

A threat inflated?

The countering and preventing violent extremism agenda in Kyrgyzstan

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Often overshadowed by regional headline-grabbing hotspots like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, Central Asian countries like Kyrgyzstan rarely get international attention. The post-Soviet country – once on the ancient Silk Road – rarely makes the news now, but it has its share of challenges. Bisected by the 'northern route' of opioid traffickers, it struggles with pervasive corruption and the threat of political instability, ethnic conflict and now – purportedly – a jihadist underbelly. In response, alongside counter-terror efforts to bolster Central Asian state security services with training and equipment, international policy towards Kyrgyzstan has become increasingly focused on 'countering/preventing violent extremism' (C/PVE).

Over the past five years, Saferworld research has documented how international counter-terror and C/PVE efforts have played out in different contexts. In countries like Afghanistan, Kenya, Somalia, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen, the evidence suggests that these approaches pose a range of risks to sustainable peace. C/PVE can work in favour of peace, but our research suggests that its narrow focus on the recruitment of individual 'violent extremists' is no substitute for more comprehensive strategies that address all the causes of conflict and prioritise peace, rights and development for all.

In this long-read article, which draws on interviews with national and international experts and practitioners, the latest scholarly research, and years of community-based programming in-country, our researchers analyse how C/PVE has – and hasn't – worked in Kyrgyzstan.

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Header photo: A woman on a bus stuck in a traffic jam in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. © William Daniels/Panos



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Kyrgyzstan's ongoing journey from Soviet authoritarianism towards a more democratic and open society has not been easy. The country's first president, Askar Akayev, ruled for 15 years and was deposed in 2005 after the 'Tulip Revolution' galvanised the people against his alleged corruption and authoritarianism. Just five years later, public discontent unseated his successor, Kurmanbek Bakiyev.

Following President Bakiyev's ouster, the tensions between the country's ethnic Kyrgyz majority and Uzbek minority led to the outbreak of widespread violence in the regions of Osh and Jalal-Abad in southern Kyrgyzstan, where most of the Uzbek population is concentrated. In the summer of 2010, between 500 and 2,000 people lost their lives, 80,000 more were displaced, and over 2,500 buildings were razed to the ground.¹ Nearly a decade on, this episode still looms large for communities living nearby, with many of the tensions that caused the violence left unresolved.

Although there was an international focus on Kyrgyzstan immediately following the 2010 clashes, it was short-lived and has declined quickly since 2014. Now, outsiders tend to cast Kyrgyzstan and its neighbours as danger zones for 'radicalisation' and 'violent extremism'.² It is true that some people from Kyrgyzstan have joined militant groups in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Others have been involved in high-profile attacks (for example, the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, and the attack on the Saint Petersburg metro in 2017).³

Couple these well-publicised attacks with Kyrgyzstan's geographic proximity to contexts struggling with jihadist militancy – and the prediction that Islamic State (ISIS) may pivot towards a web of more localised operational cells as its territory shrinks – and then consider the perceived spread of conservative religious practices, and fears that Kyrgyzstan could become a new 'front line' in the global war on terror begin to look plausible.⁴ The apparent urgency of 'violent extremism' has led many actors to prioritise the C/PVE agenda.⁵

Despite this, many of those we spoke to questioned the hype surrounding the agenda in Kyrgyzstan.⁶ In this paper, we examine the basis for the C/PVE agenda, and ask what it means for peace and security in Kyrgyzstan.

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Now, outsiders tend to cast Kyrgyzstan and its neighbours as danger zones for 'radicalisation' and 'violent extremism'.

Footnotes

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6. Interviews with Western donor, UN and INGO representatives, Bishkek, May 2018–February 2019.

Header photo: Song Köl lake, Kyrgyzstan © Thomas Depenbusch (Depi) / Flickr



Taking root: the C/PVE agenda

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As one interviewee told us in Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, "the reality is that the big players have bought into working on preventing violent extremism".⁷ Kyrgyzstan's capital is home to almost a sixth of the country's six million residents⁸ and to an array of United Nations (UN) and other multilateral agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and embassies – all drawn to the freedoms Kyrgyzstan offers in contrast to some of its more authoritarian neighbours.

