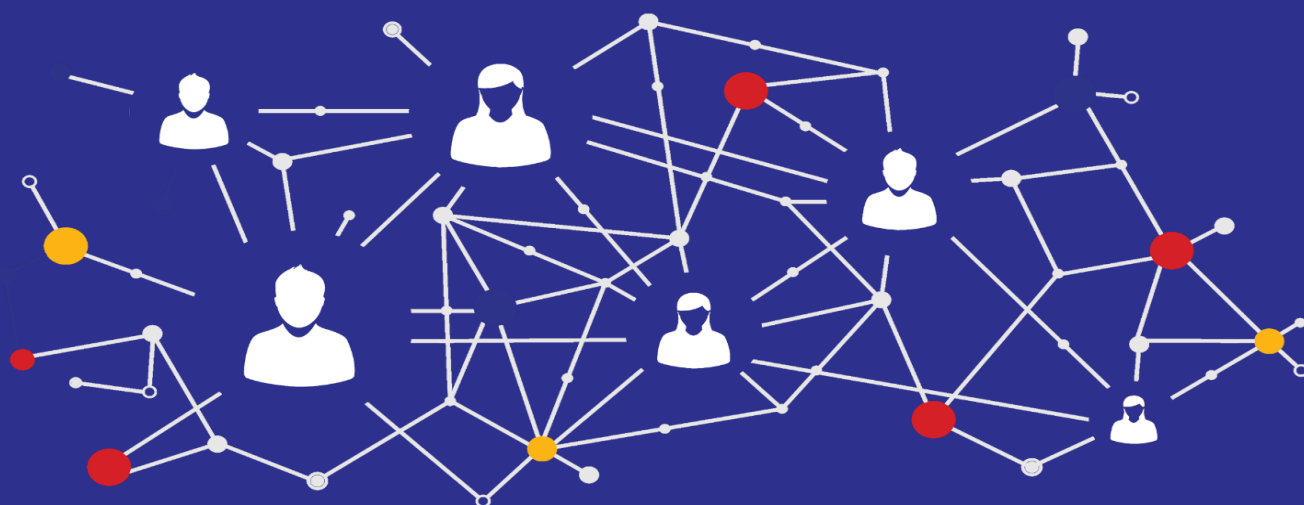


Cross- Country Analysis: The Role of Youth and NGOs in Violent Extremism and Radicalization Prevention Efforts in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.



Prepared by CLWG Organization

List of Acronyms

AYS – Agency for Youth and Sport (North Macedonia)

CVE CENTER – Center for the Coordination of Countering Violent Extremism (Albania)

EU – European Union

FECH – Forum for Quality Education for Humanism (North Macedonia)

KRF – Youth Council of Ferizaj (Kosovo)

LOJA – Center for Balkan Cooperation LOJA (North Macedonia)

MCSC – Municipal Community Safety Councils (Kosovo)

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO – Non-governmental organization

P/CVE – Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism

PVE – Preventing Violent Extremism

TSMC – Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (referenced in context of semiconductor export restrictions)

UN – United Nations

VRSH – Vizioni Rinor i Shalës (Vision of Youth of Shala) (Kosovo)

Yahr – Youth Association for Human Rights (Kosovo)

YCCC – Youth Community Center Çair (North Macedonia)

Table of Content

List of Acronyms	2
Executive Summary.....	4
Key Findings.....	4
Regional Patterns	4
Introduction and Regional Context- research context	5
Methodology	7
Country-by-Country Analysis	9
Albania-Current Extremism Landscape.....	9
Comparative Analysis.....	19
Regional Patterns and Critical Insights	23
Best Practices with Regional Transfer Potential-Economic Empowerment Integration Models	27
Recommendations.....	30
For Policy Makers and Local Institutions	30
Establish Systematic Funding Mechanisms for Civil Society Prevention Work.....	30
Conclusion	34

Executive Summary

This comparative research is part of the project “Strengthening the Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Prevent Youth Violence and Build Resilience,” implemented by the Advocacy Training and Resource Center (ATRC) in Kosovo, Counselling Line for Women and Girls (CLWG) in Albania, and the Association for Active and Healthy Development of Women and Children Pleiades in North Macedonia. The report was developed with the support of the “SMART Balkans – Civil Society for a Shared Society in the Western Balkans” regional project, carried out by the Centar za promociju civilnog društva (CPCD), Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM), and Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM), and financially supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA). The content of the report is the sole responsibility of the project implementers and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA) or the SMART Balkans consortium.

Key Findings

Youth organizations and NGOs have evolved from basic awareness groups into sophisticated prevention actors. However, their approaches and institutional contexts vary. In Albania, organizations demonstrate comprehensive service integration combining economic empowerment with community inclusion. Kosovo shows innovation in peer-to-peer models and digital literacy approaches, developed alongside functional institutional mechanisms. North Macedonia exhibits strength in cultural and intercultural programming that addresses ethnic diversity challenges through creative engagement.

These organizations have developed specialized capabilities that complement government institutions. They excel particularly in building trust within vulnerable communities, facilitating peer-to-peer engagement, and addressing sensitive dimensions of extremism prevention. Their effectiveness varies, with Albania showing systematic evaluation approaches in some organizations, Kosovo demonstrating outcome documentation alongside impact measurement capabilities, and North Macedonia developing innovative programming despite limited systematic evaluation frameworks.

However, this potential remains constrained by systemic challenges that affect each country differently. All three countries struggle with funding sustainability, though Albania benefits from EU integration funding streams, Kosovo faces donor dependency patterns, and North Macedonia experiences frequent institutional turnover that disrupts partnerships.

Regional Patterns

Four key regional patterns emerge:

1. **Essential intermediary role:** Civil society actors bridge gaps between government initiatives and community needs.
2. **Youth-centered effectiveness:** Prevention works better when young people serve as decision-makers and co-creators, not passive recipients.
3. **Distinct funding contexts:** Each country requires different sustainability strategies.
4. **Functional coordination:** Countries have working coordination mechanisms with implementation variations, not systematic failure.

Introduction and Regional Context- research context

This comparative analysis examines how youth organizations and NGOs help prevent violent extremism across Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The research, conducted in 2025 under the scope of the SMART BALKANS project, recognizes young people's potential as drivers of positive change. We investigated how civil society groups operate locally, what challenges they face, and what conditions help them succeed.

We chose these three countries because they share important similarities—historical experiences, cultural ties, and political transitions—that make cross-country learning especially valuable.

All three are post-conflict societies in the Western Balkans pursuing European Union integration, facing similar challenges related to youth marginalization, economic constraints, and evolving security threats. Each has developed national strategies for preventing violent extremism while recognizing the critical importance of local-level implementation.

Historical and Political Framework

The Western Balkans region's experience with violent extremism reflects complex socio-political dynamics shaped by post-conflict transitions, European integration processes, and evolving security challenges. All three countries have experienced manifestations of violent extremism, though with different characteristics, timelines, and institutional responses.

Albania's vulnerability stems from its complex socio-political history, including the aftermath of communism's collapse, the Kosovo conflict, and influence from foreign religious movements. The country has experienced challenges related to political instability, economic hardship, and the spread of radical ideologies from neighboring countries and the Middle East. While most Albanians oppose engagement in foreign armed conflicts, concerns persist about political corruption, foreign religious influences, and skepticism about global engagement, with some viewing international structures as tools for Western dominance over Muslim countries.

The country has developed a comprehensive strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), including a 2023-2025 Action Plan addressing the needs of 37 individuals returning from conflict zones. The Center for the Coordination of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE CENTER) oversees national strategy implementation and coordinates inter-agency collaboration through 12 Regional Committees addressing local CVE challenges, providing systematic institutional coordination. However, coordination between central and local efforts remains challenging.

Kosovo's experience is shaped by religious extremism and foreign fighter phenomena, with around 400 Kosovo citizens departing to join armed groups in Syria and Iraq during the 2012-2015 period. This phenomenon revealed vulnerabilities in Kosovar society to radicalization, including socio-economic challenges and the influence of transnational ideological networks. Although this wave has subsided, new patterns of radicalization have emerged, particularly along ethno-political lines.

Contemporary risks are increasingly linked to far-right ideologies, ethnic polarization, and digital disinformation, representing a shift from primarily religious to ethno-political radicalization concerns. Current coordination occurs through Municipal Community Safety Councils (MCSC) that maintain systematic institutional mechanisms alongside civil society innovation. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, as

the key institution involved in preventing and countering violent extremism, maintains largely positive cooperation with civil society organizations.

North Macedonia represents one of the most recent countries to develop comprehensive approaches to combating violent extremism, with growing recognition of the crucial role that young people can play in this field. The country has developed institutional frameworks including the formation of the National Council for the Fight against Violent Extremism and Terrorism (2024) and a National Strategy for 2023-2027 with accompanying Action Plan.

The institutional development timeline reflects systematic framework building from foundational legal structures through implementation mechanisms. The Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies (2020) established the first legal framework defining young people as a separate group and mandating youth work and youth organizations. This was followed by the National Strategy for 2023-2027 with accompanying Action Plan regulating cooperation with local levels, where 12 activities are directly related to youth empowerment.

EU Integration and Regional Cooperation

All three countries situate their prevention efforts within broader European integration commitments, though with different degrees of integration and institutional relationships with European frameworks.

Albania's P/CVE work aligns directly with EU accession conditionality, particularly in areas of rule of law, protection of fundamental rights, and judicial reform. The EU has pledged over €920 million in financial assistance under the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, with Albania receiving an early tranche of €64.5 million to support its reform roadmap. This funding supports institutional resilience, rule of law, youth empowerment, and education—key pillars for long-term P/CVE efforts. This represents the most systematically integrated approach among the three countries, where prevention work is structurally linked to broader governance reform processes and EU integration requirements.

Albania participates actively in regional and global counter-extremism frameworks, including the Global Coalition Against Daesh and UN counter-terrorism instruments. The country indicates commitment to preventing support for Foreign Terrorist Fighters while supporting rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees through both policy and practice.

