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Albanian Media Institute
Instituti Shqiptar i Medias

BASELINE STUDY

Media coverage of violent extremism and terrorism

An assessment of the needs of journalists, journalism students, and spokespersons of public institutions

ALBANIAN MEDIA INSTITUTE

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Tirana, February 2020

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INTRODUCTION

Scholarly debate on the media coverage of events, different topics, situations and problems of the society, constitutes one of the most fertile fields of study on the effects of media reporting. In general, the debate on the effects on the public opinion of media's coverage of various events derives from the concept that the media possess the power to influence public opinion, guide and steer public attitudes and behaviors. However, this discussion is not limited only to studies and research on the professional and ethical standards of journalists, or on factors that could influence media editorial policies. The research on the effects of the media rather involves a series of disciplines and tries to shed light on the role of the media on individuals and on the society as a whole.

The media, according to the well-known paradigm of separation of powers, is considered as the fourth estate, with a clear mandate to watch over the activity of the other three estates in the interest of the public. The media coverage of events involves other external actors which cooperate with journalists, as primary sources of information, as well as direct contributors in the news making process. From this standpoint, it is necessary to adopt a multifactor and multidisciplinary approach when conducting an analysis on media coverage of events, which should take into account, alongside the input of journalists, the contribution of other actors, such as public institutions, civil society organizations, etc.

Reporting on violent extremism and radicalism constitutes one of the main challenges of the media all over the world. Ever since the terrorist attacks on the twin towers on September 11, 2001, journalists all over the world have been reporting on acts of terrorism, wars and outbreaks of violence, while facing a series of professional and ethical challenges. Manuals and guidelines, compiled to orient and assists reporters in covering such events, advice journalists to rely on facts and to contextualize their reporting. At a first glance, it would appear as if abiding by the main ethical and deontological principles of journalism would be enough to ensure fair reporting of such events. According to this line of thinking, journalists that cover violent extremism or radicalism should make sure that, just like in any other type of situation, their reporting should be objective, accurate, unbiased, comprehensive, and based on facts.

However, in practice these rules and norms are subject to interpretation, depending on the socio-political context, the education level of journalists, journalistic culture, as well as the relationship of the media with other actors in the society. These dilemmas have tormented the Albanian media for many years. The coverage of September 11 terrorist attacks was the first encounter with this type of information for most of the Albanian journalists. The subsequent reporting on measures that were taken by Albanian authorities to monitor and shut down several organizations suspected of being affiliated to Al Qaeda, forced Albanian media and reporters to face these challenges head on.

In the years that followed, the Albanian media covered terrorist attacks happening all over the world, following the same approach that was adopted by the main western media organizations. Because of this approach, information regarding terrorism, violent extremism and religious radicalism, have been presented to the Albanian audiences as developments and events happening far away, unrelated to the local reality. As a result, the main media organizations in the country have paid very little attention in training journalists and other professionals of the field to cover these events. The Albanian media are prone to sensationalism as a means to boost their audience numbers, and furthermore their reliance on the world media's framing of terrorism and violent extremism has caused the Albanian media to do very little to contextualize these phenomena.

The Albanian media started to report more intensively on these topics following the eruption of the conflict in Syria and the emergence of ISIS. The involvement of individuals from Albania and Kosovo in this conflict is still one of the main topics of reporting on extremism and radicalization. Nowadays, it is necessary for Albanian journalists to improve their level of knowledge of the terminology of this field, religious terminology, as well as to respect deontological and professional norms.

Improving the level of knowledge on these topics should commence with the students of journalism, by introducing these subjects in the university curricula for journalism schools. It is also necessary for professionals of the field, who cover events related to terrorism and violent extremism, to receive training and other forms of professional education, in order to improve their professional capabilities and skills.

GENERAL CONTEXT

Violent extremism and the menace of radicalism are present also in the Albanian society. Awareness to this phenomenon has increased over these last years and the legal framework has improved, and as a result topics and discussions on these matters have been more present in the media and the public sphere. Several actors, including civil society organizations, the media, national security institutions, religious communities, etc. are more and more aware that these phenomena require very good coordination in order to be properly addressed. Recent studies that have focused on risk assessment and the identification of factors that incite violent extremism confirm the presence of this phenomenon in the Albanian society. The conflict in Syria and the involvement of individuals from Albania and the Balkans, indicate that factors that incite extremism are present in our society.

Violent extremism on religious grounds attracts most of the attention of the state institutions and other actors involved in the prevention of violent extremism and radicalism. As a result, it is safe to say that the possible occurrence of other forms of extremism has been overlooked. A

recent study conducted by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation found that "actors in the Albanian society underestimate the eventuality of nonreligious extremism. However, susceptible to extremism could be a considerable number of Albanians, who justify the employment of illegal means to solve their problems, including the daily struggle for survival, a political system that is perceived by them to be dishonest and serving only the well-connected elites, as well as the violation of rights and freedoms by state institutions" (Vurmo & Sulstarova, 2018).

This research study identified a series of instigating factors for violent extremism and radicalism. Some of the most important elements are socio-cultural factors, which are mostly related to the living conditions of communities in the outskirts of urban areas, as well as political factors, which include corruption and impunity for criminals.

One of the main points of concern in relation to violent extremism and radicalism is their potential to escalate the situation into religious conflicts, which would undermine one of the most important values of the society: harmony and religious cohabitation. (Zguri, 2017)

In this context, media coverage of violent extremism takes on an especially important role. Ethical journalism and the respect of professional standards while informing the public on events related to violent extremism are of special importance to the Albanian society.

Previous research studies have underscored the importance of improving knowledge on religious matters, as well as the professional conduct of journalists covering events related to religious extremism. In covering certain events the media has allowed the discourse to veer towards islamophobia, even though this has not yet reached worrisome levels. Researcher Rrapo Zguri underlines the concern for the use of Islamophobia as a means to legitimize radical Islamic discourse, and as an alibi to disguise or camouflage extremist propaganda and activities. (Zguri, 2017).

A research study conducted by American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) on the way how the American media covers violent extremism, pointed out at the framing power of the media over the events that it covers. One of the main questions posed by this study is the following: "What else is the media covering when they cover extremism?" (Hallowell, 2016)[1].

UNESCO's Handbook on Terrorism and the Media identifies the main factors that have an effect on the quality of terrorism coverage by the media. The quality of terrorism coverage is determined by the degree of the freedom of the press, economic resources available to the media, cultural factors, perceptions of ethical norms and the social role of the media. (Marthoz, 2017).

In the Albanian context, it is important to analyze and understand the needs and concerns of media organizations and other groups that are involved in the process of informing the public on violent extremism, terrorism and radicalism.

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[1]Hallowell, B. (2016). MIXED MESSAGES, How the media covers "violent extremism" and what you can do about it. American Friends Service Committee.
https://www.afsc.org/sites/default/files/documents/Mixed%20Messages_WEB.pdf

Journalist and media expert Lutfi Dervishi is concerned about the absence of properly trained reporters to cover religious affairs in a professional manner. (Dervishi, 2018). Under the conditions of an unrelenting crisis facing the Albanian media, it would appear that the idea of having journalists specialized to cover religious affairs could not be on the top of media's agenda. However, there needs to be an understanding that professional-level coverage of religious activities and events in the country serves to protect and promote harmony and coexistence in the Albanian multi-religious society.

METHODOLOGY

This baseline study aims at identifying and assessing the needs of journalists, students of journalism and representatives of public institutions to tackle the phenomenon of violent extremism and radicalism. This study presents a full picture of the level of knowledge, perceptions, and needs of the aforementioned actors regarding issues related to violent extremism, terrorism, and radicalism.

The study was conducted by using a complex methods research that integrates quantitative and qualitative elements. The quantitative research was carried out with a survey of 112 individuals. The sample was selected in such a way as to ensure representation from all the four aforementioned groups, while the survey was compiled by alternating general questions with specific questions to identify the specific needs of each group.

The questionnaire distributed to reporters and editors was compiled of 21 questions, and 15 of them were designed to identify and assess the level of knowledge regarding violent extremism, needs of journalists and newsroom editors towards improving coverage and reporting of violent extremism, terrorism and radicalism. This block of questions was also aimed at collecting data to identify elements that could be impeding quality reporting, as well as to get acquainted with the perception of journalists regarding the trustworthiness of sources of information.

