

POLICY BRIEF



Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan: the Role of the International Donor Community

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KEY POINTS

- In the past 4 years over 30 projects have been implemented in Kyrgyzstan in the field of prevention of violent extremism (PVE) with the support of international organizations and agencies with a budget exceeding 42 million USD.
- The abundance of international funding available in this field has attracted substantial criticism, with the international donor community being accused of both inflating the threat of violent extremism (VE) in the country and of distracting civil society organizations (CSOs) from tackling more systemic issues such as structural injustice and exclusion.
- The data collected on the ground revealed that the international PVE agenda comprises three sets of activities: PVE-specific activities, PVE-related activities, and PVE-relevant activities. The PVE-specific activities account for only 5% of the total.
- PVE projects conducted in Kyrgyzstan have a very broad scope and include activities in 7 fields - 1) Dialogue and Conflict Prevention, 2) Strengthening Good Governance, Human Rights and the Rule of Law, 3) Engaging Communities, 4) Empowering Youth, 5) Gender Equality and Empowering Women, 6) Education, Skills Development and Employment Facilitation, and 7) Strategic communications, the Internet and Social Media - in line with the “UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism” of 2015.
- This policy-paper provides concrete examples of activities conducted in the framework of PVE projects in Kyrgyzstan in two selected fields: “Empowering Youth”, and “Gender Equality and Empowering Women.”
- In PVE projects, the empowerment of youth and women is very often translated in capacity building aimed at 1) Improving civic education and critical thinking skills (especially with regard to religion-related issues), 2) Enhancing the integration of the target groups in their community and in decision-making processes at the local level and 3) Strengthening their entrepreneurial skills.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the different initiatives focused on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) that have been conducted by the international donor community in Kyrgyzstan since 2016 and to offer some recommendations on how to make the international engagement in this field more effective. According to a mapping exercise carried out in the Spring 2019, in the past 4 years over 30 PVE-related projects have been implemented in the country with the support of international organizations and agencies with a budget exceeding 42 million USD. The abundance of international funding available has attracted substantial criticism with the international donor community being accused of both inflating the threat of violent extremism (VE) and of distracting civil society organizations from tackling more systemic issues such as structural injustice and exclusion.¹ This paper offers an empirical investigation of the PVE engagement of the international community, looking at concrete activities carried out on the ground. The study is based on the opinions expressed by international agencies as well as by representatives of international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) during semi-structured interviews carried out in Bishkek in 2019 and complemented by an analysis of official documents and project evaluations.

The new focus on PVE characterizing the international agenda should be contextualized in the framework of the “Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism” launched by the United Nations at the end of 2015. The Plan has marked an important change in the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy grounded in the growing international consensus that security-based counter-terrorism measures have not been sufficient to prevent the spread of violent extremism (VE).² In this regard, the document calls for the use of a more comprehensive approach combining ongoing, essential security-based counter-terrorism measures with systematic preventive measures directly addressing the drivers of violent extremism. The document invites member states to develop a national plan of action identifying national priorities for addressing the local drivers of VE and suggests addressing these local drivers by aligning their national development policies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In 2017, the Kyrgyz Government approved its National Program on countering extremism and terrorism for 2017-2022 and launched its Action Plan.³ The Action Plan identifies three main priorities: 1) Prevention of extremism and terrorism, 2) Detection and suppression of extremism and terrorism, and 3) Improvement of legislative mechanisms and the interaction in the sphere of combating extremism and terrorism. Noteworthy, the Plan foresees opportunities for cooperation with interested partners among the international donors (and non-governmental organizations) under Priority 1 in 2 specific areas. These areas are: 1) supporting research activities deepening the understanding of problems related to extremism and terrorism and contributing to the development

¹ K. Tricot O'Farrell and J. Street, “A threat inflated? The countering and preventing violent extremism agenda in Kyrgyzstan,” Saferworld, March 2019, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/long-reads/a-threat-inflated-the-countering-and-preventing-violent-extremism-agenda-in-kyrgyzstan>.

² “Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism,” UN General Assembly, 24 December 2015, <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/70/674>.

