EU Efforts to Prevent Violent Extremism (PVE) by Engaging Civil Society in Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

Although a number of previous studies have investigated violent extremism in Central Asia, rigorous research concerning the international efforts in preventing this phenomenon in the region is still limited. In response to this gap in the literature, the paper examines the EU's engagement in preventing violent extremism (PVE) through the involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Kyrgyzstan. In particular, by providing new insights into the EU-funded civil society projects under the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) and its program Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE), it deepens our understanding of the security–development nexus and the approach to stability and peace that characterizes EU assistance on the ground. At the same time, by looking at the concrete activities carried out by EU-funded organizations in Kyrgyzstan, this article presents a classification of CSO forms of engagement in PVE that is relevant for the selected country and beyond.

Keywords

European Union – civil society – Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) – Kyrgyzstan – Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) – security–development nexus – Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism (STRIVE) – whole-of-society approach

1 Introduction[1]

The last few years have seen a noticeable increase in the number of instances of international terrorism linked to Central Asians, and more of these incidents have been found to involve foreign terrorist fighters.[2] For example, an ethnic Uzbek was involved in a suicide bombing at Istanbul's Atatürk Airport in 2016,[3] and an Uzbek national was responsible for a mass shooting at a nightclub on the Bosporus on New Year's Eve 2016.[4] In 2017 a Kyrgyz-born ethnic Uzbek carried out a suicide bombing on a subway car in Saint Petersburg,[5] an Uzbek national drove a truck into a crowd in Stockholm, Sweden,[6] and another Uzbek national drove a truck down a bike path in New York City.[7] After the huge military defeats suffered by ISIS and the consequent halt in the flow of fighters to Syria, experts such as Serik Beisembayev warned that the factors that originally drove people to leave Central Asia had not changed and were perhaps now causing problems "at home."[8] This risk materialized in July 2018 with the killing of four Western tourists in Tajikistan on behalf of a group that swore loyalty to the Islamic State.[9] ISIS/Daesh has recently expanded its area of activity in Central Asia and has called for terrorist attacks on public gatherings, primarily in the Ferghana Valley.[10]

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 OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

2 Mohammed Elshimi and Raffaello Pantucci, "Explaining the Radicalization of Central Asian Migrants," *The Diplomat*, January 29, 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/explaining-the-radicalization-of-central-asian-migrants.

3 Faith Karimi, Steve Almasy, and Gul Tuysuz, "ISIS Leadership Involved in Istanbul Attack Planning, Turkish Source Says," *CNN*, July 1, 2016, https://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/30/europe/turkey-istanbul-ataturk-airport-attack/index.html.

4 Ahmet S. Yayla, "The Reina Nightclub Attack and the Islamic State Threat to Turkey," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 3 (2017): 9–16.

5 Yaron Steinbuch, "St. Petersburg Metro Bomber Reportedly Identified as Kyrgyz-born Ethnic Uzbek," *New York Post*, April 4, 2017, https://nypost.com/2017/04/04/st-petersburg-subway-bomber-identified.

6 Per Nyberg, Sarah Chiplin, and Angela Dewan, "Stockholm Attack: Suspect Has ISIS Sympathies," *CNN*, April 9, 2017, https://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/09/europe/stockholm-attack-arrests/index.html.

7 Haley J. Ott, "Accused NYC Attacker is 4th Terror Suspect with Uzbekistan Links in 2017," *CNN*, November 1, 2017, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/new-york-attack-suspect-sayfullo-habibullaevic-saipov-links-uzbekistan.

8 "Not in Our Name," *Radio Free Europe*, n.d., https://pressroom.rferl.org/p/6831.html.

9 "Western Tourists Killed in Tajikistan Attack Claimed by IS," *Deutsche Welle*, July 30, 2018, https://www.dw.com/en/western-tourists-killed-in-tajikistan-attack-claimed-by-is/a-44877191.

10 OSCE, *A Whole-of-Society Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: A Guidebook for Central Asia* (Vienna, 2020), 28.

The phenomenon of radicalization in Central Asia cannot be reduced to a monocausal explanation but rather is influenced by a variety of factors, such as socioeconomic constraints, state repression, social injustice and poor governance, individual hopelessness, and ethnic, religious or social conflict and their interactions.[11] In such circumstances, experts advocate a preventive approach aimed at understanding the social, cultural and political drivers of violence, taking into account the contexts and dynamics that enable extremist ideas to emerge, grow and be sustained.[12] Similarly, in a recent report, the OSCE highlighted the importance of applying a broad "whole-of-society approach" to prevent and counter violent extremism (VE) and radicalization in Central Asia.[13] According to this approach, civil society organizations (CSOs), which are "better placed, more credible and more knowledgeable and experienced in working with specific groups," would play a pivotal role in helping to "identify and address the grievances that make individuals more vulnerable to violent extremism and radicalization."[14]

The European Union (EU) has also recognized the essential role that civil society plays in the prevention of violent extremism (PVE), as emphasized by the 2014 Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism. This strategy highlights both the unique contribution that CSOs can offer in building resilience to withstand the appeal of terrorism and the EU's commitment to providing these actors with the necessary support and resources.[15] A good example of the EU's whole-of-society approach to PVE are the projects that CSOs implemented under the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) and its "Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism" program (STRIVE) in Kyrgyzstan between 2017 and 2019. Remarkably, although the IcSP is large in scope and foresees financial support for projects in a variety of fields ranging from demining and election support to security sector reform, at the time of the fieldwork for the current study (spring/summer 2019) the regional project conducted in Central Asia, as well as the national projects carried out in the selected country, were presented

11 Frank Evers, Jeannette Klötzer, Arne C. Seifert, and Esther Somfalvy, "Civilian Prevention of Radicalization in Central Asia," working paper (Hamburg: University of Hamburg, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, CORE Centre for OSCE Research, 2018), 6.

12 E.g., Jessica Stern, "Mind of Martyr: How to Deradicalize Islamist Extremism," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 1 (2010): 95–108.

13 OSCE, *A Whole-of-Society Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism*.

14 OSCE, *The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: A Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe* (Vienna, 2018), 13.

