ENC ANALYSIS

EU, Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) and civil society: some considerations on the IcSP in Kyrgyzstan

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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[1] The views expressed and the conclusions reached in this paper are exclusively those of the author and are not necessarily shared or endorsed by the ENC nor the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

Key Points

- Five **main forms of engagement in PVE** characterise civil society organizations (CSOs) receiving EU funding under the "Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace" (IcSP) and its programme "Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism" (STRIVE) in Kyrgyzstan. These forms include: (1) Development and delivery of training programmes for awareness-raising and capacity building; (2) Establishment of mechanisms for dialogue, consultation and advocacy at the local, national and international levels; (3) Research and research capacity-building; (4) Production of counternarratives and alternative narratives; (5) Sub-granting of smaller-scale and/or community-level projects.

- Overall, **three types of activities are conducted** by internationally funded CSOs in the PVE field: PVE-specific, PVE-related and PVE-relevant. *PVE-specific activities* include efforts directly targeting individuals involved in deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration processes. *PVE-related activities* are aimed at strengthening the resilience of individuals and communities through their socio-economic empowerment. *PVE-relevant activities* are focused on systemic reform.

- A **prevalence of PVE-related and PVE-relevant activities emerge** from the projects carried out under the IcSP and STRIVE in Kyrgyzstan with EU-funded CSOs prioritising development over security in the implementation of their initiatives on the ground.

- **Forms of ownership on behalf of EU-funded CSOs** under IcSP and STRIVE are accompanied by processes of reappropriation that are reinforced by the ambiguity typical of the international PVE agenda and might contribute to the perpetuation of inappropriate development interventions.

- **PVE-specific engagement should be expanded** through projects aimed at deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration with an emphasis on individualized gender- and age-specific social and psychological support, especially in the case of child returnees. PVE-related and PVE-relevant activities should be focused less on violent extremism (VE) and more on development priorities identified by local communities, by engaging them in articulating their visions of a "good life".

- A new **pilot capacity-building programme** addressed to young people as agents of peace could be launched. In particular, financial assistance could be provided to implement youth-led community initiatives tackling root causes of conflict related to climate, water and environmental security.

Introduction

Since the United Nations' "Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism" was launched at the end of 2015, Kyrgyzstan has been a major recipient of international funding in Central Asia in the field of preventing violent extremism (PVE) on behalf of a number of organisations, including the EU, Helvetas, the OSCE, UNDP, UNODC and UN Women. Three fields of engagement in PVE can be identified that characterise the international donor community in Kyrgyzstan as foreseen by the Peacebuilding Priority Plan (PPP): (1) justice and security, (2) prison and probation and (3) community development.[2]

In the field of justice and security, projects were conducted to support the host state's efforts to combat organised crime, drug trafficking and cybercrime and to address terrorist threats in line with international standards and best practices. In the field of prison and probation, initiatives funded by the international donor community included projects that aimed at strengthening community policing and forensic services in cases related to terrorism and extremism, thus ensuring adherence to fair trial standards; at increasing citizens' awareness of human rights; and at improving legal and policy frameworks with regard to human rights issues. However, most of the PVE projects funded in Kyrgyzstan concerned community development. They were targeted to youth and women and were directed towards building community resilience in the face of violent and manipulative ideologies (including ideologies that exploit faith) by means of education, empowerment and dialogue. In addition, projects were designed to increase the capacity of small- and medium-sized civil society organisations (CSOs) that are already active, or could become active, in countering violent extremism (CVE).

Both the Kyrgyz government and the general public have welcomed this new international focus on PVE and have adopted a "narrative of heightened threats" concerning violent extremism (VE) and terrorism in Kyrgyzstan in response to the increases in extremist online propaganda and in conservatism with regard to religious beliefs and practices.[3] In 2017 the Kyrgyz government launched a national programme and a related "Action Plan on countering extremism and terrorism for 2017–2022" where three main priorities were singled out: (1) prevention of extremism and terrorism, (2) detection and suppression of extremism and terrorism and (3) improvement of legislative mechanisms and interaction in the sphere of combatting extremism and terrorism.[4] In the Plan, PVE activities were foreseen to raise awareness with regard to extremism, terrorism and effective countermeasures, to build

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[2] United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office: Peacebuilding Priority Plan, 2020, https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/en/31253-peacebuilding-priority-plan-ppp.

