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New tasks for the new NOT: Proposals for improving interdepartmental coordination in preventing and combating violent extremism





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I Introduction

According to international reports published over the past few years, the threat of terrorism and violent extremism in Montenegro remains relatively low. This conclusion is based on the fact that, in recent years, the focus has been placed on preventing the departure of fighters to foreign battlefields, to Syria and Ukraine, and their rehabilitation and reintegration once they return. Granted, Montenegro has had relatively few foreign fighters.

However, all recent analyses have been pointing to the growing problem of ethnic, religious and political polarization of Montenegrin society and the radicalization of individuals and groups that comes with it, which could lead to violent extremism if not tackled and prevented in a timely manner. Although the problem of radicalization has become apparent in the past couple of years only, the expansion of ethnically and religiously motivated violence in the public discourse and public space that we are witnessing today has been building up gradually, owing to the constant inaction by competent state authorities.

In its analysis **The Main Causes Behind the Rise of Ethnic Nationalism in Montenegro: CounterEvolution in 9 Images**, Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) thoroughly explored the reasons behind the strengthening of right-wing ideas in political parties, the spread of extremist ideologies and increased number of radical groups and individuals, as well as the growing and unacceptable interference of religious communities in political and public life over the past fifteen years. In the analysis **The Rising Right-Wing Extremism in Montenegro: Civic State Put to the Test**, we paid special attention to the ineffective penal policy, which leads to frequent incidents motivated by religious and ethnic hatred being prosecuted as crimes against public order, instead of ensuring that criminal justice system safeguards vulnerable individuals, but also the values of a civil society.

The problem of radicalization came to the fore amid political turmoil, fueled by hatred and tensions spurred by political and other actors. During these politically turbulent times, the CDT was monitoring the implementation of national strategic documents for the fight against violent extremism, with the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Since the set-up of government bodies in charge of this area has been delayed due to the transition of government and the implementation of strategic documents has

taken a back seat, the CDT has prepared this proposal for improving interdepartmental coordination in combating violent extremism.

The CDT's proposal is based on two premises. The first one is about turning the interdepartmental body in charge of violent extremism into a more senior political authority, by taking on board high-level officials, ministers or secretaries of state, so as to dispel any excuses for lack of decisions made, inactivity and politicians not fully grasping the importance of this issue. The other premise refers to the need to establish a professional secretariat that would be supporting the interdepartmental body and providing the necessary resources for its effective performance.

II **NOT – what has been done and what could be improved**

In February 2020, the Government of Montenegro adopted the Strategy for Prevention and Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism for the period 2020-2024, together with the Action Plan for 2020. It was preceded by the Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism 2016-2018 with an accompanying action plan, upon whose expiry the Transitional Action Plan for 2019 was adopted.

In line with the Law on Basic Principles of Intelligence and Security Sector, the Bureau for Operational Coordination of the Activities of the National Security Council established the National Operational Team (NOT), tasked with implementing, overseeing and monitoring the Strategy and the accompanying action plans.

Both positive and negative aspects have been observed when the performance of NOT thus far is concerned.

The initiative put forward by the CDT resulted in the set-up of the National Platform for Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism, and the national RAN network was organized following the example of the European RAN network, with RAN groups set up for particular sub-areas. The platform brought together a large number of individuals and organizations from various spheres of society and numerous activities were implemented.

NOT rightfully incorporated in the new Strategy and action plans the notion that threats of violent extremism may come not only from “foreign fighters”, but also from other categories of radicalized persons who did not demonstrate their extremism by going to foreign battlefields, but might as well commit violent acts in Montenegro or other countries. However, very few practical activities were aimed at preventing and combating “domestic” extremism.

An Assistance and Protection Team was set up as part of NOT, which is a multidisciplinary mechanism in charge of keeping track of individual cases carrying potential risk of radicalization leading to violent extremism and terrorism, but the operation of this team did not take off in practice.

To a certain extent, NOT managed to engage parts of the system responsible for prevention and resocialization. However, due to the position of NOT in the system, the implementation of the Strategy was still reliant on “law enforcement” - the security and criminal justice sectors that handle these issues in the scope of their regular work duties. Some government departments have successfully been fending off any involvement and accountability for implementation of measures, and there was an evident lack of effective cooperation with local governments and proper field work.

The CDT survey from 2020 indicates that not much has been done in terms of campaigns and communications, as a very small percentage of citizens cited being familiar with the strategic goals in this area and the work of NOT.