15 Council of the European Union, *Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism* 9956/14 (Brussels, 2014), 11.

and framed by the EU-funded organizations as PVE initiatives. This focus reflects an overall trend in the international donor community, which has, since the launch of the United Nations (UN) Secretary General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism in 2016,[16] started using international peacebuilding as a delivery vehicle for PVE.[17] This development has gone hand in hand with a narrative of heightened threats of VE and terrorism that has been embraced by the general public and government officials in the country as a response to the proliferation of extremist online propaganda and increased conservatism in religious beliefs and practices.[18]

Although a number of previous studies have investigated the phenomenon of VE in Central Asia, rigorous research concerning international efforts and their concrete outcomes in preventing and countering radicalization in the region is still limited. As is evident from a review of the literature to date, no empirical studies are available that analyze the EU's PVE engagement in Kyrgyzstan at the country level. Similarly, little attention has been devoted to the role of the whole-of-society approach in the prevention of radicalization that is conducive to VE and, in particular, to the role that civil society can play in this field.

In response to these gaps in the literature, this article addresses two distinct but interrelated questions: (1) What is the substance of the EU's engagement in PVE through the involvement of civil society in Kyrgyzstan? (2) Which concrete forms of PVE engagement characterize the organizations funded by the EU on the ground? In doing so, this article contributes to the literature on international efforts to prevent VE in two ways. On the one hand, by providing new insights into the EU-funded civil society projects under the IcSP and its STRIVE program, it deepens our understanding of the security–development nexus and of the practical approach to stability and peace that characterizes EU cooperation and assistance. On the other hand, by looking at the concrete types of engagement characteristic of EU-funded organizations in Kyrgyzstan, this article presents a classification of CSO forms of engagement in PVE that is relevant for the selected country and beyond. This classification will increase our theoretical understanding of the civil society's power to tackle global security challenges at the local level and its important role in the implementation and reproduction of the whole-of-society approach on the ground.

16 United Nations General Assembly, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary-General* (New York, 2015).

17 Chuck Thiessen, "The StrategicAambiguity of the United Nations Approach to Preventing Violent Extremism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2019): 1–22.

18 Ibid.

This article begins with a contextualization of the EU's engagement in PVE in the broader framework represented by the new UN Plan of Action and of the literature regarding the added value offered by civil society actors in PVE. It proceeds by describing the phenomenon of VE as it affects individuals from and in Central Asia, looking at the main push and pull factors of radicalization. The research findings are then presented, including the five different forms of engagement that characterize the activities of EU-funded organizations. The concluding section discusses the implications of the EU's whole-of-society approach and security–development nexus for PVE.

2 Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE), the Whole-of-Society Approach, and the Security–Development Nexus

The new UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, launched in 2016, represents an important shift in the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in light of the growing international consensus that security-based counterterrorism measures have not been sufficient to prevent the spread of VE.[19] The terms "radicalization" and "violent extremism" are contested and remain poorly defined and understood, and neither the UN nor the EU have provided official definitions. Generally speaking, VE refers to the "willingness or choice to use violence, or to support the use of violence, to advance particular political, religious, ideological, and social beliefs."[20] In this context, radicalization is used to indicate "the process by which individuals adopt violent extremist ideologies that may lead them to commit terrorist acts or which are likely to render them more vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist organizations."[21] Overall, these two terms are conceptually ambiguous, since the literature often equates or confounds radicalization with VE, overlooking the fact that not all radicalization processes necessarily lead to violence.[22] The process of radicalization is not monocausal but is caused by a complex and dynamic combination of factors.

The UN Plan of Action identifies two sets of factors conducive to VE—push factors and pull factors. While *push factors* refer to structural and contextual conditions, *pull factors* are linked to individual motivations and processes that

19 United Nations General Assembly, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*.

20 Dambaru B. Subedi, "Early Warning and Response for Preventing Radicalization and Violent Extremism," *Peace Review* 29, no. 2 (2017): 135–43, 135–36.

21 Peter Romaniuk, "Does CVE Work? Lessons Learnt from the Global Effort to Counter Violent Extremism" (Goshen, IN: Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2015), 7–8.

22 Subedi, "Early Warning and Response for Preventing Radicalization and Violent Extremism," 136.

"play a key role in transforming ideas and grievances into violent extremist action."[23] Push factors include lack of socioeconomic opportunities, marginalization and discrimination, poor governance, violations of human rights and the rule of law, prolonged and unresolved conflicts, and detention in correctional facilities. Pull factors include individual backgrounds and motivations, collective grievances and victimization, distortion and misuse of beliefs, political ideologies that exploit ethnic and cultural differences, and the availability of leadership and social networks that provide orientation and organization.[24]

The new PVE approach to addressing "social, cultural and political drivers of violence, including the contexts and dynamics that enable extremist ideas to emerge, to grow and to be sustained"[25] has illuminated the importance of a whole-of-society approach that acknowledges the added value offered by civil society actors and organizations. Paradoxically, although counterterrorism measures and policies might limit civil society's contribution to the promotion of human rights, sustainable development, and conflict transformation, it is through these very efforts that civil society groups can address the political grievances, socioeconomic injustice, and power imbalances that are among the root causes of extremism and violence.[26] CSO engagement in PVE can take different forms.

CSOs can address conditions that are conducive to the spread of terrorism by offering ingredients that provide human security.[27] For instance, by working on development programs focused on peacebuilding, good governance and the rule of law, the empowerment of youth and women, and interfaith dialogue, these organizations can foster a more peaceful and inclusive society and mitigate structural conditions that could otherwise develop into radicalization and VE. Since CSOs tend to be well rooted in local communities, they are also more aware of the population's specific grievances. This knowledge enables them to formulate more context-specific responses[28] and to be more innovative, versatile, and better prepared to take risks in addressing their

23 United Nations General Assembly, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*.

24 Ibid.

25 Subedi, "Early Warning and Response for Preventing Radicalization and Violent Extremism," 135–36.

26 David Cortright, Alistair Millar, Linda Gerber-Stellingwerf, and George A. Lopez, "Friend, not Foe: The Role of Civil Society in Preventing Violent Extremism," *Notre Dame Journal of International & Comparative Law* 2, no. 2 (2012): 238–56.

27 Bibi Van Ginkel, "Engaging Civil Society in Countering Violent Extremism: Experiences with the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy," research paper (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2012), 10.

