



Lessons Learned from Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans

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The Western Balkans provides useful lessons for improving ‘whole of society’ approaches for addressing extremist violence, including how governments and civil society organisations in the region as well as international partners can bolster them.

With the 20th anniversary of 9/11 fast approaching, policymakers and practitioners around the globe have begun reflecting on the lessons learned from the past two decades of counterterrorism practice and how to apply them entering the third, post-9/11 decade.

One is that governments cannot prevent radicalisation and recruitment by terrorist groups or build community resilience to violent extremism on their own and that an increasingly diverse set of non-governmental actors, including civil society, need to be involved. This is partly due to the ever more localised nature of the threats and the limited access and credibility that governments often have with those segments of the population that are most susceptible to violent extremist propaganda. Calls for an enhanced role for civil society have grown in recent years, particularly since the elaboration of the UN’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism in December 2015. Yet, too many governments continue to pay lip-service to, and in some cases undermine, this approach. Instead, they prefer to stick with – or at least prioritise – an overly-securitised, state-centric one that leaves little room for non-governmental actors.

However, although challenges remain, there has been progress in operationalising civil society organisations’ (CSO) involvement in preventing/countering violent

extremism (P/CVE) efforts in virtually every region around the globe. This includes the Western Balkans, where governments continue to confront a range of violent extremist challenges. These include those presented by the return to the region of hundreds of fighters who travelled to fight alongside violent extremist groups in Iraq and Syria, as well as their families. More broadly, ‘a history of ethnic, religious, and civil strife has created a situation vulnerable to terrorist recruitment’. In fact, the situation in this region, which has historically favoured government-dominated, centralised security strategies, offers a snapshot of both the progress and challenges in operationalising a ‘whole of society’ approach to extremist violence. Many of the recommendations for sustaining the former and overcoming the latter are applicable to other regions.

Progress

A number of the comparative advantages of CSOs in P/CVE are being manifested in the region. For example, CSOs can provide space for constructive engagement between governments and their citizens, particularly where the level of trust between government institutions and communities is low. NGOs across the Western Balkans, especially from minority communities such as ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia, have

often stepped in to serve as a bridge between the government and their marginalised citizens for discussions about violent extremism and how best to address it.

Governments in the Western Balkans have increasingly recognised the need to facilitate the involvement of CSOs in P/CVE efforts

CSOs can have relevant knowledge of, access to, and engagement with local communities to confront the challenges of recruitment and radicalisation to violence. In the Western Balkans, some local CSOs are based in the communities most susceptible to extremist violence; CSO members may be neighbours of the recruiters and radicalisers. Members of these communities are likely to be more willing to refer an individual whom they fear is becoming radicalised to members of local CSOs as opposed to government representatives whom they do not trust and view as outsiders. This is one of the premises behind the CSO-led activities in Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia to raise mothers’ awareness of the threat posed by radicalisation to violence



and build their capacity to safeguard their families and communities against this threat.

CSOs can design and deliver innovative and locally-informed P/CVE projects, such as those in the spheres of education and culture and those linked more broadly to the implementation of a national P/CVE framework. In the Western Balkans, CSOs have strengthened young people's confidence in expressing their ideas, bonding with their peers, and developing public speaking and teamwork skills; [sports clubs](#) formed in primary schools have brought together students from different schools to help reduce or remove complex community stigmas – including against [returnees](#) from Iraq and Syria and their families; and handbooks and other tools have been developed for teachers in secondary schools for early detection and action against violent extremism.

CSOs in the Western Balkans tend to see each other as competitors for donor funding for P/CVE projects

Although the comparative advantages of CSOs are becoming increasingly acknowledged in the Western Balkans, effectively leveraging

them typically requires some support from and access to governments. Here, too, there has been progress.

In the last few years, national governments in the Western Balkans have increasingly recognised the need to facilitate the involvement of CSOs in P/CVE efforts. Nearly all the countries in the region, albeit sometimes as a result of international pressure and resources, now have national P/CVE frameworks that explicitly recognise this role. They now understand that P/CVE cannot be handled by central government and security actors alone but requires localised and specialised, non-law enforcement actors, skills and activities. This, of course, underscores the need to further empower and support civil society actors, including cultural, community, religious, and education leaders.

