



CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



This project is funded by
the European Union

B | T | D The Balkan Trust
for Democracy

A PROJECT OF THE GERMAN MARSHALL FUND



Ministry of Public
Administration of Montenegro

Title of publication: Civil Society Organisations in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans – Mapping Report

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Publisher: Forum mladi i neformalna edukacija – Forum MNE
Bratstva i jedinstva 4
81000 Podgorica, Montenegro

For the publisher: Elvira Hadžibegović Bubanja, Executive Director

Printed by:

Circulation:

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union, the Balkan Trust for Democracy, a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and the Ministry of Public Administration of Montenegro. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the donors.

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- Mapping Report-

Podgorica, December 2018

Background

This regional mapping has been produced for the project: “Communities First: Creation of a civil society hub to prevent and counter violent extremism” (the Hub). The three-year project aims to empower civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans (WB), including women, youth, and faith-based organizations, to become more effective and accountable actors and to improve their capacity to implement projects and dialogue with national and local governments around preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), influencing policy and decision-making processes as it relates to P/CVE in the region.

The Hub will provide a platform for increased collaboration and coordination among the growing number of grassroots, other relevant CSOs and other community actors engaged in P/CVE in the region. It will fill a critical gap in efforts to promote a “whole of society” approach to P/CVE in a region where addressing the threat of violent extremism has recently become a high priority for governments: namely the lack of a dynamic network of CSOs working to prevent and counter violent extremism at the local and regional level and to partner with governments in the design and implementation of effective P/CVE policies, plans, and programs.

The project is implemented by a consortium made of six CSOs from the Western Balkans¹ and is financially supported by the European Union², the Balkan Trust for Democracy, a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and the Ministry of Public Administration of Montenegro.

¹ The project is implemented by Forum mladi i neformalna edukacija – Forum MNE (Montenegro) in partnership with Hope and Homes for Children (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Partners Kosova – Center for Conflict Management (Kosovo), Search for Common Ground (Macedonia), Center for Legal Civic Initiatives (Albania), and Cultural Center DamaD (Serbia).

² Civil Society Facility and Media Programme 2016-2017, Consolidating Regional Thematic Networks of Civil Society Organisations

Context

P/CVE has increasingly become part of the policy discussions in the Western Balkans (WB) over the past several years. This new focus has been driven to a large extent because of concerns from the threats related to the radicalization, recruitment, and travel of a high number of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to Iraq, Syria and Ukraine; this includes both citizens from the WB and those travelling from Western Europe.

Governments in the region have recognized that the most effective way to address the challenge and to prevent future radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism is through a comprehensive strategy that identifies and develops a wide range of rights-respecting tools to tackle the underlying drivers that fuel the appeal and spread of violent extremism. A number of governments are now in different stages of developing national P/CVE plans of action to encapsulate this approach. Further, there are a variety of efforts at the regional level to strengthen cooperation and collaboration among governments in addressing the complex set of challenges violent extremism pose. Examples of such efforts include Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans³ signed between the six Western Balkans partners and the EU, as well as the Western Balkans Resilience Forum⁴ supported by the U.S. Department of State.

There is recognition in the WB that effective P/CVE efforts require localized and specialized efforts, thus reinforcing the need to further empower civil society actors, including cultural, community, religious, and education leaders. This is particularly important in the WB given the findings of recent studies, which identify the need to address the lack of inclusion of religious communities and faith-based organizations in the region and the lack of critical thinking skills in young people in the region as among the key drivers of violent extremism. The legacy of the recent Balkan wars and how it affects the youths' evolving identities in the dynamic and complex socio-political landscape of the region needs to be addressed in these efforts as well.

CSOs in the WB have been increasingly encouraged, including by international donors, to engage in P/CVE. However, a key barrier to effective regional programming on P/CVE within the WB remains the lack of understanding of CSOs and other local community actors that have the capacity and credibility to deliver P/CVE programming at a grass-roots level. Although the recent influx of donor funding to support locally-led P/CVE projects is beginning to allow for the diversification of civil society involvement in P/CVE, typically the space has been dominated by a small number of non-governmental research institutes with

³ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/news/docs/20181005_joint-action-plan-counter-terrorism-western-balkans.pdf

⁴ <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/scn-iri-event-in-the-western-balkans/>

a primary focus on counter-terrorism and regional and international security, with limited access to communities most affected by the drivers of violent extremism within the WB. They also have limited capacity to deliver practical community-based actions which have the potential to address the drivers of radicalization and recruitment in the region.

National mappings:

A significant barrier to effective CSO-led P/CVE programming within the WB is a comprehensive and up-to-date mapping of the range of civil society stakeholders relevant for implementing P/CVE actions. Thus, among the first tasks of this project was to conduct mappings in each of the WB countries involved in this initiative. The objectives of the national mappings were to: 1) Identify CSOs working across a range of relevant fields (both P/CVE-specific and P/CVE-relevant) and their activities; 2) describe the relationship between CSOs and national and municipal governments and the private sector in individual countries in the region; 3) provide a preliminary evaluation of the strengths, and opportunities local CSOs and formal and informal community groups experience developing and delivering P/CVE programming and engaging on P/CVE policy issues; and 4) provide a preliminary evaluation of the weaknesses, challenges, and barriers experienced by local CSOs and formal and informal local community groups in developing and delivering P/CVE programming and engaging on P/CVE policy issues. Each of these mappings was based on a common methodology and conducted by a local CSO

Methodology:

The mappings relied on and integrated information from CSOs, national and local government officials, including national P/CVE coordinators (or their equivalents), representatives from international and regional organizations stakeholders such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), International Organization for Migration (IOM), and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), as well as those from international NGOs. As anticipated, the level of cooperation – from CSOs, national and local governments, and donors – varied from country to country.

