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MONITORING REPORT

MESSAGES PROMOTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM THROUGH ONLINE PLATFORMS IN ALBANIA

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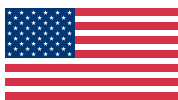
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January 2023

**The project “Trusted flaggers for a safe cyber
ecosystem against violent extremism”**

This study was drafted in cooperation with some of the security institutions in the country. Special gratitude goes to all local experts who have laid the groundwork for the methodology of monitoring extremist messages online.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Almost three years have passed since the first assessment of the threats of violent extremism in the online environment in Albanian language, carried out by the Academy of Political Studies in cooperation with the “Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism” (CVE Center) and “National Authority for Electronic Certification and Cyber Security” (NAECCS). This monitoring process enabled a baseline assessment of extremist messages and hate speech that promote radicalization on online platforms and identified gaps in the legal framework, institutional cooperation and awareness-raising of state and non-state stakeholders to counter this troubling problem for national security.

Albanian language was one of the five languages used in the official propaganda communication of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) during the period 2014-2019, aiming at the radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters in all Albanian territories in the Balkan region. Despite the military defeat of the self-proclaimed state of ISIS with the capture of the last territory controlled by it in March 2019, its followers had the opportunity to escape and continue, now in a less evident way, the efforts to plant the seeds of the new generation of extremism and regained the lost glory.

Well experienced in using the Internet for propaganda, these extremist forces continue to spread their hateful messages protected by the opportunities offered by the use of the “dark” web of the Internet and fake profiles on social media. In the novel situation of the intensive use of the Internet and the development of technology, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, this cyber space has become an even more fertile ground for extremist propaganda.

As a result, it is important to conduct a periodic assessment of threats in the cyberspace and of the distribution level of materials that promote violent extremism and the radicalization of vulnerable users. This second monitoring report, carried out at the end of 2022, summarizes the best experience gained by the group of experts engaged in the first monitoring process of 2019, including also the latest geopolitical and technological developments following the global pandemic and Russian aggression against Ukraine.

2. CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Policies in Albania related to technology, electronic communications and innovation have continued to encourage the expansion of Internet service across the country as well as free competition between private electronic operators regarding the provision of services to citizens. The digitization of public services and their provision through the e-Albania platform, which has enabled facilities for citizens and businesses, has also exerted a positive pressure for increasing the demand for internet service in the country. All these reasons have resulted in an increase of Internet users.

According to INSTAT statistics, 88.3% of Albanian families had access to the Internet in 2021, marking an increase by 5% compared to previous year.¹ In comparison with the percentage of families that had access to the Internet in the European Union for 2021, which was 92%², it turns out that Albania is at the same level as some of the EU member states if we take into consideration the OECD statistics³. By having a young population, in our country smartphones have an extensive usage, providing internet service everywhere and at low cost, where 98.7% of individuals have used mobile devices/smartphones to access the Internet.⁴

INSTAT data for 2021 also revealed that the use of the Internet “every day/almost every day” has marked the highest percentages over the years for all age groups, where the first place in the ranking is occupied by the 16-24 year-old age group accounting for about 97.2 % as well as the 25-34 year-old age group accounting for 97.4%. The use of Internet by gender shows that men comprise the largest number of users, accounting for 80.3% of users, compared to 78.3% of female users,⁵ but it is noted that the gender disparity among users has decreased, marking only 2% compared to 5.2% in 2019.⁶ It should be noted that the Covid-19 pandemic made it necessary to extend the Internet and the use of smart phones even in the remote areas of the country, as well as to reduce the sensitivity of the age of minor users due to the development of online learning or the need to communicate with family members during the isolation period.

Alongside this positive development of the Internet spread, the possibility of exposing society, and particularly young people and children, to various risks circulating in the online environment has increased. Young people and children, accounting for the largest number of users and having a propensity to trust strangers, are more targeted by groups that use cyberspace for illicit purposes. In this new virtual reality, radical and extremist groups have been provided with an efficient way to spread their ideologies as well as cooperate and convince followers without any geographical or time limits. Infamous violent extremism groups, including but not limited to, ISIS-affiliated groups, have used electronic technologies to disseminate their propaganda and expand their networks via online recruitment. According to the EUROPOL⁷ Terrorism Situation and Trend report published in 2020: *The Western Balkan region remained home to radicalised communities. In addition to returning ISIS foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), the terrorism threat also emanates from local radicalised groups and individuals, including in prison. These milieus include formal organisations and informal groups, but also individuals that self-radicalise online, for example through contacts with jihadist ideologues.*”

It is noteworthy to mention the finding of negative increasing trends at European and global level regarding the activity of groups that have managed to evade the law enforcement mechanisms related to compliance and arrest and that they carry on with their online activity. According to a communication by the Radicalization Awareness Network supported by the European Commission, the Covid-19 pandemic has an impact on the rise of extremism of radical left and

¹ INSTAT, Survey on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Usage in Households in 2021, [tik-ne-familje-2021.pdf](#)

² Statistics on internet access, Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/377585/household-internet-access-in-eu28/>

³ Statistics on internet access, OECD, <https://data.oecd.org/ict/internet-access.htm>

⁴ INSTAT, Survey on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Usage in Households in 2021 [tik-ne-familje-2021.pdf](#)

⁵ [tik-ne-familje-2021.pdf](#)

⁶ <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/6435/anketa-mbi-p%C3%ABrdorimin-e-teknologjis%C3%AB-s%C3%AB-in-formacionit-dhe-komunikimit-tik-n%C3%AB-familje-dhe-nga-individ%C3%ABt-2018-2019.pdf>

⁷ European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report (TE-SAT) 2020

right groups through anti-government propaganda and disinformation aimed at inciting people to violence.⁸

According to United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), some negative trends have been identified related to the new challenges in the field of prevention and fight against violent extremism as a result of the impact of Covid-19, among which is the increase in online recruitment, in the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, the modification of strategies for violent attacks, as well as finding new ways to finance terrorism.⁹ Some of them have also been observed in Albania, where various conspiracy theories about the pandemic and the “global governance of the elites”, which encouraged hostile reactions to the restrictive measures taken by the government for isolation and anti-Covid vaccination, were spread during the pandemic and continue to be widely active in the online space by political groups and various activists.

Albanians were one of the groups targeted by ISIS’ online propaganda during 2014-2019, which was effective in radicalizing and recruiting hundreds of fighters and their families from territories in the Western Balkans and Europe. A study supported by the Academy of Political Studies in 2015¹⁰, revealed a sophisticated ISIS online public communication strategy in the Albanian language, with the aim of their recruitment as fighters in conflict zones.

Furthermore, the Albanian language is also one of the five languages used for communication in what was considered the official website¹¹ of ISIS, proving once again the hazard that the propaganda of this terrorist group might cause for the radicalization of Albanians. However, extremist content can be propagated within the Albanian territory in cyberspace in other languages as well, such as English or Arabic by Albanian or foreign citizens, targeting an Albanian audience who knows and understands these languages.

When confronted with these developments, it is necessary for law enforcement institutions to strengthen the monitoring and cooperation mechanisms with the technology and telecommunications industry to identify and address new challenges and to provide a more secure online environment.

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE MONITORING PROCESS

This monitoring process aimed at identifying the level of messages inciting extremism through the Internet in Albania with the intention of identifying new trends in order to take the necessary measures to provide a secure electronic environment.

⁸ European Commission Website, Migration and Home Affairs, Spotlight on COVID-19, Violent Extremism and Anti-Government Movements https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-net-work-ran/ran-media/ran-spotlight/spotlight-covid-19-violent-extremism-and-anti-government-movements_en

⁹ UNITAR Factsheet, <https://unitar.org/sites/default/files/media/file/Factsheet%20CT%20Printed.pdf>

¹⁰ ISIS Online public communication strategy in Albania - 2015 http://www.asp.al/pdf/Strategjia_e_komunikimit_te_IS_-_Koncept_paper_13_Nentor.pdf

¹¹ <https://hilafeti.wordpress.com>

Namely, the objectives of the monitoring process were:

1. To search, identify and analyze extremist content on online platforms in Albania (websites, blogs, social networks, etc.);
2. To specify online platforms, social networks, websites used to distribute extremist content;
3. To provide reliable statistics for relevant policy-making.

The monitoring process relied on the methodology already established by the first monitoring, including studies and best practices of the US and the European Commission in this field.¹²

According to the Intersectoral Strategy for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Fight Against Terrorism 2022-2025, *“Violent extremism is that process of adopting radical views (political, ideological or religious) and putting them into violent actions through threats, incitement, encouragement based on ideological grounds with the aim of causing fear and insecurity.”*¹³

With regards to online violent extremism, different researchers have given their definitions in different research studies. Based on the definition of Mc Farlane (2010), it was determined what can be defined as online violent extremism. According to the researcher: “violent extremism online is the use of online communication systems as a means to facilitate, and/or influence individuals or groups, in developing, adopting, and/or advancing belief systems which lay outside the relative norms of mainstream society resulting in the advocating of threats, and/or physical acts, of violence, to further that belief system”¹⁴.

Based on these definitions on violent extremism, it was agreed upon to use the content analysis methodology for monitoring purposes, through keyword search, in order to understand the narrative, the target group in Albania and the electronic platforms used. The methodology used consisted in drafting a list of keywords that could direct users to extremist content when entered into a search engine. These keywords were categorized based on their ideological type and the potential risk associated with them.