Kosovo's institutional framework displays adaptation with coordination maintained through Municipal Community Safety Councils and ministerial cooperation with civil society, though international participation is more limited due to its disputed status. The country maintains cooperation with relevant international bodies where possible, though its participation in international frameworks is constrained by its disputed international status.

North Macedonia's emerging framework benefits from EU integration pathways while facing implementation challenges that reflect capacity building needs. The National Strategy includes 12 activities directly related to youth empowerment, mandating the Agency for Youth and Sport to oversee implementation through Youth Councils and support the creation of local youth councils and youth centers intended to be youth-led in cooperation with civil society organizations. However, significant implementation gaps exist, as youth structures such as councils and centers remain underdeveloped, with informal youth centers relying heavily on collaborations with civil society organizations to sustain activities.

Methodology

This analysis employs adapted methodological approaches suited to each country's context while maintaining consistency in core research questions about collaboration, effectiveness, and barriers in prevention work. The methodological diversity reflects appropriate adaptation to different research contexts while maintaining consistency in core investigation areas across all three countries.

Albania employed targeted questionnaires administered to three main stakeholder categories: NGOs/civil society organizations, public institutions, and Youth Organizations. This structured approach enabled systematic data collection across stakeholder categories while maintaining consistency in core questions about collaboration, effectiveness, and barriers in P/CVE work. The questionnaires were designed to capture qualitative insights through open-ended responses, providing a comprehensive view of the P/CVE ecosystem in Albania.

Detailed case studies were developed through comprehensive questionnaires administered to youth-based institutions in three municipalities: Tirana, Rogozhina and Kamza. These comprehensive open-ended questionnaires served as the primary data collection tool for case study development, capturing essential perspectives and experiences with existing prevention initiatives. The in-depth responses provided critical understanding of how national policies translate into local contexts and impact youth engagement, forming the empirical foundation for the case study analysis.

Kosovo utilized a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative data collection through interviews, desk review of key documents, and comparative case study analysis focusing on the municipalities of Ferizaj and Lipjan. The research process consisted of five semi-structured interviews conducted with key representatives of youth organizations and local institutions, including Rin'ON, VRSH, YAHR Lipjan, and two local experts in Ferizaj and Lipjan. Interview questions focused on actors' experiences in PVE, perceptions of youth vulnerability, successful interventions, institutional cooperation, and challenges in implementation.

A comprehensive desk review was undertaken, examining relevant policy documents, project reports, and academic literature, enabling triangulation across different data types and allowing the analysis to reflect both macro-level analysis and grassroots dimensions of prevention. Additionally, the research incorporated input from local government officials, including a written interview with the adviser to the Mayor of Ferizaj, providing insight into municipal coordination mechanisms and partnerships with NGOs and schools.

North Macedonia employed desk analysis of organizational activities combined with exploratory research through interviews with NGO representatives and municipal authorities in Tetovo and Çair municipalities. The desk analysis focused on describing key activities identified and disseminated by organizations through their websites and published documents that could be assigned as activities on preventing violent extremism, such as community resilience and social cohesion activities. The methodology focused on thematic analysis of community resilience, social cohesion, and direct PVE initiatives, with conclusions drawn from both desk research and interview findings.

Methodological Limitations

The case study municipalities—Tirana, Kamëz, and Rrogozhina in Albania; Ferizaj and Lipjan in Kosovo; and Tetovo and Çair in North Macedonia—were selected in alignment with the SMART Balkans project’s strategic focus on strengthening multistakeholder approaches in targeted local contexts. While offering valuable insights into the prevention landscape across the three countries, the research has certain methodological limitations.

Moreover, the limited input from program beneficiaries restricts understanding of how prevention efforts are experienced on the ground, and the lack of longitudinal data hinders evaluation of long-term effectiveness. The emphasis on institutional and CSO perspectives may also overlook informal community dynamics. Nonetheless, the study’s multi-level approach—combining desk research with structured data collection—enables triangulation and a nuanced understanding of how national strategies are implemented locally, highlighting the essential link between civil society and institutional efforts.

Country-by-Country Analysis

Albania-Current Extremism Landscape

Albania's vulnerability to violent extremism stems from its complex socio-political history, including the aftermath of communism's collapse, the Kosovo conflict, and influence from foreign religious movements. The country has experienced challenges related to political instability, economic hardship, and the spread of radical ideologies from neighboring countries and the Middle East. While most Albanians oppose engagement in foreign armed conflicts, concerns persist about political corruption, foreign religious influences, and skepticism about global engagement, with some viewing international structures as tools for Western dominance over Muslim countries.

The country has developed a comprehensive strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), including a 2023-2025 Action Plan addressing the needs of 37 individuals returning from conflict zones. Data from high-risk municipalities reveals that many youths feel left behind, underrepresented, and without real opportunities to influence community life, creating vulnerability to extremist narratives. Research identifies that numerous young people experience marginalization, lack of representation, and limited meaningful opportunities for community engagement, creating conditions where extremist narratives may appeal to those seeking purpose and belonging.

Youth Demographics and Civil Society Ecosystem

Organizational Transformation and Sophistication

Albania's NGOs and youth organizations have grown far beyond basic awareness campaigns. They now serve as sophisticated prevention actors and the backbone of community resilience efforts. These groups have developed comprehensive approaches that government institutions find hard to match. What makes them effective? They combine economic empowerment with community inclusion and address sensitive gender issues that traditional security approaches often overlook. They build trust where official agencies struggle with credibility. They reach marginalized populations with specialized services. Most importantly, their peer-to-peer approaches work better than traditional top-down methods. Their ability to deliver measurable results—from increased income and self-confidence among returnees to behavioral changes regarding violence and discrimination—highlights their essential role in prevention efforts.

Comprehensive National Framework

Albania's institutional architecture represents comprehensive development among the three countries, featuring coordination across multiple government levels. The CVE CENTER coordinates 12 Regional Committees addressing local CVE challenges, while the framework spans the Ministry of Interior (counter-terrorism coordination), Ministry of Justice (legal reforms and returnee management through specialized terrorism courts), Ministry of Health and Social Protection (community-based mental health programs for early radicalization risk detection), Ministry of Education (P/CVE curriculum integration), and Ministry of Defense (NATO collaboration and critical infrastructure protection).

Specialized implementation occurs through the General Directorate of Prisons and National Probation Service, which manage terrorism offender rehabilitation including religious counseling and vocational training. This includes specialized agencies with operational roles, where these institutions manage

incarceration and rehabilitation of terrorism offenders, implementing deradicalization programs including religious counseling and vocational training.

Key Organizations and Their Specialized Interventions

Counselling Line for Women and Girls operates as a leading organization providing specialized services addressing gender dimensions of prevention. Their work emphasizes women and girls as key actors in building secure and resilient communities through psychosocial counseling, training programs, and awareness campaigns. The organization's approach integrates theological counseling with psychosocial support, demonstrating how religious guidance can be effectively combined with mental health approaches.

The organization showcases comprehensive programming that combines communication training and counter-narrative development with direct psychosocial support services. Their approach includes training for CVE centers and frontline workers on effective communication strategies, empowering religious communities to address extremism challenges through positive messaging, awareness campaigns to improve public perception toward returnees and reduce stigmatization, and psychosocial support for returned children through art and music therapy and digital diary creation for emotional expression. Their work with women returned from Syrian camps through vocational training programs, including soap-making and artisanal crafts training, has resulted in measurable increases in income, self-confidence, and community engagement among beneficiaries, demonstrating successful integration of economic empowerment with prevention programming.

Tirana Youth Council operates within Albania's capital, implementing a comprehensive prevention strategy that integrates awareness-raising with targeted interventions addressing gender-based violence and extremism. The organization's approach centers on training programs focused on tolerance, awareness activities, and dialogue promotion among young people within the community. The Council has developed specialized programming that addresses gender dimensions of prevention work. Their awareness programs target gender equality, girls' empowerment, and prevention of gender-based violence, with the organization reporting measurable influence on reducing radical and violent attitudes linked to extremism. Programming is designed to address locally identified needs, including domestic violence, gender inequalities, and limited access to psychological and social support services. A notable initiative involved organizing a podcast featuring young people from Kosovo and North Macedonia to address digital violence. This cross-border collaboration provided a platform for youth to share experiences and perspectives while building capacity to identify and respond to emerging forms of online violence and extremism. The organization employs systematic evaluation approaches including direct feedback collection from participants, periodic assessments, continuous participation tracking, and behavioral change observation regarding attitudes toward violence and discrimination.

Kamez Youth Council operates in Kamëz Municipality, implementing a community-integrated approach emphasizing peer-to-peer learning and participatory program development. The organization focuses on youth activities promoting tolerance, critical thinking, and social inclusion through comprehensive capacity-building initiatives including human rights training, civic participation programs, and conflict management education aimed at raising youth awareness about extremism consequences while promoting inclusion and dialogue as alternatives to radicalization.

A distinctive feature of the Council's approach involves peer-to-peer activities where young people provide mutual support through support groups and self-confidence training. The organization reports this horizontal approach as more effective than traditional methods. Community activities incorporating art, sport, and public debate serve as vehicles for social integration of vulnerable youth populations.

The organization maintains systematic youth involvement throughout program cycles, conducting preliminary consultations, focus groups, and ensuring young people serve as co-creators from ideation through implementation and evaluation phases. This participatory approach ensures programming relevance and youth ownership of prevention activities. Impact assessment utilizes pre-and-post activity questionnaires, brief participant interviews, and continuous feedback mechanisms to document changes in self-assessment, social engagement, and challenge-facing abilities among participants.

