists and former violent extremists. Three interviewees released from prison confirmed this. Despite the absence of financial incentives, interviewees that were released from prison gradually began to discuss. Moreover, the families as well as the former violent extremists and violent extremists had been interrogated several times by the state structures, and often reported intimidation from frequent interrogations. This also hindered access to interviews.

Other obstacles are created by the international community, predominantly by limiting access to researchers outside of the international community's network. In the Western Balkans context, only specific organisations had access to prisons even though other organisations or researchers may have had other, equally relevant research questions and methods to employ. Therefore, accessing prisons is very difficult as most researchers were unable to receive such permissions in the past. For example, in Kosovo, there was an informal ban on speaking to VE prisoners and only the US

---

<sup>18</sup> Email Exchange with a Serbian governmental representative.



International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICTAP) and Kosovo governmental officials could access them. Kosovo's government expressed willingness to grant researchers access to prisons as they considered it important to have various researchers working on the topic rather than only one organisation. However, after consulting with the US authorities, Kosovo's government formally refused researchers access to prisoners. Consequently, local researchers facing such realities at times turn to other means to obtain information for research purposes. These could consist of communication and interviews with prisoners via illegal telephones in prisons. Such circumventions were present in the context of Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania. Other countries did not respond to such access requests.

Furthermore, fatigue and former harm contributed to the hesitance of interviewees to participate in research. Many interviewees (mainly directly affected individuals in local communities) had been contacted or interviewed by journalists and NGOs already and therefore developed caution towards participating in the research. The most common promised rewards were accessing a program for de-radicalisation, financial incentives, assistance to release children from prisons or assistance to access family members in Syria. However, most of these rewards had not been followed up. There was also a widely held perception among interviewees that NGOs abuse the financial resources allocated to VE research, abuse the directly affected communities by not keeping their promises, and shift too much attention towards the topic in order to receive more funds. For example, the citizens of the town of Kacanik in Kosovo reported to be disturbed by the high number of activities taking place in their town relating to the VE research.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, fatigue and the risk of P/CVE islamisation is uncovered as a side effect of intensive P/CVE programs in Albania.<sup>20</sup>

Another challenge is that the research process and gatekeepers' availability must be aligned. Gatekeepers are individuals that introduce researchers to the community. They may withdraw from assisting the research because of family, health and work circumstances and/or political changes in the country. Hence, it is important to identify times in which gatekeepers are willing and able to participate and plan the interviews correspondingly. For example, if gatekeepers have been part of a VE network, they may be imprisoned or persecuted, which can diminish their (or the rest of the group's) availability. Given such gatekeepers' knowledge on both active and disengaged or de-radicalized individuals, they can increase the set of valuable interviewees considerably. Thus, it is highly recommended to reach out to such gatekeepers and use their networks, if possible. However, this presupposes the building of trust and convincing gatekeepers of the research's independence, which is usually a lengthy process. Once this step was ensured, gatekeepers proved to be reliable and most helpful partners.

<sup>19</sup> Fieldwork Notes, Fall 2017, Spring 2018, Western Balkans.

<sup>20</sup> Ebi Spahiu, "Fighting Terrorism & Radicalization In Europe's Neighborhood: How To Scale Up EU Efforts: Albania" (European Policy Centre, November 2018).

When gatekeepers are available, researchers should then prove flexibility in seizing the opportunity to conduct as many interviews as possible even if the project planning foresees them in another period.

Moreover, the research revealed that time is crucial to successfully implement the snowball sampling technique since meeting interviewees takes a lot of time, involving up to three interviews with associates of interviewees.<sup>21</sup> This means that researchers must spend a long time in the field, which results in a shortage of time for other vital activities such as recording the data, writing, reporting and follow up activities (i.e. keeping in touch with contacts). Importantly, this also requires sufficient research funds to be available. For this type of research, lengthy periods of time must be invested in keeping the created network active. It necessitates flexibility by clients/donors issuing the research regarding fieldwork planning, reporting and delivering the deliverables.

Another helpful tool for accessing interviewees while conducting qualitative research, using the life story approach is a prior relationship between the researcher and local networks, so that individuals are familiar with researchers' profiles and work on the topic. For instance, the researcher in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was familiar and known to the targeted VE groups (both religious and far-right), thus access to them was much easier than in other instances. According to this local researcher, accessing the far-right community was easy since "everyone supports the agenda of Milorad Dodik [a Bosnian Serb politician] and everyone speaks publicly about it".<sup>22</sup> It is also beneficial to contact and receive support from government officials at the highest hierarchy levels possible. The same logic applies for getting access to religious violent extremists. The researcher in BiH reported that "knowledge, intelligence, wit and emotions" were beneficial characteristics in accessing the targeted communities.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the researcher in Serbia received community access due to a priori familiarity with the targeted network and population in that area. However, the researcher in Serbia faced difficulties to gain access to far-right groups since (alongside security risks which will be discussed in the next section) they knew of the researchers' viewpoints diverging from far-right ideas. For the researcher in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, the lifestory interview technique and snowball sampling were mainly used to uncover silenced voices on VE, which for both the far-right and religious VE was successful even though it took a lengthy period of time. Local researchers' ability to speak the local language also assisted in reaching vulnerable communities (even though at times language needed to be accommodated to different dialects).

---

<sup>21</sup> Fieldwork Notes, Fall 2017, Spring 2018, Western Balkans.