28 Ibid.

communities' security concerns.[29] In addition, thanks to their proximity to local communities, CSOs have more legitimacy and influence and are perceived to be credible messengers of counternarratives and alternative narratives that can be used to challenge extremist ideas.[30] CSOs can also channel and create platforms for the different perspectives within a society, including those of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups. By giving voice to these groups, civil society can provide outlets for addressing their demands and grievances, thus avoiding forms of exclusion that might lead to violent radicalization.[31] Agastia and colleagues identified five main ways in which CSOs can engage in radicalization (or deradicalization) processes, namely through research, training, advocacy, dialogue facilitation, and the promotion of tolerant or moderate values.[32]

The new soft-security approach, which is focused on the root causes of radicalization, should also be contextualized within the framework of the security–development nexus. Over the last two decades, both academic and policy discourses have emphasized the interconnectedness of security and development, and their mutual influence, with security being a precondition for development and development being a prerequisite for long-term security.[33] These discourses have led to the practical convergence of development policy and security policy. In this regard, it has been noted that "security issues have appeared on the development policy radar and security policy has been integrated into a broader range of concerns for developing and transition countries, so that there are an increasing number of situations where development and security meet in practice."[34] This is also true of the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which explicitly invites member states to develop national plans of action to identify national priorities for addressing the local drivers of VE and to do so by aligning their national development policies with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

29 Evers et al., "Civilian Prevention of Radicalization in Central Asia," 26.

30 Van Ginkel, "Engaging Civil Society in Countering Violent Extremism," 7.

31 Evers et al., "Civilian Prevention of Radicalization in Central Asia," 26.

32 I Gusti B.D. Agastia, Anak A.B. Perwita, and Dambaru B. Subedi, "Countering Violent Extremism through State–Society Partnerships: A Case Study of De-Radicalisation Programmes in Indonesia," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 15, no. 1 (2020): 23–43, 37.

33 Julian Bergmann, "A Bridge over Troubled Water? The Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) and the Security–Development Nexus in EU External Policy," discussion paper (Bonn: German Development Institute, 2018), 4.

34 Stefan Gänzle, "Coping with the 'Security–Development Nexus:' The European Community's Instrument for Stability–Rationale and Potential" (Bonn: German Development Institute, 2009), 22.

However, the security–development nexus has also been criticized for its political implications. It has been noted that security–development agendas have allowed major powers to sacrifice development and poverty reduction in at-risk states and societies in a way that would serve their own security needs, especially within the framework of the Global War on Terrorism.[35] Indeed, the security–development nexus has been complemented by a shift from macro-development approaches to "good governance," "pro-poor" policymaking, sustainability, and poverty-reduction programs aimed at containing potential instability, leading to the securitization and subordination of the development agenda.[36] At the same time, the security and development agendas have expanded the possibility of international interventions in situations of internal conflict so that (non-Western) states are less able to prevent the internationalization of their domestic governance processes.[37] This is particularly true in the case of the new PVE approach, which has allowed "international interventions to project local radicalization and related conflict as international security concerns in order to justify deeper forms of external influence in conflict zones."[38]

A theoretical investigation of the security–development nexus and its political consequences is beyond the scope of this study. However, a recent paper on international PVE efforts in Kyrgyzstan highlighted the practical implications of using such a broad PVE approach on the ground.[39] The article distinguished *PVE-specific*, *PVE-related*, and *PVE-relevant* activities. PVE-specific activities comprises efforts addressed to individuals becoming or already radicalized as well as violent extremist offenders engaged in deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration processes and, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, represent only 5% of the total.[40] PVE-related activities are focused on strengthening the resilience of individuals and communities by promoting, for instance, their social and economic empowerment. PVE-relevant activities are aimed at systemic reform by fostering good governance, rule of law, respect for human rights etc.[41] It follows that the great majority of what the international donor

35 David Chandler, "The Security–Development Nexus and the Rise of 'anti-Foreign Policy,'" *Journal of International Relations and Development* 10, no. 4 (2007): 362–86, 363.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 368.

38 Thiessen, "The Strategic Ambiguity of the United Nations Approach to Preventing Violent Extremism," 5.

39 Chiara Pierobon, *Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan: The Role of the International Donor Community.* Central Asia Policy Brief No. 56 (Bishkek: OSCE Academy, 2020).

40 Ibid., 6.

41 Ibid., 10.

community has labeled its PVE engagement in Kyrgyzstan was translated into development business as usual, which "has been doing before, that remains"[42] independently of the phenomenon of radicalization and VE in the country. The next section investigates how the security–development nexus applies to EU policies and is being translated into concrete initiatives in the fields of peace, stability, and PVE in Kyrgyzstan.

3 The EU's Engagement in Peace, Stability and PVE

The EU first recognized the need to address the threat of VE and terrorism both at home and abroad in its European Security Strategy of 2003.[43] As in the EU's other main foreign policy document—the EU Global Strategy of 2016—security was primarily understood to be a precondition of development and was prioritized over development policy.[44] In 2005 the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy was launched. Following the security–development nexus, it acknowledged that sustainable development cannot be achieved without peace and security and that without development and the eradication of poverty there can be no sustainable peace. Other EU development policy documents, such as the European Consensus on Development of 2006 and the Agenda for Change of 2011, highlighted the interdependency and reciprocity of development and security and the need to ensure that "the EU's objectives in the fields of development policy, peace-building, conflict prevention and international security are mutually reinforcing."[45]

Nowadays, the basis for the EU's PVE engagement is the Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism of 2014. This strategy identifies four priority areas for EU action both internally and abroad and includes the promotion of equal opportunities, community-level efforts, counternarratives, and capacity building. Remarkably, the document stresses that challenge of radicalization and recruitment to terrorism cannot be met by governments working alone and that joint efforts with communities, civil society, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the private sector—that

42 Ibid., 6.
43 EU, *A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy* (Brussels, 2012).
44 Bergmann, "A Bridge over Troubled Water?," 6.
45 EU, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Increasing the Impact of EU Development Policy: An Agenda for Change* (Brussels, 2011), 6.

is, the whole-of-society approach—are necessary.[46] A central role in building and promoting resilience to resist and withstand the appeal of terrorism is attributed to civil society. In the same year, the IcSP was introduced. It built on and replaced the previous Instrument for Stability (IfS), the European Union's flagship-like instrument for addressing the "security–development nexus."[47] On the whole, the IcSP provides for three types of assistance, including a response to situations of crisis or emerging crisis to prevent conflict (Art. 3); conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and crisis-preparedness measures (Art. 4); and interventions addressing global and transregional threats and emerging threats (Art. 5).

Actions supported under Article 3 tend to be short-term responses that provide technical and financial assistance in exceptional and unforeseen situations, such as situations that are posing a threat to democracy, law and order, and the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as situations that are threatening to escalate into armed conflict. Actions implemented under Articles 4 and 5 are of a longer-term nature and are aimed at building and strengthening the capacity to prevent conflict, build peace and address pre- and post-crisis needs. Remarkably, it is by recognizing the two-dimensionality of conflict prevention and peacebuilding through both short-term and long-term measures that the IcSP implicitly reiterates the interlinkages between security and development and the cross-policy nature of the instrument's engagement in this field.