The search engines used are “BrandMentions”, “Brand24” and “Social Searcher”, through which the data related to the keywords were generated. Search elements were also based on the keywords used in the reports of the State Intelligence Service (SHISH), regarding the spread of propaganda and calls for violent extremism and radicalization in Albania.

Experts further verified this data generated in the form of links, containing keywords and which have the potential to be content related to violent extremism, by filtering and analyzing them in order to classify their content. The collection and analysis of data was carried out by experienced researchers in matters of monitoring violent extremism as well as online communication, during two months in the period **November-December 2022**. The monitoring process was carried out for content in the Albanian language, including the English and Arabic languages as well, which are dedicated to/ accessible in Albania, using the filtering options of the tools used for monitoring.

¹² European Commission Website, Migration and Home Affairs, publication https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers_en

¹³ Inter-Sectorial Strategy on the Fight against Terrorism 2021–2025, and Action Plan 2021–2023 https://konsultimipublik.gov.al/documents/RENJK_507_Strategjia%20Nd%C3%ABrsektoriale%20AT%20dhe%20CVE.pdf

¹⁴ McFarlane, B., Online Violent Radicalisation (OVER): Challenges Facing Law Enforcement Agencies and Policy Stakeholders, Monash University, 2010

The categories established for the classification of content are: disinformation, religious discrimination, religious propaganda, anti-religious propaganda, political extremism including far-left political extremism and far-right political extremism, content related to ethnic conflict and ethnic warfare, definitions of extremists and terrorists, Islamist extremism, conspiracy theories, anti-Semitism, disinformation, other extremist content, neutral content and religious content. For each of these keywords, the number of persons or accounts spreading extremist ideologies, including ethnic, political extremism, etc., was established.

Categorization of keywords¹⁵

To identify the level of risk associated with each word in the content they are included, the keywords were divided into these categories:

- 1st Category: Extremist, violent words
- 2nd Category: General keywords

The categorization of keywords such as ‘killing of traitors’ or ‘killing of apostates’ are inherently violent, whereas others, such as ‘crusades’ or ‘caliphate’ are more general in their nature and, as such their content had to be carefully analyzed, so as not to interfere with the exercise of freedom of expression, opinion and religion or belief.¹⁶

High-Risk KeyWords	General Keywords
Suicide vest	Martyr
Killing of apostates	Jihad

Table no.1: Categorization of keywords

It is inevitable that there is some degree of overlap between the categories, however the designation reflects the nature of the keyword itself, rather than its connotations with any particular group. This means that even though the concept of ‘khilafah’ (caliphate) is mostly associated with ISIS, the word itself does not have any violent or extreme connotations. As a result it was categorised in the political Islam keyword list.

Spreading of keywords

Data on keywords usage was obtained through the search engines¹⁷, where from historical data, specific results containing radicalised and violent extremist content, were filtered. Since the monitoring process did not have access to all the historical data that may exist online for the platforms/networks monitored, the percentages of the number of links generated for the keywords mentioned in them can be used as a useful guide related to the frequency of the words used on the Internet, but they do not provide definitive figures.

¹⁵ Appendix 3, Key words to monitor

¹⁶ EU Human Rights Guidelines on Freedom of Expression Online and Offline <https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/142549.pdf>

¹⁷ Appendix 1, Search engines

Local frequencies were gathered for all keywords by selecting as an option, in the monitoring tools, the filter that generated links where these words are mentioned by country, in the specific case for Albania. The data on the frequencies of Arabic words do not correspond exclusively to the Arab geographical area, but the rationale for choosing keywords in the Arabic language and conducting monitoring for content in this language comes from the fact that it is the language used by several extremist groups without distinctions between borders.

During the data analysis, accounts were identified, and where possible, even the persons who were active on websites, social media, youtube, where the keywords were found, and statistics were extracted on their gender and content categories that they spread.

Content Categorisation

Content categorisation was established in order to have a more detailed summary of content types where the keywords were found. Designations of the content found on a website did not reflect the opinion for an entire website, but only for the content where the keyword was found.

Categories	Extremist	Neutral	Anti-religious
1	Violent		
2	Non-Violent		
3	Political Islam		
4		News, Analyses, Religious Ideologies	
5		Civil Society	
6		Governmental	
7		Religious groups	
8			Anti-Muslim, Anti-Catholicism, etc.

Table no. 2: Categorization of the content where keywords are found

Grouping on extremist content was split into three sub-categories: violent, non-violent, and radical political content of terrorist groups. Contents were categorised as violent if they contained either images of graphic violence or calls for violence.

Contents deemed to be extreme but non-violent were those expressing anti-Semitic, homophobic, racist, or sectarian views but without inciting violence. The radical political category included content that expressed a specific affinity towards a particular Islamist group. This category clearly refers to well-known political groups that are actively seeking to gain political power.

Grouping on neutral content includes mainstream media websites, websites that propagate religious ideologies, as well as content generated and/or distributed by civil society groups,

government groups and religious groups. With regards to religious groups, this includes known religious organizations as well as individuals of Islamic convictions who propagate ideologies over their religion.

Grouping on anti-religious content includes some keywords where there is a continuous presence of information consisting of extremist content against religious beliefs such as Muslim, Christian and other religions.

Content categories and definitions

- Disinformation

According to the definition of Oxford Reference, disinformation is a form of propaganda involving the dissemination of false information with the deliberate intent to deceive or mislead.

¹⁸This category includes the classification of the content which consist of the keywords used to monitor the “pollution” of the Internet, propagate false information and are related to extremist views, but which cannot be classified in other categories.

- Religious discrimination

Religious discrimination is treating individuals differently because of their religious beliefs and practices, and/or their request for accommodations of their religious beliefs and practices. It also includes treating individuals differently because of their lack of religious beliefs or practices. Religious practices are not just those required by a church or other religious group, but include moral or ethical beliefs as to what is right and wrong that are sincerely held with the strength of traditional religious views. Beliefs may be “religious” in nature even if no religious group holds such beliefs or religious groups to which others in the workplace belong do not accept such beliefs.¹⁹

- Religious propaganda

According to the definition of Oxford Reference, propaganda is a persuasive mass communication that filters and frames the issues of the day in a way that strongly favours particular interests; usually those of a government or corporation. Also, the intentional manipulation of public opinion through lies, half-truths, and the selective re-telling of history.²⁰ In the case of religious propaganda, it can be defined as a type of propaganda that is distributed with the aim of favoring the interests of a particular religious belief by manipulating public opinion through the dissemination of religious ideology in an objective or misrepresented or altered manner according to the goals that are intended to be achieved. Incitement to religious hatred on an international or national level may be in the form of propaganda aimed at maintaining political control in the hands of a religious elite against other religions in the same society. It may use all kinds of propaganda media and it may cause war, terrorism, rioting and violence, and mask injustices and inequalities, exploitation and atrocities, inducing apathy and alienation through ignorance. Religious propaganda is aggravated by religious intolerance and religious indoctrination.²¹

¹⁸ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095721660;jsessionid=1C0598946044489A11C08D711D976834>

¹⁹ Religious Discrimination | U.S. Department of Commerce

²⁰ Propaganda definition according to Oxford Reference [Propaganda - Oxford Reference](#)

²¹ Religious propaganda definition [Religious propaganda | The Encyclopedia of World Problems \(uia.org\)](#)

- Anti-religious Propaganda

Anti-religious propaganda is conducted in opposition to religious ideas, beliefs and organizations. This category classifies contents that do not simply express atheistic views, but also oppose, ironize, and deny existing religious beliefs, oftentimes in an imposing manner and through ungrounded information, expressing extreme attitudes and targeting a wide audience on the Internet.

- Political extremism and political violence

Political extremism can be defined as a political ideology that denies or opposes democracy and violates human rights and favors authoritarian regimes. Political extremism is divided into two types: far-right political extremism and far-left political extremism.

- a) Far-right political extremism

Far(extreme)-right political extremism is defined by researcher Cas Mudde as an ideology that contains at least three out of the five following characteristics: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and the advocacy for a strong state. Far-right extremism is distinguished from extreme-right radicalism in that the right-wing extremists reject democracy (including systems such as minority rights and independent institutions) as a form of government in principle and favor authoritarian systems of rule.²²

“Violent right-wing extremism are acts of individuals or groups who use, incite, threaten with, legitimise or support violence and hatred to further their political or ideological goals, motivated by ideologies based on the rejection of democratic order and values as well as of fundamental rights, and centred on exclusionary nationalism, racism, xenophobia and/or related intolerance.”²³

- Far-left political extremism

Far-left extremism: Left-wing extremists are political actors who, often influenced by communist and anarchist ideologies, reject the principles of social democracy in their pursuit of systematic change of the capitalist system. Left-wing extremism is characterised by opposition to liberal democracy, sympathies for authoritarian regimes and conspiracy theories directed against Western democracies. Left-wing extremists rely on extra-parliamentary struggle against capitalism and refuse to compromise with political actors who advocate maintaining the status quo.²⁴

- Ethnic conflict and ethnic warfare

Ethnic conflict is a form of conflict in which the objectives of at least one party are defined in ethnic terms, and the conflict, its antecedents, and possible solutions are perceived along ethnic lines. The conflict is usually not about ethnic differences themselves but over political, economic, social, cultural, or territorial matters. Conflicts in the Balkans, Rwanda, Chechnya, Iraq, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Darfur, as well as in Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, are among the best-known and deadliest examples from the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The destabilization of provinces, states, and, in some cases, even whole regions is a common consequence of ethnic violence. Ethnic conflicts are often accompanied by gross human rights violations, such as genocide and crimes against humanity, and by economic

²² Report on Understanding the New Zealand Online Extremist Ecosystem

²³ EU Commission Report “Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans:”
[ran_vrwe_in_western_balkans_overview_072022_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

²⁴ [NZ-Online-Extremism-Findings-Report.pdf](#)

decline, state failure, environmental problems, and refugee flows. Violent ethnic conflict leads to tremendous human suffering.²⁵

- Definitions of extremists and terrorists

There is no universal agreement on the definition of terrorism and extremism. OECD defines extremism as “Promoting views which foment and incite violence in furtherance of particular beliefs, and foster hatred which might lead to inter-community violence.”²⁶ Persons involved in inciting or committing such acts related to violent extremism are considered to be extremists.

