

Religious Counselling

IN DERADICALIZATION PROGRAMS

Needs Assesment Report

A mapping of needs and method of applicability of religious counselling as a measure for reintegration, rehabilitation and resocialization of individuals sentenced with crimes related to violent extremism in Macedonia

GCERF
Preventing Violent Extremism

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Association for civic activism and encouraging social responsibility **HORIZON CIVITAS**
Skopje, Macedonia

Needs Assesmet Report

on religious counselling in deradicalization programs

March, 2024

Title: Needs assessment report on religious counseling
in deradicalization programs

Publisher: Association for civic activism and encouraging social responsibility **HORIZON CIVITAS** Skopje

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Graphic design: A2 Digital World

Format: Electronic and printed

Printed circulation: ~ 20 stakeholders

The report has been made as part of the project "Community-BasedIntervention Programme: e Path to Reintegration", implemented by theConsortium of organizations, Macedonian Center for InternationalCooperation - MCIC, Horizon Civitas, Initiative for European Perspective-IEP, Nexus Civil Concept and Pleiades Organization. The project issupported by the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund(GCERF).

This report was prepared with the financial support of the GCERF. Theopinions and content is the sole responsibility of the authors and doesnot necessarily reflect the views of GCERF and the views of the otherimplementing organizations.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

Acronym	Description
CoE	Council of Europe
CRRCG	Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups of Macedonia
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
CSW	Center for Social Work
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
DES	Department for Execution of Sanctions
EU	European Union
FIS	Faculty of Islamic Studies
FOTh	Faculty of (Christian) Orthodox Theology
GCERF	Global Community Engagement Resilience Fund
CCVECT	National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	Islamic Religious Community
LMTRRR	Local Multidisciplinary Teams on Reintegration Rehabilitation and Resocialization
MOCh-OA	Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archepioscopy
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
RAN	Radicalisation Awareness Network
RRR	Rehabilitation Resocialization and Reintegration
SOP	Standard Operating Protocol
VEP	Violent Extremist Prisoner

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Executive Summary

In December 2023, Horizon Civitas commissioned an eighteen-months needs assessment in Macedonia, about religious counseling as a tool to reintegration, rehabilitation and resocialization of returned individuals from the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.

The purpose of the needs assessment was to collect and summarize stakeholder views of the current landscape of mechanisms and resources available to adapt religious counseling as a useful tool to reintegration of the returned individuals. The assessment sought to identify stakeholders' perspectives on key gaps related to the identification, referral, assistance and support on religious grounds for the target group. Stakeholders were also asked for their recommendations on how to establish a functional system of counseling in and/or post-prison period of violent extremist prisoners (VEPs). As such, this needs assessment constitutes a credible source of *'analysis of possibilities to involve religious communities in the process of rehabilitation and reintegration of convicted individuals'*, indicated as a measure to achieve the strategic goal 4.1 Disengagement/Deradicalization in scope of the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism 2023-2027 of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia.

There is a growing concern about the potential for radicalization and terrorist activities by VEPs (in prison or post-release period) in Macedonia. Several reports identified and pointed out the issue of radicalization in prisons. The EU Country Report 2022 in particular recommends to continue to implement the Joint Action Plan on Counter Terrorism with a focus on deradicalization in prisons. Accordingly, *increasing institutional capacities on prevention of radicalization in prisons* is a trending agenda in the country's efforts to counter violent extremism. In this regard, the Department for Execution of Sanctions (DES) started to closely cooperate with the Council of Europe (CoE) in recent years.

While the current deradicalization and/or reintegration approaches in the country involve solely psychologists, pedagogues and social workers as front-liners, counseling services by religious workers remains an untouched topic. Without appropriate referral and support for all persons who experienced religious misinterpretation as a driving motive to join terrorist groups, it is not possible to have a comprehensive response to radicalization. Hereby this needs assessment report discusses the applicability of possible inclusion of religious workers in those efforts, as well as provide a roadmap in creating the relevant policies. As such, the report focuses on identifying current institutional capacities for the applicability and accordingly putting up recommendations.

The needs assessment involved five primary steps: (1) a desk review consisting of collection, coding and analysis of documents identified by Horizon Civitas and supplemented by the

research team; (2) development of a tool for the identification of stakeholders to include in the needs assessment; (3) interviews with identified stakeholders in-person and online; (4) focus group with identified stakeholder; (5) analysis and triangulation of all data sources using a structured coding scheme to develop findings and initial recommendations; (6) presentation and correction/validation of study findings and recommendations at a roundtable discussion with stakeholders.

While the needs assessment yielded valuable insights, it faced several limitations worth understanding:

Subjective Views at the Forefront:

- The study primarily relied on stakeholder perspectives, meaning the data reflects their specific knowledge and opinions about religious counseling, resource gaps, and potential solutions. This valuable input, however, limits the objectivity of the overall picture.

Generalization Challenged:

- Convenience sampling was used for interviews, restricting the findings' applicability to broader populations. We can't assume the viewpoints of chosen representatives from government, agencies, or other groups fully capture the perspectives of everyone within those institutions.

Uneven Data Landscape:

- Desk review materials and interview informants varied in availability across the country, potentially creating data imbalances.

Recommendation Structure Unforeseen:

- Our initial plan was to categorize stakeholder recommendations by immediate actions, interim goals, and long-term aspirations. However, over 90% of stakeholders didn't provide this differentiation, resulting in uncategorized recommendations, which might present challenges in prior.

Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data with triangulated findings, successfully produced robust insights into religious counseling resources, gaps, and needs across the country. However, interpreting and applying these findings should be done with these limitations in mind.

Needs Assessment Findings

Our needs assessment yielded 12 key findings, not reflecting every question or topic raised.

We prioritized issues:

- Frequently mentioned: Repeatedly cited by informants, respondents, and documents.
- Extensively discussed: Given significant time or space in interviews, responses, and reports.
- Widely relevant: Consistently identified across different respondent types and relevant reports.