This international ecosystem developed to help Kyrgyzstan through its democratic reform process and later with the consequences of the violent events of 2010. As the country stabilised, funds for Kyrgyzstan declined despite clear evidence that continued support was still needed. Today, amid concerns of Kyrgyzstani citizens joining or supporting violent groups, much of the peace, governance and development funding available for Kyrgyzstan is tied to C/PVE objectives – reflecting a trend in Western capitals and at UN headquarters.⁹

Although the C/PVE agenda has grown dominant in Bishkek, closer examination reveals that it has done so despite a lack of consensus among analysts over the severity and nature of the problem. Nor has the agenda been based on a clear and impartial assessment of either underlying conflict dynamics or communities' needs and priorities.

A questionable evidence base

People of Kyrgyzstani origin have joined violent groups abroad and have been involved in attacks in Western countries.¹⁰ Government figures state that 764 Kyrgyzstani citizens have travelled to Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan since 2012.¹¹

Of these, it is not clear how many became combatants. The figures are also outdated, and can vary depending on the source.¹² Another problem is that the government has refused to share specific cases, leading some to question their validity.¹³ For instance, some Kyrgyzstanis have been tried or held in neighbouring countries,¹⁴ while others have returned to Kyrgyzstan – although it is unclear what has happened to them.¹⁵ Apart from some rough numbers of suspected 'extremists' arrested (sometimes under questionable circumstances), no details are published related to convictions or charges.¹⁶

A number of people we interviewed noted the political convenience of these official figures.¹⁷ Writing that exact estimates for the number of Central Asians mobilised into the conflict vary widely, analyst Noah Tucker alluded to this back in 2015, saying that 'there are many incentives on the part of regional security services and their favored commentators to exaggerate the level of threat to the region'.¹⁸ Although International Crisis Group (ICG) acknowledged in 2016 that '[ISIS] appears to be targeting Kyrgyzstan for recruiting', it also observed that 'the actual threat Salafism, but more specifically violent jihadist groups linked to IS, pose is contentious, complicated by unreliable security-service claims and ethnic rifts'.¹⁹

In addition, despite all the build-up around 'violent extremism' as one of the most pressing security risks facing the country, our interviews and research have revealed little evidence of strong support for violent groups or of more than a few recent cases of people travelling abroad to join them.

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Lost in translation

In Kyrgyzstan, most people talking about ‘violent extremism’ are usually referring to individuals who have travelled to join violent groups elsewhere, individuals who support violent groups, or those who they believe may carry out violent attacks. But many others, including authorities, tend to include ‘extremism’ and ‘radicalisation’ – whether violent or not – in this definition, which they readily link to conservative or political Islam. This catch-all definition reflects growing concerns that increasing adherence to what some see as ‘non-traditional’ branches of Islam can lead people down a path of ‘radicalisation’ towards ‘violent extremism’ and, eventually, ‘terrorism’.²⁰

These fears are reflected in Kyrgyz law. The 2005 Law on Countering Extremist Activity, which was updated in 2016, features a worryingly broad definition of ‘extremism’ and criminalises ‘extremist’ or ‘extremist-related’ activities regardless of whether they are violent. It has been criticised for threatening freedom of religion, speech, expression and association.²¹ This sweeping definition is a direct manifestation of a growing tension between religious and national identity in Kyrgyzstan.²²

Symptoms rather than drivers?

Despite these fears, the reality is that very few incidents of violence within Kyrgyzstan have been linked to ‘violent extremist’ groups and violent groups are not the main risk factor for insecurity and violence.²³

It is true that in many communities where Saferworld works in the south of Kyrgyzstan, people are worried about groups that follow conservative religious traditions, isolate themselves from society, or use religious beliefs to justify violent attacks or limitations on rights and civil liberties.²⁴ But few speak from first-hand experience, instead citing what they have heard from authorities or sensational media reports.²⁵ Even though certain communities have first-hand experience of members leaving the country to join violent groups, most people we interviewed indicate that this is no longer as significant a problem as it was a few years ago.²⁶

However, through our in-country programme, real and perceived threats are mainly driven by social and economic marginalisation, political exclusion, poor governance and corruption, difficult access to justice, intolerance, harmful gender norms as well as individuals seeking a sense of belonging or purpose.²⁷

Inconclusive research

Often the starting point for analysis in Kyrgyzstan is not whether there is a problem of people supporting or joining violent groups, nor how large the problem is. Instead, the focus tends to be on why the problem exists – without an interrogation of the extent to which it is a problem.²⁸ Apart from localised research, studies broadly analysing the drivers of ‘violent extremism’ have produced few clear insights beyond previously known drivers of discontent that tend to lead to violent behaviour in many contexts, including in other Central Asian countries.

