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Policy brief to stakeholders with policy recommendations



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What should the EU do about violent extremism? Recommendations for EU policy and practice

Dylan Macchiarini Crosson, Tatjana Stankovic, Pernille Rieker, and Steven Blockmans¹

Despite a recent spike in concern about a resurgence in great power conflict, addressing terrorism and violent extremism has driven the foreign policy debate in the collective West for the better part of two decades since 9/11.

During this time, the United States and its closest allies in Western Europe have set the international political agenda and identified terrorism and violent extremism as two of the primary threats to their respective national security interests. In the European Union, these concerns most prominently emerged in the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS).²

The first key threats identified by the ESS were terrorism and “violent religious extremism” originating in the EU’s neighbourhood and caused by weak institutions, conflict, and state failure.

Then, when a wave of violent extremism spread across Western Europe in 2015 and 2016, the EU decided that it was time to heighten its focus on counterterrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism (CT-P/CVE).³

And it did – increasing its references to violent extremism in key strategic and policy documents 30-fold between 2014 and 2016 – including in the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS) June 2022 Council Conclusions on Addressing the external dimension of a constantly evolving terrorist and violent extremist threat.⁴

The crux of the matter, however, is how this increased attention translates in policy terms. In other words, is the EU’s chosen CT-P/CVE policy mix balanced and fit for purpose? And, as stated 20 years ago by the ESS, is the EU “particularly well equipped to respond to such multi faceted situations”?

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² Council of the European Union. A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy. Brussels, 12 December 2003. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:r00004>.

³ Cross, M. 2017. Counter-terrorism in the EU’s external relations. *Journal of European Integration*. 39:5, pp. 609-624. doi:10.1080/07036337.2017.1327524.

⁴ European External Action Service. Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy. Brussels, 28 June 2016. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf. Council of the European Union. Council Conclusions on Addressing the external dimension of a constantly evolving terrorist and violent extremist threat (2022/C 248/04). Brussels, 30 June 2022. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022XG0630\(01\)&qid=1681169450016](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022XG0630(01)&qid=1681169450016). These conclusions are complementary to, and build on, the Council conclusions on external counter-terrorism of 9 February 2015 and 19 June 2017.



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The EU's changing understanding: Towards socio-economic development

Often, the focus of the EU policy debate about CT-P/CVE is focused on *specific* interventions that target the phenomenon of violence itself. And it is often binary – pitting a focus on democracy and values (promotion) against efforts to secure third countries' borders and support their armed forces. And the conclusion often is that the EU over-securitises its approach.⁵

Yet, according to the French Ministry of the Interior's technical cooperation operator (CIVI.POL) and the UK-based Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), good CT-P/CVE requires a fine balance addressing the socio-economic development gaps that act as structural drivers of violent extremism as well as fostering inclusive governance, community resilience, and social justice beyond targeted intervention in the realm of law enforcement.⁶

So how does the EU actually approach CT-P/CVE? The framing of the CT-P/CVE challenge and its understanding of available solutions is not static and has evolved over time. First, the EU has changed from being primarily inward-looking in the realm of justice and home affairs to now seriously also considering its significant external dimension.

Second, there has been significant buy-in to the idea that an EU-wide external approach might enhance the coherence and effectiveness of its policies and activities, mutualise EU Member State responsibility, and avoid reputational risks for the Member States themselves.

Third, there is also a renewed recognition that a comprehensive response is required that touches upon development aid, diplomacy, crisis response actions, and civilian and military missions in partnership with international organisations, third countries, and local communities.

This third point is crucial – and supported by evidence: Text-as-data analysis⁷ and an overview of the EU's complex funding portfolio (see below) confirm this basic understanding that CT-P/CVE policy should balance diplomatic, socio-economic/developmental, and security-related rhetoric through an integrated approach.

Since 2015, the most notable novelty has been an emerging emphasis in policy documents that, by addressing the structural causes of violent extremism, development cooperation can be a key tool to prevent and counter violent extremism in the EU's neighbourhood and beyond (see *Graphs 1-4*).

