

Regional Comparisons,
preventing violent
extremism

D8.3
Policy brief
summarising the
lessons learned
from assessing the
EU's measures to
prevent violent
extremism in a
comparative
perspective



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Introduction

Elapsing 30 months into the PREVEX consortium's work, synchronizing results from both PREVEX-generated and external research outputs, this policy brief presents three key lessons from the analysis of the EU's measures to prevent violent extremism (PVE) across its three regional focal areas: MENA, Maghreb/ Sahel and the Balkans. It then teases out three policy recommendations emanating from these lessons. While lesson #1 speaks to the broader framework of the EU's PVE efforts, lessons #2 & #3 are more specifically geared toward the regions under PREVEX' scrutiny: The Balkans (#2) and MENA and Maghreb/Sahel (#3).

Lesson # 1: The need for a holistic EU-specific general PVE approach that streamlines across the EU's different activity realms

PVE seems to work best when it merges faith-based efforts with rising economic developmental horizons, and when those are streamlined alongside security-based applications of law enforcement (including harsher preventive measures when these are called for). The examples of Morocco, Jordan, Kosovo, and other countries' fruitful efforts speak to this point. The *sine qua non* for such a vision of PVE is a clearly defined holistic approach: one which both marries all these aspects and pays attention to its domestic, regional and transregional specificities. While economic development would clearly fall under the EU's purview in its cooperation with neighbouring national governments, anti-terrorism and harsh law enforcement are more aligned with domestic capacities, which rely on domestic state consent and application, and where any EU directly-controlled military means and troops are absent.

A holistic model for PVE would ideally be multi-layered and multi-thematic, designate what an actor's roles in this model are and which roles it should *not* undertake. Currently, the EU does not operate according to such a holistic model for PVE, something the EU's recently aired Strategic Compass, with its sporadic references to PVE, bears witness to (EU, 2022, p:20). To pin-point this issue further, the EU has yet to erect a central EU-wide PVE hub – one place from where all the bloc's PVE efforts are coordinated, and which reaches out to all the EU's activity branches to harness them into one holistic PVE effort.

One crucial point in this lesson concerns the turning of the EU's PVE efforts to where these might be most effective, and vice versa – the redundancy of efforts where these stand at low chances to bear positive fruits. One example of this concerns counter-terrorism and harsher law-enforcement activities. These demand direct military capacities and intelligence capabilities that are traditionally in the hands of domestic governments, either of EU members, or of neighbouring countries, or even of remote state actors such as US forces. Being a multi-national regional bloc in the first place - devoid of its independent military capabilities, the assumption that the EU's counter-terrorist activities can live up to those of domestic governments (or of the US, for that matter) seems somewhat short-sighted.

If the EU's strengths lie in its economically-driven incentivised 'soft power', then let it do just that. Let it focus its PVE efforts on the broad realm of activities that fit its inherent multi-national regional character, rather than trying to shoehorn its efforts into realms of activities that are diametrically opposed to its distinct ontological nature. One such idea revolves around the efficacy of EU's efforts towards effective governance via improved tax collection within



African and MENA countries that adhere to so-called ‘electoral authoritarianism’ (i.e., political rule where elections are held regularly in line with constitutions and absent electoral fraud, yet with the entire political system heavily bent in favour of incumbent regimes). Indeed, the EU itself already referenced such ideas in its own policy briefs. The point here is one of association between PVE, and effective governance, albeit via the promotion of a universally-recognized good governance practice - fair and equitable tax collection (EU, 2020, p:13).

Yet, for this to materialise, the EU would require a complete PVE model, which is premised on an EU-driven PVE theory of change, which allocates a place for domestic forces, external forces, or supra-national structures such as the UNDP. This model should articulate a clearer division of labour between its different components. Given its primary role as an economic force (and a monetary one, given the Euro’s stance as a central exchange currency in the bloc’s neighbouring vicinity), the EU should allocate a clear place for its economically-driven PVE efforts and play a far more significant role in marrying PVE with the broad socio-economic development efforts it undertakes in partnership with domestic governments in the Balkans, MENA and Maghreb/ Sahel. Such an approach must also pay attention to larger regional dynamics, which in turn affect specific states, which could yield: ‘clearer multi-scalar prioritisation that includes the macro-regional level’ (Raineri and Strazzari, 2021, p:14).