According to a C/PVE expert in Central Asia, this body of research is often grounded in an interest to justify donor spending and interventions, and is based on anecdotal evidence and questionable normative assumptions.²⁹ The issues that are generally identified as driving people to join violent groups are the same that Saferworld and countless others have identified as leading to different types of conflict, insecurity and violence, such as domestic and gender-based violence and violence between youth or between different ethnic groups.³⁰

Whereas much of the focus in Kyrgyzstan remains on the ‘ideology of extremism’ and the process of recruitment, such research is useful in revealing that a broad range of grievances can lead to support for violent groups. But because of the way C/PVE defines the problem, and the interests that support the C/PVE agenda (discussed further below), responses do not always correspond to the grievances flagged by researchers – raising questions about how analysis is being used by policy makers.

As such, despite the apparent reservations of many in the Bishkek policy community, the C/PVE agenda has gained currency, propelling it to the top of the agenda for many state institutions, foreign governments and partners. To understand why this matters, it is important to understand the implications of the agenda for broader conflict and security in the country.

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Header photo: A shepherd in the “zhailoo” (“high mountain pasture”) south of Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyzstan © Saferworld/Karen Wykurz



Impacts of C/PVE on Kyrgyzstan

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To stop people leaving for Iraq and Syria, international actors have – sometimes under broader counter-terrorism objectives – bolstered state security services in Central Asia with training and equipment, or improved integrated border management or prison capacity.³¹ This support has been complemented with C/PVE interventions that have ranged from hard security approaches to softer, more community-focused work. Yet C/PVE efforts can be problematic in ways that are not always acknowledged by those involved.

At the sharp end

In Kyrgyzstan, like in other countries, authorities' approaches to 'prevention' often rely on deterrence: offering communities, including school children, awareness-raising sessions about the legal consequences of being convicted on terror charges, or attempting to educate 'at-risk' populations about 'acceptable' religious practices.³² It is unlikely that dissuading communities with scare tactics is helpful, given the risks of further marginalising and alienating groups that are already on the periphery. A representative of a multilateral agency we spoke with said that such interventions carry considerable risks, especially because "authorities perceive religious people as a homogeneous group" instead of a diverse range of individuals that have different – and legitimate – needs, concerns and grievances.³³

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As research has clearly shown in many contexts, harassment and abuse in the name of C/PVE serves only to worsen grievances against the state, and could deepen support for violent groups - instead of the one about liberal approaches to religion.

Through engagement with communities, authorities believe they can also identify potentially 'radicalised' individuals. An official told us that the criteria for assessing 'radicalisation' may include people's appearance, the use of curtains between women and men, professing support for banned groups (even if these are non-violent), or disliking art or music – arbitrary indicators at best.³⁴ While there are legitimate concerns that these characteristics or beliefs could indicate adherence to socially conservative branches of Islam with deeply intolerant practices – such as limiting children's education or women's access to healthcare³⁵ – linking such practices to terrorism can worsen inter-communal tensions. This is especially true in a context where the media is not always sensitive in how it covers these issues,³⁶ and where some feel they are already discriminated against because of how they practice their religion.³⁷

While Kyrgyzstan's relatively liberal approach to religion sets it apart from its neighbours, it faces internal and external pressure to control religion and religious institutions more tightly.³⁸ However, communities that isolate themselves socially should not be seen as a threat to national security, but should be approached in a way that allows them to identify and address the specific social issues and problems

they face, while taking into account conflict and gender dynamics. And, where there is a link to potential violence, as a previous Saferworld report argues, 'it is essential to distinguish between a criminal justice response to inciting violence and a more general clampdown on religious thought, belief and practice'.³⁹

Unfortunately, this is not always the case and deterrence interventions may be accompanied by hard security measures such as arbitrary arrests, unlawful detention and, according to a Human Rights Watch report, the use of torture to force confessions. Published in September 2018, the report found that hundreds of people have been arrested under article 299 of the Criminal Code for possessing banned videos, pamphlets and books, even if they did not distribute the material or use it to incite violence.⁴⁰

