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Albania's counter-terrorism policy in the face of evolving terrorist threats

Albańska polityka antyterrorystyczna w obliczu ewoluujących zagrożeń terrorystycznych

Abstract: This topic explores the dynamic landscape of terrorist threats in Albania and delves into the country's counter-terrorism policies. Analysing the evolving nature of these threats, the discussion will focus on Albania's strategic initiatives, cooperation, and existing institutions. By analysing the multifaceted dimensions of Albania's counter-terrorism efforts, this study aims to shed light on the country's commitment to protecting its citizens and contributing to global security. The aim of the article is to analyse the terrorist threat in Albania and the anti-terrorist policy pursued. Two research methods were used in the article, i.e. the institutional-legal method and the content analysis method. Both methods allowed the analysis of selected normative acts and the selection of institutions dedicated to the fight against terrorism. With the use of a selected content analysis relating to the developing situation in Albania in recent years, the author indicates the reasons for the occurrence of possible terrorist threats and evaluates whether Albania is a country with a low terrorist threat.

Keywords: Albania, terrorism, radicalization, religion

Streszczenie: Temat ten bada dynamiczny krajobraz zagrożeń terrorystycznych w Albanii i zagłębia się w politykę antyterrorystyczną tego kraju. Analizując ewoluujący charakter tych zagrożeń, dyskusja skupi się na strategicznych inicjatywach Albanii, współpracy i istniejących instytucjach. Analizując wieloaspektowy wymiar albańskich wysiłków antyterrorystycznych, niniejsze badanie ma na celu rzucenie światła na zaangażowanie kraju w ochronę swoich obywateli i przyczynianie się do globalnego bezpieczeństwa. Celem artykułu jest analiza zagrożeń terrorystycznych w Albanii oraz prowadzonej polityki antyterrorystycznej. W artykule zostały wykorzystane dwie metody badawcze, tj. metoda instytucjonalna-prawna oraz metoda analizy treści. Obie metody pozwoliły na przeanalizowanie wybranych aktów normatywnych oraz wyselekcjonowanie instytucji dedykowanych walce z terroryzmem. Za pomocą wyselekcjonowanej analizy treści odnoszącej się do kształtującej się w ostatnich latach sytuacji

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w Albanii, autorka wskazuje na przyczyny występowania możliwych zagrożeń terrorystycznych oraz odpowiada na pytanie, czy Albania jest krajem o niskim zagrożeniu terrorystycznym.

Słowa kluczowe: Albania, terroryzm, radykalizacja, religia

Introduction

Albania, like many nations worldwide, grapples with the persistent and evolving threat of terrorism, which poses significant challenges to its national security and stability. As a country at the crossroads of various geopolitical influences, it is susceptible to the impact of global terrorism, necessitating a comprehensive and adaptive approach to counter this menace. This introduction highlights the pressing need for a robust anti-terrorism policy in Albania, one that not only responds to current threats but also anticipates and addresses emerging trends in extremist ideologies and tactics. Albanian authorities are aware of the potential danger from international terrorist organisations such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaida, especially in the context of the spread of jihadist propaganda and its negative impact on society. Therefore, a high level of security is maintained in the state, based on normative and institutional aspects. The country's counter-terrorism capabilities have improved significantly in recent years. In addition, Albania maintains and continues to develop close contacts with international partners, including the European Union (EU), in detecting, responding to, preventing and combating terrorism. The interconnected nature of contemporary terrorism underscores the importance of international cooperation. Against this backdrop, this discussion will explore the multifaceted dimensions of terrorist threats faced by Albania, shedding light on the country's existing anti-terrorism policies and the imperative for continuous refinement to safeguard its citizens and preserve regional security.

The subject of this article will be the analysis of the terrorist threat in Albania and the country's policy in terms of preventing and combating terrorism. For this purpose, the author will use the institutional-legal method and the content analysis method. The indicated methods will be useful for the exploration of Albania's legal acquis, but only in a reductionist approach, which means a selective choice of normative acts chosen from the total legal acquis, focusing solely on the area of prevention and combating terrorism, as well as institutions dedicated to this issue. With the help of a selective content analysis relating

to the situation in Albania, it will be possible to identify the reasons for the existence of potential terrorist threats. This analysis will lead to the formulation of conclusions to answer the question: is Albania a low terrorist threat state?