Government Policies and Institutional Responses

Albania's institutional framework includes the Ministry of Interior as the central coordinating body, supported by specialized agencies including the National Probation Service and General Directorate of Prisons implementing deradicalization programs. The Ministry of Youth and Children provides programs focusing on youth engagement and empowerment to prevent radicalization, particularly in vulnerable municipalities. Municipal-level responses vary, with some reporting established collaboration frameworks while others indicate minimal or limited current NGO cooperation. The Municipality of Kamëz exemplifies successful cooperation by actively collaborating with the Kamëz Youth Council, focusing on addressing youth-related challenges and fostering social cohesion. This partnership indicates that systematic cooperation between local authorities and Youth Organizations is vital for strengthening community resilience and provides a replicable model for other municipalities.

Municipal-Level Implementation Variations

Local implementation reveals disparities reflecting broader coordination challenges. Tirana Municipality, as the capital, plays central roles in policy implementation, delivering social services and community engagement initiatives, and has adopted the "Strategy for Youth 2019-2025" for inclusive youth environments. Kukes Municipality faces unique socio-economic challenges including high unemployment and has been proactive in addressing these through local initiatives focusing on community engagement and youth development. Kamez Municipality, despite struggling with providing social care services due to limited revenues and complex social structure, has demonstrated effective local partnerships with the Kamza Youth Council, showing how cooperation can emerge despite resource constraints.

Successful Prevention Models and Impact

Multi-Stakeholder Coordination Success

Youth Organizations report positive collaboration experiences with local government institutions, describing cooperative and constructive experiences with local government institutions in P/CVE efforts, having built strong relationships with local actors through awareness activities, training, and community dialogue to address risks and specific area needs. Organizations also maintain partnerships with other civil society organizations through joint projects, expertise and resource exchange, and cooperation networks to increase community impact.

NGOs report particularly successful collaboration with local actors, religious communities, state institutions, and civil society organizations, noting that active involvement of local leaders and religious institutions as key partners in prevention processes has been a significant strength. Their approach demonstrates effective coordination in capacity building and awareness campaigns, plus information sharing between actors, showing how religious communities can be systematically integrated into prevention frameworks.

Economic Empowerment Integration

Albanian NGOs demonstrate successful integration of economic empowerment with prevention work, suggesting opportunities for scaling approaches that combine vocational training, small grants, and self-employment support as direct methods to prevent marginalization and radicalization. Their vocational training programs have shown positive outcomes in supporting women returned from Syrian camps, providing proof that addressing socio-economic drivers of radicalization through skill development while building sustained relationships with vulnerable populations represents an effective prevention approach.

Key Challenges and Gaps

The universal concern about funding sustainability across all stakeholder categories indicates a prevention sector often operating in project-based cycles that can undermine the long-term relationship-building that organizations identify as essential for effective P/CVE work. NGOs identify that projects are often funded for limited periods, making it difficult to provide long-term support for individuals and families needing extended reintegration processes and sustainable psycho-social support.

Youth Organizations report that funding limitations can prevent program expansion and development, while sustainability concerns sometimes force focus on short-term and limited projects, limiting long-term impact and intervention continuity. Public Institutions acknowledge that sustainable financing for long-term projects is essential for effective collaboration, recognizing that short-term project cycles limit joint prevention and rehabilitation effort effectiveness.

Organizations face challenges of overcoming both community stigma toward returnees and resistance from some vulnerable youth populations, requiring specialized approaches that balance sensitivity with effectiveness. NGOs identify stigma and social isolation of returnees and their families as hindering their community inclusion and affecting reintegration processes. Organizations also report specific difficulties in engaging women, who often hesitate to become part of programs, requiring specialized outreach approaches and extended relationship-building efforts.

The research reveals significant variation in institutional engagement levels: some correctional facilities and probation services report established collaboration frameworks with NGOs, while others indicate they are still in early stages of establishing cooperation or have no current partnerships, creating coordination gaps across different institutional levels and geographic locations.

Current Extremism Landscape- Kosovo

Kosovo's experience with violent extremism is multifaceted, shaped by complex interplay of socio-political, ideological, and geopolitical factors. The emergence of peak religious extremism, particularly during the 2012–2015 period, was marked by the departure of around 400 Kosovo citizens who joined armed groups in Syria and Iraq. This phenomenon revealed deep-seated vulnerabilities in Kosovar society to radicalization and violent extremism, including socio-economic challenges, as well as the influence of transnational ideological networks. Although this wave has since subsided, new patterns of radicalization have emerged, particularly along ethno-political lines. Recent research reveals a perceptible shift in Kosovar public security concerns from religious extremism to ethno-political radicalization. While extremist religious ideologies continue to pose localized challenges, especially in rural pockets of municipalities like Ferizaj, the broader threat landscape increasingly features divisive nationalist rhetoric, historical revisionism, and hate speech targeting ethnic communities. This trend is particularly salient among youth who engage with polarizing online content or who feel disconnected from formal civic structures.

Institutional Evolution and Coordination

Current coordination indicates institutional adaptation where civil society innovation has developed alongside rather than in compensation for systematic coordination mechanisms. Local government coordination occurs through Municipal Community Safety Councils (MCSC) which bring together diverse stakeholders from security sectors, ethnic and religious communities, and youth organizations for coordinated responses to potential challenges of violent extremism nature. Municipal officials emphasize that municipalities act as conveners and enablers, fostering trust between institutional actors and communities while ensuring localized responses are timely and culturally attuned. In Ferizaj, the Municipality, through the Municipal Council for Safety in Communities (MCSC), maintains structured collaboration with security institutions, school officials, and community actors. This coordination extends to targeted educational initiatives, direct engagement with youth, and awareness campaigns implemented through local schools and neighborhoods. In Lipjan, Mayor Imri Ahmeti has consistently supported initiatives that empower youth to lead preventative action, emphasizing that institutions share equal responsibility with society in confronting extremism and pledging ongoing institutional support for youth-led and civil society efforts.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs, as the key institution involved in preventing and countering violent extremism, has developed cooperation with civil society organizations, though this cooperation remains inconsistent and often donor motivated. The country participates in regional and global counter-extremism frameworks where possible, demonstrating commitment to preventing support for Foreign Terrorist Fighters while supporting rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees through both policy and practice.

Youth Demographics and Civil Society Ecosystem

Kosovo's civil society exhibits resilience and innovation in responding to radicalization risks through youth-centered approaches that combine informal education, peer mentorship, and civic engagement. Organizations serve as trusted, and sometimes only, platforms for young people, especially those in rural areas, offering both belonging and structured pathways for leadership and expression.

Rin'ON (Ferizaj) operates as a youth-led civil society organization based in Ferizaj, working to empower young people with particular focus on rural and marginalized communities. Founded in 2013 and formally registered in 2017, Rin'ON emerged from a grassroots initiative focused on civic activism and community service. Today, the organization provides a structured platform for youth engagement through peer-to-peer learning, volunteerism, and leadership development. With a strong emphasis on inclusivity, Rin'ON offers a "safe space" for young people to express themselves, develop their skills, and participate in local decision-making. Rin'ON's portfolio of activities spans civic education, social inclusion, countering violent extremism, and youth-led community development. In 2024, the organization led initiatives such as the "Inclusive and Resilient Communities" project, high school and village council empowerment programs, media education workshops, and anti-hate speech campaigns. Through creative formats—ranging from movie nights and art activism to public health campaigns and environmental projects—Rin'ON bridges gaps between institutions and youth, while fostering interethnic cooperation and critical digital literacy. Their partnerships with schools place Rin'On in a unique situation to mobilize youth.

Vizioni Rinor i Shalës - VRSH (Lipjan) operates as a youth organization based in the municipality of Lipjan that focuses on fostering social cohesion, civic engagement, and the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) through community-rooted and youth-driven approaches. The organization combines informal education, creative programming, and interfaith dialogue to empower young people as active contributors to a safer, more inclusive society. VRSH focuses on building youth capacity to critically engage with sensitive issues such as online radicalization, hate speech, and discrimination, often working in close partnership with schools, municipal institutions, and local communities. Through projects like "Empowering Youth to Prevent Violent Extremism," VRSH has trained students in digital literacy, counter-narrative development, and social advocacy. Its programs range from forums and workshops to arts-based activities and sports competitions designed to channel youth energy into constructive civic action. The organization also uses innovative formats like reading circles, film screenings, and volunteer camps to create safe spaces for dialogue and leadership development. One of VRSH's flagship efforts, "*Rini Europiane*" - European Youth - worked with over 250 young people in EU-themed educational campaigns, while the large-scale "*Mërgata Fest and Sports 2024*" event attracted thousands of participants through a weeklong cultural and recreational program.

Youth Association for Human Rights - YAHR (Lipjan) operates within municipal safety and youth policy implementation frameworks in Lipjan. While Lipjan is generally perceived as calm, with "*no incidents of religious or interethnic tension*," YAHR promotes mental health, civic education, and violence prevention through partnerships with schools and the police. Their efforts underline a key principle of PVE: prevention is not only about responding to risks but about cultivating environments that make radicalization less likely to occur in the first place.

The Youth Council of Ferizaj (KRF), while not formally focused on PVE, has become increasingly aware of radicalization trends among youth. The organization's president noted a concerning pattern of students openly expressing extreme religious views, disrupting classes, and pressuring peers about behavior and dress codes. KRF has responded with peacebuilding forums, public lectures, and interfaith roundtables involving over 700 youth and religious leaders, filling an institutional gap in early awareness and community response.

Successful Prevention Models and Impact

Kosovo's most promising PVE interventions often originate not from state institutions, but from youth-led and community-based organizations. Initiatives like Rin'ON's "*Unity Month*" and VRSH's "*Empowering Youth*

to Prevent Violent Extremism" do not rely on securitized language or top-down mandates. Instead, they invest in identity formation, peer leadership, and inclusive narratives, meeting young people where they are—emotionally, culturally, and socially. These efforts work precisely because they are hyper-local, culturally aware, and rooted in lived experience.