[3] Chuck Thiessen: The strategic ambiguity of the United Nations Approach to Preventing Violent Extremism. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism (2019). doi:10.1080/1057610X.2019.1647685, p. 3.

[4] Order of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 414, as of 20. September 2017.

capacity among the authorised state bodies to combat extremism and terrorism as well as to improve religious education and preventive work with target groups. In addition, improvements in legislative mechanisms and in the detection and suppression of extremism and terrorism were striven for by expanding operational and analytical activities in this field and by organising and better coordinating anti-extremism and anti-terrorist activities and agencies. Remarkably, this Action Plan has opened up opportunities for cooperation with non-governmental organizations in (1) conducting sociological and analytical studies regarding causes and conditions that facilitate the spread of extremist ideas and terrorism in society, (2) preparing and publishing additional information materials aimed at fostering resistance to the ideas of terrorism, extremism and radicalism in society and at strengthening principles of secular, inclusive, and tolerant state and the rule of law and (3) informing the public about state policy in the field of extremism and terrorism.[5]

The new trend of the international donor community is also reflected in the more recent strategy "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Strong Partnership" of 2019. This strategy states that preventing VE and radicalisation and addressing the issue of returning terrorist fighters constitute priorities of the EU engagement in the region.[6] In particular, the EU has committed itself to promoting the "exchange of good practice on the prevention of violent extremism, including research on the drivers of violent extremism, preventive measures and counter-messaging" and "to strengthen[ing] the resilience of the local communities towards violent extremism […], in line with the UN Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism".[7] In this framework, the "whole-of-society approach" has been assigned a pivotal role, with civil society regarded as better placed to tackle the underlying conditions that are conducive to terrorism and VE by means of consistent outreach to vulnerable populations.[8] Recently, the challenges posed by radicalisation that can lead to terrorism in

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[5] Ibid.

[6] High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy: Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU and Central Asia: New opportunities for a stronger partnership (15 May 2019). https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf, p. 5.

[7] Ibid.

[8] See Council of the European Union: A secure Europe in a better world: European security strategy. Brussels, 8 December 2003, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15895-2003-INIT/en/pdf; Council of the European Union: Revised EU strategy for combating radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism (9956/14), Brussels, 19 May 2014, http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9956-2014-INIT/en/pdf; European External Action Service: Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe: A global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy. Brussels, June 2016,

Central Asia have also been emphasised in the "Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism" of 2020, reiterating the need for the EU to be open to counter-terrorism engagement and outreach in the region because of its strategic importance for European security.[9]

The emphasis of the international donor community on PVE in Kyrgyzstan has been strongly criticised by commentators such as Tricot O'Farrell and Street (2019), who referred to VE as an "inflated threat" and to the PVE agenda as diverting funding from more systemic issues such as structural injustice and exclusion.[10] At the same time, Thiessen (2019) has attributed to this agenda a strategic ambiguity that allows international donors to "build consensus and operational support from a diversity of partners" and "implementing partners to interpret and re-case […] objectives according to self-interests".[11] It is in this framework that reappropriation processes on behalf of CSOs have become very common in Kyrgyzstan, as will be demonstrated in the following section.

Case study: The "Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace" (IcSP) and its programme "Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism" (STRIVE)

The projects implemented by CSOs under the IcSP and its STRIVE programme in Kyrgyzstan are a good example of the EU's whole-of-society approach to PVE. Overall, five main forms of engagement in PVE can be identified that characterise CSOs funded under this Instrument in the country:[12]

(1) Development and delivery of training programmes for awareness-raising and capacity-building

(2) Establishment of mechanisms for dialogue, consultation and advocacy at the local, national and international levels

(3) Research and research capacity-building

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https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf; Council of the European Union: Council conclusions on EU External Action on preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism. Brussels, 16 June 2020, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44446/st08868-en20.pdf, p. 2.