As things currently stand, the EU’s PVE efforts seem piecemeal, fragmented, and scattered across multiple realms of activity, albeit devoid of a centralised logic to make them cumulatively more effective. As noted previously: ‘there is still a lack of a common European policy across much of the PVE board’ (Blockmans et al., 2020, p:10). In a minority of cases, one observes EU activities that significantly contribute to PVE (notably in sectors of economic development and infrastructure), yet, where the PVE element is either sublimated or not expressly sufficiently manifested as the *cause célèbre* it ought to have been. The marriage between the EU’s broad economic activities and PVE deserves to move much higher on the priority list.

Lesson 2: In the Balkans, the VE threat emanates from both ethno-nationalist and Islamist extremism

Lesson # 2 points towards the need for a strong re-calibration of attention as to what serves as the most pertinent VE threat stemming from the Balkans. As PREVEX research has consistently demonstrated, violent extremism in the Western Balkans should be understood in two different, and in some instances intertwined, aspects: as religiously driven Islamist extremism, and as ethno-nationally driven far-right or political extremism. From Bosnia to Albania, and from North Macedonia to Sanjak, it is ethno-nationalist forces who in recent years have demonstrated potential to be the most prone to executing violent extremist actions, compared to similar potentials by Balkan Islamic entities.

At the outset of PREVEX’ field research, the challenges brought about by Islam, and most notably – by the entry of the non-indigenous Hanbali-Wahabi Islam (especially into Kosovo and Bosnia), was rightfully seen as a significant VE threat. More specifically, the clash of the soft Hanafi Islamic tradition of the Balkans, renowned for its moderation, religious tolerance, and gifted accommodation with other faiths in the region (notably Christianity and Judaism),



with the harsher Hanbali-Wahabi traditions, was initially (and rightfully) seen as a cause for concern. Yet at that very outset, within PREVEX' original proposed project document, the dangers of ethno-nationalist driven VE were clearly stated with reference to the Balkans (PREVEX Project Proposal, pp:58-67). In essence, the past seven years in the Western Balkans have witnessed a clear: 'deradicalization of Islamic extremism from 2015 onwards, combined with a rise of ethnonationalist/far-right extremism' (Evstatiev and Mishkova, 2022, p:4). With the bulk of the field research concluded, it is clear that in the Balkans, a serious VE threat, in terms of outright potential towards terrorism, comes from ethno-nationalist forces, at least as dangerous (and some would argue even more so) than violent threats emanating from Islam. This result begs the realignment of attention of EU policy makers who must now shift their primary attention regarding VE in the Balkans, from focusing exclusively on Islamist extremism, to directing more attention towards ethno-nationalist forces.

To this, one must add a macro-level perspective. The ethno-nationalist VE threat in the Balkans ought to be contextualized alongside bigger macro-level threats and first and foremost amongst these, the considerably alarming possibility of the breakup of Bosnia due to extreme ethno-nationalist political drives heralded by the likes of Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska. Similarly, the mere floating of macro-level ethno-religious engineering ideas, which see it as legitimate, for example, to consider so-called 'forced population exchanges' between areas such as the Presevo Valley in Serbia (with a majority of Albanians) and Northern Mitrovica in Kosovo (with a Serb majority), could equally serve as crude ideological fertilisers for ethno-nationalist VE (Rossi, 2018). The amplifying effects that such macro-level political shifts can have in enhancing VE outbreaks seem more prone to embolden ethno-nationalist lines of violence than Islamic ones. So above and beyond the fact that Balkan ethno-nationalism has been clearly shown to carry a higher potential for VE than Balkan Islam has, the amplifying effects of macro-political trends upon which such ethno-nationalist VE can further thrive, could provide an extra flammability component to ethno-nationalist VE violence, which is less present when it comes to Islamic Balkan VE threats.

All this clearly does not mean that Islamic VE threats in the Balkans should be discarded or played down. On the contrary, the EU should continue its efforts in this field. Yet, with that said, one ought to recognize the simple fact that local Hanafi Islam has demonstrated a remarkable ability to "reign in" extremist Islamic voices in the Balkans, and gradually bring them to 'fall in line' with the more traditional and long-standing tolerant Balkan Islamic traits. It is precisely this major moderating factor of local Balkan Islam that seems overtly absent when it comes to "reigning in" ethno-nationalist forces with VE potential. The EU should draw the corresponding conclusions therefrom.

Lesson # 3: MENA & Maghreb/ Sahel- inject faith-based logics into EU PVE measures

Lesson # 3 concerns the EU's activities geared towards PVE within Muslim majoritarian lands in proximity to the EU's southern and eastern Mediterranean rim, in the MENA and the Maghreb/Sahel. In these predominantly Muslim countries, PVE efforts seem to be most successful when they are clearly, overtly, and unapologetically premised upon broad faith-based considerations, both in their initial design, and during their operational application.



