ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Vasko Shutarov
Alumni Scholar, European Center for Security Studies "George C. Marshall", North Macedonia
sutarov@yahoo.com

Abstract: The CVE concept has been intensively promoted since 2015 and counters the process of radicalization through various stakeholders within the civil society intending to raise awareness and build resilience among vulnerable target groups. The UN since 2006 has recognized the important role of civil society in the implementation of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism. Civil society has many advantages in CVE, especially through answering grievances in society; improving societal inclusion, and facilitation of government-citizen relations. Civil society in the Western Balkans has been actively engaged in CVE since 2015 with the exaggerating problem of radicalization and recruitment in the Syrian context. Public awareness about the radicalization and terrorism phenomena within the society, promotion of the CVE concept, research on the local specifics of radicalization, organization of conferences and workshops, and inter-sectoral cooperation were the main response of the civil society. The example from Albania is presented through the efforts of the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) and their project based on a research study serving as a basis for public awareness activities in different municipalities, especially within schools as well as representatives of different state institutions. The example from Kosovo is presented through the work of the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) as a leader in the field. KCSS has been active in several CVE areas of activities such as research on various aspects of the radicalization phenomena, public awareness, emphasizing the role of different stakeholders within society, specialized training for target groups, and organization of workshops, conferences, and roundtables. From the extensive KCSS CVE program, selected project examples at the municipal level are presented that illustrate public awareness campaigns, especially among students and inter-sectoral cooperation and coordination. The example of Serbia is presented through the "whole of community" approach by Cultural Center "DamaD" focused on Sandzak area, especially the activities related to the referral mechanism for preventing extremism and radicalism, sensibilization of different stakeholders from the central and local government, development fo training packages and related activities for strengthening community's resilience
Keywords: civil society, terrorism, extremism, citizens, municipality

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) was promoted in 2015 by the US government and adopted by the United Nations by the preferred name "Preventing Violent Extremism" (PVE) and the OSCE as "countering violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism" (VERLT). While the "counter-terrorism" (CT) counters already radicalized persons and terrorists through repressive measures (police actions, arrests, prosecutions), "countering violent extremism" (CVE) counters the processes of radicalization, through various stakeholders (local governments, educators, social workers, and civil society). CVE aims to create resilience to radicalization, especially among vulnerable target groups such are youth. This could be achieved through the spectrum of actions: raising public awareness or training throughout the entire community or at specific locations suitable for radicalization (schools, universities, youth, and sports clubs, religious premises, prisons, refugee centers, or on the internet). The specific of the CVE concept is that it reaches out to all sectors of society, defines the struggle against radicalization as a collective task, and mobilizes groups and individuals that are not typically involved in security issues (mayors, teachers, religious leaders, youth workers). The concept has been criticized because it "securitizes" civil society. [1]

Accordingly, the engagement of civil society is considered essential to effectively counter terrorism and prevent the spread of violent extremism. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are often more knowledgeable, experienced, and trusted by local communities than governments. The important role of civil society in counter-terrorism and counter-extremism has been recognized by the United Nations and stressed in the initial 2006 resolution adopting the "Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy", where nongovernmental organizations and civil society are encouraged to engage and enhance efforts to implement the Strategy. Member states also resolved to foster the involvement of civil society in a global campaign against terrorism and for its condemnation. Several relevant General Assembly and

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[1] Neumann, P.R. (2017, September 28). Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalisation that Lead to Terrorism: Ideas, Recommendations, and Good Practices from the OSCE Region. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/2/346841.pdf

Security Council resolutions acknowledge the contributions of civil society to preventing violent extremism and counterterrorism.[2]

Today, civil society is a partner in CVE and CT efforts across the globe. For example, civil society participation has been a fundamental part of building community resilience and contributing to the success of the United Kingdom's counter-terrorism strategy PREVENT. The UK government has been worked with 82 CSOs in over 40 priority areas within the country in its attempt to CVE.[3]

