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Country Reports on Terrorism 2021: North Macedonia

BUREAU OF COUNTERTERRORISM

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North Macedonia

Overview: North Macedonia cooperated with U.S. counterterrorism efforts. With no terrorist attacks in 2021 and no reported departures to join ISIS, the main counterterrorism issue North Macedonia faced consisted of returned FTFs from Syria and Iraq, given these individuals' ability to establish violent extremist cells, plan attacks, and radicalize others to violence. The National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism (NCCVECT) estimated that 143 citizens of North Macedonia (excluding children) in recent years have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria, to Iraq, or both, to join terrorist groups. Of these 143 adults (133 male, 10 female), 38 were killed, 79 returned, five are believed to remain in Syria, and two are in prison or a refugee camp. Another 16 (11 men and 5 women) were repatriated, and three FTFs were deported from other countries. Authorities assessed the terrorist threat level to be "average high," or medium, as ISIS members and sympathizers maintained a presence in country. In July, the government repatriated four FTFs and 19 family members.

2021 Terrorist Incidents: There were no terrorist incidents reported in North Macedonia during 2021.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: North Macedonia's legislative framework is adequate to prosecute individuals suspected of committing or aiding terrorist activities or participating in foreign wars. Low sentencing for terrorism-related offenses remains a challenge but improved, compared with previous years, and sentences are generally longer than in other Western Balkans countries. The U.S. Department of Justice provided mentoring and battlefield evidence training to case prosecutors and investigators.

In July, authorities repatriated four adult male FTFs, five women, and 14 children from Syria. Two pleaded guilty and received sentences of three and five years for participation in a foreign army. In November, an appellate court doubled the three-year sentence. Separately, the appellate court lengthened prison sentences for three individuals arrested in 2020 for plotting a domestic terrorist attack, as all three defendants previously had been convicted of participation in a foreign army. During September and October, a court sentenced seven additional individuals connected to the 2020 plot. In March, an FTF who returned voluntarily received a five-year sentence.

The Ministry of Interior's "Terrorism and Violent Extremism Sector" led law enforcement-related CT efforts. North Macedonia developed a new 2021-25 National Strategy for Developing the Penitentiary System, which includes a component for deradicalizing and rehabilitating FTFs. The Department for Execution of Sanctions signed an MOU with the United Kingdom in July and began implementation of a corrections intelligence unit focusing on identification and prevention of terrorism threats and criminal activity in prison facilities.

North Macedonia continued its partnership with the United States on traveler screening tools and continues to take steps to enhance border security and screening efforts to include systematic use of Advanced Passenger Information and Passenger Name Record data in line with international standards. However, there was little progress with the Passenger Information Unit. The unit is still nonoperational because of legal amendments pending in Parliament. In December, authorities met with Watchlisting Assistance and Support Program experts from the U.S. Department of State to discuss gaps and weaknesses in watchlisting efforts. North Macedonian authorities cooperated with INTERPOL, Europol, the European CT Centre, and the FBI. U.S. support for CT training and mentorship has largely resumed after pandemic-related delays.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: The country's legal framework follows international standards. North Macedonia is a member of MONEYVAL, a Financial Action Task Force (FATF)-style regional body. Its Financial Intelligence Unit, the Financial Intelligence Office (FIO), is a member of the Egmont Group. The government drafted a new law on Prevention of Money

Laundering and Terrorism Financing to implement the provisions of Directive V (2018/843) and harmonize it with EU legislation. The new draft law incorporates articles aimed at overcoming risks identified in the 2020 National Risk Assessment on terrorism financing of non-profit organizations and implements FATF recommendations. In August, the government adopted a new National Strategy for Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism (2021-24).

In 2021, the FIO received five reports for suspicion of terrorist financing from banks, and it submitted 11 total reports on suspicion of terrorist financing to competent authorities for processing. DOJ/OPDAT resident legal advisers trained prosecutors and investigators on terrorist financing.

Countering Violent Extremism: The NCCVECT continued awareness-raising activities around the national CVE strategy and action plan. In August, the government appointed a new National Coordinator and CT and CVE deputies and expanded the committee's staff. The NCCVECT established two additional multistakeholder Community Action Teams now operational in six municipalities and focused on preventing violent extremism.

FTF repatriations were conducted in accordance with international law and the National Plan for the Reintegration, Resocialization, and Rehabilitation of Returnees From Foreign Armies. The government, with the support of the International Organization for Migration, in March drafted and adopted standard operating procedures for treatment protocols of FTFs and their family members. Social workers and mental health practitioners received training on psychosocial support for individuals who have returned from conflict zones.

The United States supported the NCCVECT in organizing an interfaith dialogue, which included the country's two largest religious communities, the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Religious Community. The U.S.-funded Women Without Borders' MotherSchools program continued teaching mothers in identified municipalities how to recognize and respond to early warning signs of radicalization and extremism in their children and their communities. Eight municipalities in North Macedonia are members of the Strong Cities Network. North Macedonia is also a partner country of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF).

International and Regional Cooperation: North Macedonia continued its close cooperation with other Western Balkan countries on CT and CVE issues. North Macedonia participated in

the implementation of projects in the Western Balkans funded by GCERF, *Hedayah*, the Strong Cities Network, Integrative Internal Security Governance, and others. Regionally, authorities held working meetings with the equivalent coordination bodies of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The government implemented capacity building projects supported by the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and others. These efforts will help North Macedonia prepare for its 2023 OSCE chairpersonship.

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