³ Order of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic #414, as of 20 September 2017.

of effective countermeasures, and 2) improving awareness raising in the sphere of countering radical extremism and terrorism. In addition to that, in 2017 the 2017-2020 Peacebuilding Priority Plan (PPP) was developed by the UN in Kyrgyzstan in cooperation with the Kyrgyz government. The Plan is explicitly aimed at preventing radicalization potentially leading to violent extremism and, in particular, at “decreasing the number of Kyrgyz citizens leaving for Syria or other countries as foreign terrorist fighters as well as the number of extremist and terrorist cases”.⁴

Besides the development of national plans of action and regional strategies, the UN Action Plan to PVE also suggests government and regional and international institutions to mobilize resources by identifying other funding across sectors and by adapting existing funds so as to expand programming that is sensitive to preventing violent extremism. Indeed, as stated in the document, “within the peace and security sector, there is a growing understanding that many preventative measures, traditionally understood to be part of development efforts, can help address these drivers.”⁵ This policy-paper offers a micro-level analysis of PVE initiatives and projects implemented by international donors in Kyrgyzstan as part of their development efforts. In the analysis, particular attention is given to two selected main fields of action: “Empowering Youth” and “Gender Equality and Empowering Women.” In the final part of the paper, the evidence collected on the ground will then be used to elaborate concrete recommendations on how the international donor community could make its PVE engagement more effective.

PVE - An Unclear Concept

Based on the interviews conducted on the ground, the PVE agenda in Kyrgyzstan started to appear predominantly under its own name as of mid-2015, when it became clear that at least 1,500 Central Asian citizens had joined ISIS.⁶ Although the estimations vary considerably, recent publications report that the number of fighters from the region who have gone to Iraq and Syria range from 1,946 to 4,195⁷, roughly 800 of which come from Kyrgyzstan.⁸ The estimates have been slightly revised upwards during the fieldwork based on which around 5,000 Central Asians and over 850 Kyrgyz citizens have become foreign fighters. The causes of radicalization have already been discussed in this and other venues and will not be further investigated in this article since it is beyond its scope.⁹

⁴ “Peacebuilding Priority Plan – Kyrgyzstan 2017-2020,” United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office/Peacebuilding Fund, 2017.

⁵ “Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism,” UN General Assembly, 24 December 2015, <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/70/674>, 13

⁶ See also. B. Ibraev, “Addressing the Daesh Threat in the context of Central Asia,” Central Asia Policy Briefs no. 31(2016).

⁷ E. Lemon, V. Mironova, and W. Tobey, “Jihadists from Ex- Soviet Central Asia: Where Are They? Why Did They Radicalize? What Next?” Russia Matters/U.S.-Russia Initiative to Prevent Nuclear Terrorism | Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Research Paper December 2018, 7.

⁸ E. Zhirukhina, “Foreign Fighters from Central Asia: Between Renunciation and Repatriation,” ISPI (2019), <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/foreign-fighters-central-asia-between-renunciation-and-repatriation-24072>.

⁹ See, for instance: C. Batyrbekov (2016) and M. Idrees (2016), as well as F. Evers, et al. (2018), International Crisis Group (2010, 2011, 2015), A. Matveeva (2018), N. Tucker (2015).

When asked about their understanding of the PVE agenda in Kyrgyzstan, the interviewed organizations unveiled an overall lack of clarity regarding both the concept as well as their related engagement as highlighted by the following interview quotation

“My understanding of PVE is quite a vague issue: What is PVE? What is violent radicalization? It is contested, there is not common concept and, working in PVE last three years, I had a lot of such questions and discussions and what I will say, when you say PVE activities, prevention of radicalization activities, we say those activities which we think would improve the resilience of communities to the radicalization or to the violence.”¹⁰

Other organizations pointed out how what is generally called PVE at the international level translated into peace-building activities at the local level. More precisely,

“So, we’re not really targeting anti-radicalization, anti-terrorism, but rather sort of like developing... sort of contributing to the environment, and preventing sort of the possible sort of radicalization, so that we are working... by applying different sort of peacebuilding instruments.”¹¹