We organized these findings into three categories:

- **General Approaches:** Broad approaches to religious counseling in Macedonia
- **Institutional Framework:** Applicable structures and systems for implementing religious counseling.
- **Content and Implementation:** Specific topics and methods for effective delivery.

Based on the abovementioned, the findings of this report are grouped and highlighted as follows:

General approaches on religious counseling

- Religious counseling is mostly perceived as a theological concept (spiritual guidance) rather than a P/CVE practice or measure. This leads to complexities in understanding the role of imams in the process as 'supporters', and not treaters of cases.
- The general attitude towards religious counseling is that it is useful for prisoners. In addition, most believe that it would be highly welcomed by the prison population.
- The absence of officially delegated religious workers (appointed in cooperation with Islamic Religious Community) to conduct main (Islamic) Friday prayer within prisons leave space for VEPs to misuse the prayer for further radicalization within prisons.

Institutional applicability or framework

- Key approach is that Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG) for this kind of measure, in coordination with Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG), National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism (NCCVECT), as well as religious communities.
- The best system of recruitment of religious workers for counseling is by listing nominations from religious communities and afterward individual contracting by DES as 'temporary consultants'.
- While current human resources for implementation of such a measure in related institutions is relatively sufficient, the operational and financial resources are not.

Content and implementation

- While religious counseling for the general prison population is identified as a useful tool to be on a voluntary-basis, the measure is suggested as mandatory for VEPs.
- There is a significant difference for religious counseling topic suggestions for the general prison population and VEPs.
- In addition, there is a significant difference for the frequency of implementation of this measure for the general prison population and VEPs.

Needs Assessment Recommendations

Recommendations following from stakeholder views and these findings seek to address the primary gaps for a possible implementation of religious counseling as a measure in scope of RRR policies. The primary recommendations reflect the suggestions made by interviewed informants and survey respondents, as well as discussed and validated at the *Roundtable discussion about the role of religious communities in preventive measures for prevention of violent extremism that leads to terrorism*. There are 10 consecutively numbered recommendations ordered by topic ; the order in which the recommendations appear does not reflect their importance. Each of the recommendations are articulated in Section 5. Conclusion and Recommendations.

To institutions:

Recommendation 1: To establish a Working Group on Religious Counseling for RRR of VEPs

Recommendation 2: To identify the operational and financial resources

Recommendation 3: To set a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for religious counseling

Recommendation 4: To recruit and certify nominated religious workers

Recommendation 5: To strengthen capacities of recruited religious worker

Recommendation 6: To develop a list of topics for religious counseling

Recommendation 7: To conduct monitoring and evaluation policies

To Islamic Religious Community:

Recommendation 1: To make a list of nominated religious workers

Recommendation 2: To appoint a person in charge for religious counseling

To civil society:

Recommendation 1: To implement capacity building activities on religious counseling

Introduction and Background

In December 2023, Horizon Civitas commissioned an eighteen-month needs assessment about religious counseling as a tool to reintegration, rehabilitation and resocialization of returned individuals from the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.

The purpose of the needs assessment was to map the current state of play, challenges and recommendations for implementation of this measure in Macedonia. The assessment sought to identify key gaps related to the implementation of the measure in the country, as well as provide a baseline study for a possible implementation in the near future, respectively. As such, the report constitutes a credible source for institutions in making analysis for involvement of religious communities in rehabilitation and reintegration of convicted individuals. This measure is indicated for achieving the specific objective 4.2 Disengagement/Deradicalization in scope of the National Strategy for CVE 2023-2027 of the Government of Republic of Macedonia.

This section of the report provides a brief overview about religious counseling as a RRR measure, as well as current state of play in Macedonia for implementation of such measure, respectively. Section 2 details the methodology used in the assessment, presents the framework and key research questions for the assessment and highlights limitations to the research. Section 3 reports the primary findings of the assessment. We have categorized findings by the assessment's research questions including: (1) general approaches on religious counseling, (2) Institutional applicability or framework and (3) content and implementation. Each research topic appears numbered in bold front. Each is followed by the findings that address the question, set off with a bullet point and in italics to distinguish their status as a finding. Each bullet point is followed by a discussion of the data supporting it, including illustrative quotations collected during the interviews. The section 4 provides an overview of good practices on religious counseling as a RRR measure from the region and broader. The report concludes with Section 5, which offers an articulated set of recommendations from stakeholders followed by summative conclusions. This report also includes the following for appendixes: Appendix A: Identifying Needs Assessment Stakeholders, Appendix B: List of Review Documents, Appendix C: Interview Guide, Appendix D: Roundtable discussion presentation.

Context

With the return of individuals participating in the foreign war of Syria and Iraq to the country, authorities of Macedonia prioritized the agenda of reintegration, resocialization and rehabilitation. In this context, the Government, namely the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counter Terrorism established an Interagency Working Group on reintegration, resocialization and rehabilitation of returned foreign fighters and their

family members. Later on, the Group mapped a National Plan on RRR, formed Local Multidisciplinary Teams on RRR (LMTRRR) in targeted municipalities, as well as developed a Standard Operating Protocol (SOP). While the National Plan was highly evaluated by some international experts, some national ones suggested that the preparation process of the Plan was not inclusive, namely not including considerable stakeholders such as civil society or religious communities.

Many studies about emergence, manifestation and trends of violent extremism in the country, pointed out that the ideologically driven misunderstanding and misinterpretation of religion was a crucial factor in the process of radicalizing and recruiting individuals to the foreign wars in Syria and Iraq. [1][2][3] Furthermore, observations from the field indicate that those violent extremist prisoners (VEPs) are further radicalizing other prisoners through various activities. However, neither the ***National Plan on RRR for returned foreign terrorist fighters from Syria and Iraq, and their family members nor the Action Plan for CVE 2023-2027*** foresee any direct measure that can ultimately address this issue. Given the magnitude and complexity of the problem, it is of utmost importance to have measures that trigger reorientation of their religious belief and approaches.

