



CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



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CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

- Mapping Report-

Podgorica, December 2018

Background

This regional mapping has been produced for the project: “Communities First: Creation of a civil society hub to prevent and counter violent extremism” (the Hub). The three-year project aims to empower civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans (WB), including women, youth, and faith-based organizations, to become more effective and accountable actors and to improve their capacity to implement projects and dialogue with national and local governments around preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), influencing policy and decision-making processes as it relates to P/CVE in the region.

The Hub will provide a platform for increased collaboration and coordination among the growing number of grassroots, other relevant CSOs and other community actors engaged in P/CVE in the region. It will fill a critical gap in efforts to promote a “whole of society” approach to P/CVE in a region where addressing the threat of violent extremism has recently become a high priority for governments: namely the lack of a dynamic network of CSOs working to prevent and counter violent extremism at the local and regional level and to partner with governments in the design and implementation of effective P/CVE policies, plans, and programs.

The project is implemented by a consortium made of six CSOs from the Western Balkans¹ and is financially supported by the European Union², the Balkan Trust for Democracy, a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and the Ministry of Public Administration of Montenegro.

¹ The project is implemented by Forum MNE (Montenegro) in partnership with Hope and Homes for Children (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Partners Kosova – Center for Conflict Management (Kosovo), Centre for Common Ground (Macedonia), Center for Legal Civic Initiatives (Albania), and Cultural Center DamaD (Serbia).

² Civil Society Facility and Media Programme 2016-2017, Consolidating Regional Thematic Networks of Civil Society Organisations

Context

P/CVE has increasingly become part of the policy discussions in the Western Balkans (WB) over the past several years. This new focus has been driven to a large extent because of concerns from the threats related to the radicalization, recruitment, and travel of a high number of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to Iraq, Syria and Ukraine; this includes both citizens from the WB and those travelling from Western Europe.

Governments in the region have recognized that the most effective way to address the challenge and to prevent future radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism is through a comprehensive strategy that identifies and develops a wide range of rights-respecting tools to tackle the underlying drivers that fuel the appeal and spread of violent extremism. A number of governments are now in different stages of developing national P/CVE plans of action to encapsulate this approach. Further, there are a variety of efforts at the regional level to strengthen cooperation and collaboration among governments in addressing the complex set of challenges violent extremism pose. Examples of such efforts include Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans³ signed between the six Western Balkans partners and the EU, as well as the Western Balkans Resilience Forum⁴ supported by the U.S. Department of State.

There is recognition in the WB that effective P/CVE efforts require localized and specialized efforts, thus reinforcing the need to further empower civil society actors, including cultural, community, religious, and education leaders. This is particularly important in the WB given the findings of recent studies, which identify the need to address the lack of inclusion of religious communities and faith-based organizations in the region and the lack of critical thinking skills in young people in the region as among the key drivers of violent extremism. The legacy of the recent Balkan wars and how it affects the youths' evolving identities in the dynamic and complex socio-political landscape of the region needs to be addressed in these efforts as well.

CSOs in the WB have been increasingly encouraged, including by international donors, to engage in P/CVE. However, a key barrier to effective regional programming on P/CVE within the WB remains the lack of understanding of CSOs and other local community actors that have the capacity and credibility to deliver P/CVE programming at a grass-roots level. Although the recent influx of donor funding to support locally-led P/CVE projects is beginning to allow for the diversification of civil society involvement in P/CVE, typically the space has been dominated by a small number of non-governmental research institutes with

³ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/news/docs/20181005_joint-action-plan-counter-terrorism-western-balkans.pdf

⁴ <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/scn-iri-event-in-the-western-balkans/>

a primary focus on counter-terrorism and regional and international security, with limited access to communities most affected by the drivers of violent extremism within the WB. They also have limited capacity to deliver practical community-based actions which have the potential to address the drivers of radicalization and recruitment in the region.