In its Montenegro 2020 Report, the European Commission recommends continuation of efforts towards improved coordination in the area of prevention, especially at the local level. Also, attention was drawn to the fact that the new Strategy for Combating Terrorism, Terrorism Financing and Money Laundering was yet to be adopted, and that coordination of work in this area and the fight against violent extremism should be enhanced, so as to avoid overlap and creation of clan culture.

III **New NOT – an opportunity for development and institutional strengthening**

In June 2021, the Bureau for Operational Coordination issued a Decision on the appointment of a national coordinator and members of the Nati-

onal Interdepartmental Operational Team for Combating Violent Extremism, Terrorism, Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing.

The European Commission's suggestions for coordinating activities between the two interconnected strategies i.e. for the fight against terrorism and violent extremism, were taken on board, and the scope of competencies of the team were therefore expanded.

The current NOT has fewer members than the former one, and some representatives of state institutions and authorities hold managerial roles therein, which should contribute to greater commitment to performing tasks and enhanced coordination.

For reasons previously explained in the introductory part, the implementation of the Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy is currently not at a satisfactory level and there is a need to establish an adequate organizational and personnel structure that will ensure the smooth continuation of activities and enhanced operation.

CDT analyzed three approaches towards adequate positioning of NOT in the legal and institutional system of Montenegro. In addition to the current model, we analyzed the possibility of positioning this authority as a temporary or advisory body of the Government of Montenegro, but also considered the notion of establishing it as a fully independent agency for combating extremism and terrorism, a solution present in other countries.

However, the potential establishment of a dedicated agency for combating extremism and terrorism is a time-consuming process, especially given the likely reluctance by the existing authorities to share powers with the newly established institution. Also, the formation of a Government Council could bring more visibility, but there are no practical guarantees that it would improve coordination drastically.

Having in mind the competencies of Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro, which entail coordination of the entire security sector, chairing the National Security Council and the Bureau for Operational Coordination, this official could also perform a role in the current managerial structure and current set-up of NOT, if provided with adequate political and administrative support.

The most effective way to provide support would imply setting up a professional service that would be carrying out specialized, administrative and technical work in preparing and holding sessions, and subsequently monitoring the implementation of conclusions and commitments reached at

Council sessions. The service would be providing support to NOT sessions and activities, coordinating the work of RANs, providing support to the Assistance and Protection Team, helping maintain cooperation with state authorities and drawing up strategic decisions and documents.

It is necessary to re-establish the Assistance and Protection Team within NOT, which would tackle individual cases of radicalization. NOT must also set up a call center where citizens can get information, or report suspicions of risks of violent extremism.

As for the local level, all municipalities need to appoint contact persons in charge of this subject matter, which would be coordinated by NOT and exchanging information with them. A team should be formed within the NOT that would primarily be in charge of drawing up strategic plans and documents, as well as a team that would be in charge of coordinating and exchanging operational information, and which would primarily work with NOT members from the Police Directorate and intelligence and security services. This team would be directly working with the future Department for Combating Extremism and Terrorism within the Police Directorate.

IV How to improve the work of NOT?

In the previous period, NOT was underperforming due to political changes that prompted shifts in the organizational structure of ministries and personnel changes, and it is therefore very important to shift the focus on improving the operation of NOT and understand the importance of this institution in solving issues related to radicalization and extremism that Montenegro is witnessing on an almost daily basis. Creating a just state and society as well as minimizing all kinds of inequalities and ensuring consistent respect for principles of rule of law are the most efficient ways to stand against ethnonationalism and extremism.

It is extremely important for the Government and other state institutions to acknowledge the need for a coordinated, well-planned, energetically managed and inclusive process of building society's resilience to these phenomena. By creating a sense of justice, we develop a civil and tolerant community.

Montenegrin citizens need to feel safe in their country at all times, and it is up to the state to ensure this. Cases of violent extremism must be handled with a strict and non-selective approach and with concrete outcomes. At this time of political instability and constant tensions in the country, such cases must be kept under tight scrutiny.

We are hereby presenting recommendations for improving the work of NOT, which include some of the activities that the Government of Montenegro should by all means implement in the fight against extremism, through the work of NOT, TPZ and a much more intensive engagement by competent departments; the recommendations herein take into account the NOT's track record thus far and the fact that this body is "starting anew".

1.