Much of this material is from Hizb ut-Tahrir – a banned group in Kyrgyzstan that seeks to establish a caliphate and end secular statehood in Muslim majority countries, but which has publicly disavowed the use of violence.⁴¹ It has been alleged that, in some cases, the material was banned only after individuals were arrested, and that in others, evidence may have been planted,⁴² possibly to extort bribes.⁴³ As research has clearly shown in many contexts, harassment and abuse in the name of C/PVE serves only to worsen grievances against the state, and could deepen support for violent groups.⁴⁴

Neglecting conflict risks

The narrow focus on 'radicalisation' and 'violent extremism' has been adopted by many organisations and agencies that previously worked on a range of peace, governance and development priorities crucial for building peace – including reconciliation, inter-communal dialogue and the promotion of inclusive and participatory decision-making.⁴⁵ Under C/PVE, analysis tends to be reduced to factors causing recruitment into violent groups, resulting in programmes that focus on issues like religion and which target individuals, groups and movements labelled as 'radicals', 'extremists' or 'terrorists' – at the risk of missing the bigger picture of what causes conflict.⁴⁶

The UN in Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz government developed the 2017-2020 Peacebuilding Priority Plan (PPP) to "[support] efforts by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic to prevent radicalization potentially leading to violent extremism" with the "ultimate purpose... [of] decreasing the number of Kyrgyz citizens leaving for Syria or other countries as foreign terrorist fighters as well as the number of extremist and terrorist cases".⁴⁷ Whereas the UN funds a range of non-C/PVE related projects under the UN Peacebuilding Fund,⁴⁸ it is still concerning that the current UN peace strategy, priced at US\$20 million, puts 'extremism' and 'radicalisation' as primary concerns.⁴⁹ When we asked the representative of a multilateral agency why this was happening, we were told that it was because of limited resources.⁵⁰

The rationale is that C/PVE programmes are just 'another way of doing peacebuilding' in an environment that will not fund work labelled as such.⁵¹ While the UN and most donors fund projects that aren't specific to C/PVE, the overwhelming pressure to focus on the perceived threat of 'extremism' has sucked much of the oxygen from work on other peace and development issues, and distracts organisations from tackling more systemic issues such as structural injustice and exclusion.⁵²

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This trend is clear when attending meetings and conferences in Bishkek that focus on the role of women, youth, the media or communities in C/PVE. This litany of C/PVE debates was described to us by the national staff of one INGO as almost "completely disconnected from what is happening on the ground".⁵³ While some C/PVE projects focus on important priorities that need support,⁵⁴ it is impossible to ignore the links between this agenda and both domestic and external national security objectives of the national government and international partners – many of whom are not always focused on the interests and needs of communities.

It is important to note that the C/PVE approach is not the universal preference of UN employees and national and international NGOs (I/NGO) representatives. Some expressed overt discomfort with the emphasis on C/PVE in the PPP, with one person describing the UN's new role as effectively "taking the state agenda to the next level".⁵⁵

Yet, with the reality of the current funding environment, many believe it is necessary to be pragmatic. However, some people we spoke to also expressed support for prioritising a peacebuilding approach – instead of C/PVE framing – in order to address the context’s conflict drivers in all their complexity.⁵⁶

Limiting civic space

With different ideas of what ‘violent extremism’ means, C/PVE approaches likewise vary considerably. Many donors and international partners try to focus on ‘violent extremism’, yet for others the focus is often on religious ‘extremism’ – violent or not.⁵⁷ In practice, this has meant that C/PVE interventions and deterrence measures have come to target dissenting movements and certain minority groups.⁵⁸ As a Kyrgyzstani INGO worker told us, C/PVE has “provided a new pretext for state security actors to overly scrutinise minorities”, and in turn this has “contributed to new cycles of societal exclusion that have long since threatened peace in Kyrgyzstan”.⁵⁹

Authorities have also criticised activists and journalists for speaking out against their counter-terror and C/PVE approaches, and have even banned two reports by human rights organisations as extremist material under the vague definition set out in the 2005 law.⁶⁰ Some people have also been prosecuted for sharing opinions on social media that were perceived by the Kyrgyzstan State National Security Committee to be an “incitement to ethnic, racial, religious or interregional hatred” on the basis of unclear criteria.⁶¹

It is worth noting that some I/NGO representatives believe C/PVE provides an opportunity to bring people together to discuss issues that might otherwise be off the table if they were not linked to ‘violent extremism’ or seen as relevant to addressing it. Nonetheless, with government institutions, international donors and implementing organisations on board, and each seeking to defend their own interests, there are risks and limited incentives for I/NGOs to raise concerns they may have about the C/PVE agenda.

