



**The Prevention Project**  
Organizing Against Violent Extremism

**Civil Society as a Key (and often missing) Ingredient to Effective Multi-Stakeholder Approaches to Managing the Reverse Flow of FTFs: Challenges and Opportunities**

**Side-Event**  
**OSCE-wide Counter-Terrorism Conference**  
**Rome, Italy**

**10 May 2018**

**Summary**

Chaired by the **Prevention Project's Eric Rosand**, this side-event focused on the diverse contributions that civil society organizations (CSOs) can make, and in some cases are making, often in partnership with governments, to manage the reverse flow of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs). It highlighted both examples of CSO contributions and some of the challenges they face working on these sensitive issues.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Rosand drew attention to some of the [recommendations](#) from the “civil society day” at the May 2017 OSCE counterterrorism conference, noting that many of them remain relevant today and will likely be addressed by the speakers. These include the need: 1) to provide CSOs with the necessary political and legal space to engage effectively on P/CVE; 2) to ensure CSOs have the necessary expertise and capacity more broadly to work on P/CVE; be mindful of the sensitivities among CSOs around terminology such as “CVE” or “P/CVE”; 3) to ensure local ownership of CSO-led initiatives; 4) to build trust between CSOs and local law enforcement; 5) to focus more attention on the gender dimensions of disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DRR) work; and 6) to ensure meaningful engagement of CSOs in policy discussions around P/CVE whether at global, regional, or national levels.

Mr. Rosand also spoke to the work of the [Global Solutions Exchange](#) (GSX), a global platform to facilitate collaboration and structured engagement among CSOs and between CSOs and governments and multilateral bodies around the P/CVE agenda.

He emphasized the GSX's commitment to providing practical recommendations from civil society on how to improve P/CVE practice and highlight its guidance on the [rehabilitation and reintegration](#) of returning FTFs.

**Melinda Holmes**, Senior Adviser and Program Manager with the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) and coordinator of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL), spoke of the need for a gendered approach to and increased understanding of the unique roles that women play across the spectrum of P/CVE issues, including DRR.

She drew attention to an ongoing ICAN-UNDP research initiative focusing on DRR of women and girls affiliated with violent extremist groups and [its recent practitioner workshop in Oslo](#) that served to validate a preliminary mapping of current policies and programming for dealing with women and girls who have been affiliated with violent extremist groups and identify good practices and gaps that will inform guidance. She noted how the workshop addressed various dimensions of the complex and multi-dimensional topic: legal and policy, security, socioeconomic, ideological transformation, psychological and trauma care, and media and public engagement.

As to why the focus on women and girls, Ms. Holmes highlighted the need to apply a gendered analysis to each P/CVE issue; the limited existing programs focused on women/girls in the context of FTF returnees and DRR more broadly; the risks of ignoring the gender dimensions of the challenge; and the lack of attention given to women/girls in the literature on FTFs and returnees. She added how most existing approaches to engaging family members of FTFs or the FTFs themselves are not gendered and how gendered assumptions have resulted in the dominant framing of women as victims when the realities are in fact more nuanced with women playing a role as supporters, perpetrators, willing or unwitting accomplices, as well as victims.

She shared some of the project's preliminary findings. These include 1) that the majority of DRR programs focus on ideological change, frequently to the exclusion of other dimensions, including gender; 2) the over-estimation of the role that ideology plays in violent extremism, leading to the neglect of structural, material and other psychological factors; 3) the challenges of handling women/girls FTF returnees given the absence of female officers within the security forces meeting them at the airports or other border crossings; 4) women who are genuinely convinced of the ideological narratives and goals of violent extremist groups are more resistant to de-radicalization; and 5) in the absence of national DRR policies and programs in most countries, CSOs in places like Indonesia, Nigeria, and Tunisia are developing local solutions, which often include connecting different parts of the community that need to be involved in DRR cases.

**Elvira Hadzibegovic Bubanja, Executive Director of Forum MNE, which works with youth in Montenegro,** spoke about the importance of evidence-based actions against violent extremism in the Western Balkans and how some governments in the region continue to rely on evidence generated by neighboring countries rather than investing in their own evidence collection. She noted the recently completed national P/CVE action plan in Montenegro and the importance of ensuring an inclusive, participatory approach to and regular monitoring and evaluation of its implementation, as well as adequate funding to support CSO-led implementation projects. In addition, she highlighted the limited capacity of and opportunities for CSOs to contribute to P/CVE efforts in the region, and the mistrust between governments and CSOs that continues to exist. She introduced a recently-launched initiative in the region that is intended to help address this lacuna.

*Communities First*, a three-year project funded by the European Commission, involves the creation of a Western Balkans civil society hub to prevent and counter violent extremism, a recommendation that emerged from the "[civil society day](#)" organized on the margins of the May 2017 OSCE counterterrorism conference. Forum MNE is the lead member of a CSO consortium that includes CSOs from Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia. The primary objective of the hub is to enable CSOs and faith-based organizations to be more effective and accountable actors and to improve their capacity to implement projects and dialogue with governments, influencing policy and decision-making processes as it relates to P/CVE.

The Hub's main activities will include: a) a mapping of CSO-led P/CVE activities in the region and those CSOs interested in participating in the platform – which is soon to get underway; b) convening CSOs and other community actors from each country in the region to identify capacity-building and other requirements of the network; c) providing ongoing support to and training for CSOs in the areas of P/CVE policy development, program design, grant application, project management; d) developing a CSO P/CVE action plan for the region with correlating implementation guidelines for CSOs across the region for steps to advance the P/CVE agenda; and e) developing and managing a small-grants mechanism to support the design and implementation of activities by members of the Hub.