There are varieties of advantages of civil society involvement in CVE. The most important are:
- Answer grievances in society that could potentially develop into radicalization or violent extremism. CSOs contribute to countering conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. Many CSOs work on issues such as conflict transformation, peace-building, good governance, development, political participation, interfaith dialogue, youth programs, human rights, etc.
- Improve societal inclusion. CSOs provide participation and channeling the different voices within society, they can create platforms of dialogue and societal inclusion as an answer to the exclusion that might lead to radicalization.
- Facilitate government – citizen's relations. CSOs are often well-rooted in local communities which enable them to provide context-specific responses and not the general solutions that may be formulated on a national or international level. CSOs can function as facilitators between governments and citizens and are often perceived as a more credible messenger of alternative narratives that avoid or counter-radicalization.[4]

While the role of civil society is widely acknowledged, in many cases, the work of CSOs is overlooked. It is an enduring imperative, and the United Nations and member states access the expertise of the private sector and civil society to build an efficient mechanism on CVE.[5]

Since 2015, and the exaggerating problem of Foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in the Syrian context, the CVE concept has been extensively promoted in the region mobilizing CSOs, think tanks, and academia. In the first phase, they have engaged in raising public awareness about the radicalization and terrorism phenomena within the society, promotion of the CVE concept, research on the local specifics of radicalization, organization of conferences and workshops to promote research work, but also to emphasize the role of the different stakeholders within the society. In the second phase, CSOs have been actively engaged in the communities, either for the training of vulnerable target groups or work with families and victims of radicalization. The post-prison phase or repatriation of FTFs and families was followed by resocialization and reintegration projects where the most important is the role of local neighborhoods and communities. Local CSOs can again lead these efforts and be valuable government partners.

2. ALBANIA

The Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) in the period 2014 – 2016 has implemented the project "Preventing religious radicalism among youth" with financial support from the US Embassy in Tirana. The initiative came as a response to several cases signaling the high risk of radicalization and manipulation of vulnerable categories of citizens in underdeveloped areas through the misuse of religion. The goal of this initiative was to assess risks and key drivers of potential radicalization, address rising economic concerns, and prevent risks of (religion-based) radicalization among youngsters and young families faced with severe socio-economic challenges in remote areas of the districts of Korca, Elbasan, Diber, and Kukes. The project employed a participatory approach, relying on continuous exchange and cooperation with religious communities, local governments, youth organizations, education institutions, and other state institutions and non-state actors.[6] Within this project, IDM issued the report "Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania", which includes: theoretical concepts of radicalization and violent extremism, the process of radicalization and its causes, radical groups, religious radicalism, different drivers for radicalization (socio-economic, political, cultural), concluding with

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[2] Bonnefont, A. (2021, June 23). Engagement With Civil Society: The Missing Piece in UN Counterterrorism Efforts. https://theglobalobservatory.org/2021/06/engagement-with-civil-society-the-missing-piece-in-un-counterterrorism-efforts/

[3] UNODC. (2017, May 24). Civil society is a key factor in preventing and countering violent extremism conducive to terrorism. https://www.unodc.org/unodc/ngos/civil-society-is-key-to-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism.html

[4] Van Ginkel, B. (2012, August). Engaging Civil Society in Countering Violent Extremism Experiences with the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.
http://www.icct.nl/app/uploads/download/file/ICCT-Van-Ginkel-Civil-Society-in-CVE-August-2012.pdf

[5] UNODC (2017)

[6] IDM. (2015). http://idmalbania.org/?p=4195

recommendations to state and religious institutions and civil society.[7] Based on the findings of the report, the project delivered several activities at the community level responding to target groups' needs, as well as advocacy actions aiming to improve prevention mechanisms by state and non-state actors.[8] IDM, in cooperation with the MoI, launched a national conference the findings of the study gathered representatives of the expert community and civil society, experts of state institutions and senior officials, representatives of international organizations, foreign diplomatic missions, etc.[9]