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Co-opting civil society

Just as donors and UN agencies have bought heavily into C/PVE, many NGOs, both national and international, are facing pressure to repackage their projects as C/PVE work because resources, particularly around peace and governance issues, have shrunk considerably in Kyrgyzstan.⁶² In turn, organisations – including Saferworld – may face the stark choice of either repackaging work to focus on C/PVE, or not applying for funding opportunities (and potentially shutting down altogether).

Aside from diverting NGO priorities away from long-term human security and community development, there are other implications. For one, organisations working to prevent violent conflict or address the causes of support for violent groups can end up making things worse if they lack expertise, are not familiar with the principles underpinning conflict sensitivity, or have not conducted thorough context analyses to ensure their interventions ‘do no harm’.⁶³ They may also be ill-equipped to analyse and mitigate the risks associated with C/PVE, or they might feel insufficiently empowered to question what they are being asked to do by donors and authorities.

In some cases, organisations working to improve relations between communities and authorities may be pressured to focus on C/PVE. In particular, organisations with projects focusing on crime prevention and community security are being encouraged to contribute to broad C/PVE objectives. If such programmes could come to be perceived as providing specific information or intelligence gathering services, this poses risks for them, and potentially undermines the trust they are trying to build between communities and authorities.⁶⁴ These organisations depend on the trust of local communities to carry out their work, so this could undermine cooperation and foster mistrust if communities come to perceive them to be ‘spying’ for authorities and their international backers – particularly if ‘suspects’ went on to be mistreated.

Unfortunately, these risks are insufficiently recognised by many of the individuals and organisations involved in C/PVE. At a recent event on counter-messaging in Bishkek, local NGOs were constantly referred to as the most ‘credible messengers’ for anti-radicalisation efforts, without considering the risks that they or their operations could be subject to when collaborating with security agencies in a context affected by low trust and human rights abuses.⁶⁵

In particular, donors are increasingly supporting organisations that are led by or work on issues related to women and youth, and looking for entry-points for C/PVE work. There is a logic behind this: young people – predominantly male – are the most likely to join violent groups, and youth and women’s groups are often seen as channels through which donors can gain access to at-risk communities for counter-messaging and anti-radicalisation campaigns.⁶⁶ It is perfectly legitimate for youth- or women-led civil society organisations (CSOs) to work to address violence and support for violent groups if they see these issues as important, and the funding made available to these groups can be a way to finance innovative projects. But donors should be aware of the consequences of pushing such organisations to work with a potentially harmful agenda that some communities may find alienating.⁶⁷

For example, the focus on certain religious groups can be stigmatising, and projects may stray into risky territory by attempting, for instance, to cajole women into preventing family members from joining violent groups or to gather intelligence on ‘at-risk youth’ who could become members of violent groups. Thus the growing involvement of CSOs in C/PVE can risk undermining work with women and youth as valued members of society and supporting them to assert their rights and address their priorities.⁶⁸

Programming based on inconclusive evidence

Another effect of the rush to counter the apparent threat of foreign fighters from Kyrgyzstan has been the rapid flow of money into C/PVE initiatives despite questionable evidence and assumptions around the extent and nature of the problem. The predictable result has been an array of programmes that misdiagnose the problem and tend to focus on tackling ‘violent extremism’ individually rather than systemically.

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The current PVE thrust is largely superficial. It is misunderstood at the political level and incoherently applied locally,” - Kyrgyzstani INGO representative

“The current PVE thrust is largely superficial,” said one Kyrgyzstani INGO representative. “It is misunderstood at the political level and incoherently applied locally.”⁶⁹ This misunderstanding risks making the problem worse. One analyst told us that while there’s a chance that the C/PVE ship might just sail by, with little damage done save for the funding and focus it diverts from more needed policy responses to violence, it might also do serious harm – serving to drive further exclusion through a mix of stigmatisation and hard security responses to social issues.⁷⁰

Although researchers have identified many potential factors driving people to support or join violent groups, state ownership of the C/PVE agenda diminishes emphasis on issues beyond the state’s comfort zone – such as corruption, exclusionary governance and deficits in the criminal justice system.