Under this Instrument, financial, economic, and technical development can be funded in cooperation with third countries, regional and international organizations, and other state and civil society actors. Within this framework, the EU's definition of civil society is very broad and ranges from NGOs, trade unions and organizations that represent social and economic interests to research and scientific organizations and universities, churches, and religious associations and communities, public and private foundations, and the media.[48]

If we turn our attention to the specific case of the IcSP in Kyrgyzstan, four national projects were implemented between 2017 and 2019 with a budget exceeding €3.3 million; moreover, except in Uzbekistan, a regional project with a similar budget was conducted in each of the Central Asian republics in

46 Council of the European Union, *Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism*, 5.

47 Gänzle, "Coping with the 'Security–Development Nexus,'" 53.

48 EU, "Regulation (EU) No 230/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014 Establishing an Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace," *Official Journal of the European Union* (Brussels, 2014), 2.

the same period.[49] In addition, under the IcSP, a number of actions have been launched around the world as part of the STRIVE program. STRIVE provides support to innovative projects, "working with local communities to create conditions conducive to development and resilient towards violent extremism."[50] In particular, under the STRIVE Global Action, the Hedayah Center was awarded €5 million from the IcSP for supporting local partners in designing, developing, and implementing initiatives against radicalization and recruitment to terrorism. Projects funded under STRIVE comprise four main strands of activity: 1) capacity building, 2) civil society empowerment, 3) media professionalization; and 4) research. At the time of this study three projects had been implemented under the STRIVE program in Kyrgyzstan.

Before we proceed with the analysis of the concrete projects and activities conducted by EU-funded CSOs within this framework, the next section provides an overview of the phenomenon of VE and of the main push and pull factors that are conducive to radicalization among Central Asian citizens both in the region and abroad. As the reader will notice, the available literature tends to be characterized by a regional approach and a focus on Islamic radicalization and to emphasize the role of push factors, although it does not underestimate the importance of the interplay of push and pull factors on the ground.

4 Radicalization and VE in Central Asia

The phenomenon of radicalization and VE affecting Central Asians is controversial and highly debated. In a critical paper, Heathershaw and Montgomery framed this issue as a myth sustained by analysts and commentators with little evidence. Indeed, these scholars argued that the small number of individuals from Central Asia who commit violent acts in the name of Islam do not represent a broader trend and that a causal relationship cannot be assumed.[51] Similarly, Tricot O'Farrell and Street refer to the phenomenon of

49 Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), "The Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace Responds Rapidly to Crisis, Builds Peace and Prevents Conflict around the World," European Commission, n.d., https://ec.europa.eu/fpi/what-we-do/instrument-contributing-stability-and-peace-preventing-conflict-around-world_en.

50 European Commission, *STRIVE for Development: Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2015), 13.

51 John Heathershaw and David W. Montgomery, "The Myth of post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics," research paper (London: Chatham House, 2014), 2.

VE in Kyrgyzstan as an "inflated threat."[52] According to these authors, very few incidents of violence that have taken place in Kyrgyzstan have been linked to extremist groups and nowadays these groups do not represent the main risk factor for security in the country. Lemon and colleagues offered a different picture, showing that 18 terrorist attacks (resulting in a total of 141 deaths) were carried out by Central Asians in the region between 2009 and 2018.[53] These researchers also estimated that by 2017 the number of Central Asian foreign fighters who had gone to Iraq and Syria was between 2,000 and 4,000, accounting for 5% to 10% of foreign terrorist fighters worldwide.[54] This number is disproportionately high, considering that Central Asian citizens represent less than 1% of the world's population.[55]

Despite an abundance of studies, it is not clear what motivates individuals in and from Central Asia to turn to VE. Commentators have also observed that politically motivated exaggeration and distortion of the level of threat, as well as inaccuracy in the estimates and in the methodology used for data collection, might affect the quality of the available data.[56] In addition, most of the empirically grounded publications focus on individual cases.[57] As a result, the scarcity of rigorous and conclusive findings concerning the drivers of radicalization makes it difficult to design effective PVE interventions that can tackle the factors that are conducive to violent action on the ground in a given case.

Migration, particularly economic migration to Russia, is a crucial experience for Central Asians who join extremist groups in Syria and Iraq, as testified by arrest reports, martyrdom statements, and social media accounts.[58] Although they migrated to Russia because of a lack of opportunities for employment and advancement, as well as religious repression and discrimination in their home

52 Kloé Tricot O'Farrell and Jordan Street, *A Threat Inflated? The Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism Agenda in Kyrgyzstan* (London: Saferworld, 2019), 1.

53 Edward Lemon, Vera Mironova, and William H. Tobey, "Jihadists from Ex-Soviet Central Asia: Where Are They? Why Did They Radicalize? What Next?," research paper (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2018), 16.

54 Ibid., 6.

55 Ibid., 7.

56 E.g., International Crisis Group, *Syria Calling: Radicalization in Central Asia* (Bishkek/Brussels, 2015); Noah Tucker, *Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses* (Arlington, VA: Management Systems International Corporate Offices, 2015).

57 Edward Lemon, "Pathways to Violent Extremism: Evidence from Tajik Recruits to Islamic States," *Harriman Magazine* (2018): 4–9; Anna Matveeva, "Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan: On the Way to the Caliphate," *The RUSI Journal* 163, no. 1 (2018): 30–46.

58 Tucker, *Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq*, 11.

countries, it is their experience of discrimination in the receiving country that makes Central Asian citizens more susceptible to radical ideology. At the same time, labor migrants from Central Asia who are living in Russia have better access to the Internet and social media and are therefore more exposed to pull factors represented by Islamic State propaganda, online discourses and networks. These narratives are able to provide migrant workers who are isolated, discriminated against, stigmatized, and resentful with new meaning for their lives and to influence their decision to join militant organizations and support those who mobilize.[59]

In a more recent study, Mohammed Elshimi and colleagues noted that there is no proof of a direct link between the marginalization of Central Asian labor migrants and the push factors that might drive individuals to VE.[60] Their findings indicate that the experience of migration (including difficulties in regularizing their status as legal migrants, economic exploitation, and financial hardship) together with the social marginalization and stigmatization that migrants face abroad can have an impact on the process of radicalization but do not necessarily determine it. These scholars shed light on the role of pull factors, such as access to social media, a more tolerant environment for accommodating religious beliefs, the availability of a "global Islamic identity that transcends ethnic and national origins," and spiritual incentives to explain migrants' decision to join extremist organizations.[61] Remarkably, Elshimi and colleagues see no clear, conclusive evidence regarding what makes Central Asian migrants in Russia so vulnerable and how their experience in the country influences their propensity to radicalize.