During the sample selection process for **journalists and editors** for the purpose of this survey, the authors tried to select a group that would be as representative as possible. As a result, the sample is proportionally composed by journalists working for traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers) and those working for online media. This sample of 46 reporters and editors represents an accurate picture of the market structure, as well as a proportionate representation of work experience, age, gender, and education level of the media workers.

The second group of professionals involved in this survey was compiled of individuals employed as **spokespersons** dealing with the media, or public relations professionals in various public institutions. The questionnaire compiled for this group contained general questions to assess the level of knowledge on terrorism, violent extremism, and radicalism, aimed at assessing their perception on the role of the media, the degree of cooperation with journalists, as well as the

need to draft respective handbooks to address these issues. This sample was comprised of 16 individuals working in ministries, city halls, and other public institutions.

The third questionnaire was distributed to 20 **students of journalism**. This group included students of journalism and mass communication from three of the country's four universities that offer these studies. The students' questionnaire includes questions that aim at identifying the level of information provided in university courses regarding violent extremism, radicalism, and disinformation.

One of the most important actors in countering violent extremism and radicalism is the **civil society**. A special questionnaire was compiled to assess the perceptions of representatives of the civil society, university teachers and independent researchers on the role of the media and public institutions in the fight against extremism and radicalism. In this case the sampling of 30 representatives from civil society aimed in particular at selecting representatives of organizations which had been involved in other projects in this field.

The second component of the methodology involved *in four depth interviews,* with representatives of civil society, media, religious communities and state institutions. The main reason for involving representatives of religious communities in the interview phase was to assess the perception on the cooperation with the media during the reporting of incidents related to religious-based extremism. In this case in-depth interviews were used as components of qualitative research to enrich the information provided by the quantitative research with detailed personal insights to help explain the empirical results.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from questionnaires distributed to journalists, students of journalism, representatives of civil society, and media spokespersons of public institutions provided a clear representation of the extent of knowledge, perceptions and needs of each of these actors in building and strengthening capacities to tackle violent extremism and radicalism in Albania. In order to have a clear picture on all the groups involved in this study, the processing and the analysis of the data has been carried out separately.

Common findings

The data collected from responses to the common questions for all four groups revealed the need to improve the level of knowledge regarding violent extremism and radicalism through training and similar forms of continuing education. As can be seen by the data depicted in the chart,
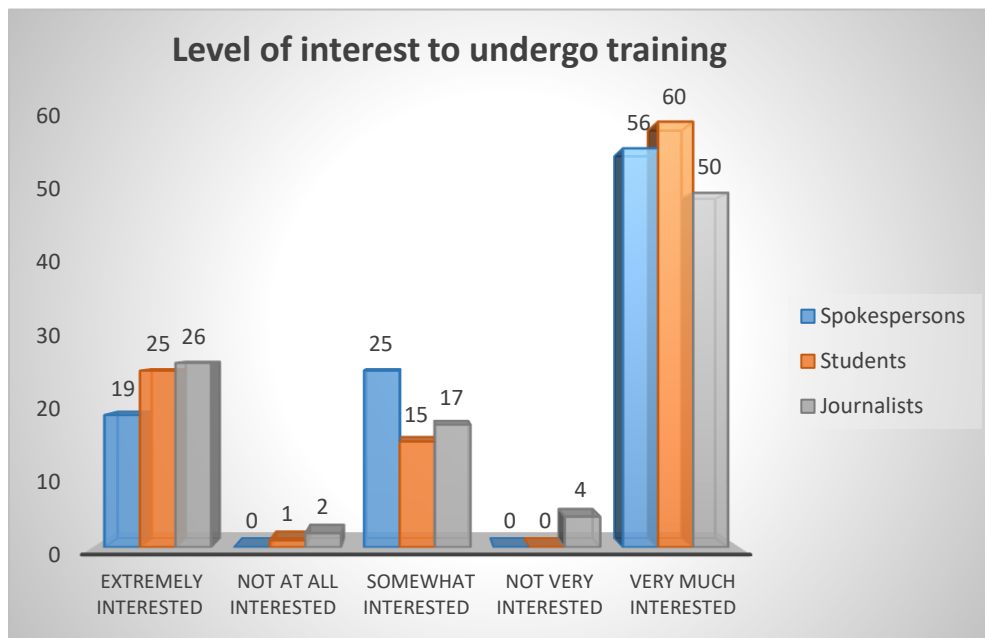
Level of interest to undergo training

Chart 1 – Level of interest to participate in training

journalists are very much interested to participate in trainings on reporting on violent extremism and terrorism. Namely, 50 percent of respondents said they were "extremely interested" to receive training, while an additional

26 percent of respondents said they would be "very much" interested to undergo training. The level of interest to improve knowledge on this type of reporting through training goes up to 76 percent. In the case of students of journalism, there is even more expressed interest to receive training than the other two groups. When asked how interested they would be to take part in trainings, 60 percent of them said they would be very much interested, while 25 percent said they would be "extremely interested". In the meantime, even spokespersons of public institutions appeared to be very much interested to improve the level of their knowledge and their capabilities on these topics. The data depicted in the chart above, provide a clear picture of the need for training on the part

Chart 2-Need for training of spokespersons

of spokespersons, students and journalists involved in covering and reporting on violent extremism and terrorism.

Another significant set of data that supports the need for training is the perception of representatives of the civil society. Respondents of this group were asked to express their opinions on the need to provide training to

journalists, media spokespersons, and representatives of public institutions. As can be seen by the data shown in the Chart 2, 73 percent of respondents fully agree with the idea that there is need for additional training.

Journalists

Reporting on violent extremism and terrorism, especially when it is religiously motivated, often tests the limits of professional capabilities and skills of Albanian journalists. In general, reporting on religious affairs in the Albanian media over these last years has been largely superficial and in most cases journalists display a remarkable lack of knowledge on religious terminology, or the significance of religious rites and practices.

Earlier studies have researched reports on religion in the Albanian media. Besides covering religious community events and festivities, the media also reported on various incidents and radicalized individuals that took part in the Syrian conflict. Researchers have pointed out that the radical discourse is often put on display in the course of the media coverage. In this case there is a risk that this kind of reporting could strengthen stereotypes about different local communities or religious people.

The lack of specialized reporters on religious matters can be easily noticed over the course of reporting in the main media organizations.[2] The lack of well trained and specialized reporters, the proliferation of fake news, mounting pressure on journalists to be on top of breaking news stories at all times, have all contributed to transform reporting on extremism, radicalism or terrorism into a serious challenge for the Albanian media.

The need to improve professional skills in this field was largely acknowledged by the journalistic community. The findings of the survey revealed that most of the journalists believed that they did not possess the necessary skills to report on such events. When asked about whether they believed that they were capable of reporting on violent extremism and terrorism, 78 percent of them said that their skills needed to improve. These data provide an insight into the scale of awareness of the problem by the community of reporters and media editors. These data also explain the high level of interest on the part of respondents to receive additional training.

Do you believe you possess the necessary skills to report on violent extremism and terrorism?

- Yes, I believe I have the necessary skills
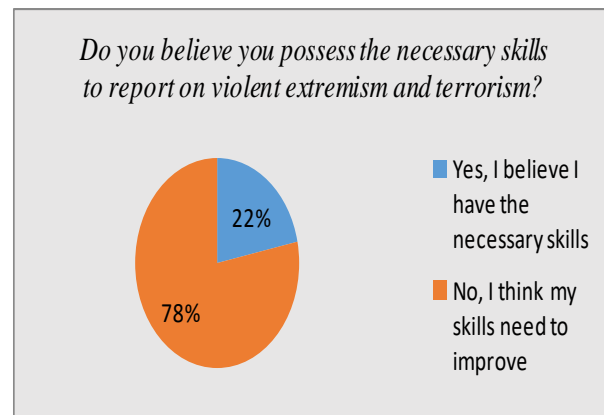- No, I think my skills need to improve

22%

78%

Chart 3 – Reporting skills

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[2] Rrapo Zguri; "Ekstremizmi fetar në media" (Religious extremism in the media), Albanian Media Institute, Tirana, 2017

Have you ever been trained on topics such as violent extremism and terrorism?