Adding this socio-economic dimension – a natural *forte* of the EU considering the significant financial resources it can mobilise on development policy – has opened up a new level of

⁵ Keohane, D. 2008. The absent friend: EU foreign policy and counter-terrorism. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 46:1, pp. 131–2. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5965.2007.00770.x

⁶ European Commission. 2014. Operational Guidelines on the preparation and implementation of EU financed actions specific to countering terrorism and violent extremism in third countries. <https://issat.dcaf.ch/download/131230/2684696/EU-CT-CVE-guidelines.pdf>.

⁷ See Annex I.



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analysis: CT-P/CVE policies can be both *specific* (targeted) and *relevant* (development oriented).

A by-product of the EUGS vision for an integrated approach was the establishment of a maxi umbrella funding tool, the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI).⁸ The objective was to break down programming and policy siloes in the EU’s external action to foster “whole of government” external action as well as to enhance the timely deployment of EU funding for pressing foreign policy needs.⁹

This also applies to CT-P/CVE. Under the NDICI funding stream, CT-P/CVE programmes are primarily funded through both the geographic and thematic pillars of NDICI, through an integrated approach perspective. The primary thematic programme is the Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention programme, but CT-P/CVE-*relevant* development-oriented funding can also be channelled through the NDICI’s geographic pillars (see *Chart 1*).

Recognising the importance of the socio-economic dimension tests a key element of previous analyses that view the EU as going back on its commitment to good governance by emphasising a security-based response to violent extremism.¹⁰

So, the EU adopts a more holistic approach by considering that socio-economic development can produce positive CT-P/CVE-*relevant* spill over effects for its CT-P/CVE objectives. But the previous PREVEX research also shows that a key ingredient for CT-P/CVE success also requires greater attention towards inclusive governance mechanisms, community resilience, and social justice.¹¹

And, considering the evidence below, it emerges that the EU undoubtedly struggles to address good governance, democracy, human rights, and peace. It dedicates only 14 % of space in CT-P/CVE policy documents to the language of governance and peace across the Western Balkan, North Africa, Middle East, and the Sahel, and only 3.25 % of its funding to human rights, democracy, peace, stability, and conflict prevention.

⁸ European Parliament and Council of the European Union. Regulation 2021/947 establishing the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe. Brussels, 9 June 2021. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R0947>.

⁹ Debuysere, L. and Blockmans, S. 2019. A Jumbo Financial Instrument for EU External Action? Bertelsmann Stiftung. <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/a-jumbo-financial-instrument-for-eu-external-action#detail-content-6209-5>.

¹⁰ Skare, E. 2022. Staying safe by being good? The EU’s normative decline as a security actor in the Middle East. *European Journal of International Security*, 1–17. doi:10.1017/eis.2022.29.

¹¹ Mishkova, D. et al. 2021. Enabling environments, drivers, and occurrence/non-occurrence of violent extremism in the Balkans. PREVEX Working Paper Deliverable 5.2. https://www.preveX-balkan-mena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/D5.2-FINAL_3019.pdf.