According to the UN, terrorism²⁷ means an action or attempted action where:

1. The action:

(a) Constituted the intentional taking of hostages; or

(b) s intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to one or more members of the general population or segments of it; or

(c) Involved lethal or serious physical violence against one or more members of the general population or segments of it;

and

2. The action is done or attempted with the intention of:

(a) Provoking a state of terror in the general public or a segment of it; or (b) Compelling a Government or international organization to do or abstain from doing something;

and

3. The action corresponds to:

(a) The definition of a serious offence in national law, enacted for the purpose of complying with international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism or with resolutions of the Security Council relating to terrorism; or

(b) All elements of a serious crime defined by national law.

Persons involved in inciting or committing such acts related to terrorism are considered to be terrorists. Materials found online that describe cases of the involvement of extremists and terrorists in the commission of criminal acts of incitement and/or the commission of terrorist acts will be addressed in this study as content related to terrorist implications.

- Islamist Extremism

Islamist extremism describes the advocacy of a system of belief that promotes the creation of an exclusionary and totalitarian Islamic state, within which those who do not subscribe to this vision are portrayed as an inferior ‘out-group’ and are subjected to implicit, explicit or violent means of subjugation and prejudice. Islamist extremists propagate a dehumanising ‘othering’ mindset

²⁵ Ethnic conflict definition, [Ethnic conflict | Definition, Causes, Types, Examples, & Facts | Britannica](#)

²⁶ Definitions according to UNODC [Counter-Terrorism Module 2 Key Issues: Radicalization & Violent Extremism \(unodc.org\)](#)

²⁷ Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism [Microsoft Word - A HRC 16 51 FOR PROCESSING.doc \(ohchr.org\)](#)

that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights. Extremist groups pursue and advocate a systemic political and societal change that reflects their worldview. They may do this through non-violent and more subtle means, as well as through violent or explicit means, including terrorism. Extremism can be advocated by state and non-state actors alike.²⁸

- Conspiracy Theories

A conspiracy theory is a belief that a group operating in secret is trying to control social or political processes out of self-interest, and with little regard for the common good. In this report, we focus on conspiracy theories with the potential for real-world harm, and the potential to create fertile ground for extremist ideologies.²⁹

- Antisemitism

According to the definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) on antisemitism: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”³⁰ For the purposes of the monitoring analysis, the category of anti-Semitic content includes those related to anti-Semitism, which have anti-Semitic elements.

- Other extremist content

Other extremist content is classified as content that has the quality of being extremist or spreads extremist ideas, beliefs or superstitions that affect the misorientation of society, including by inciting fear or panic. Such content is related to spells or other materials.

- Neutral content

Content neutrality refers generally to publications that are without bias, representing all views fairly.³¹ In this section we have classified objective informative news in general which deal with information or events related to religious ideologies, extremism, violence, and not only, in an objectively impartial way, informing the audience.

- Religious content

Religious content means scripture, sacred text and writings, or excerpts thereof; written materials used during worship services or religious observances; and written materials that describe, explain, analyze, advocate either for or against; the practices and/or beliefs of a religion. It also includes material that celebrates religious holidays.³²

²⁸ [NZ-Online-Extremism-Findings-Report.pdf](#)

²⁹ [NZ-Online-Extremism-Findings-Report.pdf](#)

³⁰ Press release of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) [press_release_document_antisemitism.pdf \(holocaustremembrance.com\)](#)

³¹ Based on the content neutrality definition [Content Neutrality Law and Legal Definition | USLegal, Inc.](#)

³² Definition, religious content [Religious content Definition | Law Insider](#)

4. MONITORING ANALYSIS

The search is focused on the monitoring of online platforms used even by Albanian users (websites, blogs, social networks, etc.) such as Web, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, LinkedIn, Reddit, Vimeo, Quora, Pinterest, and Online Games, for cases of spreading propaganda or influencing certain views with an extremist character, which can lead to radicalism or violent extremism. At the stage when someone has followed a hashtag or joined a social media group, it is probable that they have already shown an interest in that ideology.

The research found that in Albania there are many web pages and accounts in social networks, which can be used to spread extremist ideologies. It was also noticed that there are accounts with false names and incorrect or non-public data that share content with elements of extremism in Albania in the Albanian, English and Arabic languages and accounts with foreign names that share content in the Albanian language, but their locations were impossible to be identified during this monitoring period while analyzing each link generated by the search tools. Nevertheless, the search tools have extracted all the data for Albania, so it is implied that the location in which these users operate is Albania. The opportunity that social networks offer for hiding of data and anonymity of users posed difficulties for analyzing data and classifying users accurately by gender and age.

The monitoring process by means of the programs “BrandMentions”, “Brand24” and “Social Searcher” led to the finding of content in which the keywords related to violent extremism are mentioned. 289 generated links were identified, out of which the links with content having the highest potential to be classified in the abovementioned categories were considered for a detailed analysis. With regards to the rest of the links, upon analysis, it was concluded that they had no content worth monitoring, despite the fact that the keywords were mentioned in them.

4.1 SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media refers to interactive websites or internet applications that allow users to generate and share content, information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression within virtual groups and networks.³³

Particularly, social media platforms can facilitate the establishment and development of online social networks that draw users’ attention to propaganda and other information, allowing for the easy sharing of such information. Such a thing enables users to find other individuals or groups with common interests and expand their networks. Social media is oftentimes used by certain groups to spread propaganda about radicalism and violent extremism, including social networks such as: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, and others.

³³ J. Obar, “Social media definition and the governance challenge: an introduction to the special issue”, 2015 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315490381_Social_Media_Definition_and_the_Governance_Challenge_An_Introduction_to_the_Special_Issue

4.1.1 FACEBOOK³⁴

Statistics reveal that in Albania the Facebook penetration rate in January 2022 reached about 67.8% of the population and the number of Facebook users amounted to about 1,947,600 users in Albania, being the social media with the largest expansion in the country.³⁵ During the keyword search, it was noticed that the social network Facebook is mainly used by users that disseminate religious propaganda with extremist inclinations in the Albanian language. Despite detecting some users with fake accounts and some organizations with suspicious religious profiles, a detailed analysis of users and the content they share with others was carried out.

A total of 17 accounts and 23 links with the relevant content were found on Facebook, out of which:

- 13 links were classified as religious propaganda;
- 2 links were classified as religious content;
- 6 links were classified as religious discrimination;;
- 2 links were classified as far-right political extremism;
- 1 link was classified as disinformation.

Upon analysis, it was identified that the same content could be classified into two or more categories at the same time as there were some cases where the same content spreads religious propaganda and promotes religious discrimination at the same time.

As regards other content categories, no Facebook links were found for the monitoring period.

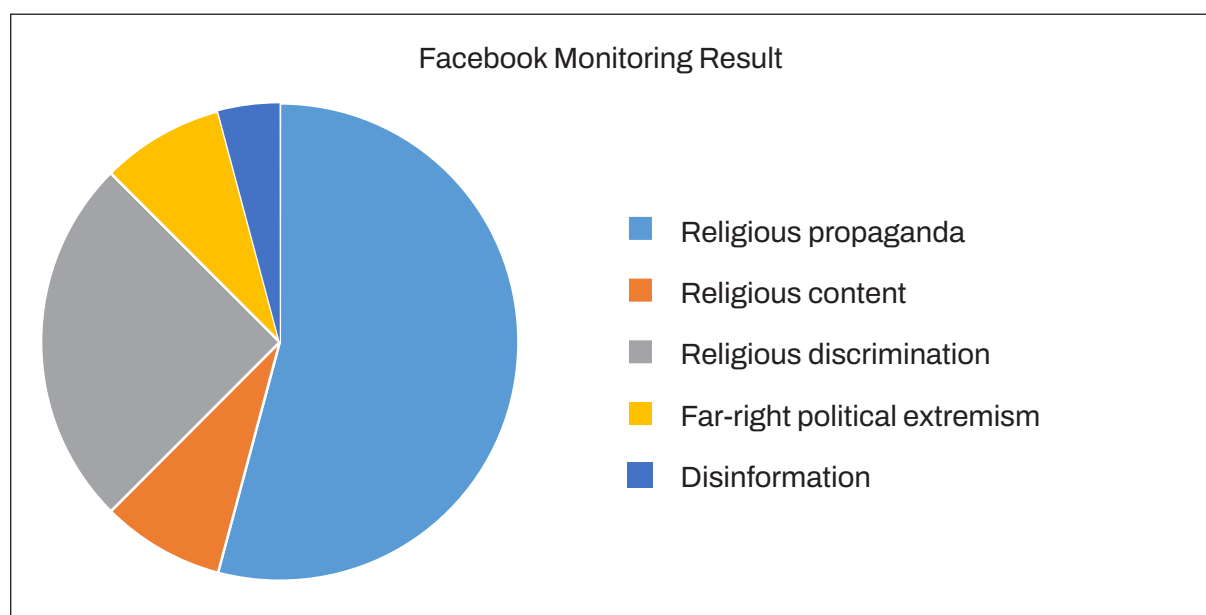


Figure 1: No. of links found on Facebook by users who spread content by certain categories

³⁴ According to Appendix 2, references found from Facebook.