The article is divided into the following sections: an introductory part (discussed above), providing an introduction to the topic under discussion. In the second part, the author will discuss the issues of religious diversity in Albania and highlight the factors that may lead to an increase in terrorist threats. Part three will analyse the normative acts dedicated to the fight against terrorism, while part four will discuss the institutions that are responsible for the fight against terrorism in Albania. Part five will provide a conclusion.

1. Terrorism threats in Albania and religious diversity

Albania is a religiously diverse country, with approximately 57% of the population practicing Sunni Islam, 10% practicing Catholicism, 7% practicing Christian Orthodoxy and 2% practicing a form of Shiite Sufism. The table below presents the exact religious breakdown in Albania as of 2023.

Religion	%
Islam	58.79%
Sunni Islam	56.70%
Bektashi	2.09%
Christianity	17%
- Roman Catholicism	10.03%
- Orthodoxy	6.75%
- Other Christians	0.14%
Unaffiliated/no religion	7.99%
Undeclared	13.78%

Source: *Albania Population and Religion Percentage*, <https://www.findeasy.in/population-of-albania/> [4.01.2024].

Albanians are also ethnically homogeneous, with an estimated 80%-90% of Albanians considering themselves ethnic Albanians. Albanian ethno-nationalist movements in neighbouring Kosovo and Macedonia have led to the growth of terrorist groups such as the Albanian National Army, the National Liberation Army and others. However, the danger from Albanian ethno-nationalist terrorism has largely bypassed Albania itself. Instead, the country is often praised for its cul-

ture of tolerance and religious and ethnic cohesion. Religion is also not an obstacle for Albanians, who often enter into mixed marriages and engage in interfaith celebrations. More than 90% of Albanians consider religious tolerance a core value and affirm that the state does not interfere with an individual's religious beliefs. They also believe that national sentiments, secularism and religious community leaders play an important role in sustaining and strengthening religious tolerance. Most Albanians lead secular lives, have little information or knowledge about religion and reject religious considerations that shape or condition their way of life. While more than a third (37%) consider themselves to be religious practitioners, only just over a quarter (28%) say that their friends and colleagues identify them as religious practitioners. These percentages are lower among religious practitioners, with fewer than two out of ten Albanians regularly practicing religious rituals and following religious norms in their daily lives¹. It should also be emphasized that Albanians highly value the role of religious community leaders and local clergy in promoting religious tolerance, as well as the fact that the dominance of national tradition and culture over religion is a factor that promotes religious tolerance in the country. Therefore, religious extremism, terrorism, as well as the politicisation of religion, propaganda, or external threats, including conflicts occurring abroad, are the most frequently reported threats to religious tolerance in the country. Consequently, Albanians' perceptions of possible threats to religious tolerance in Albania are more related to the global picture than to local or social factors².

Albania has a long history of religious tolerance and cohesion, but, as Steven Woehrel writes, regional instability in 1990, high crime rates and poor border security meant that al-Qaeda was able to gain a foothold in Albania in the mid-1990s³. Between 1994 and 1996, radical Islamist terrorist activity in Albania intensified and the country began to be used as a transit point for mujahideen from Afghanistan who were heading to Bosnia to fight the Serbian army. A number of factors contributed to the ability of terrorist organisations to use Albania

1 *Religious tolerance in Albania*, Report 2018, p. 4, <https://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Religious-tolerance-in-albania-1.pdf> [20.08.2023].