<sup>22</sup> Researcher, Email Exchange, Spring 2019, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Two female researchers' experiences attested to the fact that gender played a significant role in the research process, particularly during interviews, as well. Being a woman was beneficial since male interviewees maintained contact and provided new data over time, while women felt more at ease when discussing the topic. Women are perceived as less harmful in these communities, open up easier and men, in order to boast, often provide data that reveals their network involvement (i.e. a presumably disengaged violent extremist offering a ride back home in a Porsche, another presumably disengaged one showing the gun, and so on). In this sense, being a woman seemed to assist in collecting interviews as trust could be established easier. On the other hand, being a woman in this research also posed challenges regarding access to communities. It is common that interviewees express the need to connect on a personal level with researchers and understand their personal status. Hence, female researchers need to be aware that in maintaining transparency and gaining interviewees' trust they may have to reveal personal details. Also, the number of interview meetings and amount of messaging with female researchers is higher than with male researchers. Additionally, some female researchers were also exposed to discrimination and sexism which might lead to lower effectiveness in the field research process. For example, international officials and local NGO representatives made comments relating to women's role as 'child bearers' that should not be involved in such research but focus on family planning instead. Also the risk of rape in this context was pointed out, recommending female researchers to refrain from such research "because you cannot imagine what might happen".<sup>24</sup> Mitigation strategies such as meeting in open spaces or together with a third trustful person proved to be very effective and increased women's perception of safety. No incidents occurred during the research. Thus, even though in some cases access to interviewees may have been hampered due to gender stereotypes, there are also benefits in involving female researchers since interviewees open up more easily and introduce women researchers to new participants. Thus, employing female researchers can be cost effective.

Lastly, it is important to note that quantitative tools (such as questionnaires) to assess the impact of P/CVE programs often neglect local contexts in targeted communities. Aside from experiencing fear on the topic, they tend to have a high presence of illiteracy and only partial education. This illustrates that the impact of the P/CVE program cannot be always be quantifiable, as the donors request. Most importantly, the attempt to measure the impact through quantitative tools can hamper access to affected communities and harm P/CVE programs and local communities in the long run. Therefore, it is suggested to employ qualitative methods to measure effectiveness, such as ethnographic research methods to refrain from conducting more harm to the local societies.

---

<sup>24</sup> Fieldwork Notes, Western Balkans, Spring 2018.

To conclude, due to these difficulties that can be faced in accessing the targeted communities, this type of research requires extensive budgets and sustained engagement over longer periods. Lengthy investment is required for VE research to be conducted while respecting ‘do no harm’ principle towards the targeted communities. Some elements that are beneficial in accessing communities seem to be of use, such as the lifestory interview technique, snowball sampling, gender considerations, a priori familiarity between researchers and local networks, the knowledge of the local languages and employing qualitative methods to measure effectiveness. Now, we turn to another significant type of challenge posed while conducting the VE research: security risks.

### 3. Security Risks

This section outlines the risks faced by both researchers and research participants as revealed during fieldwork conducted in various countries in the Western Balkans region between 2016-2019, such as fear of reprisals, attacks, threats, blackmail, manipulation and exposure to arms in the field.

The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) advises to take into account the security risks for the organisations conducting projects and partners,<sup>25</sup> however, we recommend assessing the risks for research participants as well. Safety is a challenge because of the political and cultural sensitivities surrounding P/CVE in the Western Balkans region. Fear is prevalent among communities in the region. The researcher in Bosnia and Herzegovina who interviewed many Salafis reported difficulties in reaching new interviewees despite being connected to the network of religious violent extremists.<sup>26</sup> Even though trust was present, it took some time to re-access those individuals. Interviewing Serbian former fighters (far-right) was difficult due to the turbulent political situation in the country. Once interviewees were contacted online, they would withdraw. Moreover, the local researcher was intimidated by unknown individuals receiving phone calls several times.<sup>27</sup> A report from the EU Commission also stated that threats, violence and intimidation against journalists are present in Serbia and need to be countered by the state.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, a group of civil society organisations pointed out that in the absence of freedom of expression, civil society is under threat as well.<sup>29</sup> While the researcher investigating security topics related to the far-right attempting to reach out to far-right individuals faced intimidation, conducting research on religious VE has not resulted into such threats. This indicates that there are attempts to control information regarding developments on far-right VE in Serbia.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Ritzmann, “RAN Guidelines for Effective Alternative and Counter-Narrative Campaigns” (Radicalisation Awareness Network - Centre of Excellence, December 2017).

<sup>26</sup> An email exchange with the Research Assistant in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 24th April 2019.

<sup>27</sup> An email exchange with the Research Assistant in Serbia, 24th April 2019.

<sup>28</sup> “Serbia 2019 Report,” Commission Staff Working Document (European Commission, May 2019).

<sup>29</sup> “Democracy in Progress: State of Democracy in Serbia,” *European Western Balkans* (blog), August 2, 2017.

In North Macedonia, interviewees feared prosecution out of the (perceived) possibility that the researcher might represent the government. Among the Albanian community, there exists a perception that Albanians are persecuted arbitrarily and unjustly out of politically driven agendas which generated unwillingness to participate in sensitive research. The necessity to remove political interference in the judiciary has also been affirmed by the European Commission.<sup>30</sup> However, since the researcher in this project was a member of their ethnic community, this barrier decreased gradually. However, this also meant that the interviews took place mainly in closed settings (i.e. houses) which could have placed the interviewer into more danger. Risks can also increase as the political situation changes. For example, in one case, a researcher was threatened and forced to leave the country due to uncertainty on the actual threat and security level at that point.

In Albania, less perception of being under risk has been reported since gatekeepers were generally more trusted. In Kosovo on the other hand, researchers face security risks due to the frequent alterations of violent extremists from VE to non-VE or disengaged and vice versa. For example, a researcher found out that a family released their dogs outside as they decided not to speak to the researcher. In other cases, violent extremists carried arms while being interviewed. As a consequence, some researchers turned away from VE research as one researcher illustrates: “It is a big thing [VE] but people [violent extremists] can sometimes be dangerous. So even us, we are trying to move away from radicalisation. Our researchers are putting themselves into risk”.<sup>31</sup> Sometimes, the choice of the locations such as deeply rural, even though in an open setting, places the researchers in danger.

