

Preventing violent extremism in the Balkans

D5.5 Key stakeholder dialogue



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Key Stakeholder Dialogue: “External stakeholders’ efforts in preventing violent extremism in the Western Balkans – lessons learned and a look ahead”

Date: Tuesday, 05 February 2021

Time: 15:00 PM – 16:30 PM (CET)

Venue: Zoom platform

Duration: 90 minutes

The debate was moderated by **Morten Bøås** (NUPI), PI of the PREVEX project. He opened the discussion by briefly presenting the project’s agenda and core goals, and by thanking the EU for its generous and timely support for such an ambitious comparative research in the Balkans and the MENA.

Diana Mishkova (CAS Sofia) came up with some general observations on the outcomes of the first stage of the research on the Balkans, while leaving the country-specific aspects to the other presenters. None of the external stakeholders (EU, member countries, US, international organizations like UNDP and OSCE), which operate in the investigated region has adopted a monolithic approach to the region, and all have tried to devise context- and country-specific policies in co-operation with local governments and the civil sector. Although all of them have applied a wide array of mixed P/CVE measures, there is a clear tendency in local perceptions of associating hard measures with the US agents, and the softer ones with the EU policies. Local governments’ P/CVE strategies have followed closely those of foreign stakeholders, the EU in particular. Due to the lack of financial and organizational capacities, however, concrete implementation steps are often taken only with the assistance of foreign embassies, which brings forth the problem of local ownership and initiative. The multiplicity of actors, on the one hand, and the limited resources, on the other, raise issues of competition and insufficient co-ordination on the ground. In concluding, Mishkova spelled out the recommendations laid out in the [Policy Brief](#) produced by the team.

Arber Fetiu (GLPS, Kosovo) introduced the Kosovo case and pointed out some of the shortcomings of the country’s strategy for P/CVE, which, in his view, deserve special attention in the future. State and other agents do not, as a rule, address the family as a relevant social unit and the importance of gender roles in tackling the P/CVE challenges on the ground. Building community resilience is not among the priorities, despite the fact that it can serve as a turning point factor in the non-/escalation of violent ideologies and activities. The budget that the Kosovo government distributes is very limited and mainly directed to international actors at the expense of local ones. As in other countries in the region, Kosovo’s strategy focuses on Islamic radicalism and dismisses other religious and ethno-national forms of extremism.

Edina Bećirević (AI, BiH) shared her first-hand observations from interviewing different actors in her country. She insisted on the importance of further elucidating the difference between violent and non-violent extremism. For most of her interlocutors (both international and local) it is legitimate to focus on militant Islamic groups while not paying attention to Orthodox or Catholic counterparts. Different local actors, for example Christian priests, did not demonstrate awareness that a problem exists. In her opinion, a step in the right direction would be to exert determined international pressure on local authorities and communities to stop commemorating war criminals in BiH.



Leonie Vrugtman (IDM, Albania) stated that the Albanian experience in terms of P/CVE strategy and the outcomes of its implementation through cooperation with the international agencies is more or less successful. However, she pointed to certain deficiencies, such as the lack of ownership, which leads to the main problem, namely, that people do not identify with their government's policies. These tendencies, she believes, can be fought with long-term monitoring and focused funding to facilitate specialization and deep expertise. Vrugtman concluded by reminding the audience about the recent boom of nationalist and far-right sentiments, which feed distant and specific types of extremism.

Predrag Petrović (BCSP, Serbia) presented a retrospect of how the issue of violent extremism and terrorism entered the political agenda of Serbia and how it was treated by authorities. After 2014 the criminal code in Serbia was amended in a very specific way by allowing the co-existence of two terms: terrorist and foreign fighter. In practice, terrorists became those who went to Syria and Iraq, while combatants in Ukraine remained “foreign fighters” and were prosecuted differently, if at all. This created grievances among Muslim communities of unequal treatment. Another example of legislation misuse is the harassment of local oppositional NGOs with the tools of P/CVE measures and regulations. Everything in Serbia looks fine but only on paper. External actors need to have a more coordinated approach and more resources should be invested in uncovering these kinds of abuses of the captured state.