Neglectingthe problem, the government risks (1) neglecting crucial measures: failing to prioritize preventing further radicalization among existing and future prisoners, (2) misunderstanding the threat: lag behind developing nuanced responses to the changing nature of prison-based radicalization (3) missing key partners: collaborating with civil society and religious communities, hindering evidence-based deradicalization programs both inside and outside prisons.

On the other hand, results from countries (in the region and broader) involving religious workers in the process of deradicalization in the prison and post-prison period proves that religious counseling has remarkable effects in reducing the violence motivation at VEPs, as well as their radical understanding and approaches. Based on local contexts, some countries have developed successful models of collaboration between state institutions, religious communities and civil society organizations for providing necessary expertise about religious counseling and using it in deradicalization of targeted individuals.

1 Kadri, A. and Shabani, S. (2018). "Working towards resilient communities". Analytica Think Tank."
2 Feta, B., Armakolas I. & Krstinovska A. (2023). "Community resilience against violent extremism in North Macedonia", ELIAMEP.
3 Vachoski, A., Shikova, N. & Musliu, A. (2020) "Enhancing the Understanding of Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization, and Reintegration of Returnees in North Macedonia", Nexus Civil Concept.

Considering this background, Horizon Civitas decided to conduct an assessment of existing resources and needs, and identify best mechanisms for possible applicability of religious counseling as a measure in the process of reintegration, resocialization and rehabilitation in the country. To guide the study, Horizon Civitas initiated a small research team, which developed a needs assessment framework including data collection and analysis activities. The body of the framework includes a set of research questions based on the purpose driving the study. The research team used the research questions to organize the needs assessment framework and develop data collection questions and measures. The team assembled the measures into the appropriate data collection and analysis instruments, including an analytical coding structure to guide the desk review (and later, analyze the other qualitative data), a printed questionnaire to be used for in-face interviewing, a web-based version of the same questionnaire to be used when in-face interviewing is not possible, and a PowerPoint presentation to guide a stakeholder's roundtable discussion.

Methodology

In this section, we describe the methodology used in the assessment, present the framework and key research questions and highlight limitations to the research. The needs assessment involved six primary steps: (1) desk review consisting of collection, coding and analysis of documents identified by Horizon Civitas and supplemented by the research team ; (2) development of a tool for the identification of stakeholders to include in the needs assessment; (3) interviews with identified stakeholders in-person ; (3) focus group with identified stakeholders ; (4) analysis and triangulation of all data sources using a structured coding scheme to develop findings and initial recommendations; (5) presentation and correction/ validation of study findings and recommendations at a stakeholders workshop.

Desk review

The desk review includes institutional documents and research about religious counseling and deradicalization in Macedonia. The research team identified a set of documents and reports to consider for inclusion in the desk review. In total, 12 were identified. Of these, the team reviewed, supplemented and ultimately included 8 key study documents (Appendix B: List of Desk Review Documents). The documents provided basic context for further elaboration of the topic.

Stakeholder identification

The research team developed Framework Tool for Identifying Needs Assessment Stakeholders (Appendix A: Identifying Needs Assessment Stakeholders) to support Horizon Civitas in identifying and engaging stakeholders in the needs assessment. The tool sought to help Horizon Civitas identify a robust, relevant set of stakeholders to involve in the needs assessment. Based on their contextuality with the topic, stakeholders were grouped as primary purpose, affiliation, and funding.

In-depth Stakeholders Interviews

The views and perspectives of stakeholders, including donors working on deradicalization programs in the Western Balkans constituted the pivotal component of the needs assessment. In order to gain detailed and nuanced insight into the current situation and needs, the research team conducted in-person and online interviews with a range of key stakeholders. The list of informants and respondents was developed by Horizon Civitas staff. Using the study research questions, the research team developed a set of questions to use as a basis for developing a semi-structured interview guide. In total, 24 interviews with identified stakeholders were conducted. Out of those, 17 were conducted in-person and 7 were responded to online.

Focus group

Considering the direct concern with the topic of religious counseling as a deradicalization measure, a focus group with Directorate for Execution of Sanctions (DES) was conducted. The focus group was conducted in the offices of DES in Skopje. The group consisted of five employees in the Directorate, working in relevant sectors with reintegration, resocialization and rehabilitation of VEPs. The semi-structured interview guide was used for the focus group, respectively.

Data Analysis

The research team analyzed qualitative study data (documents and interviews) first by developing topic-specific codes based on study research questions. The coding helped the team to determine the most frequent themes, patterns and answers and accordingly develop a set of concrete findings. Finally, this process allowed the team to aggregate across findings to develop a set of recommendations on how to best put religious counseling in practice.

Stakeholders' roundtable discussion

A step toward the conclusion of this brief needs assessment was a convening of key stakeholders to discuss and refine preliminary study findings and recommendations. Horizon Civitas identified a group of stakeholders from the country and invited them to a roundtable discussion about involvement of religious communities in preventive mechanisms for countering violent extremism that leads to terrorism. The roundtable discussion included two key activities: (1) presentation of preliminary study finding and recommendations and (2) discussion session of the finding and recommendations. The purpose was to produce a final set of recommendations that reflects stakeholders' priorities for next steps toward developing a module of involvement of religious communities in the RRR process through providing religious counseling.

Limitations of the Needs Assessment

This needs assessment, while informative, faced several limitations, some identified early on. These limitations are important to consider when interpreting the findings:

Data Reliance:

- Stakeholder-centric: The study heavily relied on the perceptions and views of stakeholders, leading to subjective insights into religious counseling. While their input was valuable, it doesn't represent an objective analysis of the entire landscape.

- Limited Literature Review: Although external research was considered, it wasn't a comprehensive review, potentially missing broader perspectives.

Sampling and Generalizability:

- Convenience Sampling: Interview participants were readily available individuals, not randomly selected. This limits the findings' applicability to larger populations.
- Varying Data Availability: Both desk review materials and interview informants differed in accessibility across the region, potentially skewing the data.