CSOs contacted were asked to complete questionnaires on their P/CVE or relevant work; many but not all contacted did. The mappings include information on more than 150 CSOs (and faith-based organizations) and faith-based organizations, which expressed interest in being part of this Hub, from across the six countries in the region. Based on the interviews conducted during the national mapping exercises, many more are expected to become involved once the Hub initiates country-level activities in 2019.

Preliminary Findings/Conclusions: //

Although each national mapping report⁵ reflects the political, historical, and cultural nuances of the relevant country, there are some common regional themes and trends that emerge, which are reflected below and can inform the further development and priorities of the Hub.

1. CSOs have a role to play in P/CVE, but challenges remain. //

Most governments in the region recognize that CSOs have a strong track-record of working directly with members of the relevant communities and have developed the necessary expertise to engage on a range of P/CVE topics. Further, there is growing understanding that CSOs are often better informed of the local situation and better positioned to engage at the local level in the prevention space than governments. That said, some governments continue to believe that P/CVE is primarily the responsibility of the state. Thus, they do not appreciate the unique contributions that CSOs can make in this area. Further, there are CSOs that believe that some governments are actively overlooking this issue and thus disregarding their responsibilities.

However, the ability of CSO's to contribute, is sometimes hampered by their limited technical and organizational capacities and understanding of violent extremism and P/CVE. Particularly given the limited technical expertise and other capacities of CSOs, international donors have traditionally directed P/CVE funding to a small number of established organizations that have a demonstrated track record in complying with often complicated application and implementation requirements. This trend is beginning to shift as donors are increasingly relying on "small grant" mechanisms or other programs that allow for large CSOs to disburse funds to and oversee the implementation of projects implemented by grassroots organizations.

2. Limited government funding for CSO-led P/CVE initiatives. //

Few if any national governments in the region provide concrete support to CSO-led P/CVE efforts. This has led to overreliance on international funding for such initiatives, producing programs that are typically reflective of the interests of bilateral donors or international or regional organizations and not linked to a national action plan (NAP) or another relevant national or local framework. This can lead to unsustainable programs over which communities and national/local institutions feel a limited sense of ownership.

⁵ National mapping reports are available on the websites of implementing organisations. Links to the websites are provided at the end of the publication.

Most government-CSO cooperation around P/CVE appears to take place on an *ad hoc* basis. The typically short project time-frames do not allow sufficient opportunities (let only incentives) to develop sustainable mechanisms of cooperation between CSOs and governments. Where cooperation occurs it is typically limited to a small number of CSOs with which the relevant government has existing relationships. In fact, some national governments currently appear to prioritize coordination with international donors over coordination with CSOs. However, they seem to be aware of the need to address this gap and create more formal mechanisms to enable structured and sustained cooperation with CSOs around the P/CVE agenda.⁸

In Montenegro, for example, the Ministry of the Interior established an interdisciplinary team to provide advice to and support for the implementation of the P/CVE NAP. Although a few CSOs in the country are involved, most are unaware of its existence.

A potentially promising initiative in Albania involves the national CVE coordination's center's efforts to establish a dedicated network for coordination with CSOs at the national level that would enable the exchange of information between government and non-governmental actors concerning violent extremist threats in the country and design and implementation of P/CVE policies and programs.

The center is also helping to provide donors and CSOs with information on the radicalization "hot spots" and P/CVE needs in the country, which may help harmonize the currently disparate P/CVE efforts of CSOs to avoid overlap and target areas that need to most attention.

9. Cooperation among CSOs working in the P/CVE sphere within a given country is limited.

There are no existing national networks or other mechanisms to enable such cooperation, with CSOs tending to see each other as competitors over donor funding. This in turn leads to a reluctance to share project ideas, experiences, and information.

Although CSOs might collaborate on a particular project, the lack of regular communication's channels contributes to the number of overlapping P/CVE initiatives, reports, projects, and studies. Moreover, this lacuna inhibits efforts to design and implement local, multi-disciplinary programs to help identify individuals on the path to becoming radicalized and intervene before they commit to extremist or other forms of violence.

⁸ For example, the national P/CVE coordination body in Macedonia has recognized the need to formalize and regularize its currently *ad hoc* approach to engaging with CSOs.

CSOs need more opportunities to share their achievements and challenges in the P/CVE and to explore opportunities for cooperation with each other and with other P/CVE stakeholders. Although the exception rather than the norm, there are some potentially promising developments in this area. For example, in Kosovo⁹, Partners Center for Conflict Management has worked closely with different stakeholders such as local and international CSO's, central and local governments, educational institutions and faith based organizations throughout the country in order to coordinate activities related to prevention and awareness raising. Also the Advocacy Training and Resource Center¹⁰ is leading an initiative that convenes CSOs in the P/CVE space for purpose of sharing experiences, good practices, and challenges implementing P/CVE projects in the country. In addition, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF)¹¹ has supported the creation of three CSO consortia involving 16 CSOs in Kosovo that are recipients of GCERF P/CVE grants. Similarly, through an EU-funded P/CVE project, the Albanian Helsinki Committee¹² is providing small-grants to some 21 CSOs in Albania and facilitating cooperation among the grantees.

⁹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244(1999) and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

¹⁰ <http://advocacy-center.org/>

¹¹ <https://www.gcerf.org/>

¹² http://www.ahc.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Guideline_Subgrant_en_new.pdf

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