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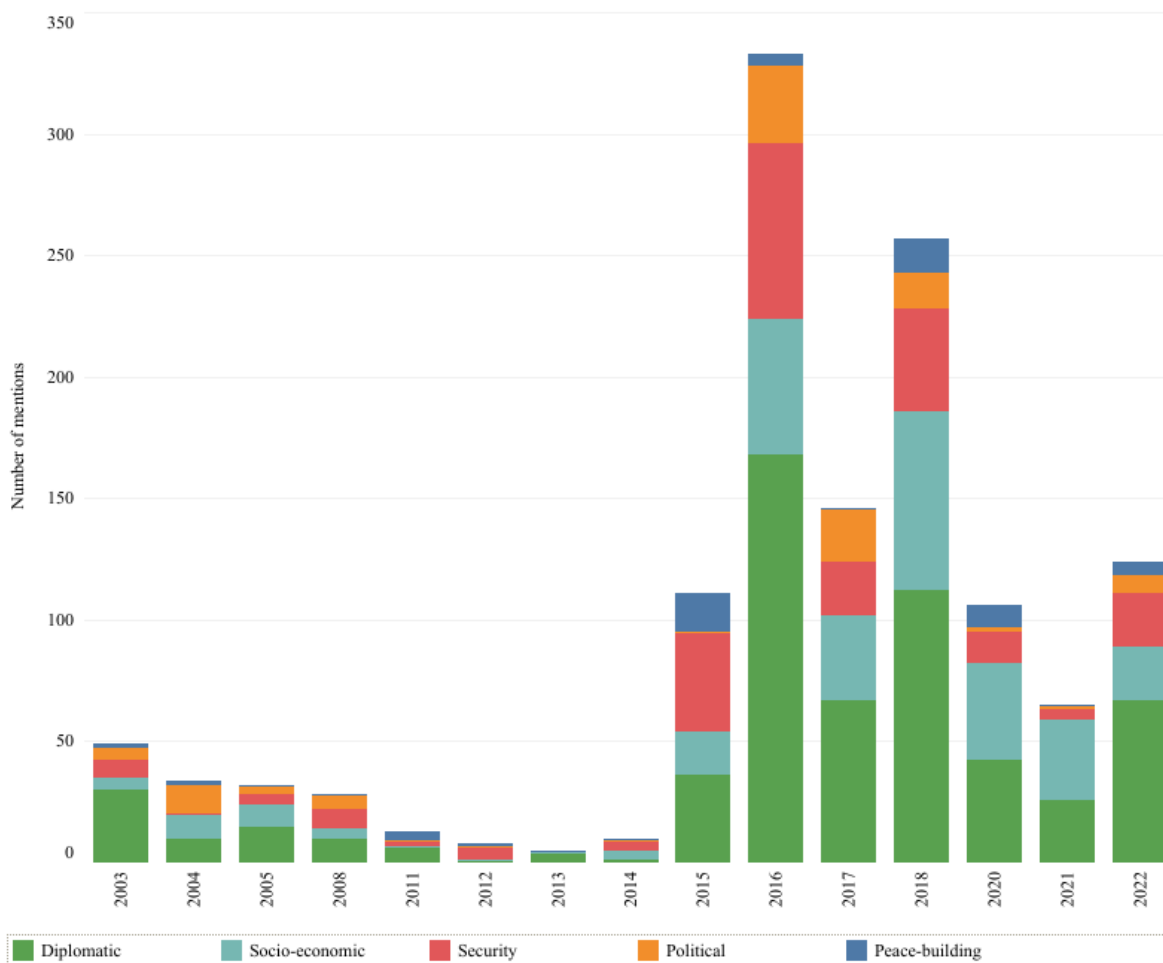
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Ben-Nun, G. and Engel, U. 2022. Comparison of ‘enabling environments’, drivers and occurrence/non-occurrence of violent extremism in the Balkans and the MENA region. PREVEX Working paper Deliverable 8.2. <https://www.preveX-balkan-mena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/D8.2-1.pdf>.

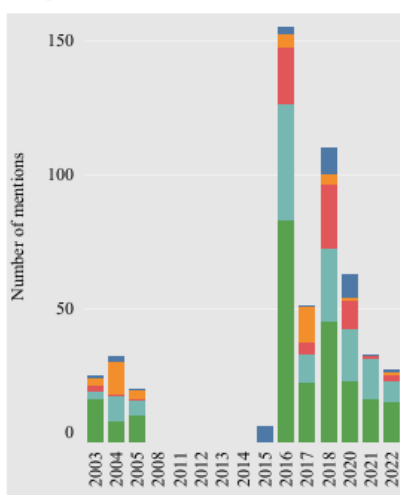


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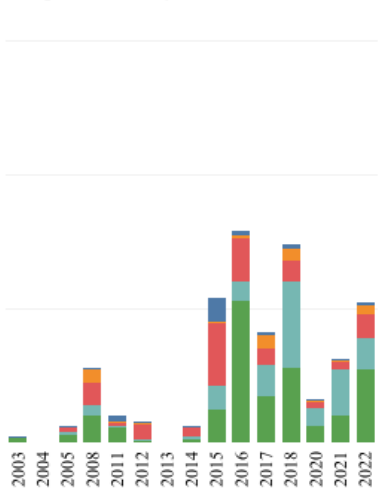
Graph 1. Total CT-P/CVE discourse by policy area in the Middle East, North Africa, Sahel, and Western Balkans