2 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

3 S. Woehrel, *Islamic Terrorism and the Balkans*, CRS Report for Congress, 26 July 2005, p. 15.

as a safe haven to build a large logistical base to finance and support their activities. One of these factors was Albania's geographical location in the Balkan region of south-eastern Europe, a location that enabled them to extend their ideology to Western European countries. Another important factor was the poor economic situation faced by many Albanian families, especially in rural areas, which favoured the penetration of Islamic organisations after the fall of the communist regime. In contrast to other religious groups that flowed into Albania during this period, Islamic organisations pretended that the main purpose of their organisations and enterprises was to support the Albanian economy⁴. Another factor was the lack of legal infrastructure in the post-communist Albanian state. The new democratic system that came to power after the fall of the communist regime was weak, both legally and politically. It also had many other problems, such as widespread corruption, a leaky border and an unwillingness to rigorously control foreign investments, companies and organisations. A general lack of experience and skills made it difficult for intelligence and law enforcement agencies to monitor the activities of Islamic charities and extremist groups and the people entering the country to work for these foundations⁵. In 1997, there were more than 90 Islamic organisations operating in Albania. While some organisations undertook humanitarian activities, others operated under the guise of charitable NGOs, thus exploiting the shortcomings of law enforcement agencies. Charitable foundations operating in Albania, such as the International Islamic Relief Agency, etc., were suspected of having links to terrorist organisations such as the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the Algerian Islamic Armed Group and Al-Qaida. Taking advantage of the general poverty and lack of qualified religious leaders in the country, these organisations have taken an active role in the so-called revival of Islam through a tradition completely unknown to most Muslims in Albania until now⁶. The organisation's activities also targeted the construction of mosques, funding of scholarships and financial support for disadvantaged families, including the distribution of free medicines and re-

4 M. Vickers, J. Pettifer, *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, New York 1997, pp. 10–32.

5 Ibid.

6 *Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania*, IDM, Tirana 2015, p. 59, <https://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf> [23.08.2023].

ligious books, and investment in construction and the banking system. In a country torn by poverty, unemployment and a lack of Western loans and funds, such activities were allowed and even welcomed⁷.

With the rise of the jihadist organisation Islamic State and the Nusra Front, Albania's Islamic religious community has worked to challenge calls to join extremist groups abroad. It is estimated that between 100 and 150 Albanian nationals joined extremist groups in Syria between 2012 and 2014, a trend that likely stopped in early 2015 with the dismantling of a nine-strong recruitment cell⁸. And although the number of departures per capita in Albania was not as high as in other Western Balkan countries, the context in which these people travelled indicated that Albania faced a serious security challenge. Unlike other (European) countries, a large part of this group consisted of entire families, where women and children travelled together with their husband or father⁹. In April 2021 the General Prosecutor's Office of Albania published its annual report, according to which, in 2020, twelve people were charged with terrorist offences. Among these charges were acts with terrorist intent, financing terrorism and incitement, public provocation, and propaganda to commit acts with terrorist intent. Half of the defendants were suspected of public incitement and propaganda¹⁰. IS has recruited in Albania through personal recruitment networks, including in mosques¹¹. A number of IS videos and other propaganda materials have appeared online calling on ethnic Albanians, including Albanian citizens and ethnic Albanians in neighbouring Kosovo and Macedonia, to join IS in Syria¹². Al-

7 Ibid., p. 62.

8 F. Mejdini, *Albania to Host NATO Centre on Foreign Fighters*, Balkan Insight, June 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/06/23/albania-will-host-nato-center-on-foreign-terrorist-fighters-06-23-2016/> [22.08.2023].

9 L. Vrugtman, *The EU and other stakeholders' prevention strategies towards VE in Albania*, *The Institute for Democracy and Mediation*, Policy Paper, 12 January 2021, <https://www.prevex-balkanmena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Prevex-Policy-Paper-PCVE-in-Albania-final-for-web-2.pdf> [24.08.2023].

10 *12 Charged with Terrorism Offences in 2020*, Albanian Daily News, 2 May 2021, <https://albandailynews.com/news/prosecution-charged-12-people-with-terrorism-offenses-in-2020-1> [22.08.2023].

11 B. Koleka, *Albanian court jails nine for recruiting fighters for Syria*, Reuters, May 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-albania-idUSKCN0XU2AB> [20.08.2023].