In both Ferizaj and Lipjan, youth-focused NGOs act as informal early warning systems, educators, and conveners of community and youth—roles that public institutions are structurally less equipped to fulfill alone. Municipalities sometimes may lack the flexibility, trust, or contextual nuance needed to identify and respond to early signs of radicalization, especially when they emerge in peer groups or digital spaces. Civil society actors fill these gaps by being present, accessible, and embedded. For instance, Rin'ON's weekly "Movie Night" discussions and volunteer circles are safe spaces where tensions surface and can be constructively addressed. Youth-led efforts foster resilience by creating spaces of dignity, purpose, and expression in contexts of marginalization. The appeal of extremist ideologies often thrives where young people feel invisible, voiceless, or trapped in socio-economic stagnation. Youth organizations provide not just project-based programming but also meaning. Initiatives like Rin'ON's work in rural Ferizaj, or VRSH's interfaith and intercultural camps in Lipjan, give young people more than skills; they help develop stronger sense of belonging, critical thinking, and agency values.

Organizations demonstrate understanding of prevention principles and focus on outcome documentation, showing that resilience is built through awareness campaigns and long-term engagement that fosters dignity, agency, and dialogue. However, research notes that systematic assessment of actual impact of activities and lessons learned studies represents an area for organizational development and evidence-building.

Key Challenges and Gaps

Cooperation between youth-led non-government organizations and municipal institutions remains informal and inconsistent. More often than not, a major incentive for municipalities to cooperate with NGOs is if they have a project supported by a donor, as they also want to show the donor community that they are cooperative. This is especially the case when, for instance, a donor is someone like the US Embassy or any EU embassy. Despite individual support from education directorates or mayoral offices, broader institutional commitment can be weak or absent locally.

Youth organizations struggle with chronic funding insecurity. Most rely on short-term project grants from international donors, with little to no core support from municipalities. VRSH emphasized that an obstacle is the lack of sustainable funding and a coordinated municipal strategy for sustainable support for civil society. Without institutional grants or embedded municipal support, the continuity and growth of successful initiatives are constantly at risk.

Political dynamics and public stigma create additional barriers to effective prevention work. Discussions of extremism remain sensitive, and local actors often avoid engagement for fear of reputational damage, with communities hesitating to talk about extremism, creating silence that can make communities more vulnerable. Partisan dynamics at the municipal level sometimes limit access to funding or cooperation opportunities for politically unaffiliated organizations.

Current Extremism Landscape-North Macedonia

North Macedonia represents one of the most recent countries to develop comprehensive approaches to combating violent extremism, with growing recognition of the crucial role that young people can play in this field. Given that youth constitute a considerable portion of the population—and are often both the most affected by and involved in violence, they hold transformative potential in preventing radicalization and fostering peace.

North Macedonia has developed its institutional approach to preventing violent extremism in alignment with global PVE trends, establishing the National Council for the Fight against Violent Extremism and Terrorism in 2024 alongside a comprehensive National Strategy covering 2023-2027. The strategy includes an accompanying Action Plan that frameworks cooperation mechanisms with local-level actors. Within this Action Plan, 12 specific activities focus directly on youth engagement, encompassing both youth-implemented initiatives and youth empowerment programs. This youth-centered approach builds upon the foundational Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies (2020), which represents the country's first legal framework to formally recognize young people as a distinct group and establish parameters for youth work and youth organizations.

However, significant implementation gaps exist between policy development and practical application. In Tetovo and Çair, youth structures such as councils and centers remain underdeveloped, with local youth councils recently officially established but reflecting ongoing need for stronger institutional support. Informal youth centers rely heavily on collaborations with local civil society organizations to sustain activities engaging young people, indicating dependency patterns that distinguish North Macedonia's implementation challenges from other countries' more established coordination mechanisms.

Government Policies and Institutional Responses

According to the Law for Local Self-Government, responsibility for local-level decision-making in North Macedonia lies with Local Self-Governments. These decisions are often shaped by the adoption and implementation of Local Youth Strategies, where available. Furthermore, a significant number of Local Self-Governments have integrated Local Youth Councils as formal advisory bodies within their municipalities, underscoring a structured approach to youth involvement in governance and policy development.

The National Youth Strategy (2023-2027) together with the Action Plan, mandates the Agency for Youth and Sport (AYS), through its own Youth Council, to oversee the implementation of youth policies, maintain a register of youth organizations, and support the creation of local youth councils and youth centers. These centers are intended to be youth-led, in cooperation with civil society organizations and local institutions. However, local youth structures such as councils and centers remain underdeveloped, with informal youth centers relying heavily on collaborations with civil society organizations.

Youth Demographics and Civil Society Ecosystem

The research identified active organizations demonstrating commitment to empowering youth. Organizations demonstrate strategic and adaptive approaches to fostering community resilience, especially in contexts vulnerable to exclusion, radicalization, or institutional neglect. Their efforts often focus on systemic change, awareness-raising, and strengthening local capacities.

Youth Community Center Çair (YCCC) serves as an active hub for recreational and cultural events despite not being officially registered, filling important gaps in youth engagement. The center plays crucial roles in resilience-building through workshops on essential skills like first aid in collaboration with organizations like the Red Cross. These workshops not only enhance health awareness but also equip youth with practical tools to respond effectively to emergencies, thus fostering a sense of preparedness and self-reliance. YCCC's impact is amplified through partnerships and collaborative projects. As part of the Young Cities Initiative, the center has been instrumental in implementing youth-led projects that address social issues through creative arts and civic action. Initiatives like Skala Magazine and Gen W focus on using art for social change and promoting women's leadership, respectively. The center also maintains strong educational ties, having hosted university students from the Faculty of Social Sciences at Mother Teresa University.

Pleiades operates as a women-led NGO based in Skopje, North Macedonia, that actively engages in initiatives to prevent violent extremism (PVE) and build community resilience. Operating in municipalities like Çair, Butel, and Saraj, the organization runs diverse programs such as "MotherSchools," which empower mothers to play a proactive role in safeguarding their families from radicalization. Their efforts also include training frontline workers like teachers, psychologists, and social workers to enhance local capacities against extremism.

Furthermore, Pleiades focuses on the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign fighters and their families, providing psycho-social support to facilitate effective reintegration into society. A central aspect of their work is the project "Strengthening the Multistakeholder Approach to Prevent Youth Violence and Build Resilience," carried out in collaboration with partners across Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. This initiative underscores the importance of collaborative efforts among stakeholders, including local governments, civil society organizations, and youth groups. By fostering regional and international partnerships, Pleiades aims to create comprehensive PVE strategies while emphasizing the vital role of youth in building sustainable community resilience. Notably, among the interviewed organizations, only Pleiades has developed direct, and sustained interventions specifically aimed at preventing violent extremism through strategic partnerships, structured training programs, and youth-centered initiatives.

FECH (Forum for Quality Education for Humanism) demonstrates resilience-building through structural and policy-focused approaches. With support from the European Endowment for Democracy, FECH opened the Youth Activism Center in Tetovo, which has become a hub for youth to engage in workshops, roundtables, and film screenings that encourage critical thinking and civic participation. Here, young people come together to discuss important social issues, collaborate on projects, and develop the skills necessary for leadership and activism.

The organization has played a pivotal role in forming the National Student Body, a unifying platform for student assemblies from various higher education institutions in North Macedonia. This body not only voices student concerns but actively pushes for systemic change in transparency, quality, and inclusion in education. In addition, FECH offers civic education programs such as CreActive Academy, which trains youth in protest organization, media advocacy, and democratic participation.

Center for Balkan Cooperation LOJA operates as a highly visible and grassroots-focused NGO, taking action-oriented approaches to community resilience by raising awareness among youth. One of its flagship initiatives is the Watch out! Tetovo Film Festival, an annual event that showcases international short films,

documentaries, and experimental cinema. This festival not only highlights global artistic talent but also sparks meaningful discussions on human rights and pressing social issues. Additionally, LOJA collaborates with the German Embassy in Skopje to organize the Days of German Film, presenting critically acclaimed German films to promote cultural exchange and understanding. The Transformers Project further exemplifies LOJA's creative approach, combining public art installations and performances to address urban challenges and inspire civic participation through innovative expression. The organization has initiated bold interventions in response to systematic neglect, including symbolic "guerrilla campaigns" calling for public infrastructure improvements for students with disabilities. The action was not merely about accessibility—it was a public call for institutional accountability. Another notable intervention was an art-based political critique of unfulfilled youth-related promises by local officials. LOJA has been at the forefront of integrating youth into public life through artistic and environmental projects that reclaim and reimagine public spaces. Education and civic engagement are central to LOJA's mission. The Peacebuilding and Civic Activism Academy, held in April and October 2024 in Ohrid, brought together participants from the Balkans, France, and Germany to engage in training sessions on peacebuilding and active citizenship. Complementing this initiative, LOJA conducted a series of trainings on multicultural youth work in 2024, equipping future teachers with skills to manage ethnically diverse classrooms.

Mikrofoni operates by creating inclusive and expressive media spaces where young people can find both visibility and validation. Through podcasts, video interviews, and online publications, they enable youth to articulate their experiences and share their talents. The platform combats isolation by encouraging dialogue on topics such as anxiety, gender, career choices, and civic responsibility. Their GoTalks initiative, featuring psychologists and professionals, supports youth in making informed decisions about their future and builds their confidence to speak out and engage critically with their surroundings. Their work reduces social fragmentation by validating youth voices and connecting them across regions and social groups. Additionally, Mikrofon*i*.mk actively organizes and promotes cultural and educational events, including workshops, seminars, and discussions tailored to the interests and needs of young people.

Organizational Impact and Programming Innovation

North Macedonia illustrates that effective prevention extends beyond organizations with explicit PVE mandates to include comprehensive approaches addressing structural vulnerabilities to radicalization. While Pleiades provides the only organization with explicit PVE programming, organizations like LOJA, Mikrofon*i*, FECH, and others contribute to prevention through evidence-based approaches addressing structural vulnerabilities to radicalization. Organizations demonstrate strategic approaches including cultural programming that sparks meaningful discussions on human rights and social issues, media platforms empowering youth engagement with sensitive topics, and intercultural education addressing ethnic diversity challenges. These approaches align with international good practices recognizing that prevention extends beyond direct counter-extremism programming to include community resilience building.