Across the region, as governments better understand the nature of the problems they are confronting, including difficulties accessing and gaining trust in historically marginalised communities, they are seeing how schools, teachers, students, and families can contribute to prevention efforts. They are increasingly recognising why it is particularly important that grassroots organisations, which are from and are trusted by the communities they are seeking to engage with on P/CVE projects, are involved. By one estimate, there are now [well over 200 CSOs](#) across the region implementing P/CVE projects. Some of this growth

can be attributed to the investments made by international actors such as the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) and the EU in facilitating the involvement of community-based organisations in P/CVE efforts. For example, the EU supported the launch of a regional P/CVE [civil society hub](#) (which one of the authors helped launch) to bring new local voices with different experiences and expertise to the P/CVE table and provide these actors with training, skills and modest funding to allow them to deliver impactful, locally-designed and owned P/CVE projects in their communities.

Challenges

Yet, challenges to building on this progress remain.

First, while the rhetoric from governments in the region about the role of CSOs in P/CVE efforts is generally on an upward trend, few actually provide concrete support for CSO involvement. This leaves local CSOs [over-reliant](#) on international funding – typically short-term – that is more often than not reflective of the interests of [international donors](#) rather than local communities.

Second, while nearly all countries in the region have some form of national P/CVE framework that envisages a role for civil society, because the governments themselves are not investing in CSO-led P/CVE projects, too often the priorities

in these frameworks are not aligned with the CSO initiatives that international donors end up funding.

Better alignment between national P/CVE frameworks and CSOs and other locally-led P/CVE activities is essential. This could include putting in place a coordination mechanism to help create better alignment, ensuring the perspectives, needs and concerns of local CSOs are reflected in the national framework, and/or more broadly ensuring sustained engagement between national government and civil society actors. Attention, however, is needed to ensure that national governments do not use such a mechanism to undermine the independence of CSOs, including by exerting control over which CSOs receive P/CVE funding from international donors or are otherwise involved in P/CVE efforts.

Third, while civil society in the region is often being encouraged, particularly by international donors, to do more when it comes to P/CVE, there are too few opportunities for them to influence or contribute to the national policy and strategic framework in their home countries which they are then expected to help implement.

Recognising this all too frequent reality, one of the objectives of the above-mentioned regional P/CVE civil society hub was to develop a targeted and representational voice for CSO actors across the region to more effectively engage national governments on P/CVE issues, so as to inform their policies and to ensure an enabling legal and policy environment for CSO P/CVE activities. Yet, progress here has been slow. Where cooperation between governments and civil society does occur, governments appear to prioritise coordination with those CSOs that are already connected to the corridors of power, often as a result of long-standing relationships with international donors.

A fourth and related challenge is the still-limited cooperation among CSOs. As is the case in a number of regions, CSOs in the Western Balkans

tend to see each other as competitors for donor funding for P/CVE projects. This can lead to a reluctance to share project ideas, experiences, and information, let alone to collaborate. All of this can lead to a proliferation of P/CVE initiatives – reports, projects, and studies – often focused on the same communities.

The good news is that there is increased awareness – among international donors in particular – of the need to address this challenge. As a result, in addition to the civil society hub, other donor-funded P/CVE platforms or initiatives aimed at building a CSO P/CVE community of practice have emerged. These projects have included the provision of small grants to a series of CSOs which are then expected to network and exchange experiences through the implementation period. However, these have typically operated within a single country and have not included a regional dimension.

International donors need to improve coordination with each other and the relevant host governments

Going forward, attention should be given to connecting nationally focused efforts in countries like Albania and Kosovo with the regional hub. This would be an important step to developing a robust and sustainable community of practice that is supported by international partners. In this context, GCERF's efforts to develop a community of practice for its CSO-grantees as part of its expanded engagement in the region should connect with, if not be fully integrated into, the efforts of the existing regional hub.