National mappings:

A significant barrier to effective CSO-led P/CVE programming within the WB is a comprehensive and up-to-date mapping of the range of civil society stakeholders relevant for implementing P/CVE actions. Thus, among the first tasks of this project was to conduct mappings in each of the WB countries involved in this initiative. The objectives of the national mappings were to: 1) Identify CSOs working across a range of relevant fields (both P/CVE-specific and P/CVE-relevant) and their activities; 2) describe the relationship between CSOs and national and municipal governments and the private sector in individual countries in the region; 3) provide a preliminary evaluation of the strengths, and opportunities local CSOs and formal and informal community groups experience developing and delivering P/CVE programming and engaging on P/CVE policy issues; and 4) provide a preliminary evaluation of the weaknesses, challenges, and barriers experienced by local CSOs and formal and informal local community groups in developing and delivering P/CVE programming and engaging on P/CVE policy issues. Each of these mappings was based on a common methodology and conducted by a local CSO

Methodology:

The mappings relied on and integrated information from CSOs, national and local government officials, including national P/CVE coordinators (or their equivalents), representatives from international and regional organizations stakeholders such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), International Organization for Migration (IOM), and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), as well as those from international NGOs. As anticipated, the level of cooperation – from CSOs, national and local governments, and donors – varied from country to country.

CSOs contacted were asked to complete questionnaires on their P/CVE or relevant work; many but not all contacted did. The mappings include information on more than 150 CSOs (and faith-based organizations), which expressed interest in being part of this Hub, from across the six countries in the region. Based on the interviews conducted during the national mapping exercises, many more are expected to become involved once the Hub initiates country-level activities in 2019.

Preliminary Findings/Conclusions: //

Although each national mapping report⁵ reflects the political, historical, and cultural nuances of the relevant country, there are some common regional themes and trends that emerge, which are reflected below and can inform the further development and priorities of the Hub.

1. CSOs have a role to play in P/CVE, but challenges remain. //

Most governments in the region recognize that CSOs have a strong track-record of working directly with members of the relevant communities and have developed the necessary expertise to engage on a range of P/CVE topics. Further, there is growing understanding that CSOs are often better informed of the local situation and better positioned to engage at the local level in the prevention space than governments. That said, some governments continue to believe that P/CVE is primarily the responsibility of the state. Thus, they do not appreciate the unique contributions that CSOs can make in this area. Further, there are CSOs that believe that some governments are actively overlooking this issue and thus disregarding their responsibilities.

However, the ability of CSO's to contribute, is sometimes hampered by their limited technical and organizational capacities and understanding of violent extremism and P/CVE. Particularly given the limited technical expertise and other capacities of CSOs, international donors have traditionally directed P/CVE funding to a small number of established organizations that have a demonstrated track record in complying with often complicated application and implementation requirements. This trend is beginning to shift as donors are increasingly relying on "small grant" mechanisms or other programs that allow for large CSOs to disburse funds to and oversee the implementation of projects implemented by grassroots organizations.

2. Limited government funding for CSO-led P/CVE initiatives. //

Few if any national governments in the region provide concrete support to CSO-led P/CVE efforts. This has led to overreliance on international funding for such initiatives, producing programs that are typically reflective of the interests of bilateral donors or international or regional organizations and not linked to a national action plan (NAP) or another relevant national or local framework. This can lead to unsustainable programs over which communities and national/local institutions feel a limited sense of ownership.

⁵ National mapping reports are available on the websites of implementing organisations. Links to the websites are provided at the end of the publication.

3. P/CVE is often equated with a single form of violent extremism -- that related to ISIS and other Islamist groups.

In some countries, a specific image of extremism has been formed in the era of the ISIS, linking the phenomenon of violent extremism to foreign fighters who joined that and similar groups. It appears that not all national governments in the region treat right-wing extremism with the same level of concern as ISIS inspired extremism, despite evidence demonstrating that the former may be seen by many CSOs interviewed as a greater threat in the region.

Moreover, international donors are typically not funding programs to address right-wing violent extremism and thus the P/CVE work of CSOs, which rely almost exclusively on donor funds, is focused almost entirely on a single form of violent extremism, that related to ISIS. Among other things, the singular focus has the potential to isolate individuals who might feel targeted by emphasis, which can make their radicalization more likely, as well as to ignore the phenomenon of “reciprocal extremism”⁶. This concept suggests extremist groups become more extreme in response to each other’s activity, arguing violence as justified because they perceive an opposing group as extreme.

4. Most CSOs involved in P/CVE work are engaged in the prevention space, working with communities or groups rather than on programs that target individuals identified as being “at risk” of or vulnerable to radicalization to violent extremism.