Radicalization of Central Asians has not only occurred in Russia but also in Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, as well as in their countries of origin. More precisely, the recruitment of young Central Asians is a broader phenomenon linked to their experience of personal failure and disillusionment that makes them particularly susceptible to the Islamic State's offer in terms of meaning, collective identity, and individual fulfillment independent of their migratory status.

For instance, the International Crisis Group identifies as main drivers of radicalization in Central Asia a combination of push factors, such as poor social and living conditions, economic crisis and declining demand for labor, a

59 Noah Tucker, "Islamic State Messaging to Central Asian Migrant Workers in Russia," brief (Washington, DC: George Washington University, 2015).

60 Mohammed S. Elshimi, Raffaello Pantucci, Sarah Lain, and Nadine L. Salman, *Understanding the Factors Contributing to Radicalization Among Central Asian Labor Migrants in Russia* (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2018), ix.

61 Ibid., xi.

lack of quality services (particularly in rural areas), venal elites and corruption, rigged elections, and abuse of power.[62] The radicalization of women is often a response to push factors such as the social, economic, political, and religious constraints they face in the region, because it offers them an opportunity to distance themselves from marital and family obligations.[63] A lack of appropriate secular and religious education, together with the state's rejection of nonconventional religious expressions, might push young people to radicalize, and the ideological commitment to a violent jihad as well as to a holy struggle to advance their idea of a violent Islam might serve as pull factors.[64] According to Lemon and colleagues, poverty, lack of education, and high levels of religiosity are not necessary conditions for radicalizing, since people who are better off financially, better educated, and not particularly religious compared to the average person in Central Asia are also recruited.[65] In such cases, pull factors such as a desire for adventure and a call to arms might make people leave for Syria.[66]

Overall, it is impossible to construct a single profile for supporters of the Islamic State, since it appeals to a cross-section of citizens, ranging from established businessmen and families who are attracted by better opportunities for their children to women abandoned by husbands now living in Russia, school dropouts, and university students.[67] According to the International Crisis Group, Uzbek citizens and ethnic Uzbeks from the Ferghana Valley represented the largest Central Asian group to join the Islamic State, and 1,000 men and women, including 500 ethnic Kyrgyz, had already left the Ferghana Valley in 2015 to fight or support the Islamic State.[68] Nowadays, recruitment of Central Asians in the region is particularly strong in the agricultural south of Tajikistan (Khatlon Province), in isolated mining and oil-drilling cities in western Kazakhstan (Zhezkazgan, Aktobe and Atyrau), and in the predominantly ethnic Uzbek community in Kyrgyzstan's Ferghana Valley.[69]

For Matveeva, radicalization affects Muslim minorities in Kyrgyzstan far more than it does majority groups. These minority groups are drawn to ISIS specifically because of their perception of humiliation and ethnic discrimination,

62 International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Migrants and the Economic Crisis* (Bishkek/Brussels, 2010); International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Decay and Decline* (Bishkek/Brussels, 2011).
63 International Crisis Group, *Syria Calling: Radicalization in Central Asia*, 1, 8.
64 Ibid.
65 Lemon et al., "Jihadists from Ex-Soviet Central Asia," 13.
66 E.g., International Crisis Group, *Syria Calling: Radicalization in Central Asia*, 1.
67 Ibid., 4.
68 International Crisis Group, *Syria Calling: Radicalization in Central Asia*, 3.
69 Lemon et al., "Jihadists from Ex-Soviet Central Asia," 9–10.

their exclusion from senior office and intellectual and cultural life, and their restricted opportunities for participation.[70] Kyrgyzstani foreign fighters are young (22–27 years), have little or no education, come from poor economic backgrounds, and are underemployed or unemployed.[71] These push factors make them particularly susceptible to ISIS's promises regarding income (above $200/month), free housing, food and propane allowances, and the possibility of having cars, arranged marriages, and sex slaves.[72] Nonetheless, pull factors that exploit this vulnerability, such as a violent ideology and social support, are also essential to explaining pathways to VE.[73]

As noted in the Introduction, since 2016 Kyrgyzstan has undoubtedly been the main target of PVE programs and initiatives implemented by the international donor community in Central Asia, with agencies and organizations such as the OSCE, UNDP, UNICEF, UN Women, and the EU investing more than €42 million in this field.[74] However, compared with the other Central Asian Republics, Kyrgyzstan occupies a mid-field position with regard to the average number of radicalized individuals in its population, and only 2 of the 18 attacks that have occurred in the region since 2009 have been committed in that country.[75] Therefore, the international PVE efforts in Kyrgyzstan have been met with some skepticism and,[76] have been framed as the result of a shift in donor priorities that derives from pressure at home rather than from the specific situation in the target country.

At the same time, the abundance of available international funds has been criticized for generating a discourse that has contributed to radicalization becoming an issue, rather than to a reduction of its impact, in Kyrgyzstan. In addition, international NGOs involved in the implementation of these projects on the ground have pointed out a side effect of the new PVE agenda in terms of a diversion of funds away from more systemic issues such as structural injustice and exclusion.[77]

However, because of the lack of empirically based investigations into international PVE efforts—particularly those of the EU—very little is known about their concrete outcomes and implications on the ground. Remarkably, since

70 Matveeva, "Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," 39.
71 Anne Speckhard, Ardian Shajkovci, and Chinara Esengul, *Women and Violent Extremism in Europe and Central Asia: The Roles of Women in Supporting, Joining, Intervening in and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan* (New York City, NY: UN Women, 2017), 6.
72 Ibid., 9.
73 Ibid.
74 Pierobon, *Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan*.
75 Lemon et al., "Jihadists from Ex-Soviet Central Asia," 7, 11.
76 Chandler, "The Security–Development Nexus and the Rise of 'anti-Foreign Policy.'"
77 E.g., Tricot O'Farrell and Street, *A Threat Inflated?*

Kyrgyzstan has offered a very conducive environment for civil society and the implementation of civil society support programs, it also represents a particularly suitable case study for examining the EU's "whole-of-society approach" and, in particular, for exploring the different forms of PVE engagement that characterize EU-funded CSOs under the IcSP and STRIVE.