Risks are faced not only by researchers but also by former violent extremists and their families if used in messaging campaigns. Most interviewees refrained from revealing their identity in both research and messaging campaigns. This is because of the potential backlash expected from communities but also due to threats from violent extremist organisations they used to be affiliated with. Therefore, ensuring confidentiality also translated into ensuring the safety of interviewees from violent extremist organizations, governmental structures and general population. Therefore, lifestories are anonymised while still providing an individual background context in order to increase the respective interviewee’s credibility, and ensure that stories originate from credible sources (read: authentic), which do not intend to harm communities. Prior research shows that former violent extremists who have not (sufficiently) de-radicalised should not be used in public-facing CVE work and can only be utilised for intelligence or (disengagement) narratives deployed by a third party or

---

<sup>30</sup> “North Macedonia 2019 Report,” Commission Staff Working Document (European Commission, May 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous Interview, Researcher, Kosovo, Spring 2017

via a medium communicated to a target audience.<sup>32</sup> This is due to the fact that such individuals often alter their allegiances. Therefore, it is recommended to refrain from using former violent extremists publicly, unless they have been disengaged for a long period.

To mitigate the security challenges described above, several technical steps online as well as during one-to-one meetings are proposed in order to protect interviewers' safety. For interviewers' protection, interviews requested to be located in less popular or empty zones or meeting only with one person should not be conducted. Open spaces are always preferred and if inside houses, a trusted local companion should join. It is important to always drive with a second person (a trusted gatekeeper or a taxi driver) that can serve as a deterrent for interviewees. Further, it should be noted that finding trusted partners in these areas is a highly complex task and whilst doing so, it is crucial to ensure researchers' safety. During fieldwork, local partners have been changed due to lack of trust and reliability. A high degree of blackmailing is present in the region which is why researchers are advised not to engage with these types of individuals, once they are known to the researchers. Online communication needs to be protected as well, hence apps like Signal have been used while using a VPN and a separate phone only intended for the research project. These steps ensure that meetings can take place in a safe environment without violent extremists' or governments' knowledge thereof. Lastly, it is worthwhile noting that independence assists in preventing security risks that may arise from collaboration with governments. Since there is a widespread perception that most researchers are working for the state, it is crucial to establish this is not true prior to the interview. By reassuring participants on independence, potential security risks stemming from interviewees are reduced. Moreover, in times of disinformation being used by a variety of actors, practitioners must maintain needed levels of trust as well as a strong connection with the target audience via messaging based on alternative stories. This will need to happen outside of government control, thereby ensuring researchers' strict separation and independence from government influence and manipulation.<sup>33</sup> Further, in order to protect interviewees' privacy, a 'confidentiality and consent agreement' should be taken into consideration to ensure mutual consent.<sup>34</sup> However, some interviewees preferred to openly express their viewpoints against far-right groups, Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and even agreed to being audio-recorded. The way how politicization of (non)VE impacts research is outlined in the next chapter.

---

<sup>32</sup> Marina Tapley and Gordon Clubb, "The Role of Formers in Countering Violent Extremism," *ICCT*, April 12, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Pizzuto, "Alter-Messaging: The Credible, Sustainable Counterterrorism Strategy" (Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, May 2013).

<sup>34</sup> The agreement outlined among other things how the privacy rights are protected, such as by blurring the voices if allowed to be audio recorded, removing dates, names of individuals or streets, altering genders, the length of the data maintained in the database, etc.

## 4. Politicization of (Non) Violent Extremism

The following section raises questions regarding the politicization of (non)VE on the state and international level as well as regarding NGOs and how this impacts research and fieldwork. These processes leading sometimes on information control in each case study will be delved in depth, respectively on Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.

In Serbia, access to far-right interviewees has been difficult due to political influences. As reiterated above, some interviewees rejected and some hesitated to participate in research as they feared reprisal from the state. It is important to stress that Serbia's government rejected to collaborate on the project 'Countering Radicalisation through Life Stories', due to the 'inconvenient timing'.<sup>35</sup> This resulted in potential security risks being posed to researchers, consequently postponing the data collection process as well as the delivery of the final research output. The European Commission's progress report noted that cases of threats, intimidation and violence against journalists are still a concern.<sup>36</sup> This applies also to researchers from civil society. It is important to note that other countries in the Western Balkans region informally allowed for research to be conducted in their countries, considering it beneficial to their national security. Hence, several questions can be raised about the reasons behind states' rejection to collaborate on research covering both far-right and religious VE. The fieldwork has shown more intimidation towards researchers when conducting interviews with far-right VEs than with religious VEs. This indicates that a certain degree of information control regarding far-right VE presence and that decisions to reject collaboration on this matter may have been politically driven.

In the Republic of Kosovo, other challenges have led to the politicization of VE research. The country's governmental structures have advised the violent extremists or potentially former violent extremists not to speak up on the matter and respectively engage with researchers, which indicates a certain degree of information control regarding religious VE. As one interviewee revealed, the representatives of the Kosovo government had advised them to request money in return for providing interviews. This was confirmed by three interviewees released from prison. This is a likely factor to generate researchers' hesitance to interview violent extremists, as providing money may be considered as aiding and abetting VE or as not independent. However, in practice, interviewees spoke up during conversations even though our researchers had not provided financial incentives. Other interviewees pointed out that information control on the matter is beneficial for Kosovo in order to prevent the portrayal of Kosovo as a "terrorism breeding ground" by NGOs and the international media which is perceived to harm the country's state-building process. Other interviewees revealed a perception that the government withheld information on risks posed by returnees and highlighted

---

<sup>35</sup> Email Exchange with a Serbian governmental representative, 18 July 2018.