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In contrast, EU PVE efforts that overlook faith-based considerations often seem to be limited in their impact upon the Muslim societies where they are applied. The local implementors of EU PVE projects in Muslim lands might ‘walk the walk and talk the talk’ of the promotion of EU values such as democracy, gender equality, human rights, and the like. Yet, all too often, the EU’s promotion of its own values in Muslim target countries clashes against the harsh realities of autocratic despotic regimes, deficiencies in public participation, and a clear non-equality for women (not to mention the overt targeting of vulnerable LGBT minorities).

The result of this clash has seen the EU adopt its known approach of ‘principled pragmatism’. Correspondingly, PVE efforts have tended to descend into a reductionist nature of security cooperation with authoritarian governments, a focus on drivers of VE rather than upon the much-needed emphasis on widening, amplifying, and strengthening of societal forces in favour of VE’s non-occurrence. Unable to bridge the cultural divide between the EU’s overtly secular and ‘western’ valuative ethos, and the realities prevalent within majoritarian Muslim societies, EU’s PVE efforts have opted for a ‘lowest common denominator’ approach that has translated into half measures commensurate to ‘principled pragmatism’.

One cardinal issue, which lies at the heart of the EU’s woes in designing and implementing PVE efforts in predominantly Muslim countries, has to do with a major difference between European and Muslim societies: *Faith*. While in most European societies, belief in God is either lower or far lower than 50 per cent, in virtually all majoritarian Muslim societies, it is well over 90 per cent (Tamir et al., 2020). In essence, the EU should design its PVE efforts within MENA and the Maghreb-Sahel:

...acknowledging these regions as they are, rather than as Europeans want them to be, staying focused on the principles needed to secure longer-term stability

(Barnes-Dacey and Lovatt, 2022)

The lesson here is one of policy adaptation to distinct societal realities. In Muslim-majoritarian societies of the MENA and the Maghreb/Sahel, faith-based thinking is present in all walks of life. From governments’ preference towards Islamic-finance-principled funding for infrastructural projects, to the need of providing food subsidies for the price of grain during Ramadan (as has recently happened due to the war in Ukraine), one would be hard pressed to find realms of governmental action devoid of faith-based thinking. This is even true of PVE gender perspectives, whereby Muslim countries such as Morocco are prepared to accept the return of their own women back from ISIS camps to be charged and judged domestically, as opposed to European countries such as France (Ben-Nun and Engel, 2022, pp:6-10). The Islamic principle of ‘*Rahama*’ (Clemency) has been at the heart of such policy divergences between European and Muslim countries vis-à-vis even the most politically divisive issues such as how to deal with ISIS captured nationals.

Correspondingly, when designing PVE measures, EU policy makers would do well to place faith-based thinking centre-stage within their project designs, and preferably consult with senior religious leaders before the elaboration of such projects, and during their execution. One example of this might be for the EU to: ‘significantly increase its participation, support, and cooperation with High Muslim Councils and other similar bodies with consultative status’ (Ben-



Nun and Engel, 2021, p:6), while acknowledging that: ‘the independence of state religious institutions needs to be strengthened’ (Skare et al., 2021, p:8).

Such a practice would enhance trust in these projects even before their execution began, and increase their efficacy impacts. The EU should look to its own highly successful application of faith-based thinking in Northern Ireland, from the annual planning of the Orange-order Marches in Belfast and Derry, to bi-community Shared Experience schooling, to infrastructure projects that routinely ascribe faith-aligned distributive components, and draw inspiration for similar logics to be applied in the MENA and Maghreb/ Sahel.¹

Policy Recommendations:

- Erect a **central EU-based PVE hub**, which coordinates all the bloc’s efforts across its different activity domains and **marries PVE to the EU’s economic developmental efforts** in EU neighbouring countries. To this end: Draw up a **holistic EU-PVE** approach, which amalgamates domestic governments’ efforts into one structure with the EU’s efforts, with an allocation of tasks and division of labour based upon the specific characteristics of each actor.
- In the **Balkans: re-prioritize the EU’s PVE focus so that attention is first** allocated to ethno-nationalist threats and secondly to Islamic ones.
- In the **MENA & Maghreb/Sahel**: streamline faith-based thinking as much as possible into the EU’s PVE efforts, and specifically **marry faith-based considerations with economic developmental activities**.

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¹ Shared Education Schools in Northern Ireland offer equitable education to Protestants and Catholics, who attend different schools, each majoritarian to their denomination, yet which benefit from equal budgetary allocations per capita, and which – via structured joint activities- aim to bridge the image divide between both of these faith communities who often do not ‘encounter the other side’ before adulthood. See: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/what-shared-education>



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