[9] Ibid., p. 5

[10] Kloé Tricot O'Farrell and Jordan Street: A threat inflated? The countering and preventing violent extremism agenda in Kyrgyzstan. London: Saferworld (March 2019), https://www.saferworld.org.uk/long-reads/a-threat-inflated-the-countering-and-preventing-violent-extremism-agenda-in-kyrgyzstan.
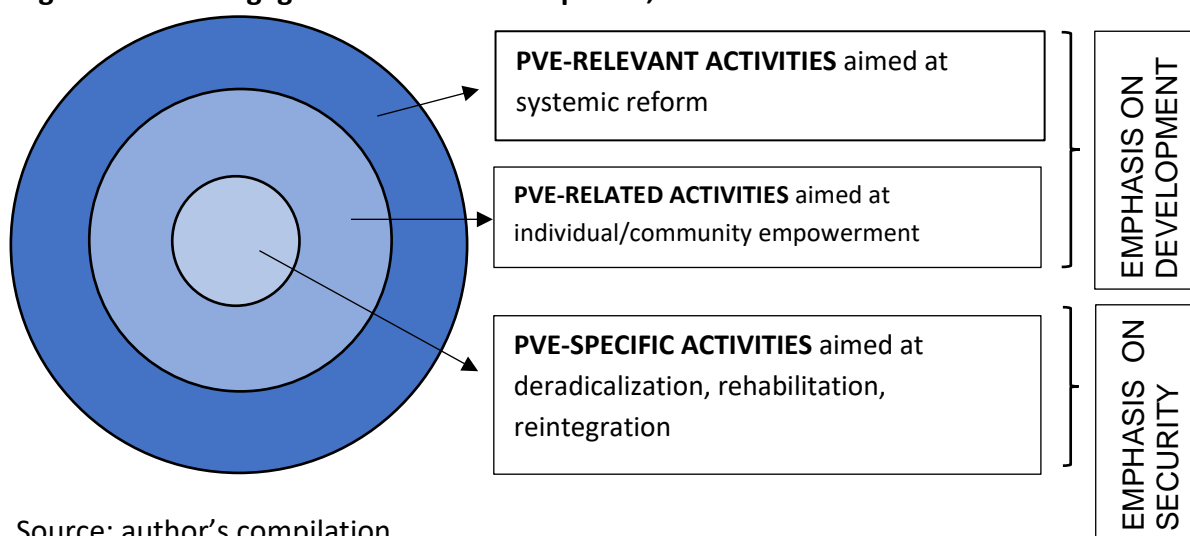
[11] Thiessen, Strategic ambiguity, p. 13.

[12] The analysis was mainly focused on the projects conducted in Kyrgyzstan under the call EuropeAid/152401/DD/ACT/KG.

(4) Production of counternarratives and alternative narratives
(5) Sub-granting of smaller-scale and/or community-level projects.[13]

When describing the engagement of the internationally funded CSOs in PVE in Kyrgyzstan, it is possible to differentiate among three different types of activities: PVE-specific, PVE-related and PVE-relevant.[14] *PVE-specific activities* include efforts that directly target individuals becoming or already radicalized as well as violent extremist offenders involved in deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration processes. *PVE-related activities* are aimed at strengthening the resilience of individuals and communities by promoting, for instance, social, financial and livelihood competences. *PVE-relevant activities* are focused on systemic reform with regard to good governance, rule of law, respect for human rights, fighting against corruption and the like. These types of activities can be regarded as three concentric cycles (see also Figure 1). Recently, it was observed that, in Kyrgyzstan, PVE-specific activities represent only 5% of the total activities.[15] Thus, the great majority of what the international donor community presents as its PVE engagement might be viewed simply as development business as usual, in that such efforts have been and continue to be independent of the phenomena of radicalisation and VE in this country.[16]

Figure 1 – CSO engagement in PVE: PVE-specific, -related and -relevant activities

PVE-RELEVANT ACTIVITIES aimed at systemic reform

PVE-RELATED ACTIVITIES aimed at individual/community empowerment

PVE-SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES aimed at deradicalization, rehabilitation, reintegration

EMPHASIS ON DEVELOPMENT

EMPHASIS ON SECURITY

Source: author's compilation

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[13] For more detailed information, see also Chiara Pierobon: EU efforts to prevent violent extremism (PVE) by engaging civil society in Kyrgyzstan. [Forthcoming].

[14] Chiara Pierobon: Preventing violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan: The role of the international donor community. Central Asia Policy Brief No. 56 (March 2020). Bishkek: OSCE Academy. http://osce-academy.net/upload/file/Chiara_Pierobon.pdf, pp. 6–10.