<sup>36</sup> "Serbia 2019 Report."

only Kosovo's progressive strategy on returnees. Therefore, it may be a hidden government strategy to control information on VE and returnees.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the topic of VE seems to have been utilised for domestic politics. There is a resurgence of Islamophobia amongst Serbian and Croatian politicians.<sup>37</sup> The elected Serb member of the BiH presidency, Milorad Dodik, some Bosnian Croats, the Croatian political establishment and some sections of the media are depicting Bosnia and Herzegovina as a "radical Muslim haven" with the aim to undermine the country. For example, Dodik accused the conservative Bosniak SDA party that their "policies and actions during and since the 1990s war have turned BiH into a sanctuary for jihadists" in a lobbying document in 2018 to Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General.<sup>38</sup> Zeljko Komsic, the Croat member of Bosnia's tripartite presidency alluded that the President of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, pursues propaganda activities at the expense of BiH.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, she noted that, in the past, Islamic religious radicalisation rendered BiH a regional security threat due to the corresponding number of returnees.<sup>40</sup> This necessitates thorough analysis and a high number of interviews in order to draw evidence-based conclusions.

Politicization of (non)VE has also been encountered in North Macedonia. As mentioned in section I (Accessing Targeted Communities), there is a widespread perception within the ethnic Albanian community that they are being persecuted arbitrarily, out of politically driven motives. The European Commission reaffirmed that there is a perception of political interference in the North Macedonian judiciary which needs to be tackled.<sup>41</sup> This perception extended also into the potential misuse of the ethnic Albanians, attempting to depict them as violent extremists (potentially by ethnic Macedonians and Serbians), which would necessitate the international community, mainly democratic countries, to remove the support from the ethnic Albanian group. On the other hand, the lack of VE related imprisonments in North Macedonia are at times regarded as an attempt to 'spread the cancer', furthering ethnic Macedonians' goal to politically destroy ethnic Albanians in the eyes of the international community. Only recently in 2019, North Macedonia imprisoned seven violent extremists that had joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq (150 are presumed to have left as foreign fighters).<sup>42</sup> Moreover, this attempt of framing ethnic Albanians as violent extremists as instigated by ethnic Macedonians was allegedly supported by Russians as well. Some interviewees point out Turks as well. In Albania and Montenegro, there was no evidence of politicization attempts of VE on behalf of state structures. These grievances assisted in accessing the targeted communities, especially the ethnic Albanians.

<sup>37</sup> Enes Bayrakli and Farid Hafez, *Islamophobia in Muslim Majority Societies*, Routledge Advances in Sociology (Routledge, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Mersiha Gadzo, "Large Increase in Anti-Bosnian, Anti-Muslim Bigotry," *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> "Croatian President Denies 'Militant Islam' Insult Of Bosnia," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, August 1, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Igor Spaic, "Bosnia War Victims Slam Croatia President's Terror Claims," *Balkan Insight* (blog), September 7, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> "North Macedonia 2019 Report."

<sup>42</sup> "North Macedonia Jails 7 IS Fighters Captured in Syria," *AP NEWS*, March 21, 2019.



The politicization of VE by governmental structures has postponed data collection on the ground as various corresponding difficulties in terms of access as well as security risks arose. Therefore, country-specific tailored strategies were developed to identify trustworthy actors on the ground and work was conducted mainly with them. In some countries such as North Macedonia, politicization of VE assisted researchers to access interviewees as lower rank officials expressed more willingness to expose the politicization. In Kosovo, governmental attempts to control information on the issue (due to its politicization) prolonged the data collection process. In Serbia, the government did not only reject collaboration on the issue but also appears to have threatened researchers attempting to conduct such interviews. On the other hand, in Albania and Montenegro, governmental actors formally stated that such research must be independent and distanced themselves from the project which is why in these countries researchers relied on NGOs, academics and journalists to obtain information.

## 5. Collaboration with Local and International Actors

Relations with local actors, whether NGOs or governmental actors, as well as international actors, whether civil society, international organisations or bilateral representatives are important. As discussed above, collaboration differs per each country in the Western Balkans region. However, some common practices can be identified amongst various countries.

Overall, collaboration with some NGOs and governmental actors remained weak over time. Researchers reported hesitance from NGOs to assist in data collection not only due to the sensitivity of the topic, but also due to perceived competition between different NGOs. The main perception was that locals are more knowledgeable, meaning that international NGOs should not engage on these topics. Some NGO representatives also expected money in return for introducing researchers to interviewees, reducing the likelihood of being assisted with referrals. Thus, it is key to any research project to choose local partners in the first place. Moreover, collaboration with different actors can provide better research outcomes.<sup>43</sup> Since there are many NGOs present and they compete amongst each other, cooperation can be rendered difficult which presents one of the most significant challenges. Collaboration, rather than competition, must remain a priority for all parties involved and must be fostered by the international community. Otherwise, competition hinders research that has the potential to alleviate security challenges.

---

<sup>43</sup> Given that collaboration will involve consultation of stakeholders from several backgrounds which are - interdisciplinarily - able to convey information from different angles, insights will be more comprehensive in nature and thus, more valuable. See Jessica K. Graybill et al., "A Rough Guide to Interdisciplinarity: Graduate Student Perspectives," *BioScience* 56, no. 9 (September 1, 2006): 757-63.

Furthermore, some researchers were advised to cease working on the theme as it is perceived to be 'a bad job in the long term'. Sexism is also present in the NGO sector which has been discussed in depth previously (See Section 1). Given that communication between directly affected individuals and female interviewers was easier, despite requiring a long time of trust-building and often involved men requesting sexual favours in return, it is crucial for female researchers to use mitigation strategies. This is relevant when collaborating with local actors and the international community, in particular with individuals in high-level positions and with a presumably very good reputation. When collaborating with local partners in the Western Balkans, gender is particularly relevant as notions of patriarchy are very present in these societies, meaning that they can persist in several work areas and hinder fieldwork considerably. Hence, it is essential to explain women's role and stance on relationships in order to break existing stereotypes (such as that open relationships are common in the 'West' and that therefore, it is permissible to request sexual favours). Thus, it is proposed to use the following mitigation strategy: once these types of individuals are encountered, meetings should be conducted with a second person present in order for the topic to remain in the professional realm.