³⁵ Statistics <https://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm>

The following was found for each of the content categories:

- **Religious propaganda**
Likes - 83948;
- **Religious content**
Likes - 11777; Comments - 8
- **Far-right political extremism**
Likes - 134; Comments - 7
- **Disinformation**
Likes - 89 ; Comments - 6
- **Religious discrimination**
Likes - 48037;

4.1.2 YOUTUBE³⁶

After Facebook, the data found for Youtube was analyzed and relevant results were generated. On the Albanian YouTube pages, in addition to professional media, thousands of citizens also publish videos, thus creating an unsafe space, where it is likely for users to be exposed to content centred on radicalism and violent extremism. On YouTube, for the monitoring period, 3 links and 2 accounts were found, where two of them were classified as religious content and one as a conspiracy theory.

On YouTube, for the monitoring period, a total of 2 accounts and 3 links with the relevant content were found, out of which:

- 2 links were classified as religious content;;
- 1 link was classified as a conspiracy theory;

The number of views for the religious content amounted to 1793 and the number of likes was 45 in total.

The number of views for the content classified as a conspiracy theory amounted to 19 000, the number of likes was 93, whereas the number of comments was 18.

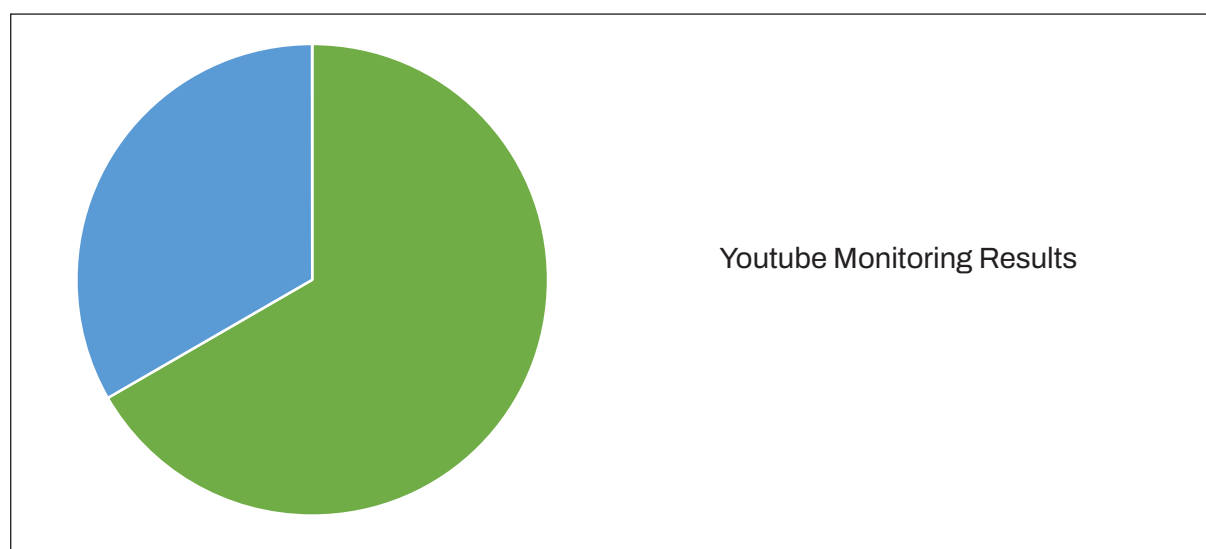


Figure 2: No. youtube links that distribute content by category in the chart

³⁶ According to Appendix 2, references found from Youtube

4.1.3 INSTAGRAM

On Instagram, 34 links with the relevant content were found, which are classified according to the following categories:

- 8 links were classified as religious content;
- 3 links were classified as religious propaganda;
- 23 links were classified as anti-religious propaganda;

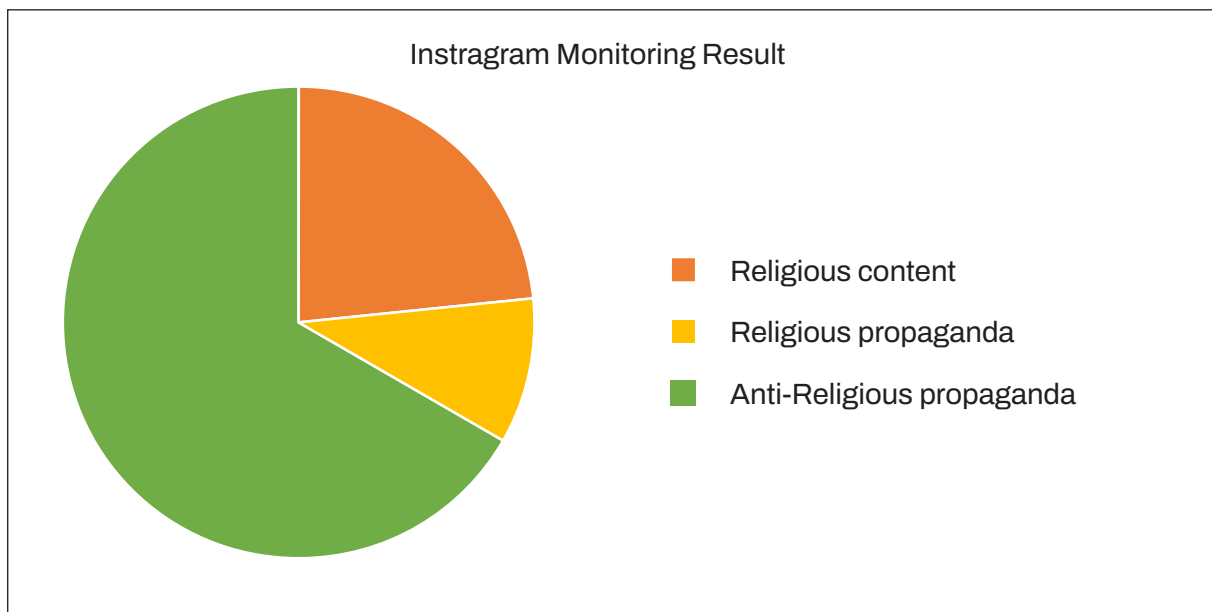


Figure 3: No.of Instagram links that spread content by category in the chart

The following was found for each of the content categories:

- **Anti-religious propaganda**
Likes - 931; Comments - 9
- **Religious propaganda**
No information was found on likes and comments.
- **Religious content**
Likes - 1180; Comments - 0

4.1.4 TWITTER

On Twitter, 3 links with the relevant content were found which are classified according to the following categories:

- 2 links were classified as Islamist extremism;
- 1 link was classified as religious propaganda

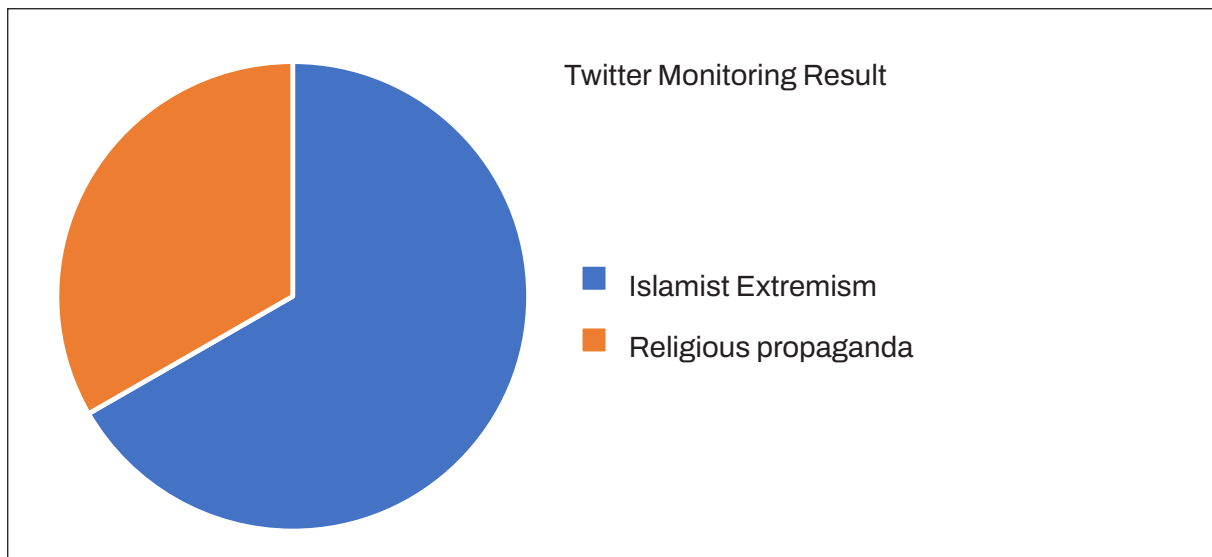


Figure 4: No. of Twitter links that spread content by category in the chart

The following was found for each of the content categories:

- **Religious propaganda**
Views - 104; Likes - 1
- **Islamist extremism**
Views - 176; Likes - 2

4.1.5 TELEGRAM, TIKTOK, REDDIT, VIMEO, GAMES³⁷

On the social networks of Telegram, TikTok, Reddit, Vimeo, and game-related ones, 17 links with the relevant content were found, which mainly spread religious propaganda as well as religious content.