Recommendation Structure:

- Unsorted Recommendations: Stakeholders largely refrained from categorizing recommendations by immediate, interim, and long-term goals. This makes prioritizing future actions more challenging.

Stakeholder Buy-in:

Roundtable Discussions: Stakeholder roundtable discussion, while valuable for feedback, don't guarantee universal acceptance of findings and recommendations. Individual viewpoints may differ.

Potential Biases:

- Self-Selection Bias: Participants who volunteered may hold strong opinions about the subject than those who didn't, influencing the data.
- Social Desirability Bias: Respondents might answer in a way they think is socially acceptable, skewing self-reported information.

Despite these limitations, the study effectively combined qualitative and quantitative data triangulation to generate valuable insights into religious counseling resources, gaps, and needs. However, interpreting and applying these findings should be done with these limitations in mind.

Needs Assessment Results and Findings

In this section, we describe the primary findings of the Horizon Civitas-requested needs assessment on religious counseling for deradicalization in Macedonia. The findings discuss - and are organized by - the following headings: (1) General approaches on religious counseling; (2) Institutional applicability or framework and (3) content and implementation. These headings align with key assessment research questions. Recommendations follow from stakeholders' priorities as discussed in the findings and reported in Section 5.

Our findings don't answer every question raised during data collection.

Instead, they highlight:

- Recurring Concerns: Issues mentioned frequently by interviewees and in documents.
- Extended Discussions: Topics that received the most attention in data collection.
- Widely Observed Themes: Concerns echoed across different interview groups.

We use bullet points and bold text to identify key findings. The number and detail of findings vary by topic, reflecting the depth of information gathered.

General approaches on religious counseling

This section describes kick-off ideas, understanding and approaches about religious counseling in Macedonia. Since the set of questions at this section was more of personalized questions, the stakeholder feedback was expected to be more of subjective personal opinions rather than rationalized objective input. In addition, the responses were quite general. It is also important to indicate that the questions at this initial stage referred to the general prison population, and not only the VEPs.

A considerable finding in the very beginning of the discussion is that the informant interview feedback suggests a general positive attitude towards religious counseling. It remains challenging to conclude rather the driving motive of the positive attitude to religious counseling is the religiosity of the respondent or the general constructive approach to a process of reintegration, rehabilitation and resocialization of a prisoner. It is worth noting that very few responded with theoretical knowledge about the practice of religious counseling as a measure to prevent or counter extremism in prison or post-prison period. This leads to conclusions that the religious counseling is mostly perceived as a theological concept.

Based on the data available and informant interviews, religious counseling can be relatively useful for prisoners in Macedonia. Some respondents pointed out the possible misuse of such a program because of religious missionary motives of the appointed counselors

to conduct this program. Hereby it was suggested that it can be useful only if it is well defined, structured, monitored by institutions in charge, and implemented by professionally equipped resources.

Asked about the most effective method to implement religious counseling in Macedonia, almost all respondents stated that this measure should be on a voluntary basis upon the request of the prisoners, and not as a mandatory rehabilitation program. It is notable that stakeholders from religious-based institutions justified this approach with a religious background, articulating that from the religious point of view, individuals cannot be forced to obey religious belief and values.

Data suggests that there is a general belief that religious counseling would be welcomed by the prison population. Asked to argue their opinion, responses indicate that the counselors can have the necessary capacities to make prisoners regret their committed crimes, as well as support constructive thinking about the future, and thereby contribute to the overall goal of the imprisonment idea.

Institutional applicability or framework

This section elaborates, as well as sets forth the most efficient institutional frame in Macedonia for applicability of religious counseling in prison and post-prison period. The set of multiple document reviews, as well as the questions of this section aimed to find out the most applicable standard, operation, procedures and/or methods of implementing religious counseling in the country. Hereby it reveals the current institutional facilities, challenges and needs for putting religious counseling in practice. In this regard, the study at this part focuses on examining the human, operational and financial resources of relevant institutions and stakeholders.

The approach of the majority of stakeholders and institutional representatives in the country is that the institution in charge for coordination and implementation of religious counseling in prison and post-prison period should be the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups of Macedonia (CRRCG). Multiple respondents rationalized that the CRRCG is the most fitting institution for such a measure due to (1) the scope of work of this institution, which is dealing with issues related to religious fields in the country, as well as (2) coordinating public institutions with religious communities - which are not public institutions. On the other hand, some argued that CRRCG is only an independent organ of state administration, and thus cannot carry on an operational duty to such an extent of coordinating high levels of human, operational and financial resources.

Following this, the majority approach is that CRRCG, as institution in charge of this measure, can establish a Working Group on Religious Counseling consisting of: (1) state institutions, namely Department for Execution of Sanctions, National Committee for CVE and CT ; (2) state-funded academic institutions, namely Department of Philosophy at University of St. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Christian Orthodox Theology, Faculty of Islamic Studies, as well as credible CSOs working on this issue, and (3) constitutionally-recognized religious communities, namely the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archipescop (MOCh) and Islamic Religious Communities (IRC). Some argued that the religiously-based academic institutions and religious communities cannot take part directly in a state-initiated Working Group due to secularism concerns. Instead, the proposal is that CRRCG establishes a Consultation Mechanism with them and transmit their approaches and consultation notes to the Working Group on Religious Counseling consisting of state institutions.

Another concerning issue relevant to this section was the debates about involvement of security institutions in a possible Working Group on Religious Counseling. While most institutional respondents pointed out that the involvement of security institutions is needed in order to make security checks to involved religious workers in this measure, mostly academia-based respondents argued that this leads to unnecessary securitization of this measure, and thus pose negative effects on involved religious-based stakeholders.

