

## IN THIS ISSUE:

- Find out more about our high profile public event: **'Assessing the risks to regional and global security: the emergence of a new radical Islamic influence in Albania and the Western Balkans'**, in "Highlight", pg 1-4.
- AIIS hosts the event **'Dealing with the Past' bringing the experience of the Czech Republic'**, Read more in "Our events", pg 2.
- **Albanian Greek relations in print media** are discussed in AIIS and FES national conference. This project is carried out together with our partner in Athens, ELIAMEP. Read more in "Our events", pg 5.
- Our experts travel to Ankara to join the regional discussions about rising radicalism in the Balkans, read more in pg 3.
- AIIS finalizes the media **monitoring report on coverage of Greece and bilateral issues between Albania and Greece** and presents the findings in national conference, more information at pg 5.

## **AIIS** Albanian Institute for International Studies

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# AIIS Newsletter

4 / July 2015

## Highlight

## 'Assessing the risks to regional and global security: the emergence of a new radical Islamic influence in Albania and the Western Balkans' International Conference

On May 27, the Albanian Institute for International Studies held its annual security conference, focusing on the new and concerning reality of increasing religious radicalism in Albania and in the wider Western Balkans region. The conference was organized jointly with the U.S. Embassy in Tirana and supported by the NATO Public Diplomacy Division. This event gathered decision makers, experts, researchers, Muslim Community officials and theologians as well as a wide audience of civil society, diplomatic community members and national authorities.

Minister of Interior Affairs Saimir Tahiri highlighted that Albania just like any other country is not immune to the threat that religious radicalism and extremism manifested mainly through the



issue of foreign fighters. Minister Tahiri mentioned the engagement of the executive with the assistance of the U.S. State Department to step up the efforts of combating

the phenomena. Commenting on the latest Albanian citizen to be killed on the front, Tahiri said that he was among the fighters

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who had become disillusioned with the extremists and wanted to return home, but he was trapped in the conflict and punished. The minister invited civil society actors to contribute to the drafting of the new and comprehensive strategy that the Albanian government is going to compile for this specific issue.

U.S. Ambassador to Albania Donald Lu started his speech by congratulating the engagement of the Albanian government on this matter, which as he said can be taken as an example to other countries. Ambassador Lu also gave a brief but concerning panorama

of various terrorist organizations' crimes around the globe. In his remarks, Ambassador Lu noted that "I share Albania's dream of a Europe whole, free and at peace. ISIS and other extremist groups threaten that dream. We must not delay in rising to meet this challenge. And we cannot leave this work to our children's generation."

The first panel of the conference gathered researchers and experts from the region and presented their assessment of what is going on in each specific country.

AIIS researcher Ebi Spahiu, recognizing the difficulty of drawing a profile for foreign fighters, gave some prominent features observed

in the research such as the age of Albanians travelling to Syria which is higher than average, being mainly in the 30s. She emphasized the increasing presence of women and children that have also traveled to the region as part of "family jihad," affecting the lives of children as young as two and as old as 15 years of age. Compared to several foreign fighters from western European countries that have joined extremist groups, such as ISIS, citizens from Albania have joined with their family members. In addition, she gave a brief mapping of the most affected areas where most foreign fighters have traveled from, which are mostly in central Albania, but other cities in northern and southern Albania have been affected as well. She also observed that a significant number of individuals have also been exposed to Western lifestyles. From secondary testimonies during field interviews, she found that a few of the recruits had been long-time immigrants in neighboring Italy, Greece and due to the EU economic crisis and increasing unemployment in these countries they had returned home to Albania to an environment that offers few opportunities and sense of belonging for them, leaving a vacuum for radical ideologies to take hold. She also explained the role of the Muslim Community of Albania in countering radical religious narratives, but also pointed out that a lot of the initiatives have not been enough because different religious waves have a stronger presence in mosques and social media propaganda tools that target Albanian-speaking audiences.

Serbian sociologist Srdjan Barisic made a very interesting presentation on the two kinds of radicalism in Serbia, first that of the extreme right wing groups displaying nationalist sentiments while being associated strongly with the Serbian Orthodox Church and adopting a lot of religious symbolism in their logos and slogans. Barisic also described the dual Muslim Community in Serbia with two centers, one in Belgrade

## OUR EVENTS:



- AIIS hosted the first lecture of its series 'Dealing with the past' bringing best practices from other former communism countries. On April 15 Director of the Czech Institute for Study of Totalitarian Regimes Zdeněk Hazdra, the Director of the Archive of Security Services Světlana Ptáčníková spoke to a selected audience about the work and challenges of their institutions and the society segments they work with.