In general, it is essential for researchers to connect with participants at the local level and also interview corrupt individuals as they are also key in understanding VE. It is very difficult to establish a balance between gaining participants' trust whilst refraining from getting involved in corrupt schemes, which is why it is vital that researchers maintain independence when engaging with local partners. Despite the fact that most individuals seem to be influenced by some party or international influencers, some individuals are still genuine and like to contribute to research causes and improve their society. Therefore, individuals with such a motivation are very open towards collaboration and do not create any obstructions for the research process. Such individuals are key local interlocutors which - even though it takes time for them to be identified - are mainly present in the middle and/or lower ranks of governments and NGOs.

Further, it is crucial to take into account that if the research goal may not fit the governments' or NGOs' agendas, they may try to manipulate work relating to the project, e.g. by attempting to undermine researchers' professional and personal credibility.

Another aspect to take into account is that communication channels differ locally. For instance, local actors tend to prefer communication via platforms such as WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram and Signal. Emailing, instead, seems not to be used very frequently given that these often remain unanswered.

In order to ease the research process, the project initially requested all countries to assess the necessity of research and whether they will permit any corresponding fieldwork to be conducted in their territories. Thus, governments have been informed about the research purpose (via email or one-to-one meetings). Collectively, the Counter Terrorism (CT) Coordinators of Kosovo, Northern Macedonia and Albania have given permission to conduct the research informally, whilst the BiH coordinator had been informed via email. Remarkably, the Serbian government formally denied the request to collaborate on the research. Additionally, most IOs and local NGOs working on the topic have been informed regarding the research project. Moreover, religious, far-right and municipal officials have been contacted and often interviewed in some critical municipalities. This procedure sometimes assisted in gaining new contacts and subsequent interviews.

Questions were raised both by NGO/journalists as well as by directly affected individuals' as to whether the researchers work for intelligence services. This can be countered by showing the researcher's independence over time and maintaining contact and visibility with involved actors.

Local inclusion needs to be implemented from the beginning. Since some actors are not reliable, it is crucial to establish and maintain a wide network and gradually identify local actors that are trustworthy. However, it is crucial to maintain independence, collaborate with more than one actor, stay patient and engage in active networking.

Moreover, it is essential for the research to be sustainable. This means that local actors, especially the local assistants in the Western Balkans region, need to gain the capacity to employ the lifestories approach after the research ends. In this research project, sustainability was ensured by training the local assistants to employ the interview technique, and by establishing an online impact campaign which consisted of the various life stories in video-form with the goal to reach directly affected, potentially radicalized and vulnerable individuals (inside and outside prisons). Also, policymakers from around the world were informed about the potential of the life story approach in strengthening prevention and re-integration strategies. A website (<https://storiesofpeace.eu>) containing these videos was created which remains online and can be used at any time. Moreover, local inclusion of the actionable research project was ensured given that all life story narratives were collected from the localities where they originated. The International Center for Counter Terrorism (ICCT) argues that messaging ought to be coordinated with activities 'on the ground' in order to obtain trust and credibility among the target audience.<sup>44</sup> This implies that various local actors need to be involved regularly in the process as well, such as gatekeepers, municipal and national officials. This results in a sustainable network of local (and international)

---

<sup>44</sup> Dr Alastair Reed, "An Inconvenient Truth: Countering Terrorist Narratives - Fighting a Threat We Do Not Understand," July 2, 2018.

individuals that are committed to and involved in countering violence and enhancing local inclusion.

Linguistics is another element that is taken into account in order to increase local collaboration. Overall, knowledge of the local language is very beneficial in terms of fostering communication and trust. Interviewees are generally more open to communicate in their native language. Thus, it was important to involve research assistants with the ability to speak the native languages of the Western Balkans region. Another aspect to be discussed is researchers' relations with the international community. The latter may result in lack of assistance on data collection. International organisations and bilateral representations need to abide by their country or missions' strategy, meaning that they will inform and direct researchers according to their agenda. If their agenda does not align with the aims of the research, collaboration will not be feasible. Sometimes, it is only revealed on the ground that - despite sharing similar strategic aims - personal preferences may differ from the goals of the research and, hence, hinder collaboration. Such personal preferences can also be politically biased and equally hinder collaboration with key organisations, hamstringing the data collection process and output production. For example, in Serbia, a high-level international representative gave instructions not to research Serbian far-right VE.

Power relations between the international and local researchers are crucial also in allowing independent research to be conducted. Instances where harm was inflicted by the international representatives were uncovered. For example, a trainer in a high school claimed that head veils are bad. But due to the power imbalance and donor dependency, the international representative was neither reprimanded by the local organization nor removed from the lecturing.<sup>45</sup> This indicates that donor-driven research and training may not be reliable due to donor dependency and it may cause harm in the long term.

Moreover, expectations from the international officials are very high regarding reporting, however, research in this field in regard to time and labour intensity does not allow for regular emailing and meetings, which requires full attention of the researchers to the field rather than reporting. Also, reporting can be a complicated process and must often be conducted in person (rather than via email or other usually unsafe channels for sharing information) as participants' anonymity needs to be ensured. This also hinders research and donor collaboration as lack of reporting in emails may be viewed as an inadequate work, transparency and credibility. Moreover, it is important to note that this type of research takes considerable time to produce in a manner which respects 'do no harm' principle while dealing with sensitive data during fieldwork. Of equal relevance is that the aforementioned time investment during fieldwork is

---

<sup>45</sup> Anonymous Interview, Researcher, Spring 2018, Kosovo.

necessary as well during the writing process which can be lengthy. Thus, it is recommended to have one-to-one meetings for reporting in order to avoid miscommunication.