Respectively:

- On Telegram, 1 channel named the “Prophetic Message” was found, and it had 620 subscribers. It was noticed that some posts had higher views than the number of subscribers. This channel contained 863 links, 140 videos and 795 images. They were classified as religious content.
- No link was found on TikTok for the monitoring period.
- 13 links were found on Reddit out of which:
 - 4 links were classified as religious content (13 Likes, 8 Comments);
 - 1 link was classified as anti-religious propaganda (Likes - 0, Comments - 5)
 - 8 links were classified as religious propaganda (Likes - 124, Comments 155)
- 1 account was found on Vimeo as the monitoring tools generated 1 link to content that was classified as Islamist extremism. There were 40 videos and 8 followers.
- With regards to the games, 2 links were found where 1 link was classified as anti-religious propaganda (0 likes, 5 comments) and the other link was classified as religious propaganda (57 likes, 14 comments).

³⁷ According to Appendix 2, links found from Twitter, Instagram, Telegram

In relation to electronic games, users of these games are also engaged in situations that affect their psychology, for example “They kill for money and for completing missions”, which leads to an aggressive behavior from an early age. In addition to the violent content, online games may contain ethnic and religious hatred. Such behaviors are demonstrated by them in the school environment with other children. As regards the social risks, gaming websites have the capacity to integrate video messages and verbal communication options, which can be used by malicious persons to obtain personal data. These individuals may establish social relations with children, pretending to be their peers or an adult they can trust, and later they try to convince them to meet in person. What can be observed in this monitoring process is that games are being used to further cultural, political and religious agendas, mainly Arab, bringing about integrated situations as part of games that disseminate messages for this purpose, including with tendencies of violent extremism, simulating war situations and military missions during the games, at different levels in implementation of these ideas.

Based on this monitoring process of social networks, the table in Figure 5 was compiled, which provides information on the number of links found that spread radicalism and violent extremism. The prevailing links are the ones that spread extremism with religious content, but there are also references to political extremism/political violence, links that contain information and extremist views about ethnic warfare, insinuations of terrorism in Albania, Islamist extremism and religious discrimination.

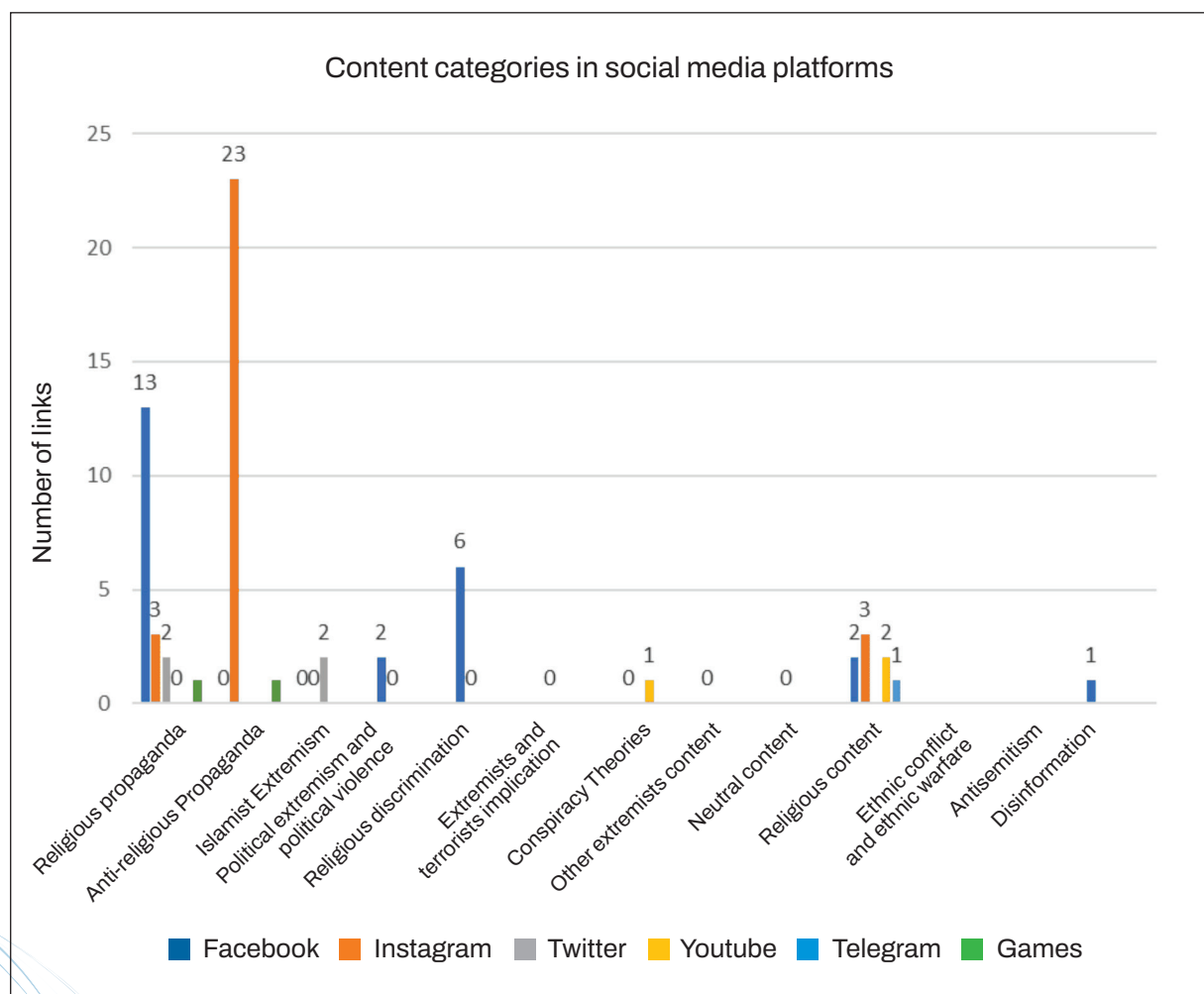


Figure 5: Number of links found by content categories for social networks

4.2 WEBPAGES³⁸

The analysis of the two-month monitoring process of web pages confirms the use of the Internet and online communication for the spread of ideologies of radicalism and violent extremism, which are mostly descriptive in nature in the form of neutral content and religious content. Out of the requested links on the website, the following were generated:

- 68 links with neutral content;
- 4 links that contained messages of religious discrimination;
- 1 link that contained implications of extremists and terrorists;;
- 4 links with content related to ethnic conflict and warfare;
- 1 link that contained messages of political extremism;
- 1 link that contained messages of Anti-Semitism;
- 2 links with religious content;
- 1 link that contained religious propaganda messages;
- 2 links containing conspiracy theories;
- 1 link where a material classified under the other extremist content category was found.

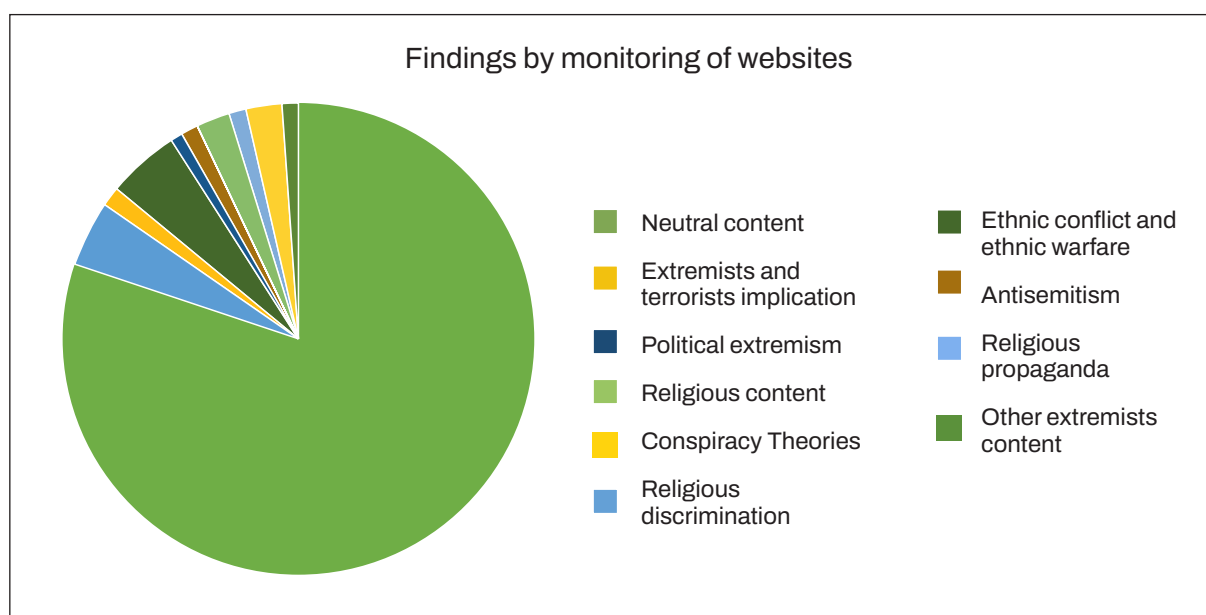


Figure 6: No. of links to web pages that distribute content by category in the chart

4.3 REFERENCES FOUND ACCORDING TO KEYWORDS

During the search for all keywords, a total of 355 links were generated by online search tools, out of which 158 links were generated for general keywords and 197 links were generated for high-risk keywords.