In November 2015, IDM organized three multi-stakeholder forums gathering 120 representatives: pedagogical staff of high schools, regional directories of education and educational offices of the municipality of Pogradec, Cërrik, Përrenjas, Librazhd, Bulqizë, and Kukës. These meetings aimed to inform the pedagogical staff (specifically teachers of social studies), psychologists, and administrative staff of secondary education institutions on the main findings of the IDM report, responding to each municipality. These include factors that enable or drive religious radicalization and forms of violent extremism, perceptions regard the level of the development of the phenomenon specifically on each municipality compared with the overall findings of the study.[10]

IDM has also launched the initiative #Sëbashku (#Together) with aim to increase the role of youth in addressing and preventing religious radicalism and violent extremism. Training and awareness activities that involved pupils of second education institutions were organized December 2015 - January 2016 in collaboration with local CSOs and informal groups in regions of Korca, Elbasan, Dibër, Kukës.[11]

IDM initiated an advocacy process with central government institutions on religious radicalism and violent extremism. On October 9 and 13, 2015, IDM organized two information and discussion sessions with representatives of different central government institutions. The first session gathered representatives of different ministries and institutions and the second session was organized with representatives from the institution's sectors responsible for security issues and law enforcement. Participants highlighted problematic issues and suggested provisions related to different stakeholders within the identified state institutions[12]

3. KOSOVO

The Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) leads the CVE efforts within the Kosovo civil society through several areas of activities such are research on various aspects of the radicalization phenomena, public awareness to promote findings of reports and emphasize the role of different stakeholders within society, specialized training for target groups and organization of workshops, conferences, and roundtables. On the research side, KCSS has significantly contributed to national CVE efforts by providing insights on drivers and causes of extremism, radicalization, and recruitment of women, citizens' perceptions of violent extremism and radicalization, spreading of ISIS propaganda, and many other issues. KCSS reports have been promoted through thematic conferences with the participation of recognized stakeholders and media attention, which additionally contributed to awareness-raising within the society.

KCSS CVE program was founded in 2015 after KCSS has published the "Report into inquiring causes and consequences of Kosovo citizen's involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq". The program has intended to analyze the violent extremism phenomena and CVE at a community level. It has been implemented at a local level in all municipalities, involving relevant factors such as representatives of the municipalities, civil society, the security sector, the Islamic community, and the media. One of the main purposes of the CVE program was awareness-raising of citizens on the risks of violent extremism, which was achieved through organizing lectures and discussions with high school students in Kosovo. KCSS team has visited more than 100 high schools and has met with more than 1000 young students. In addition, the KCSS team was engaged in a community/grass-root level, involving representatives of the communities in its discussions, conferences, and other activities.[13]

Within its CVE program, KCSS has implemented many different projects. For example, "Countering violent extremism (CVE) in Kosovo", was implemented in September 2015 in partnership with the US Government. The

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[7] IDM. (2015). Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania. http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf

[8] IDM. (2015). http://idmalbania.org/?p=4195

[9] **IDM. (2015, July 10). National Conference "Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania.** http://idm.vpsamiklat.com/national-conference-religious-radicalism-and-violent-extremism-in-albania/

[10] IDM. (2016). Information sessions on addressing and preventing religious radicalism and violent extremism among secondary education institutions. http://idmalbania.org/?p=6436

[11] Ibid.

[12] Information sessions on "Religious radicalism and violent extremism" in Albania http://idmalbania.org/?p=5806