- 41% Yes
- 59% No

Chart 4 – Previous participation in training

The lack of the necessary skills on the part of journalists to report on violent extremism and terrorism is a result of the failure to introduce these concepts in university courses, as well as the lack of training on these topics. Most of the journalists have not attended training courses on violent extremism and terrorism. The findings of the survey revealed that nearly 60 percent of journalists have never received any training on these topics, while only 40 percent stated that they had received some training. The data become even more revealing when taking into consideration the forms of training received by the minority of journalists. In most cases reporters participate in short term training seminars, while training courses or long term workshops are very rare.

On the other hand, reporters said that they needed training manuals, or sets of instructions and guidelines to learn how to cover such events. The experience of the international media has shown that such handbooks help journalists to improve the quality of their reporting. A large portion of the Albanian journalists believed that training manuals on these special topics would greatly improve their reporting. The questionnaire asked journalists to provide their opinion on to what extent their job would benefit from handbooks and manuals on how to cover and report on violent extremism and terrorism.
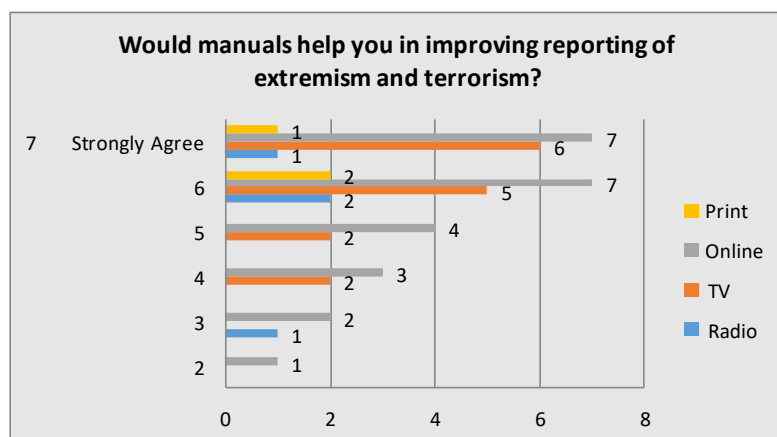

Would manuals help you in improving reporting of extremism and terrorism?

Chart 5 – Manuals make reporting easier

The data depicted in the chart show that most of the respondents believe that handbooks and manuals would improve their reporting on these topics. These data reveal the importance of producing training manuals and other instruction materials for journalists. These instructional manuals should not only make it easier for the reporters to cover these events, but they should also improve the quality of their reporting and should reduce the number of ethical violations and guarantee the respect of professional standards. At this point it is necessary to point out that manuals published by international organizations, such as the case of UNESCO and OSCE, are not sufficient to address the needs of the Albanian media.

The importance of providing reporters with instructional manuals was also acknowledged by the editor of BIRN Albania[3], Aleksandra Bogdani, who believed that training manuals are always useful to journalists. She pointed out the complexity of reporting on such topics and their effect on the public opinion. Bogdani said that "Issues related to violent extremism, or other phenomena that are present in Albania, such as the radicalization of particular individuals, combine religious and geopolitical elements and go beyond the borders of any given country, and for that reason it is necessary for journalists to be familiar with this context before even they start interviewing people or start writing stories on such topics." (Bogdani, 2020)

The general secretary of the Inter-religious Council of Albania, Genti Kruja, said that the media coverage of such events during the last few years has improved when compared to previous experiences. He also underscored the need to provide training to journalists. "There has been an improvement in the media coverage of such stories compared to the past. However, one can still notice that journalists who cover this field are not properly trained to report on such sensitive stories, such as the radicalization of citizens and violent extremism. There is a need to provide additional training and education to journalists that cover such topics and religious matters, in cooperation with the religious communities, in order to identify the weak points in dealing with these issues." (Kruja, 2020)

Relationship with sources of information

The analysis of the coverage of violent extremism and terrorismby the media in Albania sheds lights on the relationship between journalists and sources of information, which in most cases have different approaches towards cooperating with the media. In some cases this relationship does not favor journalists and this makes it harder for them to have access to the necessary information in order to produce a story. Topics related to extremism or terrorism are considered as highly sensitive issues affecting national security, which is also used as an excuse by public institutions to withhold information and refuse cooperation with the media.

There is a feeling of mistrust on the part of religious communities towards the media. Religious communities complain that the media are prone to sensationalism and shallow reporting, while on the other hand the media point out at the lack of transparency and the reluctance of authorities and religious institutions to cooperate with them. According to Mr. Kruja "the media knocks on the doors of religious institutions only on the eve of religious festivities, or whenever there is a problem, and in turn the religious communities are disappointed by the media's attitude towards them. When they call the media to report on positive developments, such as accomplishments, events, conferences, etc. the first questions that is directed at them is 'Who will be there from state authorities?' The media would show up only when government official are in attendance." (Kruja, 2020)

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[3] BIRN Albania is a non-governmental media organization based in Tirana, which specializes in investigative reporting, publishing and media monitoring.

Albania has adopted a comprehensive legal framework on information classified as "state secret." A law adopted in 1999 on classified information was amended in 2006. This law defines what type of information is classified as state secret. Over the years several articles of this law have represented obstacles to journalists when they have tried to obtain information from state institutions.

In 2014 the parliament approved Law no. 119/2014 on the right to information, which addressed the rights of citizens to be informed and clearly defines timelines and procedures for the delivery of the information requested. The institution of the Commissioner on the Right to Information was established soon after in order to review citizens' complaints against public institutions for withholding information. However, journalists have often exploited loopholes in the law to obtain information from public institutions. In several cases the institution of the Commissioner has failed to resolve conflicts between journalists and public institutions, and the latter have resorted to courts.

Even though the legislation is in place, journalists encounter numerous obstacles during their daily work. The editor of BIRN Albania, Aleksandra Bogdani, pointed out that "the legislation should facilitate the preservation of a fair balance between safeguarding state secrets and the high public interest, but in practice this does not work." She said that during the coverage of events related to violent extremism, journalists encounter problems when they try to collect official information. "It is very difficult for journalists to obtain information related to violent extremism or terrorism by filing freedom of information requests, while security institutions take into consideration 'the high public interest' only when it suits them". (Bogdani, 2020)
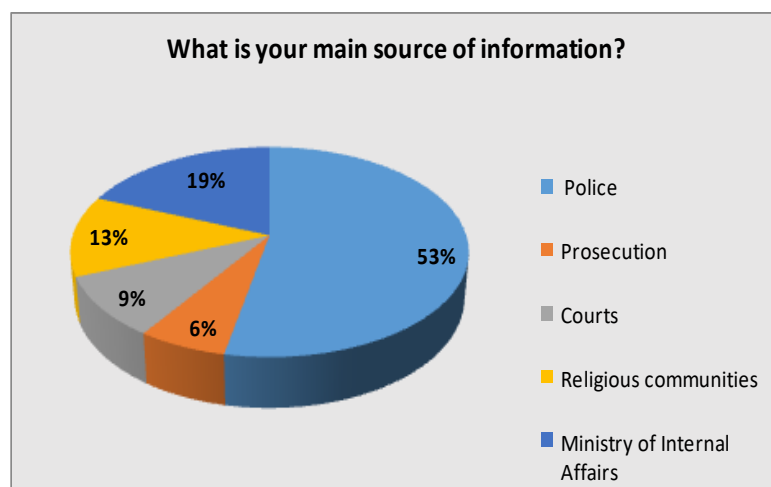

Chart 6 – Main sources of information

Survey findings revealed that the police were the main sources of information for journalists that cover events related to violent extremism and terrorism The questionnaire asked responding journalists whether they had covered any such events over the course of the last year, and if they had, which were their main sources of information.