[15] Ibid. p. 6.

[16] Ibid.

The prevalence of PVE-related and PVE-relevant activities becomes evident if we apply this classification to the aforementioned five forms of engagement undertaken by EU-funded CSOs under the IcSP and STRIVE. This prevalence has contributed to making the EU's engagement in this field less security-oriented with its funded CSOs prioritising development over security in the implementation of their projects on the ground. However, what could be interpreted as the manifestation of a forward-looking approach in line with the very essence of the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism can also lead to ambiguous outcomes. Indeed, the projects implemented within this framework run the risk of being too general to tackle radicalisation and too (P)VE-oriented to promote long-term development. The ambiguity that characterises the international PVE agenda is also linked to the lack of clear definitions of the terms "violent extremism" and "prevention of violent extremism". Consequently, difficulties arise when one attempts to monitor and evaluate progress and its impact in this field.

At the same time, such ambiguity has created room for processes of adaptation, reinterpretation and non-confrontational contestation through which CSOs reappropriated EU funds that had been made available under the IcSP and STRIVE.[17] Forms of adaptation were noted especially among smaller NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, some of which used the available EU funding to prolong their engagement in building peace and stability among local communities by simply adding a new thematic emphasis on VE to their capacity-building activities. [18] A good example of reinterpretation is offered by the labelling mechanisms used by the EU-funded CSOs to fit their particular audiences. More specifically, initiatives conducted in this framework were presented as "PVE activities" to the EU and other international donors, as "CVE activities" to the government and other state actors, and as "peace-building activities" to local communities and target groups.[19] Forms of non-confrontational contestation emerged when organisations funded under the IcSP explicitly criticised the national and international PVE agenda and adopted a broader, long-term and non-security-oriented approach tackling root causes of conflict.[20]

Reappropriation processes are evidence that ownership is not only promoted by the EU at the programmatic level but is already implemented in practice by those who receive EU

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[17] For more detailed information, see also Chiara Pierobon: European Union, civil society and local ownership in Kyrgyzstan: Analyzing patterns of adaptation, reinterpretation and contestation in the prevention of violent extremism (PVE). Central Asian Survey [Forthcoming].

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

development aid in Kyrgyzstan. However, these undisclosed forms of reappropriation might also contribute to the perpetuation of inappropriate development interventions.[21] For example, if using the label "peace-building activities" when dealing with target groups and beneficiaries at the local level is grounded on the "no-harm approach" and an attempt to avoid stigmatisation, it is reasonable to wonder what these activities are exactly aimed at and what they are actually able to achieve.

Indeed, communities are usually identified as targets of PVE initiatives when they face specific risk factors for radicalisation. Watered-down capacity-building activities in this field run the risk of being too vague and thus unable to reach and help individuals who are being or are already radicalised and may be irrelevant when it comes to those in the community who are not interested in violent ideologies and do not perceive violent extremism as an issue. In connection with this last point, there has been a certain level of PVE fatigue and criticism on behalf of beneficiaries in so-called at-risk communities that have been the targets of several PVE projects and programmes funded by the international donor community over the past five years. What is striking is that, although millions of dollars have been invested in international programmes aimed at increasing cognitive resilience to violent and extremist ideologies, these locations still lack essential infrastructures and services.

Nevertheless, it is thanks to these reappropriation mechanisms that CSOs on the ground are able to make sense of EU calls for proposals whose objectives are not always clearly defined and whose theory of change is often poorly designed. Indeed, the IcSP call for proposals issued in Kyrgyzstan in 2016 is a good example of the type of ambiguity described by Thiessen (2019). At the beginning of the call, the subsection "Thematic Area" within Section 1.1. ("Background") is dedicated to the description of state policies regarding religion in Kyrgyzstan, emphasising how these policies are aimed at both protecting citizens' freedom of religion and beliefs and countering religious radicalisation and extremism. However, at the end of the subsection, the reader realises that the EU "follows a different vector": indeed, this call for proposals intends to promote a discourse about religion in a democracy through which "people learn about the positioning of members and groups of society, how they argue, which value and belief systems they are following, which visions they have and why they act in a specific way, and what the[ir] challenges are".[22] Yet this discourse is also framed as having the potential to reach out to those who are at the margins of society, are facing isolation or are at risk of being radicalised. Surely a more coherent and clearly articulated theory of