Moreover, international organisations compete amongst each other similarly like local NGOs, hence they may also obstruct others' work by opting for competition rather than collaboration, even though their research aims differ. Moreover, international NGOs and IOs are perceived among the local community as being rich and careless institutions. Given this, developing countries often hire big consultancies (e.g. McKinsey) instead, which recently are being advised by the International Monetary Fund to not be hired as their high fees undermine local economies.<sup>46</sup>

## 6. Work Life Balance and Trauma

Due to the challenges outlined above relating to accessing targeted communities, security risks, the politicization of VE, collaboration issues with partners, researchers' health can also suffer due to the harsh conditions in the field as well as the blurred lines between their work and personal life. The workload is naturally much higher than whilst conducting desk research and researchers need to continue working after working hours as being available is important for the network and due to the short field trips. While conducting fieldwork in highly remote areas, exposure to bacteria can be common and the lack of regular and healthy nutrition often results in illnesses. Alongside a lack of routine during field trips due to sleeping in various hotels, traveling daily, working in late evening to align researchers' schedules with those of participants and keep in touch with local networks in order to keep the interview process flowing. All these factors together can be very tiring as work gradually seems to transcend researchers' lives. Additional tasks to researchers' schedules, such as the necessity to be available all the time, hinders them from switching off after working hours, as the directly affected communities (including violent extremists) use social media to reach out at various hours, usually during non-working hours and after fieldwork ends.

These stresses to researchers' work-life balance notwithstanding, it is important to note that researchers serve as connectors between academia, civil society, government, and targeted communities. While serving as connectors assist the society as a whole, it places an immense pressure on the researchers. These connections can sometimes be established during interviews, when researchers establish links to 'connecting infrastructures' while redirecting individuals to the appropriate resources, such as the Women Without Borders group in Macedonia or the Gjilan Referral Mechanism in Kosovo and so on. Interviews also frequently result in interviewees expressing their need for legal and financial aid. Though researchers cannot typically aid interviewees

---

<sup>46</sup> Magdalene Teiko Larnyoh, "Poor Countries Must Stop Contracting Global Consultancy Firms - IMF Boss," *Business Insider*, January 29, 2019.

in issues such as these directly, they can provide contact details and/or act as conduits through which vulnerable individuals are able to interact with or identify relevant state bodies or institutions. Experience from this study also shows that the trust built between researchers and interviewees often results in interviewees proactively working to maintain contact with researchers. This necessitates more availability from the research outside the working hours, which complemented with unsafe research topic, frequent travel schedules for fieldwork and presentations at conferences and tight deadlines, altogether put an immense stress on the researcher.

The long working hours also relate to the research's sensitivity. A high amount of time also needs to be spent on transcription. Since individuals usually wish not to be audio or video recorded for safety reasons, handwritten notes must be transcribed. This further prolongs the process of analysing data, synthesizing and writing the final results. One of the tools that has been used to mitigate this challenge is to directly type the interview on a laptop. This should not disrupt personal contact, such as eye contact between researchers and participants. Moreover, the international donors expect to receive responses and reporting sometimes daily, which makes it difficult for the researchers to meet these expectations due to the lack of time and trauma being experienced by them.

Former researchers have reported trauma on this research topic. Research attempting to understand the rise of the far-right attacks and the religious VE networks which are crucial in fighting them, takes a toll on researchers' lives. For instance, over a dinner, Charlie Winter, a researcher, became uneasy and had to leave due to a discussion on the ethics of eating meat and slaughterhouses, which he associated with an ISIS video where prisoners were treated as animals and killed in a slaughterhouse. Thus, the everyday life is not the normal one that every citizen's experiences. Another researcher, Seamus Hughes shifted from watching online propaganda to analysing the court records "to clear the mind".<sup>47</sup> The researchers burned out as well, especially the ones switching from understanding religious to right wing radicalisation.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Chloe Colliver, dealing with digital research at the Institute of Strategic Dialogue, says "I look at my colleagues and myself, and I see slightly angrier, more cynical people than I saw a year ago or two years ago, and that makes me sad [...] And I think a lot of that is to do with having to, day in and day out, face up to the worst of humanity".<sup>49</sup> This is called second-hand trauma, not lived by the person but being merely exposed to it. However, it is argued that not only the digital images and videos but also listening to trauma many times over a prolonged period of time can also impact the mental health of researchers.

<sup>47</sup> Hannah Allam, "It Gets To You.' Extremism Researchers Confront The Unseen Toll Of Their Work," NPR.org, September 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Charlie Winter, "Researching Jihadist Propaganda: Access, Interpretation & Trauma" (RESOLVE Network, May 2019).

<sup>49</sup> Bibi van der Zee, "Is Trauma Handed down through Generations?," *The Guardian*, October 24, 2019, sec. Society.

Thus, similar patterns have also been present not only in digital research but also in qualitative research. There is also a trauma that is being passed to the researchers during the process of conducting the interviews with family members as well as other directly affected individuals. There is a high level of trauma passed by research participants as they may express sadness, resentment and anger among other emotions during the life story interviews. Exposure to these types of local sentiments over a long time can also traumatize researchers and further slowdown the project's implementation process. For example, if a researcher has been threatened or been exposed to a high amount of stress, such memories may return even upon return to their normal environment. Lack of trust in the field and lack of safety exacerbates these processes. Therefore, it is important to provide researchers with debriefing opportunities and psychological support systems upon leaving the field in order to diminish the risks of them experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression. Moreover, during the time of researchers' fieldwork in the Western Balkans, violent extremists are released from prison and often desire to chat during the weekends, sometimes talking of their experiences. Their persistence in texting forces the researcher to maintain the contact but also exposes them to further trauma.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, supporting P/CVE networks, donors and workplace where discussions are frequently held over the topic are essential.