-On 28.04.2015, the Albanian Institute for International Studies together with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation organized the conference: "Albania and Kosovo in quest of a common future". The event was attended by high ranking officials of both countries, who emphasized the main issues affecting the mutual relations between Albania and Kosovo and the possibilities for the advancement of these relations in the future. Further, researchers from AIIS and INDEP (Kosovo) presented the findings of their research papers on different aspects of Kosovo-Albania relations. (Full executive summary of the study shall be provided in the next newsletter)

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and the other in Novi Pazar which also adds to the complexity of the issue. Shpend Kursani from the Kosovo Center for Security Studies brought some interesting insights from a recent study that his think tank has published recently. Kursani highlighted the fact that although radicalism is a threat we should not lose sight of other threats who are after all the causes that produce the phenomenon. Kursani shared the fact that almost 40 percent of Kosovo people who have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the ranks of ISIS have had criminal pasts and convictions.

Metodi Hadji-Janev from Macedonia highlighted the importance of distinguishing between general push forces that drive people to extremism and factors that are very specific to the historical and current context in their countries and communities. Metodi Hadji-Janev also mentioned the importance of Internet, illustrating it with a survey done with secondary school pupils in Macedonia. One interesting element that the Macedonian scholar mentioned is the general confusion especially among youth who cannot differentiate between secular forces against the state in Syria and the religious extremist waging battle there.

Vlado Azinovic, a professor of University of explained the difficulties inherent in the complex system of authorities in Bosnia where there are several overlapping police forces make the phenomenon much more difficult to manage. Azinovic described two different groups of foreign fighters from Bosnia, the old fighters that participated in the Bosnian conflict in the 90's mainly in the Mujahedeen Unit and the second group of late teens seeking adrenaline and self-validation. Azinovic concluded on a call to do more since until now as he said 'we are failing the families, we are failing in the schools'. Even though de-radicalization is very difficult more can be done about prevention.

Jacob Zenn from the Jamestown



The Albanian Institute for International Studies organized in May and June of 2015 three regional academies with young participants from political party youth forums in the context of the implementation of the project "Bringing out the youth vote and engineering young bipartisanship in local elections: Regional Political Academy." In the forums participants had a chance to choose issues of common interest to them and their communities and present them to the candidates running for local office. A special event was organized with the participants of Korca academy who had the chance to present the issues and discuss with HE Ambassador of the United States to Albania,



The Netherlands Embassy in Albania in cooperation with the Albanian Institute for International Studies hosted a lecture at the European Information Center in Shkodra on women in politics. Ambassador Dewi van de Weerd stressed the need for positive policies to be implemented in the field of women's involvement in public life in Albania. The meeting was addressed also by the two running candidates for the mayor office, Keti Bazhdari from the Socialist Party and Voltana Ademi from the Democratic Party. Full speech of HE Dewi van de Weerdis available at <http://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=121646>

Foundation in Washington D.C. currently engaged in Nigeria stated that there are different groups in the world pledging their allegiance to ISIS. Further he explained that ISIS is using different propaganda

tools such as YouTube, social media, etc. Propaganda is spread through the use of Arabic, Central Asian Languages and among others Albanian. The second panel of the

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conference brought together some of the people that are dealing with issues of extremism and countering it in their daily engagements. Greeting the conference on behalf of NATO, Mikael Switkes made a comprehensive presentation of the international community's efforts and resources to aid the fight against extremism and address the security issues that derive from it. Switkes focused mostly on the projects and programs put together by the United Nations, OSCE and NATO itself which vary from research to field engagement.

The head of the State Committee on Cults, IlirHoxholli, focused in his address on Islamophobia and the alienation of moderate Muslims from the rest of the society through prejudice and discrimination. Hoxholli speaking on a case of a girl refused education on grounds of being covered claimed that refusing the basic constitutional rights to Muslims reinforces the arguments of extremists and causes a lot of societal harm. Hoxholli praised the organizers for inviting members of the Muslim community and well versed theologians, whose engagement is absolutely decisive in the fight against extremism. Isolating Muslims as a measure to secure their persistence of radicalization was a recurrent theme that all speakers agreed was one main issue to address in countering terrorism.