³⁸ According to Appendix 2, references found from webpages

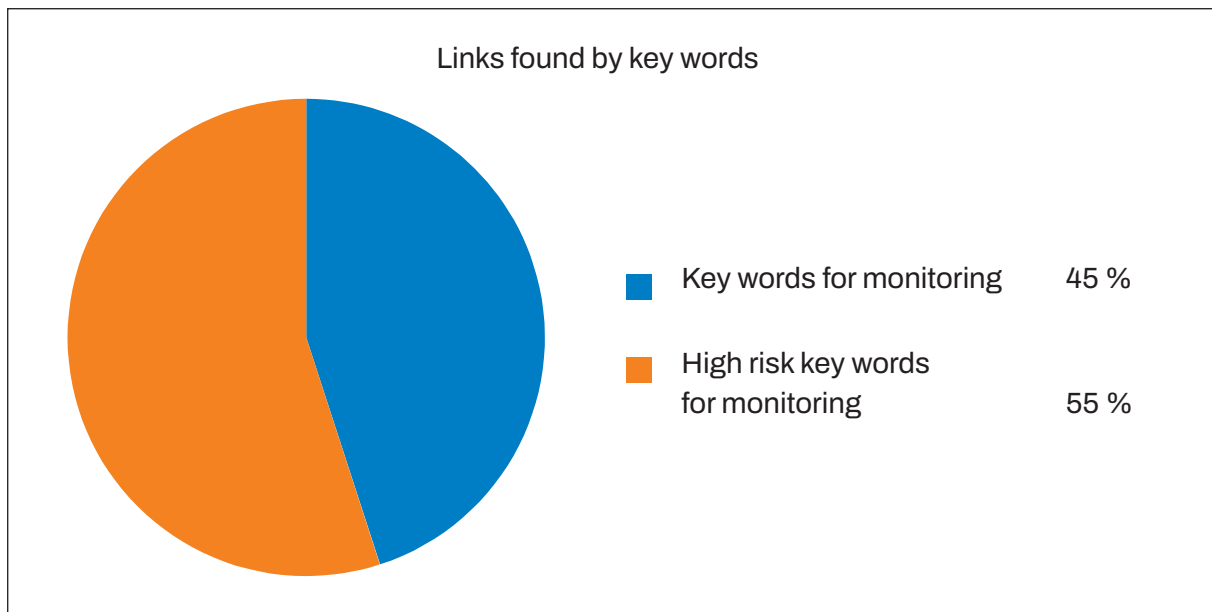


Figure 7: Number in % of the links found for keywords in total

Regarding the total of 289 links found, their contents were analyzed and filtered and only those that could be classified into the content categories described above were deemed valid for the analysis and monitoring statistics. Out of these, 57 links were generated while searching by using general keywords and 95 links were generated while searching by using high-risk keywords. The fact that these contents were generated from high-risk keyword searches does not necessarily mean that the contents were also high-risk, as it was found that there was both neutral content and religious content.

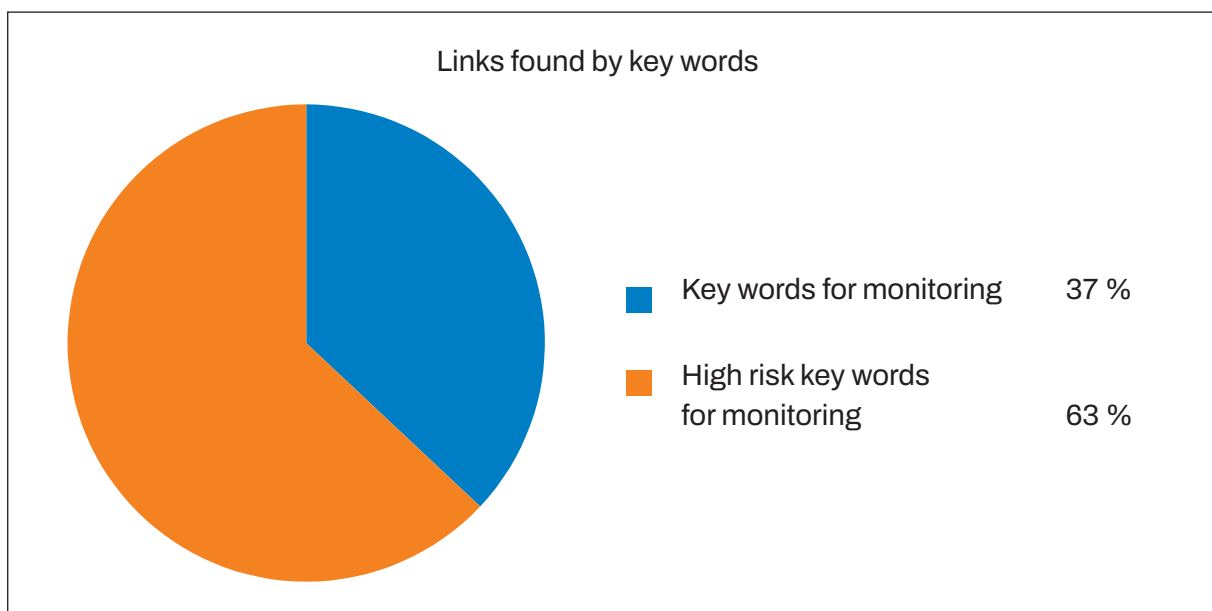


Figure 8: Number in % of links found for keywords upon filtering

4.4 GENDER OF THE PERSONS INVOLVED IN THE DISSEMINATION OF EXTREMIST CONTENT ON THE INTERNET

Following the analysis of users whose gender could be identified, female users are found to be less involved in the propagation of violent extremist ideologies compared to male users, where 22% are female and 78% are male.

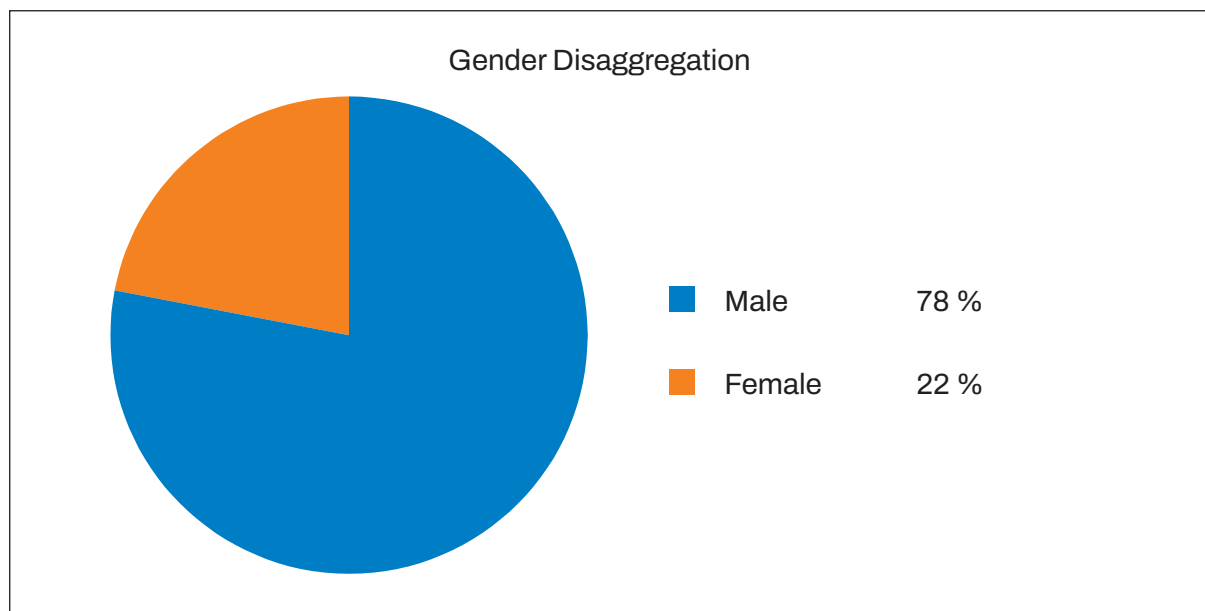


Figure 9: Gender of the persons involved in the dissemination of online extremist content

4.5 COMPARISON WITH THE MONITORING PROCESS OF 2019

Based on the previous monitoring report results for the period November-December 2019³⁹, a comparative analysis with the results of the current report was carried out. What can be observed is that out of the 107 links found in the report published in 2019, currently 39 of them are no longer accessible. The remaining part is old content, and where these are of an extremist inclination, it is necessary to remove them, ensuring that the freedom of expression, media and religious belief is respected.

As for the results related to social networks, it is found that for them:

- On Facebook and Instagram, religious/anti-religious propaganda is still the most widespread category.
- On YouTube, the most widespread content category in 2019 was religious propaganda - currently the most widespread category is religious content.
- On Twitter, the most widespread content category in 2019 was religious propaganda, while in 2022 it is Islamist extremism.

³⁹ Report, "The violent extremism propaganda circulating on online platforms in Albania" 2020 [Monitoring_report_CVE_ENG-converted_\(1\).pdf](#)

Regarding other social networks, religious propaganda is the prevailing category. A mitigation of the situation is observed in relation to the website launcher, as in 2022 neutral content is found to be the most encountered one, unlike in 2019 when religious propaganda predominated.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Different online platforms, i.e., various social networks, continue to be used by individuals and groups, who take advantage of the anonymity, the lack of supervision of these platforms, the lack of policies of the platforms themselves in order to limit illegal content, as well as the ease of access and the low cost of use, in order to promote violence and hate speech on ethnic, religious, gender and cultural grounds, to recruit young people and build online communities with a global reach, in which violent views and behaviors are encouraged, hence contributing to radicalization processes.