In the realm of community resilience, most organizations support youth through civic engagement, education, and empowerment activities that help reduce vulnerability and foster well-being. In contrast, when it comes to social cohesion, LOJA and Mikrofon*i* have taken the lead with consistent and multidimensional initiatives that promote inclusion, dialogue, and youth agency. Other organizations, including, contribute to cohesion through valuable but less targeted activities.

Key Challenges and Gaps

A recurring challenge for many NGOs is the frequent turnover of local governance structures. This disrupts ongoing collaborations and hinders prevents youth initiatives from becoming permanent fixtures. When municipal leadership or key personnel change, previously functional partnerships often dissolve, requiring NGOs to re-establish contact and renegotiate terms from the beginning. This lack of continuity undermines the sustainability of community-level structures, such as violence prevention councils. Several NGOs reported difficulties in being recognized as legitimate partners by local authorities, particularly in municipalities where relationships with civil society are underdeveloped. In some cases, organizations working actively in education or youth engagement receive little to no support or acknowledgment from municipal departments. This creates barriers to advocacy, resource-sharing, and broader institutional impact.

Lack of sustainable funding, especially local or government-based support, is another experienced barrier. Most NGOs rely heavily on short-term donor funding, which makes it difficult to implement long-term strategies or maintain a consistent presence in communities. This is particularly problematic in sensitive fields like PVE, where trust-building and continuity are crucial. Organizations emphasize that programs funded for only 12-18 months cause interruptions in community presence and weaken trust-building with youth. NGOs working in areas related to extremism, diversity, or social inclusion often operate in politically complex and socially conservative contexts. This creates tension when addressing sensitive topics such as religious tolerance, gender roles, or ideological diversity. Navigating these sensitivities requires NGOs to carefully moderate language and messaging to avoid backlash while still promoting inclusion and critical thinking. Many NGOs also face challenges due to limited technical expertise or specialized knowledge, especially in complex fields such as PVE. In some cases, well-meaning interventions by underprepared actors have had unintended consequences, underlining the need for deeper training and capacity development within the sector itself. As one organization noted: "Sometimes, initiatives by other actors without proper knowledge of extremism have caused damage, which forced us to step in and reorient the process."

Comparative Analysis-Cross-Cutting Themes and Patterns

Essential Intermediary Role of Civil Society: Trust-Building Where Institutions Cannot

Across all three countries, the research reveals that youth organizations and NGOs have evolved beyond supplementary roles to become essential intermediaries whose specialized capabilities contribute to effective prevention work. The analysis suggests convergent patterns in how these organizations fill institutional gaps through trust-building in sensitive contexts.

Trust-building represents a fundamental capability where civil society organizations demonstrate advantages over formal institutions. **Albanian** NGOs demonstrate that success in working with returnees and communities requires sustained field presence and empathy to build trust relationships that formal institutions often cannot replicate due to their structural limitations and bureaucratic constraints. **Kosovo's** organizations serve as trusted platforms for young people, especially those in rural areas who may have limited alternatives and may view state institutions with skepticism based on historical experiences. **North**

Macedonia organizations create safe environments where youth can engage with sensitive topics without stigma, particularly important in politically complex and socially conservative contexts.

The research reveals specific institutional gaps that civil society organizations systematically address. **Albanian** Public Institutions acknowledge that NGOs provide important supplementary support in their work with pre-trial detainees, particularly through joint educational projects that strengthen rehabilitative roles in ways that purely institutional approaches cannot achieve. **Kosovo's** municipal officials recognize youth organizations as key actors in recognizing risks and co-designing local responses that institutional actors alone may not achieve due to their distance from community dynamics. **North Macedonia** shows significant gaps where organizations work despite long-standing presence in education sectors while receiving little institutional support or acknowledgment. Quality assurance and intervention effectiveness represent concerns across all three contexts, with organizations sometimes serving as safeguards against inappropriate or harmful interventions. North Macedonia provides specific documentation of this challenge, with organizations reporting: *"Sometimes, initiatives by other actors without proper knowledge of extremism have caused damage, which forced us to step in and reorient the process."* This highlights how civil society organizations can function not only as prevention actors but also as quality control mechanisms helping ensure that community-level interventions maintain appropriate standards and effectiveness.

Effectiveness of Youth-Centered Approaches: From Passive Recipients to Co-Creators

The comparative analysis reveals that youth-centered prevention achieves greater effectiveness when young people serve as decision-makers and program co-creators rather than passive recipients. Youth empowerment works as a prevention because it directly addresses the marginalization and voicelessness that makes extremist narratives appealing. When youth co-create programs, they develop agency and belonging—the exact psychological needs that extremist groups exploit, explaining why participatory approaches show behavioral changes regarding violence and discrimination. However, the depth and systematization of this approach varies across countries, reflecting different organizational development levels and institutional contexts.

Albania demonstrates systematic approaches to participatory programming that involve comprehensive youth engagement throughout intervention cycles. The Kamez Youth Council implements youth involvement throughout program cycles, including preliminary consultations, focus groups, and ensuring young people serve as activity co-creators from ideation through implementation and evaluation. Albanian NGOs provide evidence that active youth involvement in debates, training, and community activities increases sense of belonging and social responsibility, representing key protective factors against extremism, although long-term impact evaluation represents an area for continued organization development.

Kosovo provides testimony for peer-to-peer model effectiveness across different organizational contexts. Organizations consistently report that peer-to-peer activities where young people help each other through support groups and self-confidence training show positive outcomes in building resilience and addressing vulnerability factors. The Youth Association for Human Rights emphasizes that peer dialogue and nonformal education, especially through sessions with psychologists where youth feel safe sharing concerns, shows measurable impact.

North Macedonia displays strength in cultural and creative engagement approaches that empower youth expression and agency. Organizations like LOJA use creative protest and civic pressure showing how resilience can be fostered through assertive, public-facing engagement that builds youth confidence and

community visibility. The WatchOut! Tetovo Film Festival and similar initiatives demonstrate how cultural programming can spark meaningful discussions on human rights and pressing social issues while building youth agency and critical thinking capabilities.

Persistent Funding Sustainability Crisis: Short-Term Cycles Undermining Long-Term Relationships

Organizations across all countries face a fundamental funding contradiction. Long-term relationship-building is essential for prevention effectiveness. However, current funding mechanisms force short-term project cycles that undermine this foundation. The 12–18-month funding cycles create a fundamental operational constraint: effective prevention requires 2-3 years to build trust and demonstrate behavioral changes, but organizations must spend 30-40% of each cycle on proposal writing and partnership re-establishment, leaving insufficient time for deep prevention work. This explains why even successful organizations struggle to demonstrate sustained long-term impact.

Albania provides comprehensive documentation of how funding cycles damage prevention effectiveness across different organizational types. NGOs report that projects funded for limited periods make it difficult to provide long-term support for individuals and families requiring extended reintegration processes and sustainable psycho-social support. Youth Organizations note that funding limitations prevent program expansion and development while forcing focus on short-term and limited projects, limiting long-term impact and intervention continuity. Public Institutions acknowledge that sustainable financing for long-term projects is essential for effective collaboration, recognizing that short-term project cycles limit joint prevention and rehabilitation effort effectiveness. Albanian organizations further note that limited resources affect not only program scope but also staff retention and technical capacity building, creating cascading effects on service quality and organizational stability that undermine prevention effectiveness over time.

Kosovo reveals specific dynamics around donor dependency that create perverse incentives and undermine systematic institutional commitment. Organizations note that major incentives for municipalities to cooperate with NGOs often involve having donor-supported projects, especially from prominent donors such as Embassies, suggesting that cooperation is externally motivated rather than systematically embedded in institutional priorities. VRSH emphasized that lack of sustainable funding and coordinated municipal strategy for sustainable civil society support represents their most significant obstacle, creating situations where without institutional grants or embedded municipal support, continuity and growth of successful initiatives are constantly at risk.

North Macedonia provides clear articulation of how funding cycles contradict fundamental prevention principles. Organizations emphasize that programs funded for only 12-18 months cause interruptions in community presence and weaken trust-building with youth, particularly problematic in sensitive fields like PVE where trust-building and continuity are crucial for effectiveness. The research shows that effective prevention requires sustained relationship-building, yet current funding structures systematically prevent this through their short-term, project-based nature.

All three countries document similar cascading effects from funding instability that compound challenges beyond immediate resource constraints. These include inability to maintain consistent community presence, staff retention difficulties, limited technical capacity building, and erosion of community trust.

Functional Coordination with Implementation Variations

All three countries maintain coordination mechanisms but face implementation challenges that vary by context. Albania has established frameworks through the CVE CENTER and Regional Committees while experiencing 'lack of multi-stakeholder cooperation and trust among central and local state actors.' Kosovo operates through Municipal Community Safety Councils with positive ministerial cooperation, though cooperation often depends on donor engagement. North Macedonia faces recognition difficulties and institutional turnover that disrupts partnerships, requiring sustained capacity building rather than representing coordination failure.

Albania operates systematic coordination through the CVE CENTER and 12 Regional Committees, though implementation reveals variations where some public institutions report established collaboration while others indicate developing cooperation frameworks.

Kosovo maintains coordination through Municipal Community Safety Councils (MCSC) that bring together security sectors, ethnic and religious communities, and youth organizations, while also experiencing informal cooperation patterns dependent on local relationships and donor engagement.

North Macedonia shows emerging coordination frameworks with considerable implementation challenges, including frequent institutional turnover and recognition difficulties that require sustained relationship-building efforts.

These patterns indicate that coordination challenges stem from varying degrees of implementation capacity and institutional stability rather than absence of systematic frameworks, though North Macedonia requires more fundamental capacity building in coordination mechanisms. These coordination patterns reflect institutional maturity stages: Albania's variations occur within established frameworks (implementation challenges), Kosovo's informality works because of strong civil society capacity (adaptation strength), while North Macedonia's challenges stem from recent policy development without corresponding institutional capacity (foundational capacity gaps).