The answers to that question revealed that over half of responding journalists listed the state police as their main source of information, while the Ministry of Internal Affairs was ranked second, followed by religious communities and judicial institutions.
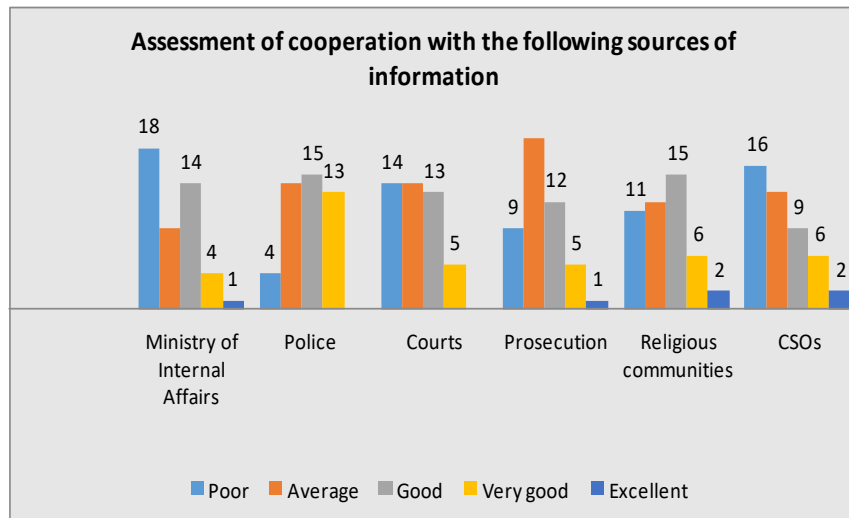
Assessment of cooperation with the following sources of information

Source	Poor	Average	Good	Very good	Excellent
Ministry of Internal Affairs	18	14	14	4	1
Police	4	15	15	13	
Courts	14	13	13	5	
Prosecution	9		12	5	1
Religious communities	11		15	6	2
CSOs	16		9	6	2

(Chart: Poor, Average, Good, Very good, Excellent)

Another component of the questionnaire was an assessment on the level of cooperation with each of the sources mentioned by journalists. Results showed that journalists rated the level of cooperation with public institutions and religious communities as average. However, it is worth mentioning that the

Chart 7 – Assessment on cooperation

Ministry of Internal Affairs received poorer marks in terms of cooperation with journalists. Civil society organizations did not receive very high marks either, as journalists ranked them in second place for their poor level of cooperation, while courts and religious communities were ranked respectively in third and fourth place.

The state police was identified as the main source of information for the media, and was considered the most valuable institution for journalists. The survey data also showed that the police received the lowest number of "poor" evaluations.

Concerns regarding coverage of extremism

The coverage of violent extremism by the media and the work of journalists reporting on these events often encounter numerous challenges and obstacles. From a journalist's point of view these obstacles are considered as problems that need to be addressed in order to improve the quality of media coverage. The level of transparency of state institutions, hate speech, disinformation and fake news, lack of knowledge of religious terminology, are some of the main concerns identified by journalists.

Responding journalists were asked to provide an assessment on each of the elements presented in the chart displayed below. These elements were included in the questionnaire of the survey following a detailed analysis of numerous studies and reports carried out in the past. In this case the aim was to identify the most concerning elements that make it harder for the media to properly cover events related to violent extremism, terrorism or radicalism. These data could also be used to come up with a more concrete approach to address the needs of journalists that cover these types of events.

Table 1 – Problems related to reporting on violent extremism and terrorism.

Rate from 1 (non-problematic) to 7 (extremely problematic) the following problems related to reporting on violent extremism and terrorism.								
	1 (non-problematic	2	3	4	5	6	7 (extremely problematic)	Grand Total
Sensationalism		2	12	15	11	2	4	46
Poor level of knowledge on media matters		4	7	8	11	3	13	46
Hate speech	1	5	9	7	6	3	14	45
Islamophobia	4	4	9	7	8	6	8	46
Disinformation		0	6	8	10	7	15	46
Lack of knowledge of field terminology by journalists	1	3	5	5	13	7	11	45
Lack of knowledge of religious terminology by journalists		3	8	2	8	14	10	45
Transparency of state institutions	2	1	2	9	5	9	18	46
Classified information	1	2	10	6	10	8	9	46
Conspiracies	4	7	9	5	3	7	11	46

The data depicted in the table show that one of the main sources of concern for the people working in the media is the lack of transparency of state institutions.
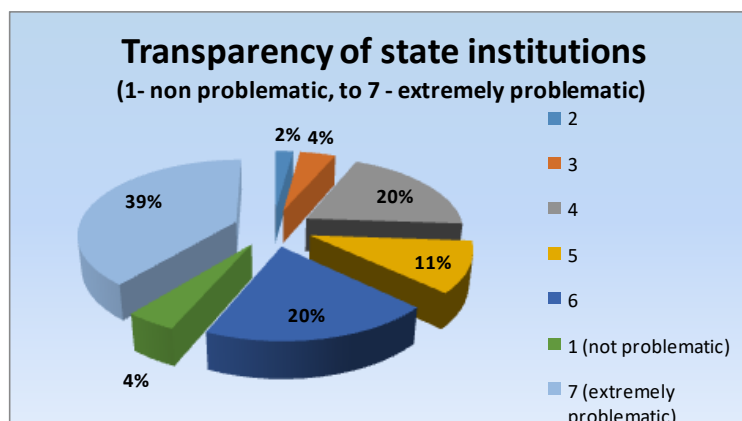

Chart 8 – Level of transparency of state institutions

The number of journalists that have stated that the lack of *transparency* is "extremely problematic" and those that believe that it is "very problematic" combine for nearly 60 percent of the total number of responding journalists. The perception in this case may not be directly related to their personal experiences from their interactions with these state institutions. However, the question of

transparency is closely related to communicating and informing with the public. At this point, the responding journalists could have considered as problematic the behavior and approach of individuals in charge of transparency in those public institutions. Judging from these data it is clear that there is a need to provide training to communication specialists or to individuals employed as media spokespersons on the importance of transparency and the relationship with journalists.

Another source of concern for journalists was the fake news phenomenon and its effect on the media coverage. According to responding journalists, *disinformation* was the second most problematic issue following lack of transparency by state institutions. It is necessary to process the data and results collected from answers to this question in relation to the query related to the perception of journalists on their level of knowledge on these topics and their level of participation in trainings.

Some 76 percent of the responding journalists said that they had received some training in relation to fake news and disinformation. Conversely, the answers to the question designed to measure their perception on the level of knowledge of journalists on fake news and disinformation provide a more positive picture when compared to their level of knowledge on violent extremism and terrorism.
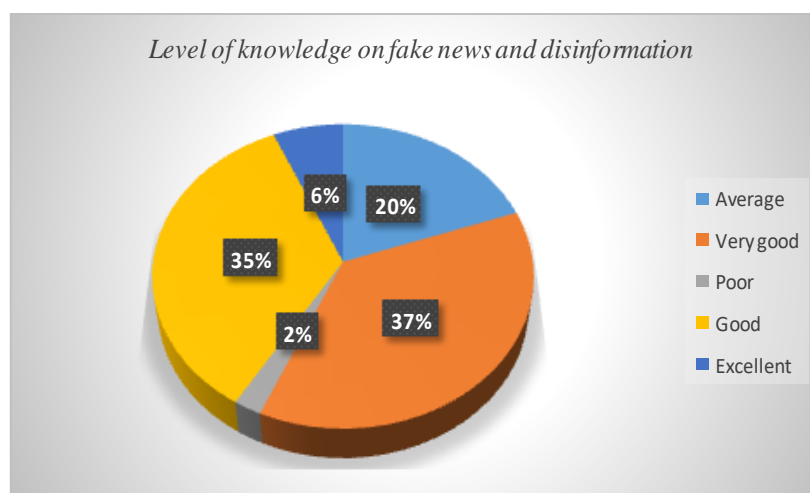

Chart 9 – Level of knowledge on fake news and disinformation

Only 2 percent of the journalists have rated their knowledge on these phenomena as being "poor". However, even though journalists have received continuous training and they felt somewhat confident about their level of knowledge on these topics, disinformation continues to be a serious source of concern for journalists in the course of reporting on violent extremism, terrorism and radicalism.

One of the main reasons is related to the fact that extremist organizations use fake news as part of their propaganda. The more knowledgeable the journalists are on disinformation and the use of fake news by extremist groups, the more protected they will be while performing their tasks. Some of the other main points of concern listed by journalists were *hate speech, poor levels of education on media matters, the lack of knowledge of the terminology of the field by journalists, and conspiracies*.

Students of journalism

Coverage of violent extremism and terrorism as part of university curricula

Discussions on topics of violent extremism and terrorism take place every day in university classrooms, in schools of journalism and mass communication in the country. However, it would appear that not enough attention is being paid to educate the young generation of journalists to effectively report on these topics. The survey conducted with students of journalism and mass communication aimed at identifying the needs of the future journalists in this field.