Due to these challenges, researchers need to adjust to their workplace upon return from the field. The big change from fieldwork to going back home is likely to cause dissonance. Cognitively the needs in the white-collar workplace, such as reporting, increasing visibility, achieving higher amounts of grants and office politics, can seem irrelevant in comparison with other societies' needs, such as lacking basic education and/or having experienced war among others. These stark differences create conditions in which researchers may become apathetic to challenges presented in their workplace or society on a more general level. Consequently, their career can be impacted negatively (researchers may even withdraw from these processes altogether). Similar patterns have also been present not only in qualitative research but also in digital research by Chloe Colliver, representing colleagues as "more cynical people".<sup>51</sup> Lastly, research shows that in most workplaces, sexism affects women, hence the chances for women succeeding in these complex careers are slim.<sup>52</sup> While the stressors will remain present, it is important to conduct longer fieldwork which allows time for data collection, providing assistance as well as responding the networks' needs. Therefore, it is proposed to have lengthier fieldwork and attempt as much as possible to mitigate the aforementioned challenges. Moreover, the visibility of the researchers work i.e. via op-ed is suggested in order to increase the impact of the research but also career

<sup>50</sup> Fieldwork Notes, Western Balkans, Spring 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Zee, "Is Trauma Handed down through Generations?"

<sup>52</sup> Dina Gerdeman, "How Gender Stereotypes Kill a Woman's Self-Confidence," HBS Working Knowledge, February 25, 2019.

chances and maintain the network engaged in the topic while the fieldwork and the writing process takes place.

## Conclusions

This paper highlighted some research challenges and their impact on the involved actors in this process encountered during a long-term study on VE in the Western Balkans. This is relevant given that the impact of VE research processes on researchers and research participants is rarely documented and understood.

Firstly, a set of challenges on P/CVE research were related to gaining access to targeted communities such as that the topic constituted a societal taboo, participants had experienced trauma during the war, there existed a state of fear and distrust within targeted communities towards such research, government interference therewith as well as potential legal consequences that may arise from participating in such research, international community interference, former harm conducted by journalists and NGOs among others and fatigue. A lengthy period of time needs to be invested to create and maintain a local network and accommodate the availability of gatekeepers that can facilitate contact to interviewees and valuable information. This requires extensive budgets as a high number of staff (the availability of which is scarce) and lengthy time investment is needed in order to ensure an efficient research process while respecting do no harm principles towards the targeted communities. Some mitigation strategies can be used such as the life story technique and snowball sampling. Moreover, the study's and researchers' independence need to be maintained during all stages alongside the planning of fieldwork trips (of one up to two months). Furthermore, it must be stressed that quantitative tools assessing the impact of P/CVE programs often neglect local contexts in targeted communities. This can hinder access to affected communities and harm P/CVE programs and local communities in the long run. Therefore, it is suggested to use qualitative methods such as ethnographic research. Gender of the researchers, being female, though facing sexism during the research, has also shown to be very efficient in collecting interviews, therefore it is proposed to employ female researchers in this field. Due to the challenges in the field, which results in a shortage of time for other vital activities such as recording the data, writing which is a lengthy process, conducting administrative tasks, reporting, maintaining the network and follow up activities. Thus, this type of research necessitates flexibility by clients/donors issuing the research regarding fieldwork planning, reporting, delivering the deliverables and necessitates high budgets.

Secondly, a number of security risks became evident during the research process, related to both interviewees and interviewers. Interviewees fear reprisals by governments (e.g. imprisonment) but also violent extremist organisations. Researchers are faced with other security threats such as attacks, threats, blackmail, manipulation



and exposure to arms in the field. Some mitigation strategies can be suggested to ensure researchers' and participants' safety, confidentiality of the interview and independence of the researcher. For example, it is vital to invest enough time in identifying trustworthy local partners, to be flexible, travel with a second person, schedule meetings in open spaces and use protected online communication.

Thirdly, there exists a high degree of politicization of VE in the Western Balkans which poses several research limitations. Sometimes governmental structures impede access to data collection on the ground. This in turn results into security risks for those engaging with research on the matter. Research has confirmed that in Serbia, interviewees fear state reprisal when engaging with VE research and the state refuses to provide information on the far-right but not on religious VE – a clear disparity stressing politicization of the matter. In Kosovo, information on VE is controlled by governmental structures which may also be a state strategy to strengthen the country's state-building process. Also, in Bosnia and Herzegovina the topic of VE seems to have been utilized for domestic politics by instigating a resurgence of Islamophobia on behalf of some Serbian and Croatian political establishment and some parts of the media. In North Macedonia, there is a reported widespread disparity between actual Albanian violent extremists and those persecuted whose number is limited. This may result into a higher risk of VE among the Albanian community if impunity remains a part of the governmental strategy.

Fourth, in collaborating with local and international actors, several common practices identified during the study must be considered. In order to reduce actors' unwillingness to assist in data collection given the topic's sensitivity and politicization or their perceived competition with other organizations, this project initially requested all countries to pre-assess the research's necessity and a respective fieldwork permit on their territories. Governments, international organizations and local NGOs but also municipal and far-right officials were contacted, informed about the research project in order to establish a wide and varied network of contacts to be interviewed. Maintaining such a network enabled researchers to establish trustworthy and valuable contacts. Moreover, researchers must find a balance in connecting with a wide range of (local) actors - also corrupt ones - in order to understand the research topic adequately, whilst maintaining their independence and integrity. Knowledge of the local language is highly beneficial in fostering communication and trust during this process. Key interlocutors have been identified to be individuals with a genuine motivation to improve their society which are mainly present in the NGO sector as well as middle lower ranks in governments. In order for research to be sustainable, the local assistants have been trained to employ the lifestories technique and use the online lifestories website (<https://storiesofpeace.eu>). Another challenge to mitigate is the presence of sexism, which must be mitigated by conducting interviews with a second person present (for female researchers) in order to maintain professionalism. This

recommendation must be used only in cases of sexism identified by the researchers. Additionally, collaboration, rather than competition among the local and international organisations, must remain a priority for all parties involved and must be fostered by the international community in order to alleviate security challenges. Another crucial aspect in relation with the international community is reporting, which the former expects regularly. The research in this field in regard to sensitivity, time and labour intensity does not allow time for the researchers to regularly report as fieldwork and writing requires lengthy periods and full attention of the researchers, while respecting 'do no harm' principles. Moreover, due to security risks involved with unsafe communication channels, the relations between these two actors may suffer. Therefore, it is proposed to have monthly one-to-one meetings for reporting with preferably the same project officer. Moreover, the personal preferences of the international representatives may as well hinder access to the field due to their political biases despite their country's strategies. Lastly, power relations between the international and local researchers are crucial in allowing independent research to be conducted. Sometimes due to power imbalances harm occurred toward local communities, which could result in further insecurity in the long term.