Regional Patterns and Critical Insights

Distinct Threat Landscapes Requiring Adapted Responses

Rather than convergent threat evolution, the three countries demonstrate distinct threat landscapes requiring different prevention approaches adapted to specific national contexts, institutional capacities, and historical experiences.

Albania faces complex vulnerabilities stemming from its socio-political history, including aftermath of communism's collapse, the Kosovo conflict, and influence from foreign religious movements. The country experiences challenges related to political instability, economic hardship, and spread of radical ideologies from neighboring countries and the Middle East. Data from high-risk municipalities reveals that many youths feel left behind, underrepresented, and without real opportunities to influence community life, creating vulnerability to extremist narratives. While most Albanians oppose engagement in foreign armed conflicts, concerns persist about political corruption, foreign religious influences, and skepticism about global engagement, with some viewing international structures as tools for Western dominance over Muslim countries. Prevention approaches must address multiple risk factors simultaneously, including socio-economic marginalization, institutional trust deficits, and foreign influence operations.

Kosovo provides data of perceptible shift from religious extremism to ethno-political radicalization, with the 2012-2015 period marking peak religious extremism when around 400 Kosovo citizens joined armed groups in Syria and Iraq. Contemporary risks increasingly feature divisive nationalist rhetoric, historical revisionism, and hate speech targeting ethnic communities, particularly affecting youth who engage with polarizing online content or feel disconnected from formal civic structures. Research reveals this shift in Kosovar public security concerns from religious extremism to ethno-political radicalization, with extremist religious ideologies continuing to pose localized challenges in rural pockets like Ferizaj, while broader threats stem from political polarization and digital disinformation campaigns.

North Macedonia represents systematic policy development addressing distinct challenges related to ethnic diversity and intercultural tensions in municipalities like Tetovo and Çair, which share predominantly Albanian populations as minority communities facing similar socio-economic challenges. The country's approach emphasizes youth inclusion through frameworks such as UN Security Council Resolutions 2250 and 2419, with the National Strategy (2023-2027) including 12 activities directly related to youth empowerment. Organizations demonstrate sophisticated intercultural programming that addresses ethnic diversity challenges through creative engagement, peace education, and interfaith dialogue, requiring specialized approaches rather than traditional security-focused counter-extremism models.

Emerging Digital and Hybrid Threats represent shared regional challenges requiring coordinated responses, though manifestation and impact vary across contexts. The SMIDGE report emphasizes how far-right narratives in Southeastern Europe increasingly merge with ethnic grievances, conspiracy theories, and nostalgia for authoritarianism.¹ Kosovo faces weaponization of misinformation and conspiracy theories through platforms like Telegram, YouTube, and gaming forums. Albania addresses digital literacy needs through counter-narrative development and critical thinking programs. North Macedonia organizations like Mikrofoli create dynamic media platforms empowering youth engagement with sensitive topics through

¹ Ramadan Ilazi. (2025). Webinar Report. SMIDGE Project, https://www.smidgeproject.eu/files/ugd/e2c6f4_48a8b18920cc4c0493f15b9dd61e9beb.pdf

positive online engagement, while LOJA illustrates creative approaches combining public art with digital advocacy.

Demographic Vulnerabilities show both convergent and distinct patterns. While youth remain at risk across all countries, research in Kosovo shows middle-aged individuals (45-65) are increasingly vulnerable due to economic precarity, cultural dislocation, and low digital literacy. Gender-sensitive analysis, particularly highlighted in Kosovo, reveals how masculinity and femininity intersect differently with radicalization. Kosovo research notes that traditional gender roles remain influential in that context, while Albania demonstrates strong gender-focused prevention programming, requiring civil society across the region to elevate young women as both participants and leaders in resilience-building initiatives.

Funding Landscapes: Different Contexts Requiring Distinct Approaches

The three countries operate within different funding realities that directly shape prevention approaches, sustainability patterns, and institutional development trajectories. These different funding contexts create distinct operational realities: Albania's EU integration funding enables systematic institutional development, Kosovo's donor dependency creates externally motivated cooperation patterns rather than local priorities, while North Macedonia's institutional instability forces organizations to repeatedly rebuild partnerships rather than deepening prevention work, requiring distinct strategies rather than uniform regional funding approaches.

Albania operates within an EU integration funding context that provides some institutional support streams, though Albanian civil society still faces the same sustainability challenges documented across all three countries. The country receives €64.5 million under the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans to support institutional resilience, rule of law, youth empowerment, and education as key pillars for long-term P/CVE efforts. This funding supports comprehensive institutional development spanning multiple ministries with clearly defined roles: Ministry of Interior for counter-terrorism coordination, Ministry of Justice for legal reforms and returnee management through specialized terrorism courts, Ministry of Health for community-based mental health programs, and Ministry of Education for P/CVE curriculum integration. The EU has pledged over €920 million in financial assistance under the Reform and Growth Facility, with Albania's prevention work structurally linked to broader governance reform processes and EU accession conditionality, creating political incentives for sustained institutional commitment beyond individual leadership changes. However, Albanian civil society still faces sustainability challenges. NGOs report that projects are often funded for limited periods, making it difficult to provide long-term support for individuals and families requiring extended reintegration processes. Youth Organizations report funding limitations preventing program expansion and forcing focus on short-term projects, limiting long-term impact and intervention continuity. Public Institutions acknowledge that sustainable financing for long-term projects is essential for effective collaboration, recognizing that short-term project cycles limit joint prevention and rehabilitation effectiveness.

Kosovo reveals donor dependency patterns where municipal cooperation often correlates with prominent donor engagement, creating external motivation for institutional cooperation while limiting autonomous development. Most youth organizations rely on short-term project grants from international donors, with little to no core support from municipalities. Kosovo's funding challenges are compounded by its disputed international status, which limits access to certain international funding mechanisms and formal EU integration pathways. Organizations struggle with chronic funding insecurity, with programs depending heavily on short-term project funding and volunteer work. Without reliable municipal or institutional backing,

successful initiatives like Rin'ON's rural outreach or VRSH's intercultural youth forums risk burnout and discontinuity despite proven value.

North Macedonia faces funding challenges compounded by institutional turnover that disrupts partnership continuity, requiring different sustainability strategies focused on relationship building and capacity development. Organizations emphasize that programs funded for only 12-18 months cause interruptions in community presence and weaken trust-building with youth, particularly problematic in sensitive fields like PVE where trust-building and continuity are crucial for effectiveness. Frequent turnover of local governance structures disrupts ongoing collaborations and hinders institutionalization of youth and community-based initiatives. When municipal leadership or key personnel change, previously functional partnerships often dissolve, requiring NGOs to re-establish contact and renegotiate terms from the beginning. Several NGOs report difficulties in being recognized as legitimate partners by local authorities, particularly in municipalities where relationships with civil society are underdeveloped. Organizations working actively in education or youth engagement receive little to no support or acknowledgment from municipal departments. Most NGOs rely heavily on short-term donor funding, making it difficult to implement long-term strategies or maintain consistent presence in communities. Organizations face limited technical expertise or specialized knowledge challenges, with well-meaning interventions by underprepared actors sometimes having unintended consequences, underlining the need for deeper training and capacity development.

Regional Funding Implications suggest that coordination should accommodate different sustainability strategies rather than assuming equivalent funding challenges across countries. Albania's EU integration pathway provides models for systematic institutional funding that could inform approaches in Kosovo and North Macedonia. Kosovo's donor engagement patterns offer insights into leveraging international support while building autonomous capacity. North Macedonia's institutional development challenges highlight the importance of capacity building and partnership continuity support in emerging prevention frameworks.

Critical Analytical Insights: Institutional Development and Regional Learning Implications

The three countries represent distinct institutional development approaches with important implications for regional learning and capacity building approaches. Rather than representing a developmental sequence, each country's approach reflects strategic choices and adaptation patterns that offer insights for understanding prevention of ecosystem development across the Western Balkans. Albania has developed comprehensive policy frameworks while facing implementation variations, Kosovo maintains functional coordination mechanisms alongside civil society innovation, and North Macedonia is building institutional frameworks while addressing capacity and recognition challenges.

Albania's Comprehensive Framework Model: Integration with Implementation Variations

Albania's institutional framework exhibits systematic policy development supported by EU integration incentives, though implementation reveals meaningful institutional capacity variations. This model's strength lies in systematic policy alignment where prevention work directly supports EU integration conditionality, creating political incentives for sustained institutional commitment beyond individual leadership changes. The early tranche funding under the Reform and Growth Facility demonstrates how prevention can be structurally linked to development funding, potentially providing sustainability mechanisms that project-based approaches cannot achieve.

However, the Albanian model also reveals implementation complexity where sophisticated frameworks require corresponding municipal capacity. The analysis conducted shows important variations in collaboration quality across different institutional units, with some reporting established partnerships while others indicate minimal cooperation, suggesting that comprehensive frameworks alone do not guarantee consistent implementation without systematic capacity building and coordination mechanisms at all levels.

Kosovo's Institutional Adaptation: Innovation Alongside Functional Mechanisms

Kosovo demonstrates a pragmatic prevention ecosystem where capable civil society organizations have developed sophisticated approaches alongside variable institutional coordination. While Municipal Community Safety Councils provide systematic frameworks and ministerial cooperation with civil society exist, implementation varies across localities. Organizations like Rin'ON and VRSH have developed effective prevention approaches that both fill institutional gaps and complement existing coordination mechanisms where they function well.

This pattern illustrates how strong civil society can maintain prevention effectiveness across varying institutional contexts, though sustainability remains vulnerable to external funding dependencies. The documented reduction in systematic central government engagement from 2016-2018, combined with donor-motivated municipal cooperation, has created a prevention ecosystem that relies heavily on civil society innovation while lacking the institutional embedding necessary for long-term sustainability.