The introduction to university courses of topics that would improve the level of the students' knowledge on key concepts of terrorism, violent extremism, or radicalism, would help them to better understand new developments in this field.
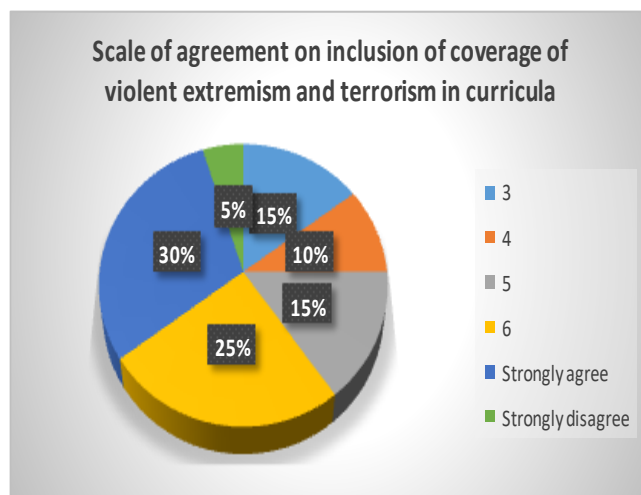

Chart 10 – Introduction to school curricula

Knowledge of theoretical concepts and the ability to discern the right definitions for each of the abovementioned phenomena would go a long way to avoid making mistakes and misunderstandings during the reporting of such events in the future. Students were asked to indicate their scale of agreement on the introduction of topics and courses related to reporting on violent extremism and terrorism in their university curricula. The survey data showed that over half of the students supported the idea of introducing these classes in the university curricula.

It is necessary that the introduction of these topics in various university classes related to news writing and reporting, or in the form of special modules, should take into account both the theoretical aspect of these topics as well as examinations of case studies. Considering that quite often the reporting on violent extremism and radicalism is related to religious matters, it is necessary that the knowledge of the students of journalism should be expanded to include education on religious matters, both from a historic point of view, and about their interaction with each other.

A lector in the Department of Communication and Journalism in the University of Tirana, Ramadan Çipuri, believes that this issue goes beyond a university-level education. "This matter goes beyond the introduction of these topics in the curricula of the journalism department. It is necessary to extend this set of knowledge to other educational levels as well. Pre-university

schools should teach their students elements of religious culture. This is not to say that they should take religion classes, but they should receive basic knowledge on various religions, their holidays, as well as highly sensitive elements of main religions, in order to avoid offending those sensitivities, which in turn may lead to more conflict." (Cipuri, 2020)
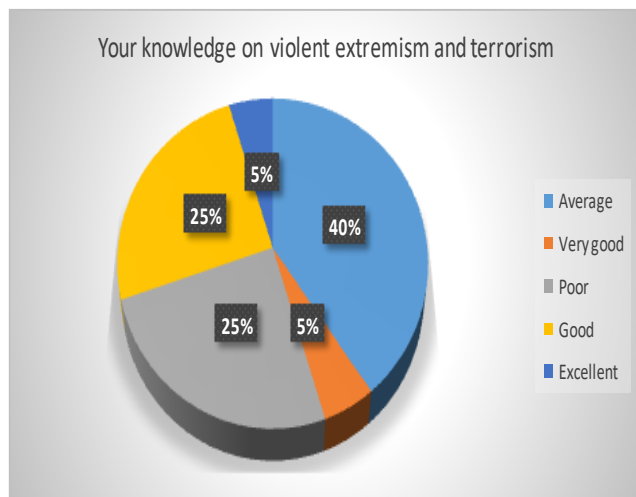

Chart 11 –Students' level of knowledge

Level of students' knowledge

The level of knowledge of students on concepts related to violent extremism and terrorism appears to be quite poor. The survey data showed than one fourth of the students acknowledge that their level of knowledge on violent extremism and terrorism was poor. Meanwhile, 40 percent of them said that their level of knowledge was average. In other words 65 percent of the students of journalism and mass communication in the country have insufficient knowledge on terrorism and violent extremism. This poor level of knowledge is an important indicator on the need of the future generation of journalists to learn more about theoretical concepts and practical approaches on the media coverage on violent extremism and terrorism. On the other hand, these data are in stark contrast to the students'

Chart 2 – Elements that need to improve

assessment of the level of knowledge of their own teachers on these same subjects.
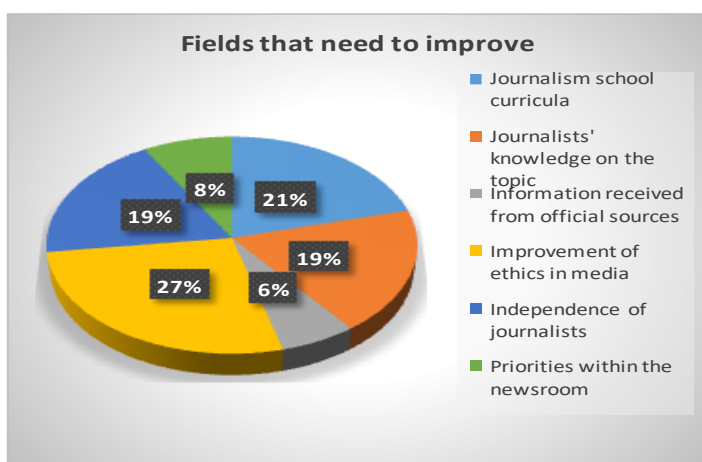
Students were asked to provide their assessment on the level of knowledge of their professors on those same topics, and the majority of them rated that level as being very high. Namely, 65 percent of the respondents in this category rated the level of knowledge of the academic staff of their university departments on violent extremism and terrorism as being "very good" or "excellent."

Another important aspect worth analyzing is the perception of the students of journalism on issues that need to improve in order to have better media coverage of violent extremism and terrorism. The responding students were asked to identify which fields and areas needed more

attention in order to improve the quality of the coverage and reporting on extremism. Survey results showed that students identified four main points of interest, and they believed that the four areas that need intervention and improving were *media ethics, journalism school curricula, a better understanding of the topic by journalists,* and the *independence of journalists.* The analysis of the data collected from answers to this question was based on the number of times (frequency) that each field was mentioned by the respondents. The data showed that students recognized the need to improve journalism school curricula, and this field was ranked second in the list of priorities that were identified by students. These data should help us understand the extent to which the journalism school curricula in Albanian universities need revamping, as they should be oriented towards helping students build capacities and acquire practical skills.

Meanwhile, another important data depicted in the chart is the level of perception of students on the respect of ethical standards in the Albanian media. Survey results showed that students of journalism considered *the respect of ethical norms in the media* as a field of priority importance, and that it needs to improve. The respect of ethical norms still remains a challenge for the Albanian media. In this case, the very fact that the future journalists are so aware of the importance of ethics in the media, and value it so highly, should be considered a positive development after all.
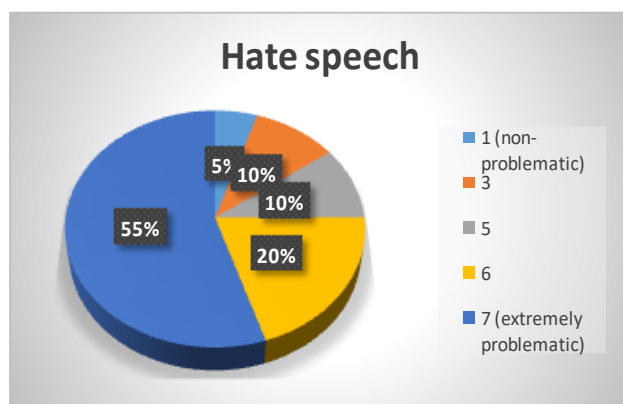
Hate   speech

Chart 3-Hate speech

One of the main concerns identified by students during the survey was *hate speech in the media.* In their opinion this problem was undermining reporting on extremism and terrorism. Some 55 percent of the respondents rated *hate speech* in the media as extremely problematic.

Nowadays, the use of hate speech in the media is a hot topic of discussion in many countries. Journalists and media organizations are trying to analyze this phenomenon from the point of view of the source of the hate speech in media coverage.