Asked about what is the most appropriate method to recruit religious workers for religious counseling, the majority of stakeholders noted that the most suitable method to Macedonia is that the religious communities provide a proposal list of religious workers to the CRRCG, and then CRRCG can issue individual temporary service contracts with the nominated workers. Multiple institutional stakeholders expressed that the existing legal framework in the country allows this process of outsourced service providing, thus there would be no necessity to create additional frame for recruitment. Following the recruitment, the majority of respondents argued that the most suitable method of reporting between institutions in charge, namely CRRCG and service providers, namely the religious workers in religious counseling, is through monthly coordination meetings. This can enable a more practical way to provide feedback and accordingly evaluate the efficiency of the measure.

When it comes to the current capacities in terms of human resources, the majority approach is that the country enjoys sufficient levels of people involved to conduct such a measure. Stakeholders believe that institutions can appoint relevant persons that can be part of the Working Group, and also that the religious communities have a considerable number of religious workers that can nominate for counseling in prison and post-prison period. However, institutional stakeholders pointed out the need for an update of the legal framework of the officials participating from public institutions, in a way that their involvement is indicated in their scope of work, or tasks and responsibilities. In addition, the need for increasing professional knowledge and qualifications of religious workers about religious counseling was mentioned as a crucial point before their involvement, respectively.

In terms of operational resources, the consideration is that there are not sufficient capacities to apply religious counseling, especially within prisons. Majority of respondents pointed out that the prisons in the country lack necessary feasibility to carry out this type of measure, such as a space for individual counseling, equipment (such as a projector if the religious counselor wants to use video presentations during the counseling), and means of transport (for the religious counselor, from and to the prison, respectively).

In terms of financial resources, there is an unanimous approach that institutions do not have the sufficient capacities to financially cover the implementation of such a measure. Namely, it is a matter of discussion to which extent the government can allocate sufficient budget to CRRCG to cover outsourced temporary service providers (religious workers). Majority of the respondents claimed that implementation of such a measure with manageable financial implications can only be possible if religious communities take charge for covering this service in scope of existing tasks and responsibility of the religious clerics. Namely, religious communities can appoint clerics (priests or imams) for prisons as a part of their daily duties to deal with community members (in this scenario, prisoners are also considered as community members). Many of the respondents also suggested that professional capacity building activities such as training, study visits, action plan meetings, can be financially covered through CSO project funding. Given that service providers are not public servants, some argued that the service payment can also be covered in scope of projects, respectively.

Content and implementation

This section elaborates the methodology of implementation of religious counseling in prison and post-prison period. Namely, it provides approaches on many aspects that have to do with this measure, such as the topics to be issued during the counseling, the method, the form and the format, as well as the frequency and the duration of it. Hereby this section offers a solid mapping on how to carry out religious counseling in Macedonia. In order to provide more concrete data in relation to deradicalization, this part includes specific focus about religious counseling measures for the VEPs, or the individuals convicted for crimes related to violent extremism and participation to foreign wars in Syria and Iraq.

Respondents identified multiple topics that can be issued with prisoners. The most frequently mentioned topics are as follows: having purpose in life, justice and injustice in religious perspective, and empathy. Once-only mentioned were mental and physical healthcare, economic prosperity, and reaching a positive status in society. This indicates that respondents mostly prefer to reorient a very core individual understanding of values at the prisoner, rather than aiming a change starting by practical daily needs.

However, when asked about the format of the counseling, the majority suggested thematic conversations based on prisoners' interest, rather than topics pre-agreed by any coordinating body (the Working Group on Religious Counseling) and the service providers (religious workers). It is also worth mentioning that those respondents preferring pre-agreed topics were mostly from the institutional background.

Another matter of discussion was the form of religious counseling. Options given to respondents to choose were: individual counseling meetings, group meetings (with 4-5 prisoners), preaching in front of all prisoners (liturgy, sermon, etc.), or all combined. It is a considerable finding that almost all stakeholders preferred the option of all combined. It is also worth to note that the stakeholder that indicated only the individual counseling meetings were officials from the Department for Execution of Sanctions.

Asked about the frequency of the counseling, the majority of stakeholders indicated that the most ideal would be to carry it out once a week. Accordingly, the majority of respondents believe that one religious counseling should last a maximum of 1 hour. This combination, some suggested, would help to create a long-lasting relation between the counselor and the prisoner, based on mutual understanding and respect. Another respondent indicated that once a week is ideal but it can be operationally difficult for institutions to handle a measure in such a frequency.

Another considerable finding is that all respondents agreed that gifting leaflets or books by the religious counselor to the prisoner should be used as an additional tool to the counseling. Many argued that encouraging reading may trigger a sense of bigger inner change in life at the prisoner. In addition, it can help to create a more emotional bond between the prisoner and the counselor, and thus ultimately the emotional frequency can help them position the counselor as a positive guide in their life.

Counseling for deradicalization

This subsection focuses on analyzing applicability of religious counseling for returned former fighters, including women and children, from participation to foreign wars in Syria and Iraq through recruitments by terrorist organizations using misinterpreted religious motivations. The main objective of the set of questions that are addressed at this part was to map specific challenges, needs and facilities in regards to religious counseling as a measure for deradicalization of this specific target group. Additionally, this part helped to observe any differences between the approaches about the methodology of implementation of religious counseling, between the general prison population and the VEPs, namely individuals convicted for crimes related to participation to foreign wars in Syria and Iraq.

Asked whether the measure of religious counseling for returnees should be mandatory or not, the approaches of the stakeholders are very different. Many stated that the very core motivation of their radicalization and violence is religious misinterpretation, or ideological approaches to religious readings in a way that justifies psychological and physical violence, thus counseling that aims their religious reorientation should be mandatory. Moreover, some stated that any deradicalization effort that does not include religious workers as frontliners of the process is predetermined to fail. On the other hand, some argue that mandatory religious counseling at this target group may have negative counter-effects, and hereby it should be left to them to express their willingness to discuss religious topics with religious counselors. In an optimal scenario, some others argue, the religious workers involved in any deradicalization program (mandatory or optional) must have an advanced background of knowledge about the Wahhabi school of thought and Wahhabi scholars, both to which returnees refer in their daily life religious interpretation and practices. Accordingly, some suggested that the most fitting counselors for religious reorientation of this target group are imams coming from moderated Wahhabi background or school of thought, which can best intervene to the misinterpretations of this target group.