The Kosovo experience reveals both the adaptability and structural vulnerabilities of civil society-led prevention approaches. Organizations demonstrate remarkable capacity to build community trust and deliver effective interventions, but their dependency on project-based funding and donor-motivated cooperation creates fragility. When municipal cooperation occurs primarily because donors are involved, the prevention ecosystem remains vulnerable to external priorities rather than being anchored in systematic institutional commitment.

North Macedonia's Comprehensive Civil Society Innovation: Beyond Direct PVE Programming

North Macedonia highlights that effective prevention extends beyond organizations with explicit PVE mandates to include comprehensive approaches addressing structural vulnerabilities to radicalization. While Pleiades provides direct PVE programming, organizations like LOJA (cultural programming and peace education), Mikrofon (media engagement and youth expression), FECH (civic education and democratic participation), and others contribute to prevention through evidence-based approaches addressing exclusion, marginalization, and identity formation.

These organizations systematically track community engagement, participant feedback, and behavioral changes to demonstrate their prevention impact on resilience and social cohesion. This comprehensive ecosystem suggests that prevention effectiveness may depend more on coordinated multi-organization approaches than on individual organization PVE specialization.

The country's experience reveals how institutional instability (frequent governance turnover, partnership dissolution requiring relationship re-establishment) can undermine prevention effectiveness despite appropriate policy frameworks. Organizations report that previously functional partnerships often dissolve when municipal leadership changes, requiring repeated investment in relationship building rather than deepening prevention work.

Best Practices with Regional Transfer Potential-Economic Empowerment Integration Models

Albania's vocational training approaches demonstrate documented effectiveness within its specific context that provides frameworks for adapted replication where similar socio-economic vulnerabilities exist. The model combining soap-making and artisanal crafts training shows positive outcomes including reported increases in income, self-confidence, and community engagement among women returned from conflict zones. This addresses socio-economic drivers of radicalization through concrete skill development while building sustained relationship-building with vulnerable populations, representing an approach that could be adapted to different economic settings and target populations across the region with appropriate modifications for local conditions.

The integration includes small grants and self-employment support as methods to prevent marginalization and radicalization, demonstrating how addressing socio-economic vulnerabilities can be systematically integrated with community inclusion approaches. Economic empowerment works as prevention through a triple mechanism: practical skills reduce socio-economic vulnerability (addressing push factors), successful completion builds self-efficacy (psychological resilience), and group training creates positive social networks (alternative belonging). This explains why Albania's approach shows simultaneous impact across income, confidence, and community engagement. The findings show that when economic empowerment is combined with psychosocial support and community engagement, the impact on prevention effectiveness is enhanced compared to approaches that address these factors in isolation.

Cross-Border Youth Collaboration Frameworks

The Youth-based regional podcast initiative represents a model for cross-border collaboration that addresses shared regional challenges. By bringing together young people from Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia to address digital violence, this approach demonstrates how regional cooperation can address shared challenges like online extremism while building youth capacity for critical engagement with emerging threats. The model provides frameworks for systematic cross-border youth engagement that could be scaled across different thematic areas and expanded to include additional organizations and municipalities.

This cross-border approach reveals how shared cultural and linguistic contexts can be leveraged to address common challenges while building regional solidarity among youth populations. The initiative shows how digital platforms can be used to facilitate meaningful dialogue across borders, providing models for addressing shared regional threats through collaborative youth engagement rather than isolated national responses.

Peer-to-Peer Support System Innovation

Kosovo's peer-to-peer models show evidence of positive outcomes across different organizational landscapes. Evidence shows that peer support groups and self-confidence training produce positive outcomes. This provides a framework for systematic regional implementation, particularly given shared cultural and linguistic contexts that facilitate peer communication and trust-building.

The peer-to-peer approach demonstrates particular effectiveness in addressing trust barriers that formal institutions may face, with organizations consistently reporting that horizontal support relationships prove

more effective than traditional vertical intervention models. This suggests that peer-to-peer frameworks could be adapted across different cultural settings in the region while maintaining their core effectiveness principles.

Participatory Programming Methodologies

Albania's systematic approach to participatory programming, where young people serve as co-creators from ideation through implementation and evaluation, show indication of behavioral changes and could be systematically adapted across the region. The methodology highlights how shifting from youth as passive recipients to active co-creators can increase program effectiveness while building youth agency and community engagement.

The participatory approach includes preliminary consultations, focus groups, and systematic youth involvement throughout program cycles, providing detailed frameworks for ensuring meaningful youth participation rather than tokenistic engagement. The findings suggest that when young people are genuinely empowered as decision-makers, prevention programs achieve greater sustainability and impact compared to approaches where youth participation is limited to implementation phases.

Cultural and Intercultural Programming Excellence

North Macedonia's innovative cultural programming approaches demonstrate strong social cohesion outcomes that provide frameworks for regional replication. LOJA's programs spark meaningful discussions on human rights while building intercultural competence, and Mikrofon's platform combats isolation while validating youth voices. These approaches address identity formation and belonging needs, which could contribute to protective factors, though they are not positioned as direct PVE interventions.

The cultural programming approaches show particular effectiveness in addressing ethnic diversity challenges through creative engagement rather than traditional dialogue formats, providing models for intercultural prevention work that could be adapted across different ethnic and cultural milieux in the region.

Municipality-Youth Organization Partnership Models

Albania's Municipality-Youth Council cooperation models provide documented frameworks for systematic partnership that could be replicated across different municipalities. The partnerships demonstrate joint programming, resource sharing, and systematic engagement approaches that strengthen community resilience while providing concrete cooperation models for other municipalities.

The partnership model includes clear protocols for collaboration, defined roles and responsibilities, and mechanisms for youth involvement in municipal decision-making processes, providing detailed frameworks for institutionalizing youth-municipal cooperation beyond informal relationships.

Systematic Coordination Mechanism Models

Albania's CVE CENTER coordination of 12 Regional Committees provides documented frameworks for systematic multi-level coordination that could be adapted across the region. This represents a **top-down coordination model** where central-level strategic direction flows through regional implementation structures. At the same time, Kosovo's Municipal Community Safety Councils demonstrate alternative but

effective local-level coordination bringing together diverse stakeholders while maintaining functionality through a **bottom-up coordination approach** supported by positive central government cooperation with civil society organizations.

These systematic coordination approaches show two distinct models for institutionalizing prevention coordination: Albania's **centralized coordination with regional implementation** (top-down flow from CVE CENTER through 12 Regional Committees) versus Kosovo's **locally driven coordination with central support** (bottom-up municipal councils backed by ministerial cooperation). This provides valuable options for adaptation to different governance contexts across the region, where countries with strong central institutions might benefit from Albania's top-down model, while those with robust local governance structures could leverage Kosovo's bottom-up approach.

Recommendations

For Policy Makers and Local Institutions

Establish Systematic Funding Mechanisms for Civil Society Prevention Work

Governments across all three countries should move beyond project-based funding cycles toward sustainable, multi-year institutional grants that enable civil society organizations to maintain consistent community presence and build long-term relationships essential for prevention effectiveness. This includes creating dedicated budget lines for prevention work within municipal budgets, establishing competitive but multi-year grant programs, and developing co-financing mechanisms that combine international donor support with government funding to ensure sustainability.

The feedback from all three countries indicates that current short-term funding cycles systematically undermine the relationship-building that all stakeholders identify as crucial for prevention effectiveness. Albania's experience with EU integration funding provides models for systematic institutional funding that could inform approaches in Kosovo and North Macedonia.

Institutionalize Municipality-Youth Organization Partnership Frameworks

Based on Albania's successful Municipality-Youth Council cooperation models, policy makers should develop formal frameworks for systematic partnership between local authorities and youth organizations. This includes establishing clear protocols for joint programming, resource sharing, and youth involvement in municipal decision-making processes. Municipalities should designate youth focal points, create regular consultation mechanisms, and develop partnership agreements that outline roles, responsibilities, and mutual accountability between local government and civil society actors.

The partnership frameworks should move beyond informal cooperation toward systematic engagement that provides predictable support for civil society's specialized capabilities while ensuring youth organizations have genuine influence in municipal prevention planning and implementation.

Develop Regional Coordination Mechanisms and Learning Platforms

Policy makers should establish formal regional cooperation frameworks that enable systematic learning exchange and coordination between Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. This includes creating regional working groups on prevention, establishing formal information sharing protocols, and developing joint training programs for municipal officials and civil society actors.

Regional coordination should accommodate different sustainability strategies rather than assuming equivalent funding challenges across countries, building on Albania's institutional integration model, Kosovo's civil society innovation capacity, and North Macedonia's emerging systematic development while addressing the unique constraints each country faces.

Integrate Prevention Considerations into Youth Policy and Education Reform

Governments should systematically integrate prevention considerations into broader youth policy frameworks and education sector reforms rather than treating prevention as a separate policy area. This includes incorporating critical thinking, media literacy, and conflict resolution into national curricula, training teachers and school officials to recognize and respond to early warning signs, and developing school-based programs that address exclusion, discrimination, and social marginalization.

The integration should ensure that prevention approaches address the specific threat landscapes documented in each country: Albania's complex socio-political vulnerabilities, Kosovo's ethno-political radicalization concerns, and North Macedonia's ethnic diversity challenges.

Strengthen Municipal Capacity for Prevention Coordination

Local institutions should invest in capacity building for municipal officials responsible for prevention coordination, including training on multi-stakeholder engagement, community-based approaches, and evidence-based programming. This includes establishing clear roles and responsibilities for prevention coordination within municipal structures and creating mechanisms for regular assessment and adaptation of local prevention efforts. The capacity building should focus on strengthening existing coordination mechanisms rather than creating new structures, building on Albania's CVE CENTER and Regional Committees model, Kosovo's Municipal Community Safety Councils, and North Macedonia's emerging local coordination frameworks.