This analysis points the finger at politics and the political discourse of politicians as the main source of the presence of hate speech in media reports. This statement rings truer for Albania, considering the public discourse of the country's politicians, who often violate all ethical norms of public communication, by incorporating into their political messages and speeches elements of hatred, discrimination language, or even base insults. So, according to journalists, the hate

speech in the media is a side effect of the coverage of everyday politics and social developments in the country. At a first glance this position appears to be just an excuse to get media professionals off the hook, by shifting the blame onto sources of information and other individuals quoted in the story.

A research study titled "Trends of Hate Speech in the Albanian media," conducted by the Albanian Media Institute and the Open Society Foundation, identified crime stories headline sensationalism as a characterizing trait of the Albanian press. (Instituti Shqiptar i Medias, 2015) – (Albanian Media Institute)

That study also called out on the unfiltered and inflammatory language published by newspapers or TV stories during interviews with victims' relatives or individuals involved in criminal activities. Considering the context and the state of mind of the interviewees, it is understandable that their speech would be highly emotional, charged with feelings of revenge and hate speech. In these cases, reporters are faced with an ethical dilemma whether to quote their sources or to paraphrase their statements in order to refrain from printing or broadcasting inflammatory remarks.

Civil society
The civil society is considered as one of the most important actors in preventing violent extremism. Various research studies have determined that the role of civil society organizations is especially important in identifying and addressing complaints and grievances of certain or groups, which could be potentially susceptible to radicalization and extremism.
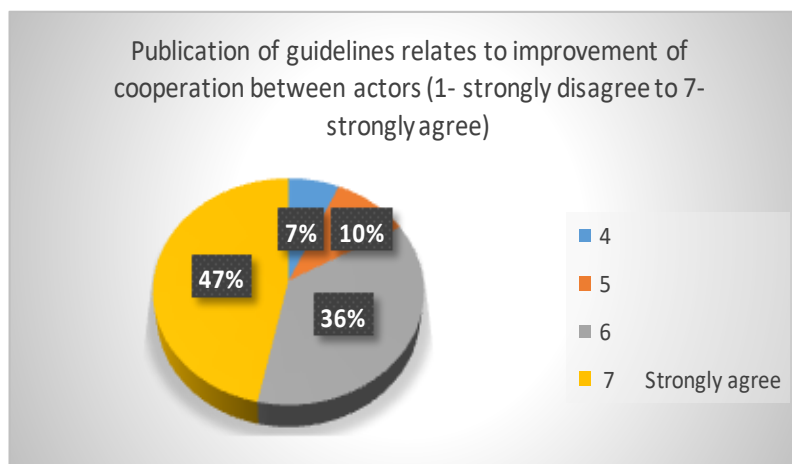

Chart 4 – Publication of guidelines

A guidebook published by OSCE on prevention and tackling of violent extremism and radicalization in Southeastern Europe has listed a number of reasons on why the civil society can play an important role in this direction. According to this manual, the civil society has the necessary capacities and expertise, while it is also familiar with the local dynamics of the society.

Furthermore, organizations that possess the right expertise can contribute on improving local capacities by training representatives "of the media, youth, religious communities, civil servants, or actors in the justice system, on addressing and preventing violent extremism on a wide and multifaceted spectrum." (Ngjela & Vuksani, 2018)

The questionnaire prepared for representatives of civil society organizations was aimed at assessing the level of their knowledge on terrorism, violent extremism and radicalism, level of cooperation with other parties, and their perceptions on the main problems related to reporting on violent extremism and terrorism. Cooperation between various actors of the society in order to prevent violent extremism is considered as indispensable.

The author of this baseline study has tried to assess the level of cooperation between the media, civil society organizations and other actors. In order to address this issue, one of the questions posed to representatives of the civil society focused on the role played by guidelines in improving cooperation between various actors. Results from the answers to this question revealed that a considerable majority of respondents believed that the publication of guidelines on violent extremism would improve the cooperation between the media, civil society organizations, religious communities and other actors.

The chairman of the Center for Inter-religion Cooperation, Arben Ramkaj, said that cooperation between actors is very necessary, while he drew attention to the fact that there is a need for more experts in the field of religiously motivated violent extremism.

He also pointed out that a large portion of civil society organizations involved in projects aimed at addressing issues related to extremism and radicalism have little experience in this field. "I believe that many actors involved in this field are greenhorns when it comes to violent extremism, because this is a fairly new problem for the Albanian society. Besides the fact that this is an unexplored area, religiously motivated violent extremism presents specific challenges. This field requires experts and knowhow. The majority of actors involved with projects from various donors in this field have not been up to the task. However, I believe that these projects have still have had an effect in addressing these issue. Previous studies conducted by civil society organizations have established a foothold to assess the situation regarding violent extremism". (Ramkaj, 2020)
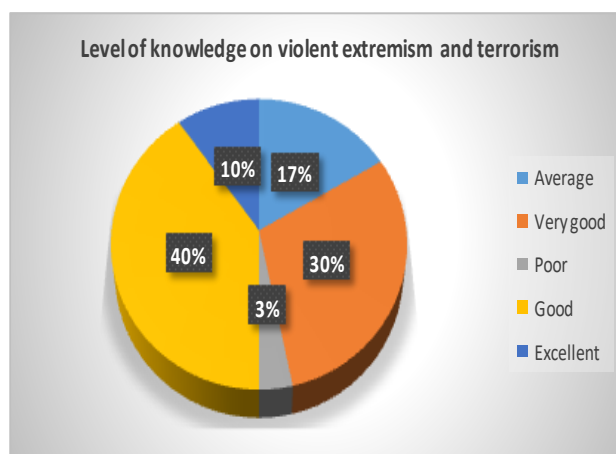
It would appear that representatives of civil society organizations have a relatively better level of knowledge on violent extremism and terrorism, when compared to other groups of respondents.

The level of knowledge of respondents was assessed by asking them to answer two specific questions. The first question was designed to assess the level of knowledge of respondents on violent extremism and terrorism, while a second question aimed at probing their level of knowledge on the National Strategy on the Fight Against Violent Extremism and the Action Plan.

Chart 5 – Level of knowledge of civil society on violent extremism and terrorism

The data show that representatives of civil society organizations are knowledgeable on the topic. Only 3 percent of the respondents identified their level of knowledge as being poor, while 70 percent of them stated that their level of knowledge was "good" and "very good".

The reasons for these findings could be related to the fact that civil society organizations have been involved in drafting and implementing policies on the prevention of violent extremism and have often participated in round-table discussions on these topics.

The National Strategy is the key document which outlines policies and roles of each of the actors involved in preventing and fighting violent extremism. For this reason, one of the questions in the survey was designed to assess the level of knowledge of professionals from various organizations. The data collected from answers to this question showed that 40 percent of respondents stated that they have a good level of knowledge on the Strategy, while 23 percent of them said that they have a decent knowledge of the Strategy, bur are unfamiliar with the measures contained in the Action Plan.

Need for training for civil society activists

Representatives of the civil society were fully convinced that there is a need for more training and improvement in the level of knowledge of journalists that cover these topics, as well as

Chart 6 – Need for training

media spokespersons of public institutions, which are often sources of information for the media.

As many as 77 percent of respondents believed that there is a need for more training for journalists, while 73 percent of them believed that more training opportunities should be extended to spokespersons and media liaisons in state institutions.

These data provide additional insights into the need to improve the level of knowledge and professional skills of reporters and spokespersons of public institutions. According to representatives of civil society organizations there is an evident need to improve the set of skills and capacities of media professionals. These data match up with the results provided by journalists' answers on their need for training. As many as 78 percent of responding journalists

in this survey said that they believed that their reporting skills on covering violent extremism and terrorism are insufficient and need to improve.