Empirically, this study relies on primary data in the form of semi-structured interviews conducted with EU officials and affiliates responsible for implementing the IcSP and STRIVE in Kyrgyzstan, as well as with the main international NGOs and CSOs that were carrying out projects on the ground. The interviews were conducted by the study's principal investigators during fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan in the spring and summer of 2019. With few exceptions, the interviews took place at the organization offices and headquarters in Bishkek and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in English and were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The data obtained were triangulated with other media sources, such as the project materials made available on the websites of the EU-funded organizations and evaluation reports. The interview transcripts and additional materials were analyzed using the software NVivo and an inductive, explorative approach that allowed five main coding categories (i.e., five main forms of engagement in PVE that characterized EU-funded CSOs) to be identified, as described below.

5 The Role of Civil Society in PVE: Evidence from the Ground

Five different forms of CSO engagement in PVE emerged from the analysis of EU-funded projects under the IcSP and STRIVE (see Table 1), which can be summarized as follows:

- Development and delivery of training programs for awareness-raising and capacity-building in the field of VE and PVE;
- Establishment of mechanisms for dialogue, consultation, and advocacy;
- Research and research capacity-building for investigating VE-related issues;
- Production of counternarratives and alternative narratives;
- Subgranting of smaller-scale and/or community-level projects.

These forms of engagement will now be discussed in more detail by drawing on selected emblematic examples.

5.1 *Development and Delivery of Training Programs for Awareness Raising and Capacity-Building in the Field of VE and PVE*

Under the IcSP and STRIVE, PVE-related and PVE-relevant activities were offered (e.g., capacity-building seminars on conflict sensitivity and mediation, gender issues, media literacy, and the relationship between religion,

Table 1 Five forms of engagement by EU-funded CSOs in Kyrgyzstan to prevent violent extremism

Developing and delivering capacity-building seminars and trainings	**Establishing mechanisms of dialogue, consultation, and advocacy**	
Conducting research and research capacity building	**Producing and circulating counter-narratives and alternative narratives**	**Subgranting smaller-scale and/or community-level projects**

Source: Author's compilation

secularity, and democracy). For instance, 100 women were trained in Bishkek and Jalal-Abad on women's rights, peace, and interethnic and interreligious tolerance. Twenty women were then selected for a second program that focused explicitly on raising awareness about VE and radicalization; they were trained to become capacity-builders in their respective communities. Throughout the project, the implementing organization sought to foster the "two-fold contribution" that a woman can make to the processes of radicalization and deradicalization. As explained by the implementing organization, the women

> can work both with passive people, enlightening them about the dangers of joining extremist groups, actually telling them the consequences of doing that, and […] with active recruits, so these women […] have the energy, but they don't have the peaceful means [to] participate. So, we are offering this kind of active [woman], who can […] perhaps have potential to become radicalized for violent extremist groups to actually be the opposite, to be kind of saving […] other people from joining extremist groups.[78]

A good example of PVE-related engagement would be two EU-funded projects that contributed to the (re-)activation and/or rehabilitation of the local crime prevention centers (LCPC). These centers bring together different state and nonstate actors, including local authorities and police, as well as women, the elderly, and youth councils engaged in preventive activities such as PVE. Although these institutions are mandated by law, some of them are not active or have never been activated. One of the organizations funded under the IcSP and STRIVE sought to strengthen the capacity of one specific group involved in LCPC: the youth councils. The projects were also used to emphasize the important contribution that this body can make in preventing juvenile crime,

78 Interview conducted in Bishkek, April 8, 2019.

and they were successful, albeit to a limited degree, in increasing state support through a locally administered budget.

The capacities of state agencies in the judicial and corrective field were enhanced within the framework of an EU-funded project aimed at institutionalizing a nondiscrimination curriculum in state training centers. In cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior, the National Security Agency, the Correctional Agency of Kyrgyzstan, and the bar association, a large-scale national training program was developed, along with relevant manuals for law-enforcement agencies and actors. Similarly, another project implemented under the IcSP and STRIVE engaged in PVE-specific activities by developing and testing a training program. The two-day training consisted of a standardized program in Russian to be carried out in former Soviet countries. It was developed in cooperation with state and nonstate institutions and was tested with 25 individuals representing a variety of stakeholders, including civil society.

The EU-funded projects also provided capacity-building activities for journalists on how to broadcast religion-related issues in a more neutral and conflict-sensitive way. With the help of experts from the Institute of Telecommunications and Technologies and in close cooperation with the State Commission on Religious Affairs, another EU-funded organization developed two web modules on digital media literacy that were addressed at and adapted to two target groups: children and teenagers in school and migrant workers. The program is now to be tested in 56 pilot schools and universities across Kyrgyzstan. The implementing organization explained:

> through different case studies and tests provided within the modules, we want to have young people be aware of certain threats online, and to be able to […] ensure their safety when going online, for instance, social media, what settings they have to pay attention to. […] It is not just about the technical skills, […] for instance, what options to select; it is also about how to relate to specific content and images.[79]

5.2 *Establishment of Mechanisms for Dialogue, Consultation, and Advocacy*

One major contribution of the EU-funded organizations under the IcSP and STRIVE was the establishment of platforms and working groups to bring together different stakeholders ranging from state officials and experts to representatives of civil society, academia, and religious groups. Within this

79 Interview conducted in Bishkek, March 19, 2019.

framework, PVE-related and PVE-relevant activities took place in the form of regular stakeholder meetings at the local, national, and regional levels.

At the local level, dialogue platforms were employed to "facilitate a process in which people could come together, better understand each other's respective problems, each other's perspectives and different interests."[80] For example, within the framework of a project focused on strengthening the capacities of LCPCs, meetings were organized and facilitated during which different stakeholders, including local CSOs and community members, were provided with new space and opportunities "to reflect about the problems that they face, think about what is driving these problems, and what the consequences are of these problems, thinking about what solutions can be brought to these problems."[81]

Overall, these platforms enhanced interaction within and between local communities and state authorities, preparing the ground for the creation of intergroup trust. In addition, they provided a space for communities to monitor the effectiveness of local responses to local problems and keep authorities accountable.