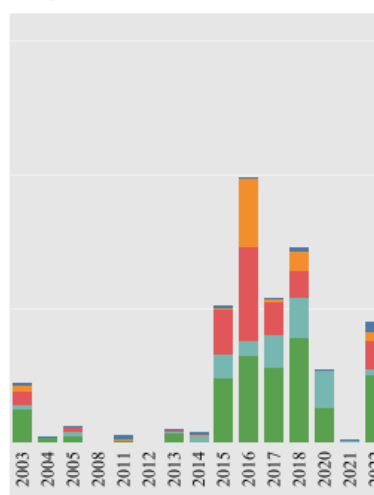
Graph 2. Middle East



Graph 3. North Africa and the Sahel



Graph 4. Western Balkans

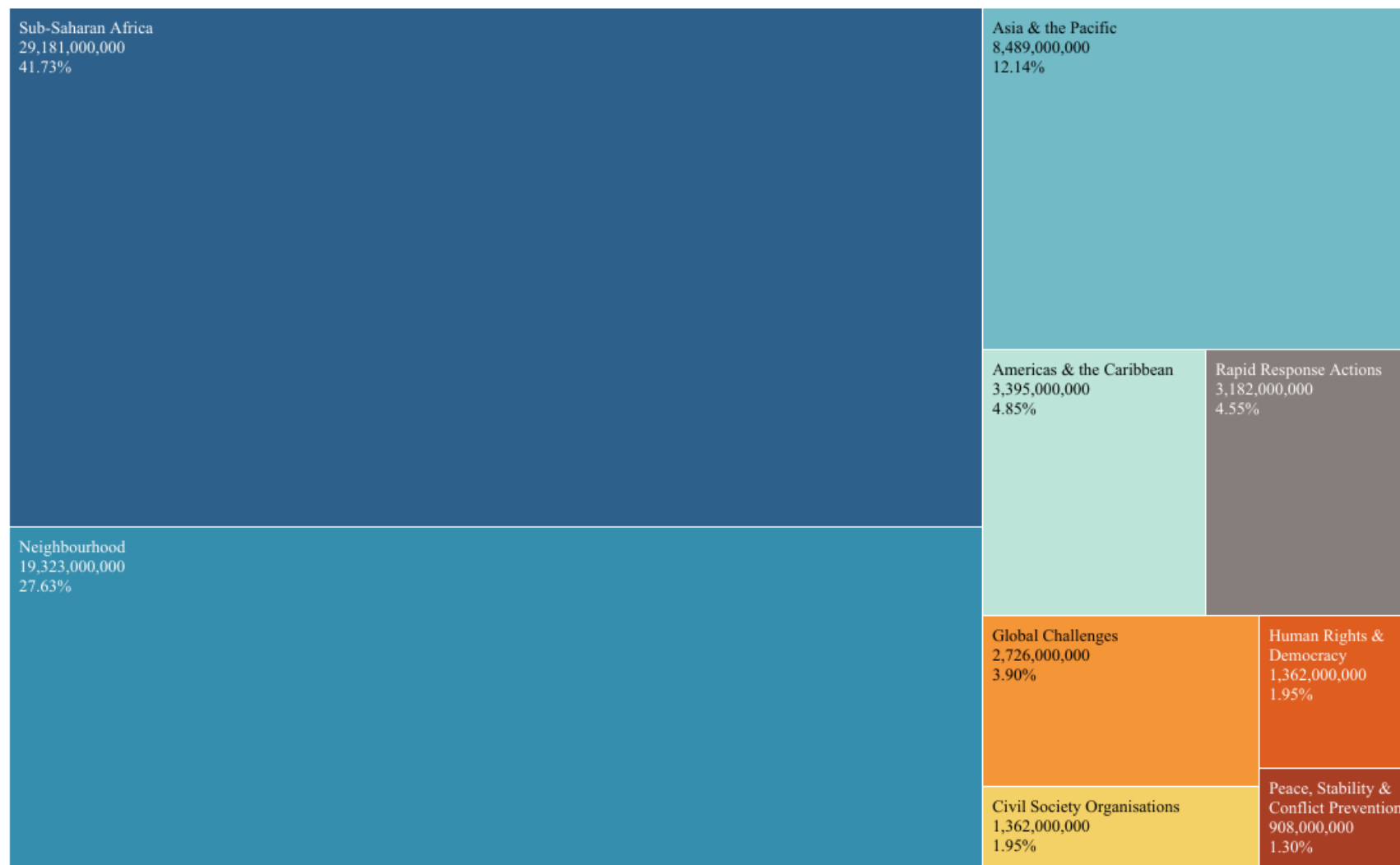


Source: Authors' compilation via text-as-data analysis



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Chart 1. Breakdown of the 2021-2017 NDICI Multiannual Financial Framework in 2018 prices (EUR) and as a share of the NDICI portfolio



Source: Authors' compilation via the NDICI Regulation



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CT-P/CVE: A delicate diplomatic balancing act

So why this gap between what the EU does and what research indicates is the preferred way ahead? Triangulating text and funding with the views of EU policymakers is helpful to unpack the question.

Interviews conducted with EU policymakers¹² indicate that, at the end of the day, CT-P/CVE is one element of a broader diplomatic balancing act with third countries. De-prioritising good governance is not due to an absence of interest in good governance on the EU side. Rather, partnering up with third countries requires several concrete trade-offs.

First, because the EU designs its CT-P/CVE based on needs jointly identified with third-country authorities, it tends towards CT-P/CVE-*relevant* policies with a focus on the socio-economic domain rather than through more *specific* measures on good governance and peacebuilding.¹³

Partnership is not only necessary for the design of engagement, but also for its implementation. For example, security sector reform cannot be undertaken without engaging with a country's security forces, educational programming cannot be carried out without cooperating with that country's education ministry, and so on.¹⁴

Cooperation with third countries is also a pre-requisite for context-sensitive policies at the sub-national level. Context is of utmost importance: insurgencies such as those in the Sahel require different forms of engagement than repression-driven grievances in authoritarian regimes in the Middle East or organised crime-funded ethno-nationalist extremism in the Western Balkans.¹⁵