This conceptual confusion is also fed by a process of repackaging and relabeling that is taking place on the ground due to a “shift of the attention to the donors (...) that have certain priorities (...) that derive from the pressure they have from tax-payers.”¹² As a result, the PVE engagement of international organizations

“is 95% similar to what we have been doing before and there are three levels of activities that we are doing. We are doing PVE-specific activities, PVE-related activities, and PVE-relevant activities. These are three convergent circles. PVE-specific activities are 5% of activities that are specifically related to PVE that we were not doing before, but the rest of 95% -relevant or -related is something we have been doing before that remains. In the PVE-specific it is a very small field.”¹³

Not surprisingly, the areas of PVE engagement of these organizations are in line with the main fields of action identified in the “UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.” These fields are: 1) Dialogue and Conflict Prevention, 2) Strengthening Good Governance, Human Rights and the Rule of Law, 3) Engaging Communities, 4) Empowering Youth, 5) Gender Equality and Empowering Women, 6) Education, Skills Development and Employment Facilitation, and 7) Strategic communications, the Internet and Social Media. These areas are now used as analytical categories for the investigation of main outputs and activities of PVE projects conducted in Kyrgyzstan with the support of international donors. For the sake of brevity, the analysis draws on a few emblematic examples focused on two fields of action – “Empowering Youth” and “Gender Equality and Empowering Women” – both also contributing to the “Dialogue and Conflict”, “Engaging Communities” and “Education, Skills Development and Employment Facilitation” fields.

¹⁰ Interview conducted on 5 July 2019.

¹¹ Interview conducted on 25 March 2019.

¹² Interview conducted on 6 June 2019.

¹³ Ibid.

Empowering Youth

Based on the interviews collected on the ground, the biggest part of local youth in Kyrgyzstan (about 90%) is not at risk of radicalization whereas around 6% is in the process of radicalizing and 4% is already radicalized.¹⁴ The PVE projects addressed to this target group had three main objectives: **1) Improving civic education and critical thinking skills (especially with regard to religion-related issues), 2) Enhancing the integration of the target group in their community and in decision-making processes at the local level and 3) Strengthening their entrepreneurial skills.**

More precisely, a first group of projects was aimed at helping young people

“to have their own approach on religion-related issues, based on good knowledge... to gain good knowledge, to make their choice without pressure from someone, to encourage them to have their own opinion.”¹⁵

In this framework, capacity building activities were offered in different provinces of Kyrgyzstan taking into account geographic distribution (including the North and South of the country) and ethnic composition (including mono-ethnic and multi-ethnic areas). These activities were aimed at increasing critical thinking skills as well as knowledge on religion, human rights and civic values, legal and institutional basis of the state and society so that young people could *“be able to ask questions and challenge ideologies that might lure them into violence and extremism.”¹⁶* For instance, special simulation games were organized during which around 800 young people in 7 projects locations in Issyk-Kul, Naryn and Jalal-Abad discussed their understanding of religion, the role of a secular state vis-à-vis religion and the right to practice one’s religion including the freedom of belief and to manifest one’s religion. Local municipalities, social welfare services and youth organizations were involved in the selection of the participants with an emphasis on the so-called marginalized and not active people from ethnic minorities and other socially vulnerable groups (i.e., disabled people). Remarkably, these activities were focused on different religious forms and practices present in Kyrgyzstan and brought together the leaders of different religious communities.¹⁷

Another important function fulfilled by the PVE initiatives was to increase youth’s identification with and sense of belonging to their communities, by getting them engaged in community development and by strengthening intergroup trust. For instance, one of the projects was specifically aimed at

“building dialogue between different groups in a community so that young people are able to talk their differences and implement some initiatives for common good, some collaborative initiatives and that’s how they cross the boundaries and building friendships and whatever positive relationship.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Interview conducted on 4 June 2019.

¹⁵ Interview conducted on 4 June 2019.

¹⁶ Interview conducted on 11 June 2019.