Cooperation of civil society organizations with other actors

The assessment of representatives of civil society organizations regarding the level of cooperation with other actors in relation to the fight against violent extremism and terrorism is an important indicator in this study.
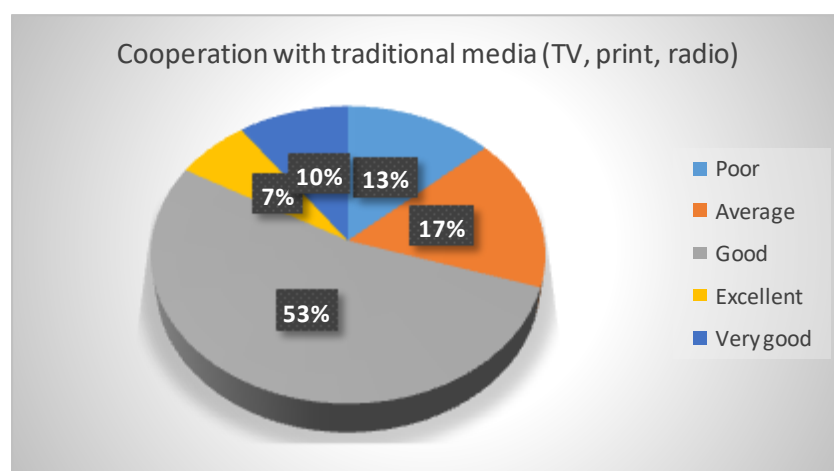
According to the data produced by this survey, representatives of the civil society rated their level of cooperation with the traditional media as average. A little more than 50 percent of the respondents said that they believed that the cooperation between the civil society and the traditional media was good,

Chart 7 – Cooperation with the media

while 13 percent of them said they had poor cooperation with the media. The assessment of the level of cooperation between the media and the civil society was perceived differently by each of these two groups. Journalists believed that their cooperation with the civil society was poor, while the latter party appears to have a more positive perception on this matter, as shown by the data depicted in the chart.

The cooperation between civil society organizations and the media takes on a special importance considering the fact that several NGOs have been engaged in various projects in the field of violent extremism and terrorism.

These organizations are focused on investigating the reasons that may lead to extremism and radicalization of particular individuals or communities in the country. Research carried out in the field and the data collected by studies conducted by civil society organizations could serve as a primary source of information for the media, in order to ensure that reporting on these topics be as complete and professional as possible. On the other hand, the civil society should improve its cooperation with the media, to make certain that their work in the field with communities and the findings of their studies would get across to the public and other stakeholders.

Problems and concerns identified by civil society

Civil society respondents have identified hate speech, poor knowledge of terminology, lack of transparency on the part of state institutions, and disinformation, as some of the main concerns and obstacles to reporting on violent extremis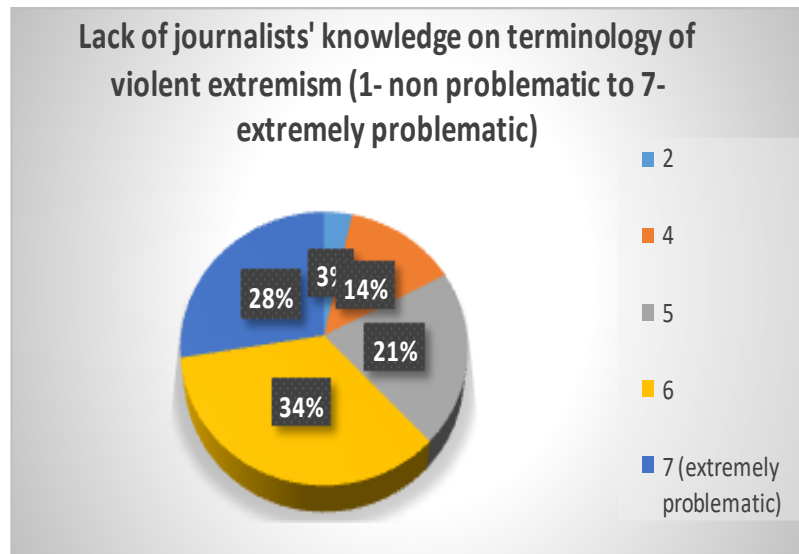m and terrorism. Representatives of civil society were asked the same question that was posed to journalists. The goal was to get the opinion of actors outside the media on the main obstacles to sound reporting on violent extremism and terrorism. The juxtaposition of these two points of view can help us to create a clearer idea on problems and obstacles to report on violent extremism and terrorism.

Chart 8 - Lack of knowledge of terminology according to civil society

The survey with representatives of the civil society has produced a list of issues and concerns which is almost identical to the catalog of problems identified by journalists and media editors. Responding journalists stated that their main concern was the lack of transparency of state institutions, while representatives of the civil society said that the main problem was the journalists' poor knowledge of the terminology on violent extremism. According to members of the civil society, disinformation and fake news remain serious obstacles. The society is paying a great deal of attention to the fake news phenomenon, and the high degree of commitment to address this issue, not just as a problem affecting the media but as a threat to democracy itself, has prompted civil society organizations to consider this issue as a major source of concern. On the other hand, both journalists and civil society representatives do not perceive Islamophobia as an obstacle to reporting on violent extremism and terrorism.

Spokespersons of state institutions

Media spokespersons and communication specialists in state agencies and institutions play an important role in providing information on violent extremism and terrorism. The relationships that they build with the media and journalists have a direct effect on reporting and the coverage of these events. This relationship is often marred by issues and problems, which surface mainly

as a result of the high degree of polarization in the media environment. Another factor that affects this relationship is the level of professionalism of the individuals working in the media and communication departments of public institutions.

In the eyes of public institutions, the information regarding violent extremism or terrorism is considered as highly sensitive. For that reason the persons responsible to provide official information to the media are often somewhat reluctant to cooperate with reporters. In a way, state institutions try to monopolize this information and to classify it as secret, by displaying a lack of goodwill to improve the level of transparency towards the media and the public.

In general, it could be said that the rush to obtain information on violent extremism and terrorism quite often leads to a dysfunctional relationship between media organizations and public institutions. The findings of this study confirmed the lack of trust between journalists and communication officials in state agencies.
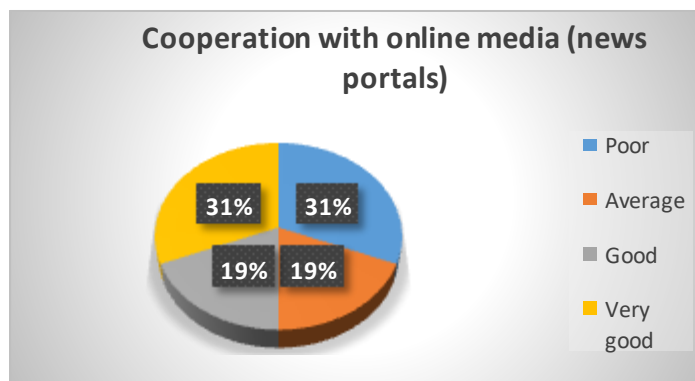
The cooperation with the online media appears to be even more difficult, according to the perception of spokespersons and media liaison officials. More than one third of the respondents in this category have rated the level of cooperation with online media outlets as poor. In relation to

Cooperation with online media (news portals)

- Poor
- Average
- Good
- Very good

31% 31%
19% 19%

Chart 9 – Cooperation of spokespersons with online media

other types of media, there is a lower appreciation for online informative websites. In the case of cooperation with traditional media outlets, only 12 percent of respondents rated the level of collaboration as "poor." In the meantime, 19 percent of the respondents said they considered their cooperation with the online media as "average." These data substantiate longstanding concerns regarding the functioning of news websites in Albania.

Even though there are no official data on the number of news websites in the country, there is large number of Albanian informative portals. Various studies, which build upon statements of the Union of Journalists, and data reported by the Postal and Electronic Communication Authority (AKEP), provide different figures on the number of news portals. A study conducted by IDRA[4] media, which was referring to the data provided in 2016 by AKEP, reported that there were some 650 Albanian news websites. (ZAJMI & PETRAK, 2019). In the meantime, statements by the Union of Journalists put his number at 800. (Cela, 2019).

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[4] IDRAMEDIA is the media intelligence and monitoring Unit of IDRA Research & Consulting, a market and public opinion research company operating in Albania

The debate on regulating the online media has been going on for years between the government and the media community. Regardless of the reasoning behind the position of each party, it appears obvious that there is a need to establish some sort of standards for online journalism. Firstly, it is necessary to establish a registration format for online portals, in order to eliminate the protection provided by anonymity for violations of professional standards.

A research study conducted by the Albanian Media Institute (ISHM) reported that some 40 percent of news portals were registered as stand-alone businesses, some 23 percent of the online media operated as branches of larger traditional media companies, while 12 percent of them are not registered at all (ISHM, 2018). However, the percentage of unregistered news websites could be even higher, when we take into consideration the fluidity and the dynamic nature of the online market.