[13] KCSS. (2016). Countering Violent Extremism. http://www.qkss.org/en/Countering-Violent-Extremism-

goal was to reduce and mitigate the threat posed by FTFs and other radicalized individuals, by capacity building of involved stakeholders in conducting localized counter-messaging and engaging in the community. The project covered 11 municipalities including Prizren, Peja, Mitrovica, Gjilan, Ferizaj, Kamenica, Elez Han, Kacanik, Gjakova, Klina, and Decan. The project's final goal was to engage citizens and community members in countering and preventing violent extremism and radicalization. Debates, lectures, and meetings with stakeholders from different fields (police, media, civil society, public institutions) were some of the activities that have been implemented.[14] KCSS has organized 18 debates with high school students, and 6 conferences, and more than 30 meetings with representatives of municipalities, representatives of state institutions, Kosovo Police, Islamic Community, and citizens.[15] The purpose of these debates was to inform students on preventing violent extremism and radicalization, initiate discussions on causes that push towards radicalization and ways of prevention, as well as tolerance, diversity, and respect of human rights.[16]

The project "Citizens Engagement in Preventing Violent Extremism in Kosovo", was implemented from 01.07.2016, and supported by Balkan Trust for Democracy (BTD). The goal was to raise the citizen's awareness in the prevention of violent extremism, as well as improve the communication between citizens and state institutions for better cooperation and coordination on CVE in Kosovo. In the municipalities of Gjilan and Vitia, roundtable discussions with the representatives of state institutions at the local and central level, security institutions, the Islamic community, media, civil society, and other stakeholders, to discuss the alternatives for CVE in Kosovo. Debates have been also organized with the high school students of these communities, with the main goal to raise awareness against the negative effects of violent extremism and develop critical thinking against extremism.[17]

4. SERBIA

Cultural Center "DamaD" from Novi Pazar since 2013, has been more specifically and intensely focused on opening up the issue of extremism and radicalism of young people in the community and developing an integrated multi-sectoral response. This topic was very sensitive to the local community of Sandzak, which is a multiethnic and multi-religious one and the often politicized issue additionally contributed to ethnic and religious tensions. For this purpose, there were special efforts to overcome the ubiquitous sense of stigmatization and for the communities to face their problems without causing a counter effect.

DamaD has worked on developing a referral mechanism for the prevention of extremism and radicalism. It has established the lateral lines of communication and cooperation and the exchange of information between institutions/organizations in the process of providing services, assistance, and support, to children/youth at risk of extremism and their families. It has also worked on Protocols of individual institutions/organizations in cases of children/youth at risk of extremism and radicalism.[18] The project was run by a multi-sector working group consisting of representatives of local government, Public prosecutor office, courts, police, schools, religious communities, cultural institutions, sports groups, and organizations that deal with youth. The idea was not to stigmatize extreme and radicalized persons but to mobilize all of society's mechanisms to counter and prevent radicalization. The project was supported by the Swiss government.[19]

In July 2016, DamaD organized a two-day conference involving 120 participants, which include the mayor and members of the City Hall, representatives of the academic community from Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Novi Pazar, representatives of member-institutions of the referral mechanism, CSOs, media, and youth, but also parents who lost

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[14] KCSS. (2015, September 1). Countering Violent Extremism in Kosovo. http://www.qkss.org/en/Current-projects/Countering-violent-extremism-in-Kosovo-782

[15] KCSS. (2016, December 19).Community Involvement in Preventing Violent Extremism in Klina Municipality. http://www.qkss.org/en/News/Community-Involvement-in-Preventing-Violent-Extremism-in-Klina-Municipality-830

[16] KCSS. (2016, December 1). Lectures in Gjakova High Schools. http://www.qkss.org/en/News/Lectures-in-Gjakova-high-schools-822

[17] KCSS. (2016, July 1). Citizens Engagement in Preventing Violent Extremism in Kosovo. http://www.qkss.org/en/Current-projects/Citizens-Engagement-in-Preventing-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo-736

[18] Dh-Šarenkapić, Z. (2017, July 17). Interview with Zibija Dh-Šarenkapić by Vasko Shutarov.