12 B. Likmeta, *Albanian Jihadists Recruit Fighters for Syria on Facebook*, Balkan Insight, 15 January 2014, <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/01/15/albanian-jihadist-use-internet-to-recruit-fighters/> [22.08.2023].

though IS appears to be losing its ability to recruit directly in Albania, the group continues to recruit online, in some cases trying to attract Albanian-speaking audiences by mixing appealing religious messages with IS propaganda¹³. It should also be noted that in the case of Albania, the process of radicalisation is slightly different than in Western European countries, which have a consolidated democracy, with radicals focusing more on comparing democracy with a political system based on Sharia law. Albania's slow and difficult democratisation process, the weakness of the Albanian state in implementing legislation and ensuring the development of the law, and the high level of corruption, especially in the judicial system, have been used by extremists to radicalise a small part of the Albanian Muslim community in an attempt to convince them that Islam is the solution to their problems¹⁴. Radical tendencies, extremist views and the presence of religious mercenaries, even if in embryonic form, can attract disproportionate attention from elites and the public, distracting from debates on important issues related to the consolidation of democracy. This could have a huge impact on the modernisation process of Albanian society, which at best, could be stalled and, at worse, could take a dangerous turn. The internet and social media are quite useful and effective as triggers of radicalisation that enable extremists to contact people ready to join their cause even in Albania¹⁵.

In recent years, terrorist threats in Albania have centred around returning fighters from Iraq and Syria and attempts by IS sympathisers to radicalise Albanian youth into committing acts of violence. In addition, the conflict between Israel and Hamas can give rise to radicalised attitudes that threaten internal security (as is the case in many countries, including in the Balkan region, including the Albanian capital, Tirana), despite the fact that the Albanian government has officially condemned the Hamas attack on Israel.

13 S.J. Marusic et al., *Balkan Jihadi Warriors Remain Safe on the Net*, Balkan Insight, 2 February 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/02/02/balkan-jihadi-warriors-remain-safe-on-the-netj-01-27-2017/> [22.08.2023].

14 *Assessment of Risks on National Security/ the Capacity of State and Society to React: Violent Extremism and Religious Radicalization in Albania*, p. 28, <https://www.aiis-albania.org/sites/default/files/Violent%20Extremism%20and%20%20Religious%20Radicalization%20in%20Albania.pdf> [25.08.2023].

15 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

2. Legal aspects of counter-terrorism policy

Albania, in its commitment to global and national security, has established a comprehensive legal framework to address the multifaceted challenges posed by terrorism. The legal aspects of the country's counter-terrorism policy are pivotal in defining offenses, outlining investigative procedures, and facilitating international collaboration. Enacted laws criminalise acts of terrorism, providing law enforcement and security agencies with the necessary tools to identify, apprehend, and prosecute individuals involved in terrorist activities. Albania's counter-terrorism legal framework likely aligns with international standards and conventions, reflecting its dedication to combating this global threat.

Albania has signed and ratified all United Nations (UN) conventions and protocols on terrorism, in addition to being a co-sponsor of UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) and the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism¹⁶. In addition to commitments related to the Council of Europe, the UN and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) frameworks, Albania's counter-terrorism agenda includes engagement within NATO, as well as in sub-regional partnership initiatives¹⁷. As an example, Chapter 3 of the 2006 Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), which explicitly mentions cooperation in the fight against terrorism, can be mentioned here. Article 82 stipulates that the parties will cooperate to prevent the financing of terrorism, while Article 84 deals with cooperation to prevent acts of terrorism, placing particular emphasis on cross-border crimes. Such cooperation includes, inter alia, the exchange of information on terrorist groups and their supporters in accordance with international law, as well as the exchange of infor-

16 *Albanian National Strategy Countering Violent Extremism. Adopted by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania (Decision no. 930) on 18 November 2015 and published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania (203/2015)*, <https://cve.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/strategjia-2018-me-ndryshime.pdf> [26.08.2023].

17 Committee of Experts on Terrorism (Codexter), *Profiles on Counter-Terrorist Capacity*, November 2014, <https://rm.coe.int/profiles-2014-albania-en/168064102e> [26.08.2023].

mation on methods, equipment and training used in the fight against terrorism¹⁸.