Secondly, it is necessary for online media newsrooms to establish stable relationships with the public institutions. A media spokesperson working in a public institution needs to establish some sort of relationship with the editor or the manager of online media newsroom. In some cases it may not be easy to establish a working relationship, due to some of the problems mentioned above. This issue should also be analyzed from the point of view of government officials in charge of providing information to media professionals. It is important to improve the level of professionalism through continuous training on establishing a relationship with the media, and improve transparency.

Improvement of professional skills
Professional skills and the baggage of knowledge of the communication professionals working for public institutions, directly affect the perception of the media and the public regarding the level of transparency of these institutions.
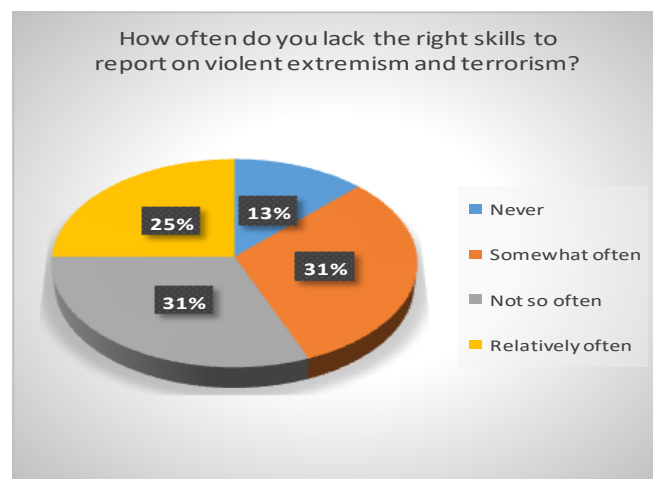

Chart 20 – Lack of skills to report on violent extremism and terrorism

The majority of the individuals hired to perform the functions of media spokespersons, media consultants, or communication specialists used to work in media outlets. However, their positions as members of staff of state officials assign them a purely political profile in the eyes of journalists and the public. As a result, they are often perceived as politicized individuals who are no longer media professionals. One of the alternatives in solving these problems would be their participation in training programs, and continuous encouragements to cooperate with the media as a necessity and an obligation in order to guarantee the transparency of institutions. In order to properly address this situation it is necessary to get to know the perceptions of individuals performing these tasks. The data depicted in the chart above provide a clear picture of self-assessment of

their professional skills. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they had noticed that they lacked the necessary skills to provide information on violent extremism and terrorism.

The data showed that 56 percent of the respondents have noticed that they lacked the necessary skills in this field "relatively often" and "somewhat often." In the meantime, only 13 percent of them stated that they had never noticed that they lacked the skills to report on violent extremism and terrorism.

These data confirm the need to improve the professional skills of individuals in charge of managing the flow of information from public institutions to the media and the public. The improvement of professional skills will also affect their relationship with journalists and the media. There is a high degree of interest to participate in training courses. More than half of the respondents said that they were very interested to receive training on reporting on violent extremism and terrorism.
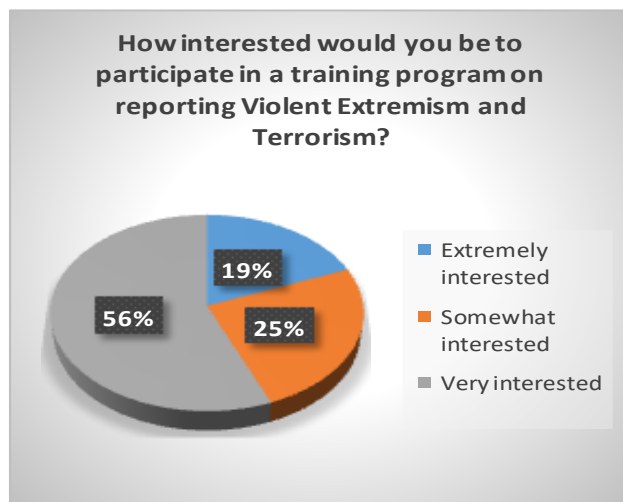

Chart 10 - Interest on training

This level of interest to undergo training is an important indicator which reveals the need to improve the communication of public institutions with the media and the public, especially those agencies which possess information related to violent extremism. On the other hand, this level of interest to participate in training courses indicates the willingness of individuals in charge of communication departments to improve their professional skills. The perceptions of this category of officials on the main problems that pose obstacles during the media coverage of violent extremism and terrorism are almost identical to concerns identified by journalists, students of journalism, and representatives of the civil society. Some of the main sources of concern remain *disinformation, fake news, and hate speech.*

CONCLUSIONS

The media environment has changed substantially over the last two decades. The monopoly of the traditional media on information no longer exists, and nowadays a journalist must cooperate with the audience in the course of producing a piece of information. We are living in a time when information is the most perishable product in the market, while communication flows around us like a flood. In this environment where the audience has become part of the process of the production of information, the biggest challenges for journalists working in the traditional

and online media remain trustworthiness, respect of ethical norms, and their level of professionalism.

Violent extremism and terrorism are phenomena that are putting to the test professional and ethical standards of journalism. In order to gain the trust and the respect of their audiences, journalists need to report not only on the consequences of violent extremism, but they must also investigate and report on the causes of the problem. Sometimes the mere reporting of events and facts are not enough in today's journalism. Besides reporting facts, journalists must also provide context on events, and display a high level of professional expertise and responsibility.

The struggle against violent extremism cannot be fought only by the media, but journalists should be aware that this battle cannot be won without improving their level of professionalism. This study on the assessment of the needs of journalists, students of journalism, civil society and media spokespersons of public institutions, revealed that there is a need for more commitment to improve the level of professional capacities of all actors in order to face the challenge posed by violent extremism.

Besides journalists, this baseline study tried to identify the needs of other stakeholders, including students enrolled in schools of journalism, civil society organizations, and communication professionals in state agencies. This study aimed at understanding the situation on the ground, problems and needs of each of the other groups mentioned above.

The study revealed the lack of sufficient knowledge on the part of journalists on violent extremism and terrorism. Furthermore, alongside a lack of expertise on violent extremism, journalists in Albania also display a poor level of knowledge about religions, which makes it even harder for reporters to do their jobs, especially when it comes to cover events related to religious extremism.

Journalists in traditional and online media outlets suffer from a shortage of training courses and other similar forms of continuing education. The findings of the study showed that nearly 60 percent of journalists in the Albanian media have never received any training on covering and reporting on these topics. Lack of training is evident even amongst media spokespersons and communication officials in public institutions. The study also revealed that journalists are aware of their lack of skills in covering violent extremism and terrorism, but they appear eager to participate in training programs on such topics. This indicates that media professionals are willing to get a better grasp on the phenomenon and improve the level of their knowledge.

Another important finding of this study is the lack of instructional manuals on ethics and other professional matters to assist in the media coverage of violent extremism and terrorism. Journalists in Albania believe that it is necessary to prepare manuals and other instructional materials for journalists. Respondents said that they were fully convinced that handbooks would not only make it easier for reporters to do their jobs in covering such events, but such instructions would also improve the quality of reporting and would prevent violations of journalism ethics and would guarantee the respect of professional standards.

Cooperation between media organizations, public institutions, civil society and other actors remains a challenge that need to be addressed in order to tackle violent extremism. The findings of this study revealed that the cooperation between parties is not at satisfactory levels, and that there is a climate of mistrust between stakeholders. Journalists have rated their sources of information and their grades in some cases have shown a low level of trust. A case in point is the perception of journalists about the willingness to cooperate on the part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, religious communities and civil society organizations.

One of the positive aspects of this research is that it analyzed each group separately and then it cross referenced the data produced during the course of the study. For the most part results from the answers of the common questions in the survey confirmed specific findings for each group.

Students of journalism and mass communication will be the media professionals of the future. The assessment of the problems and needs of this group should help with the swift addressing of those issues. The study showed that students of journalism are as eager as professional journalists to participate in training programs on violent extremism and terrorism. It is necessary to introduce classes and modules on religious affairs, extremism and radicalism during their university education. It is important for students to familiarize themselves with particular concepts and definitions of violent extremism, terrorism, extremism and radicalism. This would avoid mistakes and misunderstandings during media reporting of events in the future.

The study also identified the needs of media spokespersons in state institutions and agencies. The results confirmed the need for trainings for these individuals in order to improve their level of knowledge on religious matters and concepts related to terrorism and extremism. The most important aspect for this category remains the establishment of a working relationship with the media, as one of the ways to improve the transparency of public institutions.

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