In any of the implementation scenarios, there is an absolute agreement that religious counseling may have a very positive impact on returned former fighters, including women and children. In other words, stakeholders approach positively to establishment of a mechanism for religious counseling specific to this target group. However, some suggested, the political will by both public institutions and Islamic Religious Community to make concrete steps in establishment of such a deradicalization measure remains the main challenge or topic of discussion.

Asked specifically about topics that can be issued with returned former fighters, including women, the tendency of answers were mostly straight forward on addressing the well-known concerning topics related to Islamist radicalization and violent extremism. Most frequently mentioned topics were (1) interpretation of *jihad* (meaning 'striving' or 'struggling' in Arabic) (2) social integration with people from various religious backgrounds in countries not ruled with *Shariah* (Islamic laws) (3) non-violent solution of conflicts (4) respecting religious freedom as an essential value in Islam and (5) women rights in Islam. This list of topics indicates a drastic difference in approaches of respondents about religious counseling topics to be issued for the general prison population and for VEPs, respectively.

Another difference in approaches reflected on the format of the counseling. While majority respondents showed a tendency to believe that all combined counseling (individually, in groups, audience preach) is most ideal for the general prison population, on the other hand almost everyone stated that any counseling with VEPs should be issued only individually. This approach about the VEPs religious counseling was mostly argued with the assumption that group religious counseling with VEPs can only end up as unnecessary debates, rather than contextual counseling through exchange of ideas.

An additional difference in attitudes between the general prison population and VEPs is about the frequency of the counseling. Many of the respondents believe that religious counseling for VEPs should be more frequent. This was indicated when asked about how often VEPs should take religious counseling. While for the general prison population the majority stated once a week, for the VEPs many stated at least twice.

In addition, there was an absolute agreement at all stakeholders that any religious counseling as part of deradicalization programs for VEPs should also be part of post-penal measures. Namely, all agreed that religious counseling should be added in probation services and thus, continue to positively influence the religious reorientation after the prison period. Asked about the form that religious counseling should be conducted with the returned former fighters, including women and children, as well as including the post-prison period, the respondents preferred combination of several forms: family visits at homes, individual meetings in mosques, individual meetings out of mosque at informal locations such as cafes, restaurants, etc. ; rather than one of them.

Good practices

Many countries in the world consider religious counseling as an effective tool to deradicalization efforts within prisons and outside. Deradicalization in prisons and afterwards, while a complex and sensitive issue, can benefit from incorporating religious counseling when implemented thoughtfully and responsibly. Here are some outline descriptions of good practices of religious counseling in prison and post-prison period from various countries, indicated by topic and mechanism of functioning:

1. Religious counseling in partnership with civil society and theological institutions:
   - Albania: The CVE Coordination Centre of the Government of Albania requested Beder University - Department of Islamic Studies, as well as Muslim Community of Albania to provide theologians and imams (female and male) with background on Islam and psychology. Both have regular religious counseling with women and children returnees from foreign conflicts Syria and Iraq. In addition, the Counseling Line for Women and Girls in partnership with the Inter-religious Council of Albania has recently started a new project for capacity building of additional religious workers for providing religious counseling in prisons.

2. Interfaith Dialogue and Understanding:
   - Indonesia: The “Building Bridges” program in Indonesia brings together inmates of different faiths and backgrounds for interfaith dialogue sessions facilitated by trained religious counselors. This fosters mutual understanding and respect, challenging extremist ideologies.

3. Narrative Reframing and Identity Transformation:
   - Saudi Arabia: The “Guidance and Rehabilitation Program” in Saudi Arabia works with religious scholars and counselors to help inmates reframe their narratives and develop positive identities beyond extremist ideologies. This can involve re-interpreting religious texts and exploring alternative pathways for their values.

4. Community Reintegration and Support:
   - Morocco: The “Dar Talib Recidivism Prevention Program” in Morocco provides religious counseling alongside vocational training and community support for released inmates. This holistic approach fosters reintegration and reduces the risk of re-radicalization upon release.

5. Trauma-Informed and Culturally Sensitive Approaches:
    - Canada: The "Restorative Indigenous Spiritualities in Corrections" program in Canada recognizes the link between historical trauma and extremism among some indigenous communities. The program offers culturally sensitive religious counseling that incorporates traditional healing practices to address underlying trauma.

6. Emphasis on Critical Thinking and Religious Literacy:
- Germany: The "Violence Prevention Network Germany" trains prison chaplains to engage in critical discussions with inmates about religious texts and ideologies. This equips them to challenge extremist interpretations and develop their own critical thinking skills.

These good practices offer valuable insights into utilizing religious counseling responsibly for deradicalization efforts in prisons. Successful rehabilitation requires a multi-faceted approach that prioritizes individual needs, respects religious diversity, and fosters critical thinking while upholding ethical and safety considerations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The final part of this report summarizes the key findings, challenges, recommendations, and good practices identified in the report. It also highlights potential areas for further analysis and underscores the importance of addressing the lack of involvement of religious communities in P/CVE and RRR measures.

The report provides a comprehensive overview of the potential and challenges of using religious counseling for deradicalization in Macedonia. By addressing the identified needs and concerns, and incorporating best practices from other countries, Macedonia can develop a program that promotes reintegration, religious reinterpretation, and ultimately prevents violent extremism.

Religious counseling, if implemented thoughtfully and responsibly, has the potential to be a valuable tool for deradicalization efforts in the country. It is crucial to address ethical and safety considerations, and adopt a multi-faceted approach that ultimately enables the measure to function professionally. By learning from good practices elsewhere and carefully tailoring the program to the specific context, Macedonia can maximize the potential of religious counseling for effective rehabilitation and deradicalization.