At the national level, similar mechanisms were used as "intellectual instruments" to promote regular dialogue on topics related to, among other things, religion and religious education. One example of PVE-relevant engagement was the establishment of a working group under the IcSP that brought together the leaders of different religious groups to promote mutual understanding and tolerance. When asked about the impact of this initiative, the implementing organization highlighted the following result:

> [A]t the beginning of these working group sessions that we had, […] you could see that there was tension. For example, we had the Kyrgyz representative from the xxx religious group who […] refused to sit at the table. We had a roundtable. [His response] was "Probably I will sit there, behind." […] But after a series of meetings had taken place, religious leaders started inviting each other to each other's events. […] And they were praying (together) and that was very astonishing […]. I think that's an impact, like increasing tolerance in general.[82]

In addition, expert meetings were used for advocacy work to "convince key stakeholders, includ[ing] the government, to take action […] take decisions

80 Interview conducted in Bishkek, March 25, 2019.
81 Interview conducted in Bishkek, March 25, 2019.
82 Interview conducted in Bishkek, March 18, 2019.

based on real-life information."[83] Within this framework, CSOs familiarized law enforcement agencies with the interrelation between security and human rights and, in particular, with how "you can't address all these factors that drive extremism in the country without ensuring human rights."[84]

Similarly, at the regional level, expert meetings were organized that brought together law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, security agencies, and CSOs. This PVE-specific activity led to the formulation of "actionable responses" and policy recommendations to be included in the Central Asian countries' national strategies on PVE that are in development, providing a legal framework for civil society engagement in this field.[85]

5.3 *Research and Research Capacity-Building for Investigating VE-Related Issues*

The organizations funded under the IcSP and STRIVE conducted several studies on a variety of religion-related topics, such as Kyrgyz civic identity and the role of religion, the role of the media in covering religious issues and in building constructive dialogues on religion and democracy, the influence of religious organizations on decision-making at the local and community levels, and the phenomenon of Islamophobia in Bishkek. Other studies were specifically focused on the phenomenon of radicalization, investigating the role of the media and the information ecosystem around people who are susceptible to recruitment, factors and trends characterizing the radicalization of women, judicial practice in cases related to extremism and terrorism, and the role of CSOs in PVE.

For instance, one PVE-specific study investigated the causes and mechanisms that explain women's radicalization in Kyrgyzstan with respect to their involvement in banned religious groups. Overall, four main push factors were identified as being conducive to the radicalization of this group: a low level of religious literacy and a misconception of religious dogma; a lack of awareness of their rights and freedoms; a sense of unfairness and discrimination; and distrust of state bodies and the political system.[86] The research findings also highlight the influence exercised by kinship and neighborhood relations in the recruitment process, with women not only being recruited, but also actively spreading radical ideas within and beyond these close circles. Women

83 Interview conducted in Bishkek, March 19, 2019.
84 Interview conducted in Bishkek, March 19, 2019.
85 Interview conducted in Bishkek, March 19, 2019.
86 International Alert, *Constructive Dialogues on Religion and Democracy Project: Second Compilation of Researches* (Bishkek: 2020), 10.

are engaged in framing processes, both online and offline, through which they generate and sustain pull factors such as distortion and misuse of beliefs.

In this regard, the study shed light on women's ability to leverage traditional norms such as masculinity, especially on social media, where they use "taunts and ridicules against Muslim men who allegedly do not fulfill their male duty […] as a method of provocation,"[87] framing adherence to more radical religious ideologies as a way of (re)affirming their masculinity. At the same time, women also contribute to recruiting other women both online and offline, as in the case of correctional facilities, where it was observed that "women convicted of religious extremism disseminate their beliefs to other convicted women who are interested in learning about religion in the guise of a normal conversation."[88] The results of these studies were presented at public conferences and events and were also made available in print and online on the organizations' websites.[89]

In addition to collecting new data, the EU-funded projects also built research capacities to develop and strengthen the analytical skills of students and young researchers. The projects were characterized by a research participatory approach: for example, selected young researchers were grouped into multidisciplinary teams and conducted part of the studies in their respective communities under the supervision of experienced mentors.

Within the framework of one IcSP project, young people were trained in both community security assessment and participatory research methodologies. After attending the program, they were engaged in the identification and analysis of key security concerns in their communities and carried out field research to investigate these issues in more detail by involving local stakeholders and peers. According to the implementing organization, by enhancing their research capacities, the project not only enabled younger generations to voice their security concerns, but also empowered them to shed light on the community perception and experience of conflict.[90]

5.4 *Production of Counternarratives and Alternative Narratives*

The EU-funded organizations under the IcSP and STRIVE were also engaged in the production and circulation of PVE-specific counternarratives and

87 Ibid., 21.

88 Ibid., 22.

89 See The SecDev Group and Civil Initiative on Internet Policy, *Violent Extremism in Central Asia* (Bishkek, 2018); International Alert, *Constructive Dialogue on Religion and Democracy Project. First Compilation of Researches* (Bishkek, 2019); International Alert, *Second Compilation of Researches*.

90 Interview conducted in Bishkek, March 25, 2019.

alternative narratives, especially by means of the Internet. As one organization observed in this regard,

> [if] terrorists are so successful in propaganda, in replicating or promulgating their ideas through [the] Internet, why can't we use the same approach at least for bringing good ideas to the population and building trust between citizens and state instead of countering with these technologies, considering them as a tool of terrorism, giving the entire digital space, cyberspace, to terrorists?[91]

For instance, in the framework of one STRIVE project, over 100 propaganda videos were analyzed by a team of experts in the fields of terrorism, religion, psychology, and education. Based on the results of the analysis, ten alternative storylines targeted at young people between the ages of 14 and 28 were developed, and a video entitled "To Be Unified" was produced and made available on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media.

A capacity-building component was also included in this form of CSO engagement in PVE. In addition to providing media and digital literacy education, one of the implementing organizations emphasized how, through its activities, it aimed to "[build] the capacity of understanding, and then also [provide] a wide range of approaches in preventing violent extremism, starting with narratives, either counter-narratives or alternative narratives or positive narratives, what[ever] it is that you choose, the tools."[92]

5.5 *Subgranting of Smaller-Scale and/or Community-Level Projects*

Another important yet so far limited function fulfilled by the EU-funded CSOs is the granting of support to conduct smaller-scale and community-level projects. Under the IcSP, PVE-related mini-projects were granted financial support (about €2,000 each) to foster "gender equality and break stereotypes by promoting a new image of religious women as very active in social and cultural life and very successful professionally."[93] Community projects were devoted to establishing and/or strengthening the role of youth councils in LCPCs by investing in the rehabilitation of infrastructure and facilities (see also the first form of engagement described above). Other projects sought, for instance, to learn more about the region and its history and to enhance critical thinking by organizing debating clubs and dialogue platforms. Financial support was also provided to smaller-scale projects aimed at improving access to and the