The monitoring process of the use of these online platforms during a two-month period, found that the contents for the purpose of spreading ideologies with extremist views, propaganda and radicalization are currently present and easily accessible. The analysis of the monitoring findings revealed that the majority of the materials generated by the search tools were not explicitly violent, but mainly consisted of ideological views directed towards radicalism and violent extremism.

Some key conclusions from the monitoring process are:

- Social media in Albania continue to play a key role in the dissemination of religious ideologies and propaganda which can create the favorable ground for violent extremism. On web pages, the predominant links are the ones that propagate neutral content. Overall, information classified as religious propaganda and religious content prevails in social networks, but there are also references to political extremism/political violence, links that contain information and extremist views about ethnic warfare, implications of terrorists in Albania, extremism and religious discrimination.
- In 2022, it was observed the presence of conspiracy theories, where content of such nature was also found during the monitoring period. The spread of conspiracy theories escalated during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic and it still goes on, but to a lesser extent. Conspiracy theories can create grounds for disobedience to law enforcement authorities and opposing actions of an extremist nature.
- An identified concern is the presence of old materials on the Internet that disseminate ideologies with extremist inclinations, which continue to be accessible. Extremist messages and hate speech that incite radicalization have not been removed or blocked by Internet service providers or social networking platforms although they were published several years ago.
- Facebook social network is mostly used by users who spread extremist propaganda in the Albanian language. Extremist content also is available on personal and organizational accounts on YouTube, Twitter, Telegram and Instagram. Attention should also be paid to online games, which, in addition to patterns of violence, create the opportunity for communication between players and the spread of political and religious agendas that influence the promotion of extremist views.

- Out of the users whose gender could be identified, it turns out that female users are less involved in the propagation of violent extremist ideologies compared to male users, where 22% are female and 78% are male.
- Among the most widespread online content categories, the presence of indoctrination with extremist ideology that targets the most gullible individuals who can be exploited for the purposes of terrorist groups in their country, the so-called “lone wolves”, remains concerning.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The risk of disseminating extremist propaganda and online radicalization through the Internet and social networks remains high. It is very important to consider the steps that can lead to the commission of violent extremist and terrorist acts, where in order to establish a first contact, recruiters post propaganda material on social media to find and engage the most gullible target audience.

Their strategy also includes the creation of online communities where content sharing, interaction and isolation from society and family are promoted. It then shifts to private communications, which are difficult to monitor by the authorities, to achieve the ultimate objectives of encouraging users to commit extremist or terrorist acts. Given this type of scheme, it is recommended that the authorities focus on the first stages by monitoring online content, identifying the main actors and taking action against them according to the applicable legislation.

Moreover, taking into account the continuous sophistication of strategies, procedures and tools that extremist groups use, it is necessary that these are identified in appropriate time and addressed with legal means to provide a safer online space far from online extremism.

Based on the findings of this monitoring process, as well as the best contemporary practices, some recommendations can be made for policy-makers and other actors facing the challenges of online violent extremism:

- The full and effective implementation of the Intersectoral Strategy on the War against Terrorism 2021-2025, and the Action Plan 2021 is recommended in order to improve the component of Strategic Communication, institutional coordination and preventive measures to exchange information in the appropriate time to address persons at risk of radicalization and to create efficient measures for the provision of support, taking care that they are not stigmatized nor accused unfairly.
- Strengthening of institutional structures' capacities for continuous monitoring and follow-up of alerts that may come from private operators and individuals on the content of violent extremism that circulates on online platforms in Albania.
- It is necessary to establish objective criteria in the domestic legislation regarding the definition of a content as criminal, including messages that intentionally communicate or directly encourage the commission of a terrorist act, and that have a casual connection between the incitement and the possible commission of the violent or terrorist act.
- In order to realize the swift removal/blocking of dangerous contents on the Internet, the relevant national legislation needs to be updated and transparent and efficient court decisions are needed as well. Any attempt to filter or block online content must be made in

accordance with international human rights standards and in compliance with the norms of the rule of law.

- It remains pivotal that the approach towards the risks of violent extremism be as comprehensive as possible and include all actors and stakeholders, not being limited to punitive policies.

Based on the Recommendation of the European Commission COM(2017) 555⁴⁰ and the Directive (EU) 2017/541 on combating terrorism⁴¹, some concrete measures can also be offered that can be taken by the Albanian authorities aiming at responding to extremist messages and other illegal content on the online platforms:

- Legal amendments for providers of online platforms (websites, blogs, social networks, etc.) to provide contact points or technical interfaces, which can allow effective and timely reporting of violent extremist materials from official authorities or volunteering whistleblowers, in order to delete/block these materials or profiles. To this end, the legal regulation and procedures recently established and implemented by the Internet Referral Unit at EUROPOL⁴² can be used.
- Drafting protocols for Internet service providers in public areas such as schools, shopping centers, bars or even public squares, aiming at installing filters, special software or other innovative measures to prevent accession of harmful content on the Internet.
- Online platforms' providers should clearly state in their terms of service that they will not store materials with extremist content. This provides a more acceptable approach towards complaints or legal action that may be taken by persons affected by the deletion of objectionable material.

APPENDIX 1 - SEARCH ENGINES

The first search tool used is “social-searcher”, from which analysis and statistics are generated about the keyword we are searching for. More specifically, it generates the content, the number of times the keyword was used, on which specific page it was used, and the redirect link to that page.

Search engine URL: <https://www.social-searcher.com/social-buzz/?wblng&ntw&psttyp&searchid&period&value&fbpage&q5&abdullah+azzam+albania>

⁴⁰ Tackling Illegal Content Online – European Commission, 28.9.2017 <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2017/EN/COM-2017-555-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF>

⁴¹ Directive (EU) 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32017L0541>

⁴² The EU Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU)
<https://www.europol.europa.eu/about-europol/eu-internet-referral-unit-eu-iru>

Social Searcher - Free Social Media Search Engine (social-searcher.com)

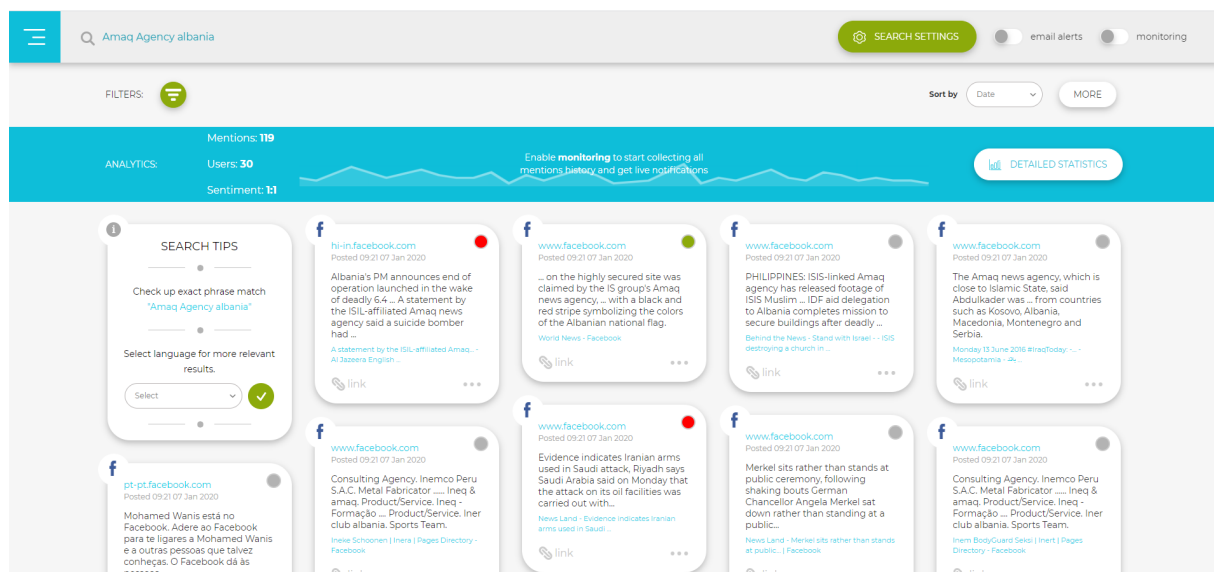
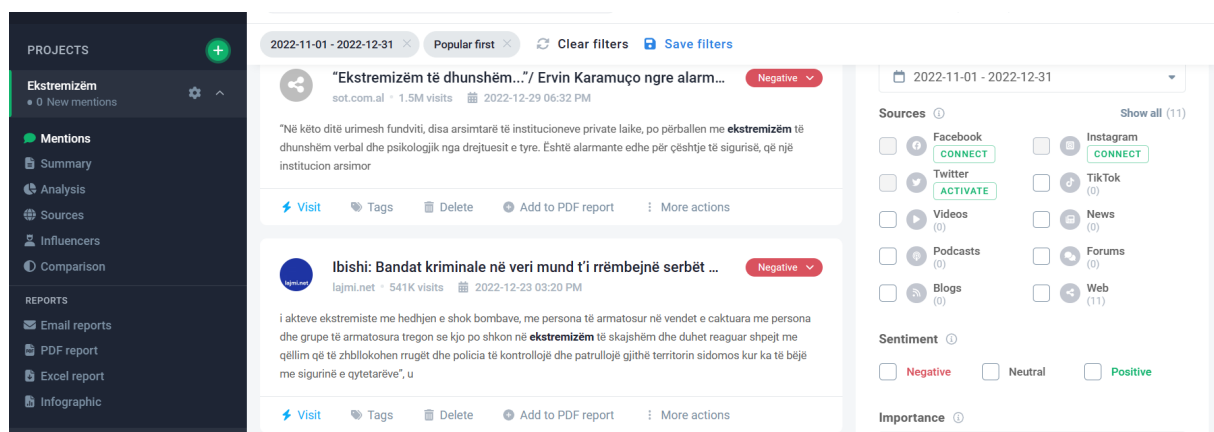