Considering the current state of play, Macedonia is considered as a country which provides a legal background of respecting the freedom of religion, belief and practices of individuals. Referring to the Law on Execution of Sanction of Macedonia, Article 194 - *The right to fulfill religious needs*, that regulates the right of prisoners to fulfill their religious feelings and needs ; Macedonia can develop the measure of religious counseling that will ultimately help its prison population not only live their rights in scope of this article, but also facilitate their reintegration and rehabilitation - as core pillars of the imprisonment period.

The report also suggests that addressing the trend of (new) radicalization within the prisons is crucial. The lack of cooperation between Directorate for Execution of Sanctions and Islamic Religious Community, especially for the part of official prayer rituals such as the Friday prayer including a religious sermon/preach - a ritual well used by VEPs to radicalize other prisoners ; creates a gap in efforts to prevent radicalization within prisons.

There is an existing positive attitude towards applicability of religious counseling measures in Macedonia, but the driving motive remains unclear (religiousness vs. rehabilitation). For the general prison population, voluntary counseling is favored. For VEPs (individuals convicted for violent extremism and foreign wars), opinions differ on mandatory vs. optional programs.

The Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups of Macedonia (CRRCG) is seen as the most suitable institution to coordinate and implement religious counseling, potentially establishing a Working Group with diverse stakeholders. Recurrent themes for counseling topics include purpose in life, justice, empathy, and religious reinterpretation. Individual and group counseling combined are preferred for the general population, while individual sessions are favored for VEPs. Once a week for the general population and at least twice for VEPs was suggested for frequency. Family visits, individual meetings in mosques, and informal settings are preferred for post-prison reintegration of VEPs. Addressing misinterpretations of religious texts, social integration, non-violent conflict resolution, and respect for religious freedom are seen as crucial for VEPs. Individual counseling and more frequent sessions are also preferred.

Some of the identified challenges are as follows:

- Defining objectives and success indicators: Clear objectives and success indicators are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of religious counseling in deradicalization efforts.
- Training religious workers: Training programs for religious workers on deradicalization approaches and critical thinking skills are crucial.
- Monitoring and evaluation: Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to assess the program's effectiveness and make adjustments as needed.
- Ethical considerations: Careful consideration of ethical and safety concerns is essential to prevent misuse of religious counseling.

In addition, the report raises important questions about the involvement of security institutions in religious counseling and the potential for secularism concerns. These issues deserve further consideration and discussion.

Other remarkable challenges on the applicability of this measure are the lack of operational and financial capacities. The financial resources and operational feasibility of implementing religious counseling need to be carefully assessed and addressed.

On the other hand, the good practices show that **partnering with civil society and theological institutions** is key in the applicability of this measure. In addition, some of the remarkable takeouts from the good practices are as follows: utilizing interfaith dialogue and understanding, applying narrative reframing and identity transformation, providing community reintegration and support, implementing trauma-informed and culturally sensitive approaches, emphasizing critical thinking and religious literacy.

In conclusion, this report offers the following recommendations:

To institutions:

Recommendation 1 - Establish a Working Group on Religious Counseling for RRR of VEPs: This Working Group is established national level institutions, led by CRRCG and consisted of DES, and NCCVECT. CRRCG meets religious communities and theological faculties for coordination of religious workers and discusses it with the Working Group.

Recommendation 2 - Identify the operational and financial resources: The resources needed to carry out the religious counseling in prison are identified and accordingly mobilized equipment and funds from relevant government institutions or international donor organizations to address those needs.

Recommendation 3 - Set a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP): In consultation with IRC and relevant CSOs working on those fields, the WG on religious counseling develops an SOP for religious counseling in prisons. The SOP sets all relevant processes in relation to recruitment, implementation, as well as reporting about the work done by the religious workers.

Recommendation 4 - Recruit and certify nominated religious workers: Following due diligence and, CRCCG engages the individually contracted religious workers with relevant certifications for conducting services in penal and post-penal measures.

Recommendation 5 - Strengthen capacities of recruited religious worker: Strengthen the capacities and motivation of religious workers in charge of conducting religious counseling in prison and post-penal probation service period through professional training, study visits and guide handbook. These activities can be implemented and financially covered by CSOs working in those fields.

Recommendation 6 - Develop a list of topics for religious counseling: The list of topics will be developed in cooperation between the WG on religious counseling and the religious communities. The topics will be tailored according to the target group (women, children and men) and interventions to be issued in religious counseling.

Recommendation 7 - Conduct monitoring and evaluation policies: Following the implementation based on the SOP on religious counseling, the WG on religious counseling accordingly conduct monitoring and evaluation policies to assess the success of such a measure.

To Islamic Religious Community:

Recommendation 1 - Make a list of nominated religious workers: The IRC drafts a list of religious workers (per city and per gender to for each city having VEPs. The list is then delivered to the CRCCG for further process of recruitment.

Recommendation 2 - Appoint a person in charge for religious counseling: The IRC appoints a person/department in charge for religious counseling. This can be the education sector within this institution. The appointed person is the focal point for the CRCCG in relation to all processes about this measure.

To civil society:

Recommendation 1 - Implement capacity building activities on religious counseling: CSOs develop projects that aim to build capacities of religious workers as well as other stakeholders about implementation of religious counseling.