In accordance with the Albanian legislation, the legal provisions concerning the fight against terrorism have been incorporated into the criminal law. Chapter VII of the Criminal Code contains, after amendments, more than 17 articles relating to terrorist offences. The penalty for terrorist activities can be up to life imprisonment in Albania. The definition of terrorism in the Criminal Code, in article 230, is quite extensive. Among other things, the destabilisation of political, constitutional, economic and social structures is considered a terrorist act. It is also a terrorist offence to hijack aircraft, ships and other means of transport, to destroy or damage aircraft and aviation or maritime navigation equipment. It is also considered a terrorist offence to disseminate information, untrue, thereby endangering the safety of an aircraft in flight or a sailing vessel. The aforementioned article 230 also refers to hostage-taking or abduction, as well as to receiving, possessing, using, transferring and stealing explosives, nuclear materials, including profiting therefrom. The remaining articles of this chapter refer to all forms of terrorism, including: crimes for terrorist purposes, terrorist organisation and participation in an armed group, terrorist financing, including the collection of funds for terrorist financing, the transfer, concealment, conversion or laundering of funds, recruitment for terrorist purposes or terrorist financing, training for the purpose of committing intentional terrorist acts, promotion, public and incitement propaganda for the purpose of carrying out acts and threats to carry out terrorist acts¹⁹. In the amended Albanian Criminal Code, the concept of foreign combatants, which was not previously provided for in Article 265 (incitement to hatred or struggle between nationalities, races and religions), is now included in articles 265/a, 265/b, 265/c. According to article 265/a, participation in military formations, military or paramilitary organizations in an armed conflict taking place on the territory of a foreign state,

18 Układ o Stabilizacji i Stowarzyszeniu między Wspólnotami Europejskimi i ich państwami członkowskimi, z jednej strony, a Republiką Albanii, z drugiej strony. Luksemburg, Dz.U.2010.1.1, 12.06.2006.

19 *Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania (1995, as amended 2015) (excerpts related to Counter-Terrorism and Violent Extremism)* (English), <https://legislationline.org/taxonomy/term/23490> [28.08.2023].

or participation in any training conducted by these structures, without being a citizen of a foreign state or a member of the armed forces of one of the parties to the conflict, is punishable by imprisonment of three to eight years. If this criminal act is committed with the intention of subverting the constitutional order or violating the territorial integrity of a foreign state, it is punishable by imprisonment of five to ten years, as set out in article 265/a. According to article 265/b, organizing participation in military activities in a foreign country, including: promoting, recruiting, organizing, directing, training, equipping, creating or using funds or other assets for financing, materially supporting persons in any form and by any means, with the aim of committing the offence provided for in article 265/a, is punishable by imprisonment from eight to fifteen years. The incitement to participate in violent hostilities in a foreign country is punishable by imprisonment of up to three years²⁰.

Based on international events such as, the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center, a number of other normative acts have emerged to combat terrorism. Examples include the Council of Ministers' National Action Plan against Terrorism of 15 November 2001, which provided for a series of measures to verify, identify, freeze and seize bank accounts and assets potentially linked to persons involved in terrorist financing, and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, under which the government froze the assets of terrorist financiers, restricted the activities of suspected Islamic NGOs and detained or expelled persons suspected of links to terrorism or attempts to foment religious intolerance²¹. And in 2004, the parliament passed a law to freeze the assets of persons designated by the UN as terrorists or terrorist financiers²². In 2005, the Albanian Parliament adopted a comprehensive anti-terrorism law. This law (still in force) is in line with international counter-terrorism standards and is an important development in the national security system. It aims to prevent, combat

20 Ibid., p. 10.

21 *Third Round Detailed Assessment Report on Albania Anti-Money Laundering and Combating The Financing of Terrorism*, Strasbourg, 11 July 2006, p. 5, <https://rm.coe.int/european-comitee-on-crime-problems-cdpc-comitee-of-experts-on-the-eval/1680715ab2> [27.08.2023].