Such issues are not best tackled under the C/PVE banner, and any assumption that ‘hearts and minds’ are all that need to be changed is unhelpful. The reliance on counter-messaging programmes – which seek to disrupt or counter the messages spread by ‘violent extremist’ groups, especially online – assume that such messages will reach and resonate with target audiences. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) global survey on youth and C/PVE found that ‘the most common types of youth and PVE initiatives have been online and offline advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns targeting young people’.⁷¹ However, according to many experts in the field, ‘there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of counter-narrative’ campaigns.⁷² Studies on support for violent groups in Kyrgyzstan suggest that real needs and grievances drive individuals towards violence, but many programmes appear to focus more on talking at people rather than consulting, listening to and jointly seeking to address their needs and concerns.

The fact that programmes are based on inconclusive evidence and at times flawed assumptions also makes it difficult to monitor their impact – not least because of the inherent difficulty of measuring changes in levels of support for violent groups. Donors, civil society groups and international organisations increasingly stress the importance of monitoring and evaluating C/PVE interventions, but there are still risks that, given the powerful political currents underpinning the C/PVE agenda, evaluations will consider too narrow a range of impacts and fail to consider unintended harmful impacts. As a result, those carrying out these projects may not learn from past experiences and adapt accordingly.

Footnotes

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Header photo: Uzgen Bazaar, Kyrgyzstan © Ninara/Flickr



Why does C/PVE predominate despite the risks?

A threat inflated? The countering and preventing violent extremism agenda in Kyrgyzstan

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Whatever its impacts may be, the C/PVE agenda continues to be the driving force for many working in Kyrgyzstan. This appears to be due to a complex interaction of strategic interests, the incentives the agenda creates and resigned pragmatism within a self-perpetuating cycle of 'threat inflation'.

Vying for influence: international interests in Kyrgyzstan

The security agendas of foreign governments, specifically China, the European Union, the United Kingdom, the United States and Russia – which are all vying for position and influence in the region – have given impetus to the focus on 'violent extremism' in Kyrgyzstan. As one Western official told us: "There are a range of issues that are crucial but security is the prism through which we perceive everything, so it's a case of selecting and balancing what we do".⁷³

As elsewhere,⁷⁴ C/PVE interventions seem to have been prioritised less as a result of analysis by local diplomatic representatives and more because officials in Western capitals are determined to assert counter-terror and C/PVE as global priorities in response to an inflated public perception of the terror threat. The argument that 'people at home are concerned about terrorism so we need to show them we are doing something about it' regularly comes up when talking to donors.

According to a donor representative in Bishkek, this has increased pressure from the higher-ups to be seen as responding to 'violent extremism'.⁷⁵ Another told us that, in this context, shifting focus away from C/PVE is a battle that can't be won.⁷⁶ While some in-country donor officials maintain that C/PVE efforts can have a positive impact,⁷⁷ others regret the de-prioritisation of governance, justice and reconciliation driven by their capitals.

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Some Western states might view C/PVE as the only way to maintain a foothold in the country.⁷⁸ After the closure of the Manas airbase in 2014, the US dramatically reduced investment in Kyrgyzstan. It provided just under US\$1.5 million in security assistance in 2018, a substantial drop-off from the US\$12 million it provided in 2013.⁷⁹ This pales in comparison to investments made by Russia, which has pledged US\$1.1 billion worth of weapons and other military equipment to Kyrgyzstan.⁸⁰ Because of their declining influence, some believe the US and other Western governments view C/PVE as a way to maintain leverage and work on issues which otherwise might be off limits (like security and justice reform, human rights and civil society space).⁸¹

We were told that some aspects of donor-government relations also further the C/PVE agenda. A Kyrgyzstani INGO representative spoke of how donor and government priorities can be disconnected, saying that “the government thinks that donors don’t listen to them so lets them play their game – also because it needs the funding they bring”. On the other hand, “donors find it difficult to engage with the government because of political instability,” which affects who they choose to work with and what type of support they are willing to provide.⁸²