Former deputy head of the Albanian Muslim Community and a well-known theologian, Ermir Gjinishi, focused on the religious roots of the problem and highlighted the problems within the institution of the Albanian Muslim Community as the key to understanding and countering the radicalization and extremism in the country. Gjinishi contradicted the Interior Minister's declaration that the flow of foreign fighters from Albania has stopped, saying that to the present day boys even from Tiran are traveling to join ISIS.

Gjinishi proposed an approach to countering the phenomena of extremisms starting with the



theological treatment in order to make the tekfirm doctrine disappear. The head of the Muftiat Council of Elbasan and an active religious moderate figure, Arben Ramkaj, focused on the role of imams themselves in preventing and fighting radicalism. Ramkaj focused on the importance of bringing together the old and new imams who have received different education, with the new imams often in need to adapt their religious understanding to the traditional Albanian practices. Ramkaj mentioned the low level of education of the imams in general. Ramkaj has led several initiatives

such as the moderate newspaper 'Mendimi' (accessible online), together with his fellow community members he also organized a march on the occasion of the Charlie Hebdo massacre to counter the narrative of extremists using religion for such criminal acts.

AIIS Deputy Director Alba Cela concluding the event announced the plans of AIIS to build a regional coalition of expertise with the think tanks engaged in the issue in order to coordinate research and most importantly the policy recommendations that will help the state and society respond to the phenomenon.

## OTHER ACTIVITIES AND CONTRIBUTIONS:

On May 21-23 AIIS Deputy Director Alba Cela and Researcher Ebi Spahiu took part in the regional academic conference organized by International Strategic Research Organization (USAK) and the South East European Research Centre (GAMER) at the University of Ankara entitled "Rising Radicalism in the Balkans: A Threat for All?" held in Ankara University, Turkey. They held presentations about the current state of affairs of religious radicalism in Albania as well as more specifically for the issues of foreign fighters. Alba Cela authored an op-ed for the topic for the prestigious Turkish academic magazine 'Analist' also republished by the Journal of Turkish Weekly. Full conference report is available at: [http://www.usak.org.tr/usak\\_det.php?id=5&cat=1059&dil=ing#.VjyDE7erSM8](http://www.usak.org.tr/usak_det.php?id=5&cat=1059&dil=ing#.VjyDE7erSM8).

## Monitoring the Greek and the Albanian media as a window into the way mutual perceptions about the neighbor are constructed and promoted: The Albanian media

The Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS) and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) organized on June 9, 2015 the conference “Greece and the Albanian-Greek relations in the Albanian printed media 2014”. AIIS and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) in Greece, supported by FES, are conducting a joined study on the modalities of media reporting about the neighbouring country and people in both Albania and Greece. During this first conference, AIIS’s researcher SashenkaLleshaj presented the finding of the study on the Albanian media and the researcher from ELIAMEP, PanagiotisPaschalidis, outlined the primary findings from the Greek media as the project in Greece will be finished in autumn 2015

The monitoring of the Albanian media outlets was conducted over a period of seven months, from January 2014 to July 2014. This study analyzed a sample of 225 articles from three daily Albanian newspapers published in Albanian - Shqip, Panorama and Mapo– and one weekly Albanian newspaper published in English – Tirana Times. The study shows that the Albanian media is very sensitive towards news related to the Albanian-Greek relations given the fact that from the analyzed sample, 213 articles have been published by the three daily newspapers in 7 months, which means at least 10 articles per month/each on average. The report peaks in January, April and June were related to three issues in particular: (1) the Greek Presidency of the Council of EU and the bilateral high level visits between Albania and Greece; (2) the Kareli case: the killing of an Albanian prisoner in a Greek prison;



and (3) a mix of issues, although it is mainly related to the coverage of the administrative reform in Albania and the side implications this could have for the Greek minority in Albania. Other issues covered in a more balanced way throughout this seven months period were: the issue of the toponyms of birthplaces in the Albanian passports of Albanians born in Greece, the Cham issue and issues related to the Albanian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, from the analyzed sample it looks like the Albanian media widely covers political and socio-political issues which also demonstrate a hunt for sensational stories that would produce headlines and thus provoke reaction in the Albanian public opinion.