EU officials have also stated that, while they try to boost good governance and peacebuilding through engagement with local civil society organisations, this can be limited by authorities to the socio-economic/development realm as civil society empowerment runs counter to their interest in maintaining political control. And identifying trusted interlocutors in the first place who are perceived as legitimate by local communities is a challenge in and of itself.¹⁶

Other times, it is not politically desirable within the EU to interact with national authorities if they are considered to be grossly violating human rights (e.g., Syria). Similarly, national authorities might try to reset the terms of their engagement with the EU, possibly under the influence of other external actors, as has happened in the Sahel.¹⁷

¹² See Annex II.

¹³ Interviews 3, 4, and 6.

¹⁴ Interviews 1 and 2.

¹⁵ All interviews.

¹⁶ Interviews 1, 2, and 6.

¹⁷ Interviews 1, 2, and 3.



In the case of the Western Balkans, both the EU and national authorities struggle to broadly address the challenges posed by violent extremism due to the general implications this would have for those countries' broader progress on EU accession.¹⁸

Another potential explanation offered up by EU policymakers for promoting socio-economic development rather than good governance is that attempting to use the language of good governance may in fact achieve the opposite effect: alienating local populations that are “labelled” as vulnerable to violent extremism and could become (even more) sceptical of governance models introduced by the West.¹⁹

Therefore, EU CT-P/CVE engagement often settles for the lowest common denominator solution that can be jointly agreed on, rather than engage in activities on democratic governance, human rights, and peacebuilding. The latter is often atomised and normally only applies to specific contexts.