A fifth challenge centres on ensuring local CSOs are allowed to maximise their contributions across the full spectrum of P/CVE issues to include not just research and community or group-

focused activities, but also work with individuals on the path to violent radicalisation or those who have already committed or been connected to terrorist violence in the past. To date, the overwhelming majority of CSO involvement in P/CVE activities has been limited to short-term projects involving activities such as building critical thinking skills; community engagement/dialogue; inter-faith dialogues; youth and gender empowerment; and awareness raising and skills-building for women, youth, and other local actors.

This reflects the fact that governments in the region remain wary of involving CSOs in what they view as more sensitive work involving individuals 'at risk' of radicalisation to violence, or those who may have already committed to violence (including terrorist offenders), believing that security and intelligence services should remain the dominant, if not exclusive, actors in these spheres.

The good news, however, is that this trend is slowly starting to shift as more governments, faced with the return of fighters and family members from Syria and Iraq, recognise – at least on paper – the unique contributions local CSOs can make, not only to addressing the needs and vulnerabilities of the many returnees who cannot be prosecuted, but also to supporting the communities into which they will return. Hopefully, GCERF's recent investment in the region – focused specifically on building the capacity of CSOs to contribute to the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees – will only accelerate this trend. Governments in the region, however, will need to demonstrate a willingness to work with CSOs on specific cases, whether returning fighters or family members, in order to translate this progress into durable action on the ground.

A final challenge centres on maximising the impact of the growing number of CSO-led P/CVE activities. Much has been written about the limited evidence base on the effectiveness of P/CVE projects and

the tendency to make decisions based on assumptions of what might work, versus evidence of what has been proven to work. Nevertheless, there have also been some recent research findings that could help enhance the impact of CSO-led P/CVE initiatives in the region.

For example, with the ever-growing focus on youth in P/CVE projects, recent [research](#) that underscores the importance of ensuring that such projects are appropriately targeted merits attention. This means focusing projects on specific ‘at risk’ groups or individuals to avoid adopting a highly securitised view of young people in marginalised communities, particularly young males, or alternatively preaching to the converted and engaging with young people who are not vulnerable to radicalisation to violence. Too often, the participants in youth-focused P/CVE projects in the Western Balkans – particularly ‘youth empowerment’ initiatives – are not the ones most susceptible to radicalisation to violence.

With the UN General Assembly’s [seventh review](#) of its 2006 Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy now underway, the role of civil society in supporting its implementation will [receive](#) more attention than ever at the global level, largely reflecting lessons learned since its adoption 15 years ago. Much of the focus will inevitably be on how to capture this

evolving role in the resolution that UN members are expected to adopt in late June to commemorate the review, or how the UN itself can support civil society in this area. However, for those governments and other stakeholders interested in understanding how this role has evolved in practice in recent years and the state of the ‘whole of society’ approach to addressing violent extremism on the ground, the Western Balkans offers a useful case study, not only of the progress achieved, but the challenges that remain and how to overcome them.

Lessons Learned

A number of lessons stand out. These include the need for governments to treat CSOs as partners across the range of P/CVE issues, instead of viewing them with suspicion. For their part, CSOs, because of the sensitive and complex nature of P/CVE, need to develop the necessary expertise and skills to maximise their contributions. They cannot simply replicate general peacebuilding or other development projects and approaches that they are most familiar with, but which are unlikely to have an impact on extremist violence. International donors need to improve coordination with each other and the relevant host governments – at both a national and regional level – including by prioritising support for locally-led and informed approaches and incentivising collaboration among CSOs, all with a view to supporting the

implementation of national P/CVE frameworks. Applying these lessons is likely to generate deeper and broader government–CSO partnerships, result in CSOs being a more reliable bridge to the communities most susceptible to violent extremism, and ensure donor funds support those P/CVE initiatives most likely to have an impact on the ground.

Those who are committed to seeing the ‘whole of society’ approach gain more traction would be wise to learn these and other lessons from the experience in the Western Balkans and look to apply them elsewhere.

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