By using a basic content analysis the study divided articles in four main categories: positive connotation, neutral connotation, quasi-negative connotation and negative connotation

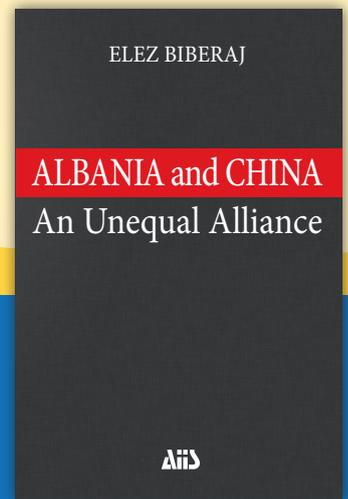
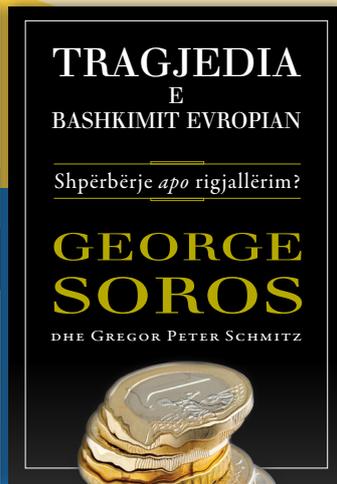
articles. The study found that results were mixed although the negative connotation articles were the biggest group with 35% of the sample. The neutral connotation articles represented 28% of the sample while the quasi-negative articles and the positive articles followed with 24% and 13% respectively.

Despite the above ‘negative’ picture, the study showed that reporting in the Albanian media was situational, depending on the specific case under consideration, and it varied considerably from case to case. Thus, this period saw the Albanian media moving from ‘happy’ stories to ‘bitter’ ones in a very short period as it was the case with the vastly positively covered Greek Presidency of the Council of EU and the bilateral visits in January and February (with 47% of articles having a positive connotation) to the vastly negatively covered Kareli case (with 68% of articles having a negative connotation) in March and April. In between these stories and all over the period other stories were covered mainly through a neutral connotation as it was the case with the issue of toponyms of birthplaces in the Albanian passports of Albanians born in Greece (45% of articles had a neutral connotation).

The study of ELIAMEP is still ongoing and a full report and a similar conference will follow in autumn 2015.



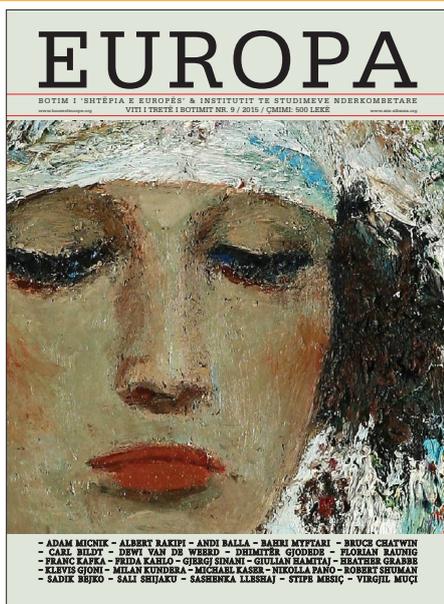
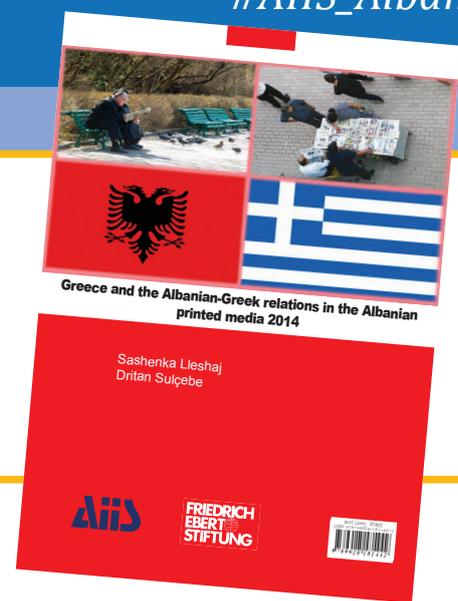
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## Research and publications

“Greece and Albanian-Greek relations in the Albanian print media 2014”



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