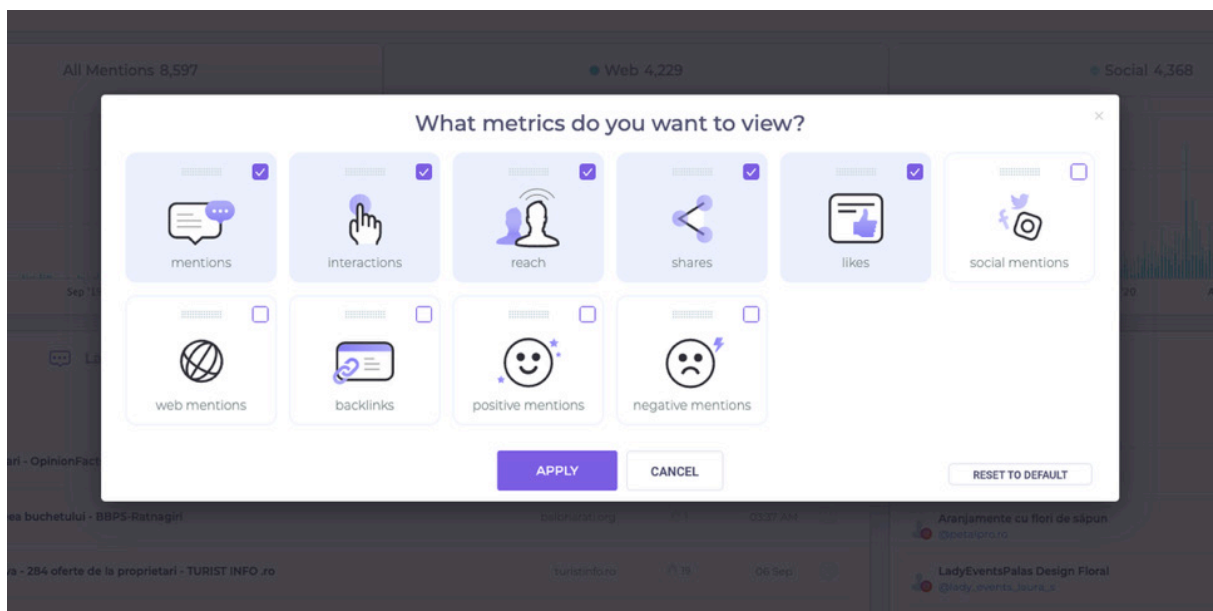
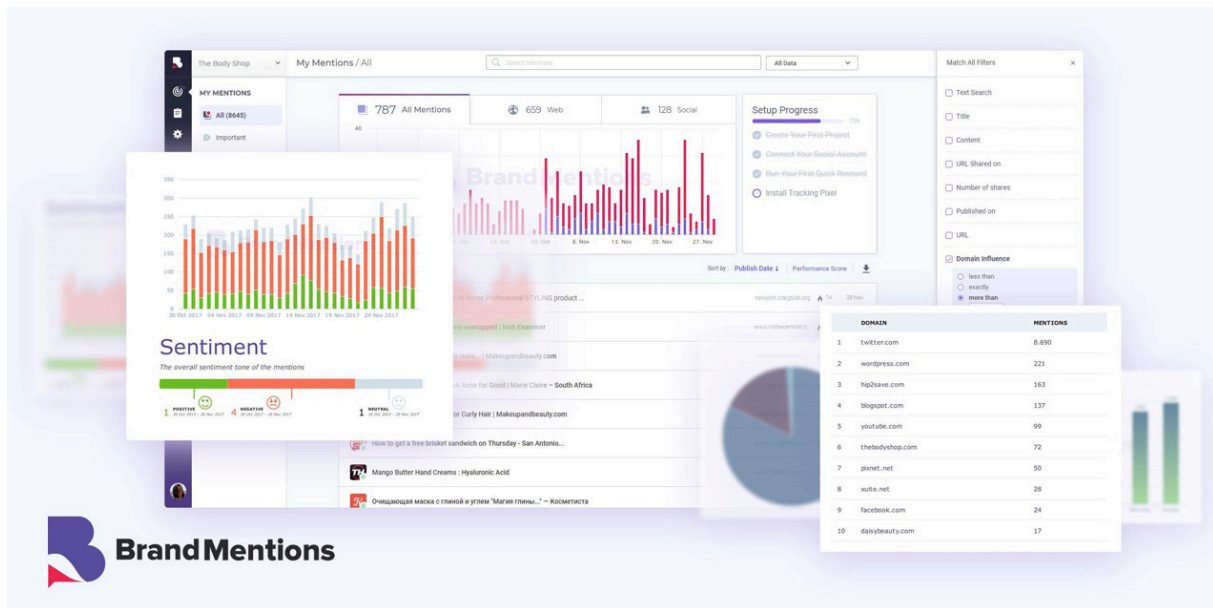
Figure: Search engine to generate analysis and statistics about keywords

Another search tool is that of Brand24, which, through payment, provides the possibility of filtering data specifically for Albania, by going to the “Analysis” option and choosing filters according to the purpose of the study, for the country we are interested in monitoring, which in this case is Albania.

https://brand24.com/?adgr=txt-brand-iv-test&keyword-ext=brand24&placement&location=9069992&gclid=CjwKCAiAk--dBhABEiwAchlwXgrBeonR6IwYGK0Pzwsh-9DbB6lajmr4wUodW-_IVw2T4lC38eqdxoCwmlQAvD_BWE



Another online search tool used is BrandMentions. It generates data on the number of times a keyword has been mentioned, monitoring in Albanian, Arabic and English, for the country we are interested in monitoring, in this case Albania, and it provides the links where it has been used and enables detailed reports for each keyword .



APPENDIX 2 - REFERENCES BY MONITORING

In this appendix are included the found links which after the analysis have been classified in at least one of the defined content categories.

The links in this appendix are confidential because of the sensitive information they may contain

APPENDIX 3 - KEY WORDS FOR MONITORING

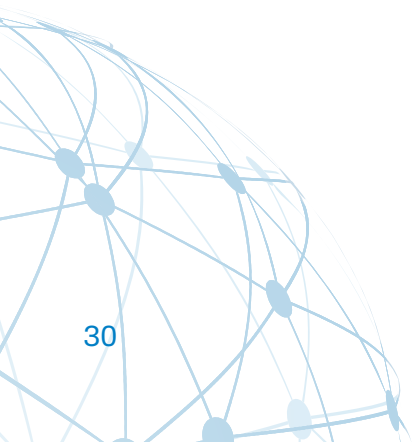
KEY WORDS FOR MONITORING

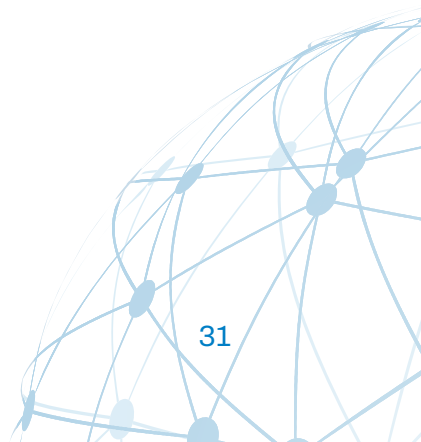
Apostasy
Apostate
Apostates
Ayman al-Zawahiri
Caliphate
Crusader
Crusaders
Dabiq
Dabiq Magazine
Ibn Taymiyyah
Islamic State
Jihad
Jihad Meaning
Kafir
Khalifa Meaning
Khilafah
Kuffar
Martyr
Martyrdom in Islam
Martyrs
Mujahideen
Shahada
Suicide Vest
Hebre

HIGH RISK KEY WORDS FOR MONITORING

Abdullah Azzam
Amaq Agency
Apostate Islam
Apostates in Islam
Beheadings
Crusader Army
Crusaders Against Islam
Dabiq PDF
How to do Jihad
Ibn Taymiyyah Jihad
Inspire Magazine
Kabbalah
Cabala
Cabbala
Cabbalah
Jewish Coalition
Jihad for Ummah
Jihad in the Quran
Khalifah
Khilafah Syria
Killing Apostates
Killing Infidels
Killing Kuffar
Mujahid
Preparing for Jihad
Rafidah
Soldiers of the Caliphate
Taghut

Ameliye Istishadiye
Al-Qaeda
Bidatci
Dawla Islamiyyah
Eksploziv
Emir
Ekstremizëm
Haku
Hawala
Hixhara
Ikhuan
Khalifat
LHT
Muxhahid
Muvahid
Murtedat
Munafik
Murxhi
Rafidijë
Shehid
Sherihat
ISIL
ISIS
Shtet Islamik (Khalifat)
Shirk
Targut
Tekfir
Kabala
Plandemi
Kaurr







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