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[21] See also Karolina Kluczewska: *Development Aid in Tajikistan: Six global paradigm and practice on the ground.* PhD Thesis, University of St. Andrews (2019), p. 227

[22] How do we want to live? Religion and Democracy EuropeAid/152401/DD/ACT/KG. https://www.up2europe.eu/calls/how-do-we-want-to-live-religion-and-democracy-europeaid-152401-dd-act-kg_1182.html

change grounded in an empirically based analysis of the local context and problems would reduce ambiguity - of both the calls for proposals and the projects submitted in this framework - and be beneficial for measuring the true impact of the EU's (PVE) engagement.

Last but not least, few of the organisations operating in Kyrgyzstan are able to meet the EU requirements in terms of experience, track record of grants and availability of a network and are therefore eligible to apply for EU funding schemes such as the IcSP, EIDHR and CSO/LA. Moreover, a history of successful cooperation with the EU no doubt increases the chances that an application will be successful. It is in this context that the adaptation and reinterpretation mechanisms employed by EU-funded CSOs become functional as a way of implementing EU's civil society assistance on the ground and of ensuring continuity in the management of development aid in spite of the more or less frequent staff rotation mechanisms affecting EU staff abroad. However, such continuity can also contribute to consolidating the privileged positions held by just a few international CSOs, which leaves fewer opportunities for younger, smaller and more locally based organisations to enter the field.

Recommendations

1. Increase engagement in research on VE/PVE
- Conduct preliminary evaluations of PVE interventions at the implementers and beneficiary levels before designing new calls for proposals. (This pertains not only to the IcSP/PVE field but to the EU's support to civil society in general.) For example, interviews could be conducted with project implementers and partners to collect their feedback and lessons learnt as well as suggestions for future calls for proposals. Focus group discussions and community surveys could be carried out in selected locations to investigate how the projects are perceived by target groups and beneficiaries (including local CSOs). Needs assessments and conflict analyses could be carried out in at-risk communities to identify concrete drivers of VE and to become familiar with the context for possible PVE interventions. In addition, interactive meetings with local and national authorities as well as with major international donors could be held in order to map existing initiatives (and the main target locations), facilitate information-sharing, avoid replication, and search for complementarity and synergies among key PVE actors.
- Research assignments could be outsourced via tender procedure, to be managed directly by the EU Delegation, starting twelve months before the launch of the new call (in the case of the IcSP). Forthcoming calls for proposals could allocate a fixed budget for research (tentatively 2%, or approximately €50,000, if one considers previous IcSP calls from 2016).

2. Prioritise security over development in PVE-specific activities, but prioritise development over security in PVE-related and PVE-relevant activities

- Use the evidence collected (see Recommendation 1) to create a solid theory of change that is targeted at the specific national and local contexts, investigating and explaining how the three types of activities – PVE-specific, PVE-related and PVE-relevant – relate to one another.
- Refine PVE-specific engagement through projects that simultaneously address push and pull factors of radicalisation in vulnerable groups, because the path to VE cannot be reduced to monocausal explanations but rather results from the interplay of these factors within a specific context. Expand PVE-specific engagement through projects focused on rehabilitation and reintegration processes with an emphasis on individualized gender- and age-specific social and psychological support, especially in the case of child returnees. Be more careful when selecting implementing partners on the ground, since PVE-specific initiatives are not "development business as usual" and require specialized knowledge and skills.
- Strengthen the development component in PVE-related and PVE-relevant activities. The challenges faced by communities considered to be at risk are not necessarily related to VE and violent ideologies but rather to a lack of resources and perspective (for the youth) that can be exploited by VE groups. Focus PVE-related and PVE-relevant activities less on VE and more on the development priorities identified by communities on the ground by engaging them in articulating their visions of a "good life".

3. Create more opportunities for young people to act as agents of peace

- Launch a pilot capacity-building programme that supports youth-led projects aimed at sustaining peace. In particular, financial assistance could be provided to youth living in the more rural areas of the country to implement "their own" community initiatives (budget to include €2,000 to €5,000) addressing climate, water and environmental security as identified in the new EU Strategy for Central Asia.