[19] Bajrović, A. (2016, September 29). Izrada dokumenata za prevenciju ekstremizma i radikalizma. http://www.radiostoplus.com/item/19740

their children in Syria. Participants spoke clearly and widely about the existence of the problem, the possible approaches, and the readiness of the community to solve it.[20]

In July 2017 in Novi Pazar, DamaD organized a conference "Prevention of violent extremism and radicalism – experience, practice, successful stories", which collected several security experts, representatives of international organizations, local government, religious communities, and CSOs. The goal of the conference was to strengthen community resilience on all challenges to human security including radicalism and extremism. A special focus has been put on extremism and radicalism among youth, understanding factors to incite and contribute pressure or attract, on which countermeasures should be developed, as well as recognizing and understanding factors that constrain and redirect radical and extreme tendencies.[21]

DamaD has been also engaged in developing training packages for:
- capacity building of institutions for the provision of services and compliance with the referral mechanisms;
- youth empowerment to counter challenges;
- journalistic reporting on extremism and radicalism, and
- conducted training for youngsters to identify extremist narratives in the media and the formulation of counter-narratives.[22]

With the support of the Swiss embassy, DamaD published the research: "An Integrated response of the community to challenges to human security in Novi Pazar" (2015), which includes perceptions, risks, and threats, and institutional capacities for prevention extremism and radicalism in Novi Pazar.[23] DamaD has been also worked on the Islamic Community Strategy for combating violence and all forms of extremism and radicalization of youth and cooperated with the local government of Novi Pazar and actively involved in the work of the "Strong Cities Network Association".[24]

In the following years, DamaD has been actively engaged in:
- strengthening the resilience of the local community, especially young people, to radicalism and extremism;
- support children and youth at risk of radicalism and extremism;
- Internet Platform "NOVI PAZAR BRINE" aimed at raising public awareness and focusing public attention on how institutional mandates and actions of local bodies, public institutions and services, cultural institutions and educational institutions, political parties and religious communities, civil society organizations and media, including citizens, contribute to the overall strengthening of the community's resilience on the extremism and radicalism;
- Support the process of CVE by exchange of information, relevant data, practices, tools, and insights among representatives of relevant institutions, decision-makers, media, CSOs, academia, religious communities, and other stakeholders on the issue of youth resistance to radicalism and extremism in six municipalities in the Sandzak region.[25]

5. CONCLUSION

Important roles of the process of radicalization have local grievances, social life, and interactions of an individual. Consequently, civil society appears crucial in prevention because could raise awareness about this threat, especially among the youth, their parents, teachers, and other actors. While the governments were focused more on the repressive side (police actions and prosecutions), civil society in the Western Balkans has taken leading initiatives in prevention. The provided examples illustrate the potential of the civil society in CVE with a spectrum of activities: research reports on different aspects of the phenomena, rising public awareness through conferences, workshops, roundtables, moderation between different government bodies and institutions and other stakeholders, sensibilization about the role of different actors, drafting and implementation of projects based on local needs and specifics, training, initiation of multi-sector groups, running referral mechanisms, help and shelter centers, capacity building, resilience building, creation of counter-narratives, creation platforms for cooperation among different stakeholders. In addition, the legitimacy and neutrality of the civil society can also lead to efforts for the post-prison phase,

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[20] Kulturni Centar DamaD. (2015, June 1). Integrisani odgovor zajednice na izazove po ljudskou sigurnost u Novom Pazaru. http://www.kcdamad.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Integrisani-odgovor-zajednicena-izazove-po-ljudsku-sigurnost.pdf

[21] Sandzacke Novine. (2016, July 7). Novi Pazar: Borba protiv radikalizma i ekstremizma počinje na lokalnom nivou. http://www.sandzacke.rs/featured/novi-pazar-borba-protiv-radikalizma-i-ekstremizma-pocinje-na-lokalnom-nivou/

[22] Zibija Dh-Šarenkapić (2017)

[23] KulturniCentar DamaD (2015)

[24] Zibija Dh-Šarenkapić (2017)

[25] Zibija Dh-Šarenkapić (2017)

resocialization, rehabilitation, and de-radicalization processes. Aside from the FTFs context, civil society should recognize its role as a continuing challenge to promote tolerance, inter-faith dialogue, peace, and co-existence.

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