Existing CSO-led P/CVE initiatives tend to focus primarily on research (e.g. identifying the drivers to violent extremism at the national and sub-national levels and how to address the drivers, including by building community-level resilience) and activities in the prevention space. CSOs are engaging typically at the community or group as opposed to the individual level.

Prevention-focused projects generally involve activities such as: a) building critical thinking skills, b) community engagement, c) inter-faith dialogue, d) counter-narratives, e) youth and gender empowerment, d) awareness raising among mothers, youth, women, and teachers on the signs of radicalization and how to address it, f) mediation and transitional justice, g) human rights, h) educational programs, and i) peace activism.

Although the national mapping reports capture data on scores of such projects, many would appropriately be characterized as relevant to P/CVE rather than intentionally designed to achieve specific outcomes related to preventing and countering violent extremism.

⁶ <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/mcgarry-far-right-reciprocal-radicalisation/>

5. CSOs' involvement in intervention, rehabilitation, and reintegration issues is limited

To the extent that governments in the region acknowledge that CSOs should be part of a comprehensive approach to P/CVE, they seem to believe that their contributions should be limited to the “up-stream” prevention work, with law enforcement and intelligence services (and government actors more generally) continuing to dominate the intervention, rehabilitation, and reintegration spaces.

Thus, for the most part, CSOs, despite their recognized comparative advantages, are not working with returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and/or their families and are not participating in individualized interventions with members of a community identified as being “at risk” of radicalization to violent extremism.

6. CSO's capacities are often limited.

For example, they can lack an understanding of violent extremism, radicalization, P/CVE, and other relevant terminology. This can inhibit the ability of CSOs to develop effective programming, but also collaboration among them.

The lack of understanding contributes to some civil society-led P/CVE programming being insufficiently tailored to meet the needs of P/CVE beneficiaries. These programs instead simply re-adapted (and/or relabeled) from previous peacebuilding, reconciliation, and democratization projects.

There are few training opportunities or tools available to build CSOs' P/CVE expertise, although the recent publication of the OSCE⁷ on the role of CSOs in P/CVE in the WB should help close this latter gap. Further, increased attention has recently been given to raising awareness of violent extremism and P/CVE among CSOs at a local level. However, limited attention has been given to providing CSOs with the necessary knowledge and skills, let alone opportunities, to contribute to the development of national or local plans, policies, and programs related to P/CVE or to specialized P/CVE interventions focused on addressing issues of trauma, anger, and identity that can be drivers of extremist violence at the individual level. This has contributed to the lack of individually-focused P/CVE interventions, particularly ones targeting those in the “pre-criminal” space, where CSOs, including those that have the necessary training in counseling or mentorship, typically can play an active role.

Beyond the substantive capacity challenges, CSOs are also working in an environment where trust between governments and CSOs can be lacking, with the former continuing to have difficulty in translating the rhetoric around the need for a “whole of society” approach to P/CVE into action. Too many government

⁷ <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/400241?download=true>

actors continue to view P/CVE as security as opposed to a community issue and the periodic exploitation of P/CVE in the political arena can complicate the efforts to CSOs to implement P/CVE projects in particular communities.

Further, many local CSOs have limited experience in monitoring and evaluating and project management more broadly or, as noted below, few opportunities to share lessons learned and challenges, and information more broadly, with fellow CSOs at the national let alone regional level.

7. P/CVE priorities and geographic areas of focus within a country are highly determined by the donors.

CSOs are often viewed as “simply” implementers of donor-driven objectives and not involved in decisions regarding the design or targeting of the initiatives. Most CSO-implemented P/CVE efforts are focused on donor-identified “hot spots”. This leads to the preponderance of initiatives in those communities from which individuals travelled to Iraq/Syria or other conflict zones or to which they are returning. This can thus ignore other communities where risks and vulnerabilities might be similar and where prevention efforts are needed, but where the threat is not seen as pressing to donors.

In general, although donor funding for CSO-led P/CVE efforts in the region continues to increase, CSOs perceive the donor approach to P/CVE in their respective countries as lacking coherence. In addition to the perhaps overly narrow geographic focus, there is a feeling that too much money is being spent on projects that lack the necessary resonance in the communities donors are targeting. This is partly the result of a lack of consultations with local CSOs and other community-level stakeholders on the needs and priorities of the relevant communities, let alone what types of P/CVE initiatives should be pursued.