¹⁷ Interview conducted on 18 March 2019.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Remarkably, the projects contributed in introducing new mechanisms of interaction between the youth and local authorities through the mediation of civil society organizations (CSOs). This is well exemplified by a pilot project in the field of Youth and Child Friendly Local Governance (YCFLG) during which CSOs conducted a need assessment looking at the younger strata of population and included their priorities in a new youth action plan to be implemented by local municipalities. As reported by one of the organizations in this regard

“In some municipalities the youth through the civil society was requesting the municipality to have streetlights, some sport activities and whatever libraries. They got it. And by getting it there is understanding that youth can express their grievances and their ideas in a constructive way and they can receive some support rather than going into VE.”¹⁹

Another important area of engagement was the improvement of the entrepreneurial skills of young people. The reasoning behind this engagement is that

“there is a linkage between employment opportunities and turning to radical groups. So, as long as the youth has proper work, decent work and payment, then people usually do not join radical groups.”²⁰

This observation sums up the results of a base-line study conducted in Kyrgyzstan comprising surveys, focus groups and informal observations that were administered to over 500 members of local self-governance (LSC) and youth representatives. The study was carried out as part of a project aimed at identifying key priorities and expectations characterizing young people and at providing them with facilitated access to employment opportunities and business. Within this project, after the successful completion of a training program in business and entrepreneurial skills, youth representatives and young entrepreneurs could apply for revolving funds up to 5,000 USD for the launch of new start-ups and businesses.

Gender Equality and Empowering Women

Together with the youth, women undoubtedly represented a major target of PVE measures. Interestingly, when asked about the reasons why the group is perceived as particularly vulnerable to radicalization, most of the interviewed organizations were not able to provide a clear answer as well exemplified by the following quotation

“I mean, women are more vulnerable in terms of recruitment, because they are very vulnerable in terms of ideological vulnerability... Because most of vulnerable women are very in need, they need to be protected.”²¹

¹⁹ Interview conducted on 6 June 2019.

²⁰ Interview conducted on 12 June 2019.

²¹ Interview conducted on 2 July 2019.

As in the case of the youth, the PVE projects addressed to this target group had three main objectives: 1) Improving civic education and critical thinking skills (especially with regard to religion-related issues), 2) Enhancing the integration of the target groups in their community and in decision-making processes at the local level and 3) Strengthening their entrepreneurial skills. For instance, one of the PVE projects aimed at empowering women religious leaders by building a dialogue between them and local authorities, by increasing their participation in community-activities and by strengthening their leadership skills. In this framework, 86 women went through a 2-round-leadership school program during which they became familiarized with topics such as tolerance, social responsibility, media literacy, religion and religious policy. The theoretical activities were followed by 2 rounds of practical initiatives at community level. As observed by one of the implementing organizations in this regard

“So, we engaged women religious leaders because they are very respected in some communities but usually they are not involved in any kind of project. And at the same time there are some mutual stereotypes between women religious leaders, women committees, local authorities and so on. And there was a lack of joint work. Then they understood during our project that they have actually the same goal of peace and stability in the communities and that they can work together.”²²

As for the youth, the creation of intergroup trust and social capital in terms of people’s relations with one another and connections with their community²⁴ played a central role in the PVE initiatives addressed to this target group.

Another project was focused on women empowerment within migrant communities by increasing their income-generating skills and by creating structural social capital in the form of self-help groups. More precisely, capacity-building activities were offered in the field of business creation and entrepreneurship. As a result of the training program, the participants developed business plans and took part in a competition for funding that provided support to the 28 best ideas in terms of financial assistance and equipment. The implementing organization highlighted in this regard

“if women are provided with skills and knowledge they will be more resilient to any bad influences or any radical ideas. And also if they will be provided by economic assistance or opportunities to start their own income generating activities, it will eventually make them more resilient in many ways, because sometimes the vulnerable women became only recruited only because of poverty, needs and lack of employment opportunities in their communities. So, this is why they became more vulnerable to be recruited for other things. These are basically our PVE activities.”²³

²² Interview conducted on 5 July 2019.

²³ R.D. Putnam, “Tuning in, tuning out: The strange disappearance of social capital in America,” *Political Science and Politics* 28, no. 4 (1995): 664–65.