Lastly, the work life balance of VE researchers is disrupted due to the high workload involved in maintaining local networks, 'do no harm' principle with participants in the research, spend longer hours with transcriptions as well as traumas experienced in the field. Common traumas that are experienced during the fieldwork are related to listening to participants' traumatic events and watching online material showing violence. This can impact researchers' personal lives as well as their workplace ethic upon return from the field. Maintaining contact with participants upon return contributes to it. On the latter, feelings of alienation in the white-collar workplace as researchers can become more cynical and the needs of the whole collar workplace seem less significant. This in turn can impact the career negatively as it hampers your delivery in these types of environments that are not specialised to deal with this type of VE research and also broadly speaking on research in less developed countries. Therefore, supporting P/CVE networks, donors and workplace where discussions are frequently held over the topic are essential. Moreover, the visibility of the researchers work i.e. via op-ed is suggested in order to increase the impact of the research but also career chances and maintain the network engaged in the topic while the fieldwork and the writing process takes place.

## Bibliography

- Alexander Ritzmann. "RAN Guidelines for Effective Alternative and Counter-Narrative Campaigns." Radicalisation Awareness Network - Centre of Excellence, December 2017.
- Charlie Winter. "Researching Jihadist Propaganda: Access, Interpretation & Trauma." RESOLVE Network, May 2019.
- "Croatian President Denies 'Militant Islam' Insult Of Bosnia." *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, August 1, 2019.
- David M. Engel, and Frank Munger. "Rights of Inclusion: Law and Identity in the Life Stories of Americans with Disabilities." *University of Chicago Press*, January 2004.
- European Western Balkans. "Democracy in Progress: State of Democracy in Serbia," August 2, 2017.
- Dina Gerdeman. "How Gender Stereotypes Kill a Woman's Self-Confidence." HBS Working Knowledge, February 25, 2019.
- Ebi Spahiu. "Fighting Terrorism & Radicalization In Europe's Neighborhood: How To Scale Up EU Efforts: Albania." European Policy Centre, November 2018.
- Enes Bayraklı, and Farid Hafez. *Islamophobia in Muslim Majority Societies*. Routledge Advances in Sociology. Routledge, 2018.
- Filip Stojkovski, and Natasia Kalajdziovski. "Extremism Research Forum | Macedonia Report." British Council, April 2018.
- Gadzo, Mersiha. "Large Increase in Anti-Bosnian, Anti-Muslim Bigotry." *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2019.
- Georgia Robins Sadler, and et al. "Recruiting Hard-to-Reach United States Population Sub-Groups via Adaptations of Snowball Sampling Strategy." *Nursing and Health Sciences*, September 2010.
- Graybill, Jessica K., Sarah Dooling, Vivek Shandas, John Withey, Adrienne Greve, and Gregory L. Simon. "A Rough Guide to Interdisciplinarity: Graduate Student Perspectives." *BioScience* 56, no. 9 (September 1, 2006): 757–63.
- Hannah Allam. "'It Gets To You.' Extremism Researchers Confront The Unseen Toll Of Their Work." NPR.org, September 2019.
- Igor Spaic. "Bosnia War Victims Slam Croatia President's Terror Claims." *Balkan Insight* (blog), September 7, 2017.
- Kath Browne. "Snowball Sampling: Using Social Networks to Research Non-Heterosexual Women." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology: Theory & Practice*, 2005.
- Lawson. "Arguments with the Geography of Movement: The Theoretical Potential of Migrants' Stories." *Progress in Human Geography*, 2002, 173–189.
- Leydesdorff, S. "Oral Histories and Their Challenge to Collective Memory: The Case of Srebrenica." *Bios: Zeitschrift Für Biographieforschung Und Oral History* 2007 (2007).
- Magdalene Teiko Larnyoh. "Poor Countries Must Stop Contracting Global Consultancy Firms - IMF Boss." *Business Insider*, January 29, 2019.
- Mari Matsuda. "Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim's Story Legal Storytelling." *Michigan Law Review*, 1989 1988.
- Marina Tapley, and Gordon Clubb. "The Role of Formers in Countering Violent Extremism." *ICCT*, April 12, 2019.
- Michael Pizzuto. "Alter-Messaging: The Credible, Sustainable Counterterrorism Strategy." Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, May 2013.
- "North Macedonia 2019 Report." Commission Staff Working Document. European Commission, May 2019.

- “North Macedonia Jails 7 IS Fighters Captured in Syria.” *AP NEWS*, March 21, 2019.
- Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland, and Lyn Lofland. *Handbook of Ethnography*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019.
- Peter Mandaville. “Cosmography Recapitulates Biography.” In *Autobiographical International Relations*, 2011.
- Reed, Dr Alastair. “An Inconvenient Truth: Countering Terrorist Narratives - Fighting a Threat We Do Not Understand,” July 2, 2018.
- Robert Atkinson. *The Life Story Interview*. SAGE Publications, Inc, 1998.
- “Serbia 2019 Report.” Commission Staff Working Document. European Commission, May 2019.
- Sinisa Marusic. “Prokuroria e Maqedonisë Heq Dorë Nga Ndjekja e Shqiptarëve Në Rastin ‘Sopoti.’” *KALLXO.Com*, March 19, 2018.
- Zee, Bibi van der. “Is Trauma Handed down through Generations?” *The Guardian*, October 24, 2019, sec. Society.