For NGOs and Youth Organizations

Develop Systematic Impact Measurement and Evidence Building Capacities

Organizations across all three countries should invest in developing comprehensive impact measurement frameworks that document prevention effectiveness and build evidence for advocacy and scaling purposes. Organizations should develop standardized measurement tools, establish baseline data collection systems, and create regular reporting mechanisms that demonstrate concrete outcomes of prevention programming. The evidence building should address the varying levels of evaluation sophistication across countries, with Albania's systematic approaches providing models for Kosovo and North Macedonia organizations while all countries work to strengthen longitudinal impact assessment capabilities.

Build Strategic Partnership Networks and Coordination Mechanisms

NGOs and youth organizations should establish formal coordination mechanisms and strategic partnership networks to address the coordination gaps and duplication of efforts identified across all three countries. This includes creating umbrella networks or consortiums for prevention-focused organizations, developing joint advocacy strategies, and establishing regular information sharing platforms. The coordination mechanisms should build on successful informal cooperation already occurring between organizations while addressing the lack of stable communication channels that leads to overlapping efforts and gaps in coverage.

Integrate Economic Empowerment Components into Prevention Programming

Organizations in Kosovo and North Macedonia should explore integration of economic empowerment components into prevention programming, adapting Albania's documented approaches that address socio-economic drivers of radicalization to their specific contexts and existing programming strengths. This includes developing skill-building programs, creating links with local businesses for employment opportunities, and incorporating entrepreneurship training into youth programming.

The economic empowerment integration should be adapted to different circumstances, with Kosovo organizations leveraging their rural community engagement and North Macedonia organizations building on their cultural programming strengths.

Enhance Gender-Sensitive Programming and Women's Leadership Development

Organizations should systematically integrate gender considerations into prevention programming, building on Albania's comprehensive approaches that emphasize women and girls as key actors in building secure communities. This includes developing specialized programs for women and girls, training staff on gender-sensitive approaches, and creating leadership development opportunities. The gender-sensitive programming should address how masculinity and femininity intersect differently with radicalization across the three countries, with particular attention to traditional gender roles in Kosovo and North Macedonia.

Develop Sustainable Advocacy Strategies for Institutional Recognition

Organizations should develop systematic advocacy strategies that promote recognition of civil society contributions to prevention and push for sustainable funding mechanisms. This includes documenting organizational impact for advocacy purposes, developing joint advocacy campaigns across organizations, and engaging in systematic dialogue with policy makers about the essential roles that civil society plays in prevention efforts. Advocacy should emphasize that civil society actors serve as essential intermediaries rather than supplementary actors, with government agencies across all three countries acknowledging their important complementary capacity.

For Regional Cooperation and International Partners

Support Regional Learning Networks and Knowledge Exchange Platforms

International partners should invest in creating and sustaining regional learning networks that enable systematic knowledge exchange and capacity building across the Western Balkans. This includes funding regional conferences, study visits, and exchange programs that enable organizations and officials to learn from each other's experiences. The learning networks should facilitate transfer of successful models such as Albania's economic empowerment integration, Kosovo's peer-to-peer support systems, and North Macedonia's cultural programming approaches.

Develop Flexible, Multi-Year Funding Mechanisms for Civil Society

International donors should move away from short-term, project-based funding toward flexible, multi-year grants that enable organizations to build sustained relationships and maintain consistent community presence essential for prevention effectiveness. This includes developing trust-based funding mechanisms

that reduce administrative burdens and creating core support funding that enables organizational sustainability. The funding mechanisms should accommodate different contexts: Albania's EU integration funding environment, Kosovo's donor dependency challenges, and North Macedonia's institutional turnover disruptions.

Invest in Evidence Building and Research Capacities

International partners should support systematic research and evidence building that documents what works in prevention across the region and enable evidence-based policy development. This includes funding longitudinal studies that track prevention programming effectiveness over time and support the development of standardized measurement tools and methodologies. The research support should address the varying evaluation of sophistication levels across countries while building regional evidence bases that can inform policy development and program scaling.

Facilitate Policy Dialogue and Institutional Learning

International partners should create platforms for systematic policy dialogue between governments across the region that enables learning from different institutional approaches and promotes harmonization of prevention frameworks. This includes supporting regular policy forums, facilitating study visits for government officials, and providing technical assistance for institutional development. The policy dialogue should focus on leveraging each country's institutional strengths: Albania's comprehensive framework development, Kosovo's functional coordination mechanisms, and North Macedonia's emerging systematic approaches.

Support Innovation and Scaling of Successful Models

International partners should identify and support scaling of successful prevention models with demonstrated effectiveness across the region. This includes providing targeted support for replication of successful partnership models like Albania's Municipality-Youth Council cooperation, Kosovo's peer-to-peer support systems, and North Macedonia's cultural programming innovations. The scaling support should include adaptation frameworks that enable successful models to be modified for different environments while maintaining their core effectiveness principles.

Address Emerging Regional Threats Through Coordinated Responses

International partners should support coordinated regional responses to emerging threats such as digital disinformation, hybrid ideological movements, and changing demographic vulnerabilities. This includes funding joint initiatives that address shared challenges while building regional capacity for anticipatory rather than reactive prevention approaches. The coordinated responses should build on existing regional cooperation frameworks while developing new mechanisms for addressing threats that transcend national boundaries and require collaborative regional approaches.

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

This comparative analysis reveals that youth organizations and NGOs across Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have evolved into essential prevention actors contributing to community-level resilience building. These organizations have developed specialized approaches that government institutions struggle to replicate, particularly in building trust within vulnerable communities, providing peer-to-peer engagement, and addressing sensitive dimensions of extremism prevention.

The research reveals notable convergence in effective approaches across the three countries. Organizations consistently demonstrate impact through participatory programming where youth serve as co-creators, peer-to-peer support systems that show positive outcomes compared to traditional institutional methods, and integrated approaches combining economic empowerment with community inclusion. Successful models feature youth leadership, varying levels of systematic evaluation approaches, and measurable behavioral changes regarding violence and discrimination.

However, this potential remains constrained by systemic challenges that create prevention landscapes operating below capacity despite individual organizational competence. All three countries struggle with funding sustainability that undermines long-term relationship-building, though each operates within different funding contexts requiring distinct approaches. Coordination occurs through functional mechanisms alongside implementation variations rather than systematic coordination failure, suggesting that strengthening and formalizing existing frameworks may be more effective than creating new structures.

The analysis reveals that rather than convergent threat evolution, the three countries demonstrate distinct threat landscapes requiring different prevention approaches adapted to specific national settings. Albania faces complex socio-political vulnerabilities requiring multi-factor approaches, Kosovo shows documented shift from religious to ethno-political radicalization, and North Macedonia addresses ethnic diversity challenges through specialized intercultural programming.

The Essential Role of Civil Society in Regional Prevention

The convergent data from the three countries suggests that youth organizations and NGOs are not supplementary actors but essential intermediaries whose specialized capabilities contribute to effective prevention work. These organizations serve as critical bridges between government initiatives and community needs, with government agencies across all three countries acknowledging their important complementary capacity.

Their effectiveness stems from combinations of trust-building capacity, community contextual understanding, and specialized service delivery that formal institutions cannot easily replicate. Albanian organizations demonstrate that success in working with returnees requires sustained field presence and empathy that formal institutions often cannot provide. Kosovo's organizations serve as trusted platforms especially in rural areas where state institutions may face credibility challenges. North Macedonia organizations create safe environments for engaging with sensitive topics in politically complex contexts.

Gender-focused prevention leadership addresses dimensions of extremism that traditional approaches miss, while peer-to-peer engagement methods demonstrate effectiveness compared to institutional alternatives across all three Western Balkan countries. The observed results show that when young people

are empowered as decision-makers and program co-creators rather than passive recipients, prevention programming achieves greater sustainability and impact.

Pathways for Enhanced Regional Cooperation

The analysis reveals significant opportunities for enhanced regional cooperation that could transform individual organizational competence into coordinated regional approaches. Successful models demonstrate potential for replication across borders, particularly around participatory youth programming, economic empowerment integration, and cross-border collaboration on digital threats.

The three countries represent different institutional development approaches that offer complementary learning opportunities: Albania's comprehensive framework model provides systematic coordination templates, Kosovo's civil society innovation illustrates how effective prevention can emerge from community-level initiatives, and North Macedonia's emerging framework offers insights for policy development and implementation sequencing.

Effective regional cooperation requires systematic knowledge exchange platforms, coordinated responses to emerging threats, and sustainable funding mechanisms that support long-term capacity building. The shared challenges and convergent approaches documented across all three countries provide strong foundations for developing regional frameworks that leverage complementary strengths while addressing systematic barriers.

Strategic Priorities for Sustainable Impact

Success depends on recognizing that effective prevention requires sustained relationship-building rather than project-based interventions, transforming the current ecosystem of individual organizational competence into coordinated national and regional approaches. This transformation requires political commitment to treating civil society engagement as essential infrastructure rather than optional partnership, with corresponding investment in systematic frameworks that support rather than constrain specialized organizational capabilities. The path forward demands moving from reactive crisis-response approaches to proactive prevention frameworks that integrate economic empowerment with community engagement, scaling successful models while addressing systemic barriers that currently prevent the ecosystem from reaching its full potential.

Regional cooperation should focus on consolidating learning, coordinating responses to evolving threats, and advocating for sustainable funding mechanisms that enable the long-term relationship-building all stakeholders identify as crucial for success. The distinct funding contexts across the three countries suggest that regional coordination should accommodate different sustainability strategies rather than assuming equivalent challenges, building on each country's advantages while addressing specific constraints.

The data corroborates that youth and civil society actors across Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia are already serving as the backbone of effective prevention efforts. Through their documented initiatives and measurable impacts, these organizations have already begun transforming the regional prevention landscape from fragmented individual efforts into more coordinated approaches, demonstrating that with systematic support and sustained investment, this transformation toward coherent, effective frameworks for building resilient communities can be further strengthened and scaled.