Recommendations

This policy-paper offered an overview of concrete activities conducted as part of the engagement of the international donor community in PVE in Kyrgyzstan. While being far from complete, the study was focused on few emblematic examples from two fields of action: “Empowering Youth” and “Gender Equality and Empowering Women”. Based on the main findings of the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Since most of the so-called PVE initiatives (PVE-relevant and -related) conducted in Kyrgyzstan between 2016 and 2019 have not been directly targeting violent extremism, the use of another label – “Strengthening Community Resilience and Capacity” – is highly recommended. Due to the risk of stigmatization and of attracting interest in the VE phenomenon, a negative connotation is very often attached to the expression “PVE” that can be misleading. If we look at the concrete engagement of international organizations in the country, a strong emphasis is placed on strengthening capacities of individuals, communities and government agencies to foster social, political and economic development. As a matter of fact, what most of the PVE projects did on the ground was to enhance local ownership in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By talking about “Strengthening Community Resilience and Capacity,” synergies with other development initiatives carried out in Kyrgyzstan could be easily identified by merging instead of diverting funding from systemic issues such as structural injustice and exclusion.
- The use of the label “Strengthening Community Resilience and Capacity” for PVE-relevant or -related activities would allow to recognize the peculiarities of PVE-specific activities. Indeed, whereas PVE-relevant or -related activities can be implemented by “regular” national and international NGOs active in the development field, PVE-specific activities require a new set of knowledge and skills that cannot be taken for granted. Therefore, more attention should be paid in the selection of implementing partners, especially at the local level, and in their training since the provision of effective assistance to individuals involved in the process of radicalization/deradicalization depends upon resources and competencies that go beyond the usual “development business.”
- In connection to this, more attention should be devoted to psychological aspects of the process of radicalization/deradicalization which at the moment represent a neglected dimension in PVE engagement. Indeed, radicalization is a complex process that cannot be reduced to monocausal explanations but is rather influenced by a variety of factors and their interplay. For instance, the improvement of entrepreneurial skills does not necessarily mean a reduction in the perception of relative deprivation on behalf of vulnerable groups. Therefore, special curricula in the field of psychology, trauma pedagogy and mediation should be introduced and counsellors should be trained who will provide support in the framework of PVE-specific initiatives. This professional figure is particularly relevant for the reintegration and rehabilitation of returnees and, especially, of women and children, who have been exposed to war and violence while in Syria and Iraq.

- A reflection of the theoretical foundation of programs and projects implemented in the field of PVE - and, possibly, of “Strengthening Community Resilience and Capacity” - is necessary. For instance, these initiatives could significantly benefit from insights coming from social capital theory since youth and women empowerment does not occur in a social vacuum but is a relational product resulting from the combination of horizontal and vertical connections. Indeed, empowerment requires access to resources, both material and symbolic, that can be found not only in the in-group (bonding social capital) but also and especially outside, by connecting with actors and groups that are different (bridging social capital) and/or have more power or authority (linking social capital). These aspects were, however, never mentioned during the elucidation of the theory of change behind the projects implemented and could surely make change more substantial.
- Finally, a lack of coordination characterizes the engagement of the international donor community in the PVE field. This phenomenon does not necessarily lead to a duplication of action on the ground, where a variety of outputs and activities involving different stakeholders are generated, at least if we consider the micro-level. However, when looking at the relationship between donor community and its local partners in forms of civil society organizations, a clustered structure emerges. The interaction between international organizations and agencies and their implementing partners takes place inside closed networks established through a history of cooperation going very often beyond the PVE field. Whereas cooperation inside the cluster is very dense, cooperation with other clusters is almost non-existent. The lack of cooperation between clusters does not allow for the sharing of information and lessons learnt from which the PVE initiatives and the CSOs implementing these programs would significantly benefit. In addition, this clustered structure results in a fragmentation of civil society - very often accompanied by mistrust and competition - that might have important negative implications for the further development of the Kyrgyz non-profit sector. The international donor community surely needs to pay more attention to this side effect of its engagement in PVE and beyond.

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