Beyond the need to partner up with third countries, the EU's approach to CT-P/CVE teeters on being context-constrained: the broader the reach of extremist activities within a country – accompanied by further deterioration of its security – the harder it becomes for the EU to engage in CT-P/CVE actions and the greater the urgency to adapt to a changed security environment.²⁰

There are also significant difficulties in deconstructing the language of extremism, combatting disinformation, and implementing effective strategic communications. Designing and implementing communications and awareness-raising campaigns that provide robust and credible alternatives to radical narratives inherent to reactionary schools of Islamic thought or far-right extremist propaganda is not an easy endeavour.²¹

EU officials also encounter uncertainty in designing methods to engage on CT-P/CVE with ethno-nationalist groups and conservative religious actors. They are cognisant of the reputational risks to doing so, there is an absence of political will among EU Member States who also face these challenges internally, as well as the risk that those actors carry interests of their own and may act as gatekeepers to local communities.²²

Guidelines to engaging with non-state armed groups are also lacking, exacerbating the EU's limited margin for manoeuvre. Moreover, EU policymakers require guidance on how to link CT-P/CVE to disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration, and reconciliation (DDR+).

¹⁸ Public event 1.

¹⁹ Interview 3.

²⁰ Interviews 1, 2, and 3.

²¹ Public events 1 and 2.

²² Public events 1 and 2; Mishkova, D. et al. 2021. *Ibid.*



Recommendations for an EU Agenda for Peace

This evidence base demonstrates that the EU has rhetorically and financially added a fundamental tool to its artillery of tools that can be mobilised for CT-P/CVE purposes: socio-economic development. At the same time, a key takeaway is that the EU faces a series of diplomatic trade-offs that constrain its ability to ensure that good governance is embedded in its CT-P/CVE activities.

Upstream, key documents shy away from referencing the language of governance and peacebuilding. And yet, many of the ingredients for CT-P/CVE success – inclusive governance mechanisms, community resilience, and social justice – are also part and parcel of sustainable peace, a strategic end that the EU claims to pursue in its external action.

It is clear, therefore, that the EU must begin to frame CT-P/CVE as part of its wider endeavour to support sustainable peace in the world. It has begun to recognise that a more values- and norms-oriented approach might be needed, as supported by the June 2022 Council Conclusions on addressing the external dimension of a constantly evolving terrorist and violent extremist threat.

However, what is truly necessary is a foundational positive peace agenda agreed upon at the highest political levels that mainstreams good governance, sustainable peace, and resilience in the EU's external action writ large.²³

In other words, an **EU Agenda for Peace** that once again underlines the EU's commitment to promoting inclusive governance, community resilience, and social justice providing the framework for future CT-P/CVE actions.

Though the need to partner up (and compromise) is fundamental to ensuring access and the basic conditions for policy implementation, such an agenda would signal to all third countries that the EU takes its peace vocation seriously, moving the needle on what third-country authorities might expect from the EU.

The contexts the EU often looks at through a CT-P/CVE lens have a legacy of national and/or localised conflict involving legitimate yet unresolved grievances. Channels to express these historical grievances are sometimes closed, with violence understood as a means of last resort to express discontent. The linkage between CT-P/CVE and broader conflict prevention efforts could therefore be further reinforced by such an agenda.

Looking downstream towards implementation, this agenda would address several challenges as well. The allocation of (much-needed) material, financial, and human resources to these conflict and crisis prevention activities across the EU must be bolstered – and a new Agenda for Peace would help obviate the recurrent need to make the case for preventive engagement.

²³ Council of the European Union. Council Conclusions on Addressing the external dimension of a constantly evolving terrorist and violent extremist threat (2022/C 248/04). Brussels, 30 June 2022. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022XG0630\(01\)&qid=1681169450016](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022XG0630(01)&qid=1681169450016)



An Agenda for Peace would also help clarify how to confront implementation challenges such as engagement with ethno-nationalist group, mediation efforts with non-state armed actors, and DDR+.

Cooperation with and amongst EU Member States only stands to benefit from an agenda that underlines the need to share information, jointly engage with national authorities and prioritise funding programmes together in a renewed Team Europe spirit.

This agenda would naturally set a standard for what positive peace looks like, making the task of monitoring and evaluating CT-P/CVE activities look like less of a mountain and more of a molehill.