91 Interview conducted in Bishkek, March 19, 2019.
92 Interview conducted in Bishkek, April 5, 2019.
93 Interview conducted in Bishkek, March 26, 2019.

quality of legal aid for vulnerable communities. Within this framework, public interest strategic litigations were carried out and awareness-raising initiatives were offered in the fields of employment discrimination and procedural rights through appearances on television and radio, as well as through direct work with the ultimate beneficiaries at the community level.[94]

Unsurprisingly, the five forms of PVE engagement that characterize the EU-funded organizations under the IcSP are in line with those identified in studies mentioned earlier,[95] albeit with some slight differences. Remarkably, the empowerment of civil society represents a side-effect of projects conducted under the IcSP and STRIVE, affecting not only the EU-funded organizations but also other civil society actors involved as targets and beneficiaries of the actions. Compared with the different forms of engagement identified by Agastia and colleagues,[96] dialogue facilitation and advocacy could not be separated empirically, especially if we consider the activities and dynamics taking place at the local level where, for instance, dialogue platforms were used by community members not only to discuss local problems, but also to monitor the effectiveness of local authorities' responses.

In addition, the promotion of more tolerant or moderate values is a transverse function that might be achieved through the CSOs' other forms of engagement in PVE—for example, as an objective of capacity-building seminars aimed at raising awareness, of community dialogue, or of subgranted projects—with the exception of research, though this might become a research topic in its own right. At the same time, the analysis revealed subgranting as a new form of PVE engagement that characterizes EU-funded organizations. Remarkably, it is in this quadrant of Table 1 that, at least theoretically, the different forms of engagement of CSOs in PVE can be reproduced indefinitely.

6 Conclusion

This article presented a case study that focused on the EU's engagement with civil society in Kyrgyzstan to offer new insights into international efforts to prevent VE. The examination of the projects carried out under the IcSP and

94 Interview conducted in Bishkek, March 22, 2019.

95 Van Ginkel, "Engaging Civil Society in Countering Violent Extremism"; OSCE, *The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism*; and Agastia et al., "Countering Violent Extremism through State–Society Partnerships."

96 Agastia et al., "Countering Violent Extremism through State–Society Partnerships."

STRIVE revealed the existence of at least five different forms of CSO engagement in the field of PVE: 1) the development and delivery of training programs for awareness-raising and capacity-building in the field of VE and PVE; 2) the establishment of mechanisms of dialogue, consultation, and advocacy; 3) the conducting of research and research-capacity building; 4) the production and circulation of counternarratives and alternative narratives; and 5) the subgranting of smaller-scale and/or community-level projects. Functions 1 and 2 unquestionably represented the main fields of engagement of the EU-funded organizations. The projects involved different types of capacity-building activities, ranging from raising awareness about conflict sensitivity and mediation to improving technical knowledge and skills in order to deal with PVE-related issues and the training of trainers and multipliers in this field.

The IcSP and STRIVE projects allowed CSOs not only to implement but also to conceptualize and pilot new training programs on this topic. Mechanisms of dialogue, consultation, and advocacy were established that brought together different stakeholders at the local, national, and regional levels. Research was conducted to understand VE-related push and pull factors that are conducive to radicalization. Counternarratives, alternative narratives, and videos targeted at youth and women were produced and circulated. Subgrants were awarded to support the finding of solutions to community issues at the local level. In addition, the analysis highlighted the importance of the subgranting form of CSOs' engagement, through which the EU's whole-of-society approach becomes locally grounded by involving local actors in the implementation of PVE-related projects. Indeed, it is by carrying out mini-projects that communities and local NGOs can become involved in joint efforts with the EU not only as targets and beneficiaries but also as active agents of change.

Overall, the projects carried out under the IcSP and STRIVE adopted a broad whole-of-society approach, involving a variety of state and especially nonstate actors at the macro, meso, and micro levels. In line with Pierobon's macro-level findings regarding international efforts,[97] this meso-level analysis revealed a greater prevalence of PVE-related and PVE-relevant activities compared with PVE-specific activities, although the PVE-specific activities clearly accounted for more than 5% of the total. Therefore, the majority of civil society initiatives funded under the IcSP between 2017 and 2019 in Kyrgyzstan can be described as "development business as usual," which prioritizes development over security. This can also be explained as a result of the ambiguity that characterizes

97 Pierobon, *Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan*.

the VE/PVE agenda,[98] which has allowed a very mature Kyrgyz civil society sector to adapt, contest, and negotiate concepts and programs according to its own interests and priorities.[99]

However, a lack of knowledge about the factors and conditions that are conducive to radicalization makes it difficult for PVE initiatives to be effective on the ground. In addition, due to the broad nature of the objectives that characterize EU-funded projects, no evidence was provided concerning their concrete impact in changing people's attitudes to VE. The diffuse scope of the programs translated into myriad of activities that, with few exceptions,[100] did not address what had emerged from the literature review as the main drivers of radicalization in the region—that is, push factors. As a matter of fact, the challenges faced by so-called "at risk" communities are related to a lack of resources and perspectives (especially for the youth) that can be exploited by VE groups. Indeed, the regions that were more susceptible to recruitment were the ones more affected by poverty, economic deprivation, lack of opportunities, and (perceived) ethnic discrimination—conditions that lead to migration—although their interplay with pull factors cannot be underestimated. While there is a need for PVE-specific engagement to become more professional, specialized and targeted to demographic and geographical specificities, PVE-related and PVE-relevant engagement needs to be grounded in development priorities identified by local communities, also by providing new opportunities to exercise ownership in the development process.

Only by offering attractive and fair social and economic prospects can the international donor community reduce the willingness of Central Asians not only to become radicalized and join violent groups but more generally to leave their countries. Therefore, independent of the relevance and actuality of the phenomenon of VE in Central Asia, one more sustainable way to to prevent conflict and instability in the region would be to focus on improving socioeconomic conditions by promoting income-generating activities in more marginalized areas—and this is surely a field where CSOs can provide great(er) support.

98 Thiessen, "The Strategic Ambiguity of the United Nations Approach to Preventing Violent Extremism."

99 Chiara Pierobon (2021) European Union, civil society and local ownership in Kyrgyzstan: analysing patterns of adaptation, reinterpretation and contestation in the prevention of violent extremism (PVE), Central Asian Survey, DOI: 10.1080/02634937.2021.1905608

100 Remarkably, only one of the projects implemented under the IcSP and STRIVE addressed the lack of socioeconomic opportunities, by providing six-week income-generating sewing and baking workshops and a two-week business course in accounting and marketing for 30 vulnerable women.