Expand the range of issues to be tackled by NOT - These changes imply shifting focus from tackling predominantly foreign fighters in Syria and Ukraine to several new areas: countering the uncontrolled rise of ethnic nationalism, illicit political and financial influences from abroad, and taking a firm stand against media manipulation and disinformation aimed at radicalization and inducing conflict.

2.

Resume the operation of the Assistance and Protection Team (TPZ)

- It is necessary to launch as many "processes" as possible that would offer concrete help to citizens who might be prone to extremism, but have not crossed the line of criminal responsibility. A certain number of doctors, psychologists, sociologists and other experts have already been trained to work at TPZ. Cases of violent extremism are becoming more frequent, but are also often not dubbed that way, given the lack of familiarity with the very concept and with the ways of addressing them. This team will be available to citizens at all times to provide explanations on any reported suspicions and refer cases of violent extremism to the right instances.

3.

Improve communication between NOT and the Government - In the coming period, NOT is expected to be one of the main initiators of Government policies aimed at creating a resilient society, and it is necessary and important to intensify cooperation between NOT and the Government. The

principles of civil state entail a long-term improvement and coordination of government policies.

4.

Establish a department / service for monitoring extremism and terrorism within the Police Directorate – Successful completion of tasks within the purview of NOT depend on good cooperation with the Police Directorate, and a full commitment of the Police Directorate to addressing this problem. Therefore, as is already the practice in the entire region and beyond, a specialized service / department should be set up within the Police Directorate, whose task would be to prevent and detect terrorism and extremism-related offences. In line with its powers, this service would collect information on persons, groups and organizations whose activities may be related to extremism or terrorism, and work on preventing actions aimed at propagating extremism, and luring and recruiting people into terrorist organizations and extremist groups.

5.

Preventing media manipulations - Serious consideration needs to be given to one of the weapons of extremism - the reporting of disinformation and hate speech, especially through social media. The fight against manipulation must become part of the active policies of the state. In cooperation with the Ministry of Public Administration, NOT must systematically monitor and analyze propaganda and disinformation activities aimed at radicalizing citizens and inducing conflicts, and provide guidelines for developing government policies in this area, all the while safeguarding the democratic principle of freedom of speech in line with the law.

6.

Introduce mechanisms for preventing negative foreign influences on Montenegrin society - ssetting up a screening mechanism for inbound foreign investments and their potentially negative impact on economic, political and other social processes would be of crucial importance for the society. When it comes to foreign interference, it is especially important to keep an eye on interference coming from several different sources and to analyze in detail potential threats to national security. It is necessary for the Government to establish as soon as possible a comprehensive mechanism for screening investments as a way of protecting national interests and national security. One NOT member comes from the Ministry of Finance, but other state bodies also need to engage in this area.

7.

Promote the role and importance of NOT in preventing violent extremism - -

Before the new NOT staff gets settled and trained to work with larger groups of stakeholders and prepares information and communication campaigns aimed at citizens, it would be important to promote its work through statements issued by the National Coordinator (NC) and members of their office through balanced, reasoned and professional reactions to the phenomena of extremism in society. NOT must be heard of, it must be seen, and its importance needs to be recognized both among the political elites and among citizens that it primarily seeks to protect. It is NOT members that will in a way be promoting the work of this body. In addition, high-standard cooperation, constant exchange of information and communication with the neighboring countries are of great importance, as well as the need to meet obligations under international agreements and EU integration process, which will further increase the visibility of this body.

Some of these recommendations entail minor amendments to laws and / or bylaws, or the drafting of new procedures altogether, which would be one of the first tasks of NOT after the adoption of the new strategy and concept of functioning.

Addressing the existential issues of the most vulnerable parts of society and creating a sense of justice are the most effective ways to develop a civil and tolerant community. These are, of course, the standard goals that every government strives to achieve, but it is important to emphasize that their fulfillment significantly reduces the triggers and motivation for the growth of extremism. Further work of NOT would greatly benefit from implementation of these recommendations and NOT itself would be placed on a sound basis.

Finally, NOT also requires political support, which it can only obtain if the fight against violent extremism gets profiled as an important part of state policy. This support can be achieved through greater engagement of the Parliament of Montenegro in this area, as the most important political forum. The Parliament can set out this topic as a priority both in declarative terms and through legislation. In addition, the oversight role of the Parliament should stir both the executive and the judiciary branch into showing greater commitment to the fight against radicalism and extremism.



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