Conclusions

In sum, triangulating text, funding, and the views of EU policymakers is a useful exercise to understand how the EU approaches violent extremism. There are two key takeaways.

First, the EU's CT-P/CVE action can hardly be framed according to a binary security versus democracy logic because of the significant emphasis placed by the EU on socio-economic development to address the structural causes of violent extremism.

Second, despite the EU's developmental focus, the language of good governance and peacebuilding, as well as funding for these areas, are key elements missing from the EU's engagement.

In order to remedy the many upstream and downstream diplomatic trade-offs that EU policymakers face in tackling violent extremism, the EU must begin to frame CT-P/CVE as part of its wider endeavour to support sustainable peace.

It can do this by formulating an **EU Agenda for Peace** that once again underlines the EU's commitment to promoting inclusive governance, community resilience, and social justice.



Annex I

The strategic documents analysed are the European Security Strategy; The European Agenda on Security; A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy; A Global Strategy for the EU’s FSP Annual report Year 1; A Global Strategy for the EU’s FSP Annual report Year 2; A new strategic agenda 2019-2024; A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence; The European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy; Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism; A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU: Anticipate, Prevent, Protect, Respond; Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy; Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood; and A new Agenda for the Mediterranean.

Second, we analysed all European Council Conclusions adopted in the period January 2003–June 2022, in total 144 documents (the last document in our collection is dated 23-24 June 2022).

Third, we analysed 67 out of 1324 readable Council Conclusions adopted in the period January 2003–June 2022 (the last document in our collection is dated 21 June 2022). We analysed only the Council Conclusions that deal explicitly with security, terrorism, (violent) extremism, or radicalization. These documents were obtained by filtering the following words in the Conclusions’ title: “terrorism”, “extremism”, “security”, “CSDP” or “radicalization”.²⁴ As, six of filtered Council resolutions were on food security/biosecurity (animal health), they were excluded from our analysis.

We operationalized the five policy domains using specific combinations of regular expressions. The political domain was operationalized as “democra*|governance|rule of law|human rights”. This operationalization assumes that the EU supports a political development (*i.e.*, the development of institutions, attitudes, and values that form the political system of a country) that is in line with the Union’s democratic institutions and values – democracy, rule of law, and the respect for human rights. We have also included governance to identify whether the EU approach targets any practices or rules of governing. In operationalizing the socio-economic sphere, we have selected the regular expressions such as "civil society | women | gender | youth | reintegrat* | local | commun* | awareness | educat* | school* | job* | employ* | economic development". These expressions are chosen to identify any programs or approaches that aim at supporting the development of more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable societies and economies. In operationalizing the security realm (intelligence | information | border | capacity | laund* | organised crime | prison | prosecut* | security sector reform | technology”), we have relied on EU general security strategies that emphasize capacity building of national law enforcements as well as intelligence and technology sharing. In operationalizing the diplomatic domain, we have selected the following expressions “dialogue* | international cooperation | region* | partner* | coordinat* | communic*”. Using these, we have attempted to cover traditional diplomatic practices such as dialogue, communication, and negotiation, also

²⁴ This is necessary because Council Conclusions cover a range of topics from the European Court of Auditors to fiscal stability and macroeconomic imbalance. As such, some documents are not relevant for our purposes.



at regional and international level using words such as cooperation and partnership. Conflict prevention and peacebuilding is operationalized using "conflict prevent* | crisis management | peacebuilding|mediat*", which is self-explanatory. These are common approaches in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding.

Annex II

- Interview 1: Interview with two European Commission officials, 17.01.2023, online.
- Interview 2: Interview with a European Commission official, 18.01.2023, online.
- Interview 3: Interview with a European Union Delegation official, 19.01.2023, online.
- Interview 4: Interview with a European Union Delegation official, 19.01.2023, online.
- Interview 5: Interview with three European Union officials, 27.01.2023, online.
- Interview 6: Interview with a European Union official, 27.01.2023, online.
- Public event 1: Chatham House panel debate with European Union official, 18.04.2023, Brussels.
- Public event 2: Recorded panel debate with European Commission official, 18.04.2023, Brussels.

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