**Werner Prinzjakowitsch, Co-Chair of the EU Radicalization Network Working Group on Youth, Families & Community and Educational Director of the Association of Viennese Youth Centres,** offered a

categorization of the different types of CSOs that are not only common to Western Europe, but to some other regions as well. He further noted how they are often in competition with each other, both in terms of resources and in their differing aims for and approaches to the same issue.

These are: 1) *interest-group focused*: those led by certain communities (e.g., with a focus on a specific ethnic, religious, or interest group), who often see themselves as “representatives” of these communities; 2) *topic-focused*: organizations that focus on a particular substantive issue; 3) “*hidden business*”: often single-person organizations that use of the NGO or non-profit organization legal framework (cooperating with them can be a challenge, it was noted, given they often lack a connection with the target groups governments or donors are trying to reach); and 4) *organizations founded – and often funded – by the state* (at national or municipal level): such organizations are established under the relevant NGO or NPO legislation but remain highly dependent on their government-progenitors. Mr. Prinzjaowitsch said there are advantages and disadvantages of each of the four types, with the exception of #3, where he sees little upside to working with them in the P/CVE space.

He also highlighted how the lack of a shared lexicon can be a barrier to cooperation among different stakeholders. Researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and the “average” person, he noted, often use different terminology, abbreviations, and acronyms, inhibiting efforts to reach common understandings or to find common ground. Mr. Prinzjakowitsch stressed the need to avoid terminology around violent extremism and “P/CVE” that risks stigmatizing civil society groups or communities and makes them more reluctant to engage in a constructive dialogue with local authorities.

He also pointed to the challenges CSOs face in terms of securing sustainable funding. The reality, he said, is that CSOs often have to “jump from one project to another” in the absence of such long-term funding. He noted how such funding is often the result of having strong links to government, as is the case with his CSO in Vienna, which is celebrating its 40th year of existence, but is financed almost entirely by the City of Vienna.

**Leanne Erdberg, the Director of CVE at the United States Institute of Peace and the acting Director of the RESOLVE Network**, spoke about how in differing contexts around the globe, local communities are showing the courage and sustained commitment to change circumstances on the ground on the range of issues related to managing the reverse flows of FTFs. Ms. Erdberg argued for expanded involvement of CSOs in P/CVE “beyond conferences, formal diplomatic discussions, and project level interactions” and connecting them with government practitioners and intelligence analysts in order to better leverage CSOs’ understanding and awareness of the local dynamics and problem solving skills.

She highlighted the need to engage and build the capacity of CSOs across the spectrum of issues beyond just P/CVE and how when it comes to DRR of FTFs “there is no single play book on what works and what doesn’t; several experiments are ongoing in contexts that are constantly changing, all with interconnected theories of change that intend to impact behavior... and structural factors.” Although she acknowledged the growing number of P/CVE tool kits and international frameworks and good practices, she reminded the audience that when it comes to challenges as complex as violent extremism that we should shift away from “internationally-drafted, static plans” and place greater emphasis on investing in local change agents who can often move more quickly and in a more targeted fashion than national, regional, and certainly global actors, to design solutions to challenges in their communities.

Before concluding, Ms. Erdberg posed three questions. First, is rehabilitation and reintegration a sufficient frame to prevent recidivism and future radicalization of others? “If group identity and the perception of power are part of what makes terrorist groups active,” she queried, then reintegration efforts should include positive, peaceful ways feelings of lack of identity and powerlessness can be addressed. Second, she wondered if and how governments can do more to limit the financial risks for CSOs working with returning FTFs? Too many CSOs, she said, lack clarity on the legalities of engaging

with returnees and other “formers”; this legal limbo may need to be addressed if governments hope to see more CSOs willing to contribute to helping to manage the return of FTFs, many of whom will soon need to be reintegrated into a community and thus where CSO involvement will be crucial.

Finally, Ms. Erdberg asked “how can we ensure that donor money, which is often a lifeline for so many civil society actors that are on the front lines of doing this incredibly important rehab[ilitation [and] reintegration work, doesn’t inadvertently change the character and *raison d’etre* of CSOs solely to meet reporting needs?” The more time, energy, and resources CSOs have to spend on managing donor reporting requirements and on monitoring and evaluation, she warned, the less they have to do devote to the actual work on the ground. Ms. Erdberg asked whether the current balance is the right one and whether there might be alternative ways to ensure the necessary programmatic rigor and accountability that do not unduly interfere with the work on the ground.

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During the discussion following the panelists’ remarks, participants raised a number of issues. For example, the importance of including CSOs in policy-level discussions around P/CVE, including in multilateral fora, was stressed. This includes for the purpose of ensuring that local, on-the-ground experience and expertise, is informing “decision-makers”. It was also noted how some local actors often have more confidence in CSOs than their governments, thus underscoring how CSOs are often able to have more access to some communities than official actors.

Participants also emphasized the importance of building trust between CSOs and law enforcement and government officials more broadly, with it being noted that a lack of shared terminology and language can impede such efforts, particular around often sensitive P/CVE issues. In addition, the point was made that there are a growing number of P/CVE tool kits, but most have been developed by and for practitioners within the European Union and language and terminology barriers often impede a wide swathe of practitioners from being able to access them. Further, while participants welcomed the increased focus being given to the role of women in P/CVE and the need to adopt a gendered approach to the full spectrum of P/CVE issues, the point was made that few governments have actually operationalized such an approach. Finally, it was pointed out that there are few examples in the OSCE region of tailored approaches being developed and then used to facilitate the return of women and girl FTFs in particular.