Simeon Evstatiev (CAS, North Macedonia) highlighted, first, the specifics of the North Macedonian case and, second, the way the insights provided by this unique social and religious constellation can serve to assess the overall situation in the Western Balkans. An alarming fact in North Macedonia, which should be carefully explored, is that the number of foreign jihadists is the highest per capita Muslim population compared to the other countries in the region. Various EU and other international actors operate in North Macedonia. However, as the interviews conducted so far indicate, US agencies are recognized as the main actors in P/CVE measures, while Kosovo is recognized as dealing better with the jihadist returnees than others. Although they are often more significant in terms of funding, EU policies and interventions remain at the background of public awareness. This situation requires further attention and invites a more general consideration of the Western Balkans and their place in the wider geopolitical context. The active interventions of Russia, China, and Turkey in this European periphery, as well as the precarious relations of Europe with North Africa and the Middle East prompt urgent re-evaluation of the EU's role on the Balkans.

The *Discussion* was opened by **Holger Engelmann** (EU Special Representative in BiH) with commending the WP5 [Policy Brief](#). He continued by commenting on various issues raised by the speakers. He agreed with the observation that soft approaches are relatively neglected compared to the hard ones. He found explanation for this in the emergency of the situation back in 2014. The soft measures need to be prioritized, as they are essential for the long-lasting effects of the implemented policies. Engelmann greeted the call for a nuanced definition of violent extremism. However, he added that we should not be too quick in equating Islamist groups and their open promotion of violence via internet with far-right movements, which are more careful in this regard and more difficult to treat. He admitted the lack of coordination among the regional representatives and their initiatives. As for the lack of local ownership, it is very often due to insufficient competence and professional potential on the ground.



Selma Zeković (OSCE, BiH) built on the arguments of Mr. Engelmann. In her intervention she advocated a clear division to be made between strategies for countering terrorism, where hard measures dominate, and those aimed at preventing extremism, where social care and education should be the priorities. This has to a large extent been achieved in the EU strategic documents. When being interviewed by the project researchers, she had focused on the countering terrorism initiatives, skipping the abundance of other EU measures, dealing with the rule of law, improved education, inter-religious dialogue, etc., which are definitely contributing to the resilience of local communities to extremism. Zeković argued that sometimes we rely too much on P/CVE strategies to fight more basic factors, which enable radicalization like crowded prisons, bad social security programmes, lack of rehabilitation measures, etc. Local governments should take more seriously their role in providing long-term institutional and financial support to their civil society NGOs in order to build a solid foundation and capacities among local actors.

Morten Bøås responded to Mrs. Zeković's points by agreeing that programmes on education, on rule of law and others have their role in P/CVE. But this link is indirect and under certain circumstances education, for example, when not supplemented by other resilience factors, can lead to the opposite result – namely, precipitate radical ideas and activity. That is why the project does not focus predominantly on all these indirect and no doubt crucial measures.

Meral Tayroska (Macedonian NGO “PLEIADIS”) intervened to highlight the role of many small NGOs and professional groups in North Macedonia, which contribute to the P/CVE policies on the ground. Military, police and other types of actors using hard measures, she stressed, are not enough.

Morten Bøås passed the floor back to the presenters with the request to round up their observations.

Arber Fetiu stressed the Mitrovica case in Kosovo, where a number of international far-right movements operate and support local actors with similar inclinations. He also reminded that along with the call for more competence on behalf of local actors we should expect the same kind of context-sensitive commitment on the side of foreign stakeholders. **Edina Bećirević** went back to the political actors, who inspire confrontation and create an environment, which makes the work of violent radicals much easier. The EU should have a more assertive approach towards this kind of climate. **Predrag Petrović** pleaded for more careful examination of copy/paste counter-terrorism measures, especially in Serbia as they are very often misused for other purposes. **Simeon Evstatiev** insisted that we should be more realistic in formulating our expectations with regards to the EU and its intervention in the region.



Participants:

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