Appendixes

Appendix A. Identifying Needs Assessment Stakeholders

Name of stakeholder	Stakeholder description (primary purpose, affiliation, funding)
National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism	Primary purpose
Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups of Macedonia	Primary purpose
Directorate for Execution of Sanctions	Primary purpose
Center for Social Work	Affiliation
Islamic Religious Community	Primary purpose
Macedonian Orthodox Church	Primary purpose
Faculty of Islamic Studies	Primary purpose
Faculty of (Christian) Orthodox Theology	Primary purpose
Faculty of Philology	Affiliation
Faculty of Psychology	Affiliation
Faculty of Law	Affiliation
Local civil society organizations	Affiliation
International civil society organizations	Affiliation
Republic of North Macedonia Ombudsman	Affiliation
Council of Europe office North Macedonia	Funding
Public opinion analysts	Affiliation
Security experts	Affiliation

Appendix B. References and List of Reviewed Documents

Government of the Republic of Macedonia, National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism

2023 National strategy for countering violent extremism
2023 Action plan for implementing the strategy for countering violent extremism

Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups

2007 Law On The Legal Position Of The Church, Religious Community And Religious Group

Ministry of Justice, Department for Execution of Sanctions

2019 Law on the execution of sanctions
2019 Amended Law on the execution of sanctions
2022 Amended Law on the execution of sanctions

European Commission

2022 North Macedonia 2022 Report

Council of Europe

2016 Handbook for Prison and probation services regarding radicalization and violentExtremism
2016 Know your rights
2019 Implementing Community Sanctions and Measures

Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and Penal Reform International

2022 Protecting Human Rights in Prisons while Preventing Radicalization Leading to terrorism or Violence

Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN)

2017 The role of religion in exit programs and religious counseling in prison and probation

Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment Malaysia and Centre of Research and Innovation Management, The National University of Malaysia

2012 The Influence Of Religious Guidance And Counseling on Malaysian Prisoners' Self-Confidence

United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

2016 Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons

United Nations Development Program (UNDP)

2016 Preventing Violent Extremism Through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance, and Respect For Diversity

George Fox University

2019 Role of Religion in the Western Balkans' Societies

Minnesota State University Moorhead

2023 Best Practices in Counseling the Balkan Population: Training for Mental Health Counselors

Appendix C. Interview Guide

Needs assessment report on religious counseling for de-radicalization

Interview Guide

Respondent name and surname: _____
Affiliated institution:_____
Research team member: _____ Date:_____

Following the introduction about the questionnaire, its purpose, scope of interest, and what it will serve to, the researcher makes sure whether everything is clear, by asking:

- Do you understand the parameters of our conversation?
- Do you have any questions at this time?

I. General approach on religious counseling

1. To what extent are you informed about *'religious counseling within prisons*?

2. To what extent do you evaluate that religious counseling can be beneficial for prisoners?

3. What is the most efficient way for implementing religious counseling in Macedonia?

a) Mandatory for all prisoner
b) Voluntary, in request of the prisoner

4. How would this measure be welcomed by prisoners in Macedonia?

a) Highly welcomed
b) Less welcomed
c) Not welcomed

4.a Why do you think so (a, b, or c)?

II.Institutional applicability or framework

5. According to you, which of the following institutions should be in charge of implementation of this measure?

a) Department for Execution of Sanctions
b) Center for Social Work
c) Commission for relations with religious communities and groups of Macedonia
d) National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counter Terrori

6. Following definition of institution in charge, who should be part of (possible) inter-agency Working Group on religious counseling that will map a plan of implementation of religious counseling

7. Should the religious communities take part in this Working Group?

a) Yes
b) No

8. What is the best way to recruit religious workers that will conduct religious counseling?

a) Open Call for religious workers / theologians from institution in charge and indvidual contracting for doing this service
b) Coordination with religious communities (proposal nomination list by IRC and MOCh) and individual service contract between institution in charge and the nominated religious workers
c) Tender procedure for service providing from institution in charge towards the religious communities
d) Tender procedure for service providing from institution in charge towards various CSOs (including religious-based)
e) Acceptance of offers by CSOs (including religious-based) for service providing towards the institution in charge, on no-cost/for free.

9. How should the coordination between the institution in charge, service providers and other institutions, be established?

a) Regular coordination meetings (weekly/monthly/quartal)
b) Narrative reporting from service provider to the institution in charge

10. What are the strengths and weaknesses in the human resources aspect for implementation of this measure in Macedonia?

11. What are the strengths and weaknesses in the operational resources aspect for implementation of this measure in Macedonia?

12. To what measure do you evaluate that there are necessary financial capacities to implement religious counseling in Macedonia?

a) Satisfactory
b) Sufficient
c) Not sufficient

III. Content and implementation

13. According to you, which topics should be included in religious counselling?

14. In what format should the topics be issued?

a) Thematic address based on the prisoners interest
b) Predefined topics between the institution in charge and service provider

15. In which form should the religious counseling take place?
Individual counseling meetings

a) Group counseling meetings (4-5 individuals)
b) Preach in front of all prisoners (liturgy, sermons, etc.)
c) All combined

16. How often should religious counseling take place?

a) Once a day
b) Once a week
c) Many times in a week (twice or more)
d) Once a month
e) Spontaneous according to request

17. How long should religious counseling last?

a)Less than one hour
b)One hour
c)More than one hour

18. Should gifting leaflets or books be used as a measure in religious counseling?
a) Yes
b) No

III a. Counseling for deradicalization

19. Should religious counseling for VEP returnees from Syria and Iraq be mandatory?

a) Yes
b) No

19a. Why do you think a) Yes or b) No?

20. To what extent do you evaluate that this measure can have an impact at this category?

a) Very positive impact
b) Few positive impact
c) Neither positive nor negative impact
d) Few negative impact
e) Very negative impact

21. Which religious topics should be issued during the religious counseling for VEP returnees?
22. How should religious counseling take place with VEP returnees?

a) Individually
b) Group

23. How often should the VEP returnees be treated with religious counseling?
a) Once a day
b) Once a week
c) Many times, in a week (twice or more)
d) Once a month
e) Spontaneous according to request

24. Should the religious counseling for VEP returness continue after the prison period?

a) Yes
b) No

25. If yes, which format is the most efficient for religious counseling outside of the prison?

a) Family visits at home
b) Individual meetings in mosques
c) Individual meetings out of mosque in informal places (cafe, restaurant, etc.) All combined

Any additional comments:

Appendix D. Presentation at roundtable discussion