22 *Albanian law No. 9258 on freezing the assets of persons designated by the UN as terrorists or terrorist financiers*, 15 July 2004. See also: *Interpretative Note to Special Recommendation III: Freezing and Confiscating Terrorist Assets*, <https://ms.hmb.gov.tr/uploads/2019/01/EK-13.pdf> [28.08.2023].

and punish terrorism. It defines terrorism as the use or threat of force or violence to intimidate or coerce the fulfilment of a specific political, religious or other objective. Like the Penal Code, the law provides for severe penalties for terrorism, including life imprisonment. Albanian anti-terrorism legislation is harmonised with EU legislation, an example being: the 2008 Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism (as amended), which is based on the Council Common Position of 27 December 2001 on combating terrorism²³. In 2011 The Council of Ministers adopted a cross-sectoral counter-terrorism strategy and action plan for 2011–2015. And two years later, in 2013, a cross-sectoral strategy to combat organised crime, illicit trafficking and terrorism for 2013–2020 was adopted²⁴. In 2015, the Albanian government adopted the National Security Strategy on Combating Violent Extremism. The strategy aims to strengthen and improve the legal framework to criminalise all forms of violent extremism, as well as the recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters. The strategy points to the need to strengthen the capacity and expertise of law enforcement officials to prevent violent extremism and to promote the commitment of state institutions to work with local communities, religious representatives and other stakeholders to identify vulnerable groups that are or may be targeted by violent extremism. In addition, the strategy recommends the development of tailored programmes and policies to prevent the spread of violence and extremism while, at the same time, raising awareness of these phenomena in society and seeking the causes of radicalisation²⁵.

Albania approved a new cross-cutting counter-terrorism strategy for 2021–2025 and its action plan for 2021–2023 in December 2020. *The Cross-Cutting Counter-Terrorism Strategy 2021–2025* is the country's primary counter-terrorism strategy document, which links the agenda of integration with the European Union in relation to the implementation of Chapter 24 in term of counter-terrorism obligations with the country's sustainable economic and social development, including links to the Sustainable Development Goals. This document

23 Council Common Position of 27 December 2001 on combating terrorism, OJ L 344 of 28 December 2001, p. 90.

24 L. Vrugtman, *The EU...*, p. 11.

25 *Albanian National Strategy Countering Violent...*, pp. 4–5.

is designed to guide policy and strengthen a comprehensive approach to preventing, protecting, prosecuting and responding to terrorism. The development of this strategy, which builds on the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy, aims to harmonise the activities of the structures, agencies and institutions responsible for the fight against terrorism. Preventing and combating terrorism remain the main strategic priorities of the Albanian government²⁶.

The evolution of the provisions of the Criminal Code and other normative acts concerning the fight against terrorism in Albania, aims to reflect not only the current international approach to combating terrorism and money laundering, as crimes affecting states and the international community, but also Albania's obligations towards the European Union.

3. Counter-terrorism institutions in Albania

In Albania, there are several executive and judicial bodies that are responsible for combating terrorism. The first of these is the National Security Council. This is an advisory body to the President of the Republic, which is responsible for defining plans, goals and objectives regarding security and the armed forces. Then there is the Inter-Ministerial National Coordination Committee, which was created in 2003 to coordinate the work of the ministries and agencies responsible for combating terrorism. Not insignificant are the Ministry of the Interior and the General Police Office. They are responsible for the maintenance and protection of public order, prevention and investigation, in cooperation with prosecutors, of all forms of crime and terrorism. They have within their structure judicial police and an anti-terrorist task force, as well as an economic crime directorate. In 2014, the Counter-Terrorism Directorate was created within the Ministry of the Interior as part of the Albanian State Police, extended to 12 regions. This new structure replaced the Counter-Terrorism Sector within the Serious Crimes Directorate of the Criminal Investigations Department. The mission of the Counter-Terrorism Di-

²⁶ *Information Exchange on the OSCE, Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security, Republic of Albania 2021*, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/8/484742.pdf>. [10.09.2023].

rectorate is to detect, prevent and combat possible terrorist activities and any other related activity within the country. This change enables personnel from both local police and state police to engage in preventing radicalisation and combating violent extremism²⁷.