8. Few mechanisms exist to enable P/CVE cooperation between CSOs and national governments.

National government support for CSO-led P/CVE efforts is typically limited to providing information, participating in CSO-led conferences, inviting CSOs to participate in government conferences, granting permission to operate (e.g. to implement activities in schools), but does not include the provision of financial resources or capacity-building support. Few if any CSOs have been invited or allowed to provide inputs into the development of P/CVE national action plans (NAPs) let alone their implementation.⁸

⁸ For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina representative of only three CSOs have regularly been invited to P/CVE coordination meetings led by the national P/CVE coordinator's office.

Most government-CSO cooperation around P/CVE appears to take place on an *ad hoc* basis. The typically short project time-frames do not allow sufficient opportunities (let only incentives) to develop sustainable mechanisms of cooperation between CSOs and governments. Where cooperation occurs it is typically limited to a small number of CSOs with which the relevant government has existing relationships. In fact, some national governments currently appear to prioritize coordination with international donors over coordination with CSOs. However, they seem to be aware of the need to address this gap and create more formal mechanisms to enable structured and sustained cooperation with CSOs around the P/CVE agenda.⁹

In Montenegro, for example, the Ministry of the Interior established an interdisciplinary team to provide advice to and support for the implementation of the P/CVE NAP. Although a few CSOs in the country are involved, most are unaware of its existence.

A potentially promising initiative in Albania involves the national CVE coordination's center's efforts to establish a dedicated network for coordination with CSOs at the national level that would enable the exchange of information between government and non-governmental actors concerning violent extremist threats in the country and design and implementation of P/CVE policies and programs.

The center is also helping to provide donors and CSOs with information on the radicalization "hot spots" and P/CVE needs in the country, which may help harmonize the currently disparate P/CVE efforts of CSOs to avoid overlap and target areas that need to most attention.

9. Cooperation among CSOs working in the P/CVE sphere within a given country is limited.

There are no existing national networks or other mechanisms to enable such cooperation, with CSOs tending to see each other as competitors over donor funding. This in turn leads to a reluctance to share project ideas, experiences, and information.

Although CSOs might collaborate on a particular project, the lack of regular communication's channels contributes to the number of overlapping P/CVE initiatives, reports, projects, and studies. Moreover, this lacuna inhibits efforts to design and implement local, multi-disciplinary programs to help identify individuals on the path to becoming radicalized and intervene before they commit to extremist or other forms of violence.

⁹ For example, the national P/CVE coordination body in Macedonia has recognized the need to formalize and regularize its currently *ad hoc* approach to engaging with CSOs.

CSOs need more opportunities to share their achievements and challenges in the P/CVE and to explore opportunities for cooperation with each other and with other P/CVE stakeholders. Although the exception rather than the norm, there are some potentially promising developments in this area. For example, in Kosovo¹⁰, Partners Center for Conflict Management has worked closely with different stakeholders such as local and international CSO's, central and local governments, educational institutions and faith based organizations throughout the country in order to coordinate activities related to prevention and awareness raising. Also the Advocacy Training and Resource Center¹¹ is leading an initiative that convenes CSOs in the P/CVE space for purpose of sharing experiences, good practices, and challenges implementing P/CVE projects in the country. In addition, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF)¹² has supported the creation of three CSO consortia involving 16 CSOs in Kosovo that are recipients of GCERF P/CVE grants. Similarly, through an EU-funded P/CVE project, the Albanian Helsinki Committee¹³ is providing small-grants to some 21 CSOs in Albania and facilitating cooperation among the grantees. Cultural Center DamaD recently institutionalized a P/CVERLT referral system in Southwest Serbia. It links local authorities, service provision institutions such as those involved in health, welfare, education, culture, justice and security), CSOs, and media. It was created to enable timely and holistic provision of care and support to youth at risk of radicalization to violence. This mechanism relies on aligned policies, approaches and capacities of service providers to: a) recognize and identify youth at-risk of extremism and radicalism (or caught up in radicalization processes); b) provide comprehensive support to youth to counter radicalizing influences; and c) serve as a policy feedback mechanism that advocates for changes in legislation, public policies and institutional practices relating to P/CVE.

¹⁰ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244(1999) and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

¹¹ <http://advocacy-center.org/>

¹² <https://www.gcerf.org/>

¹³ http://www.ahc.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Guideline_Subgrant_en_new.pdf

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