In turn, at the Ministry of Finance, the Directorate General for the Prevention of Money Laundering, which operates, is responsible for coordinating work between financial institutions in the fight against money laundering and terrorist financing. Other institutions involved in anti-terrorism activities include: State Information Service, Military Intelligence Service, Customs Service, Ministry of Justice. The office of the Attorney General – is the institution responsible for investigating and interrogating terrorists. Within it, there is a directorate responsible for the fight against organised crime and terrorism²⁸. Regarding the judiciary, Albanian procedural law provides for different types of courts regarding the main path in the first instance and the Court of Appeal in cases and acts of terrorism. In 2003, the Serious Crimes Court and the Serious Crimes Court of Appeal were created in Albania, which are different from ordinary courts. The competences of these courts depend on the principle of the maximum length of possible sentences or in some cases related to organized crime, acts of terrorism, human trafficking, kidnapping, etc., the composition of the courts is different. The courts of first instance, as well as the Serious Crimes Court, are tried by a single judge and hear pre-trial motions of the parties, motions to enforce decisions and motions concerning jurisdictional relations with foreign authorities²⁹.

Albania also has an anti-terrorism division, the Department of Neutralization of Armed Elements (*Reparti i Neutralizimit të Elementit të Armatosur*), commonly known by the acronym RENEA. It is Albania's main anti-terrorism and critical incident response division. The force was created in the early 1990s in response to rising crime levels in the country after the fall of communism. RENEA's responsi-

27 *Drejtoria e Politikave të Sigurisë, REPORT: Albania's Anti-Terrorism Steps*, pp. 5–8, <https://wb-iisg.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/FULL-REPORT-Albania-Anti-Terrorism-Steps.pdf> [20.09.2023].

28 Committee of Experts on Terrorism (Codexter), *Profiles...*, p. 8.

29 *Ibid.*

bilities include rescue operations, hostage situations, counter-terrorism and responding to particularly violent forms of crime³⁰.

The institutionalisation of Albania's counter-terrorism policy gained momentum after the attacks on the World Trade Center, i.e. after 2001. The same was true for the building up of the acquis. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of this system, as no large-scale attacks have been committed in Albania so far. On the other hand, however, as the 2021 report indicates, there have been many attempts to carry out coordinated attacks³¹, but they were identified at an early planning stage, which may indicate the effectiveness of the existing legal as well as institutional system.

Conclusions

Is Albania a low terrorist threat country? The unequivocal answer to this question is that yes, it is a low terrorist threat country, but this does not mean that the country is not vulnerable to terrorist threats. The reasons why Albania may become a target for terrorist attacks can be considered based on internal and external factors. Internal factors may include religious coexistence between Albanians, a fact that is unacceptable to Islamic radicals and their supporters³². This can lead to an increase in religious tensions, with radical groups undermining the existing religious symbiosis. In addition, low levels of economic development and corruption, may encourage sympathies with radical groups. This, in turn, may manifest itself in the search for alternatives as well as the desire to make money by engaging with terrorist groups on a number of levels. Weaknesses in border management can lead to Albania being a sanctuary for terrorists. External factors, on the other hand, are related to Albania's foreign policy, which is very committed to supporting the fight against global terrorism in the forum of international organizations, including bringing its counter-

30 *New RENE special police force headquarters inaugurated*, 20 January 2020, <https://www.kryeminstria.al/en/newsroom/nje-repart-i-ri-per-forcat-speciale-renea/> [4.01.2023].

31 *Public Report 2021*, pp. 6–7, <https://www.shish.gov.al/files/Public%20Report%202021%20English.pdf> [20.10.2023].

32 A. Balliu, *Addressing Terrorism in The XXI Century Case of Albania*, "European Scientific Journal" 2020, no. 16(11), p. 34.

terrorism law in line with international standards and fulfilling its obligations to NATO and the European Union, which may intensify anger and criticism towards such a pro-Western attitude as Albania presents globally. It is evident that addressing the root causes of extremism, such as socio-economic disparities and political instability, is crucial in mitigating the risk of terrorist activities in Albania. The collaboration between Albanian intelligence agencies and international partners is essential to enhance counterterrorism efforts, intelligence sharing, and the development of effective preventative measures. Strengthening border security and improving the capacity of law enforcement agencies are imperative steps to prevent the infiltration of foreign fighters and the illicit movement of funds supporting terrorist activities. The international community should continue to support Albania in its efforts to combat terrorism, providing both technical assistance and financial resources to bolster the country's capabilities in intelligence gathering, counter-radicalisation programs, and community engagement initiatives.

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