Russia and China – Kyrgyzstan’s main economic partners – have also encouraged the focus on counter-terror and C/PVE. Security cooperation through the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization and the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization strongly favours joint counter-terrorism initiatives.⁸³ Kyrgyzstani authorities have little room to push back on Russian priorities within the region: beyond the ties borne of a shared Soviet history, the economy is heavily reliant on remittances from migrants in Russia and Kazakhstan (estimated to account for 25–30 per cent of national gross domestic product).⁸⁴ While studies suggest that people from Kyrgyzstan are being recruited by violent groups while in Russia, it has been pointed out that ‘remittance-dependent governments are unlikely to adopt any measures that would have the effect of reducing out-migration’.⁸⁵

National politicisation

Though it is rare for Central Asian governments to acknowledge internal challenges in public, the assertion by the Kyrgyzstan government that ‘violent extremism’ is an issue to contend with is not simply benevolent self-reflection. Not only is high-value external security assistance welcome, but C/PVE support also has benefits on the domestic front.

Fears that rising conservative Islam is chafing against Kyrgyzstan’s secular Soviet traditions provide an important motive for a tough response to the perceived threat from ‘violent extremism’.⁸⁶ In addition to fears that “Islam risks becoming a political force that will compromise the secular nature of the state”,⁸⁷ there are strong concerns around the increasing number of Islamic funds and organisations operating in Kyrgyzstan⁸⁸ – the objectives of which are not well understood.⁸⁹

In November 2018, the President of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan spoke publicly about the issue of Islam in the modern secular state – noting that traditionally “the state in matters of religion takes a neutral position”, but that this might need to change “to ensure peace and order and development in society”.⁹⁰ This is, according to President Jeenbekov, “the most serious problem of our time”, and it is “necessary to promote traditional Islamic values, inherited from our ancestors, as an alternative to radical religious movements”.

Several I/NGO representatives we spoke with expressed concerns that the state’s approach is inadvertently securitising religion and has the potential to create divisions in Kyrgyzstan.⁹¹ While the ‘violent extremist’ threat may be seen as a useful political narrative, in a context where there is a ‘widespread tendency [...] to link faith issues to political loyalty and identity’, ICG notes the risk that ‘religious arguments and divisions will become bound up in ethnic frictions or used to justify further severity against Uzbeks in particular’.⁹² When authorities assert claims that Uzbeks are more prone to ‘radicalisation’ and ‘violent extremism’ – something which recent research has refuted⁹³ – they can worsen harmful stereotypes and reinforce ethnic or communal divisions.⁹⁴

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As such, the state’s portrayal of ‘extremists’ and ‘radicals’ as the country’s core security challenge obscures long-standing political and economic grievances underpinning tension and conflict in south Kyrgyzstan. The focus on ‘radicalisation’ dovetails with the government’s reticence to acknowledge and address deep-rooted tensions between different ethnic groups.⁹⁵ Others have observed how C/PVE has been used as a basis for accusing activists of ‘[inciting] ethnic strife’.⁹⁶ This risks making C/PVE a tool for muting criticism on important issues, from poor governance and political marginalisation to low access to justice and social services.

In view of these factors, national authorities’ enthusiasm for C/PVE requires careful analysis and a thoughtful response to ensure it doesn’t reinforce inter-group divisions and development challenges, which could lead to further instability and violence.

A seat at the table – and a slice of the pie?

Political and financial pressure to buy into C/PVE also affects INGOs and national civil society, groups that – despite having more space in Kyrgyzstan than in neighbouring countries – may feel compelled to support the dominant agenda. As highlighted above, buying into the C/PVE agenda can guarantee survival. For example, a representative of a humanitarian and development INGO – which had yet to work on C/PVE in Kyrgyzstan – believed the problem to be exaggerated, and told us of plans to develop a concept note in response to the latest donor call for C/PVE proposals.⁹⁷ As is the case with many of its contemporaries, this organisation accepted the need ‘to get a slice of the pie’.

For some local civil society organisations and INGOs, C/PVE can be seen as an opportunity to continue doing their broader work, including issues that authorities may otherwise be reluctant to work on, like improving police behaviour or addressing domestic violence. Some also believe they can ensure beneficial use of C/PVE funds which may otherwise be used in harmful ways, in what remains a restrictive environment: “The reality is that the big players have bought into PVE: the maximum others can do is focus on improving the quality and sensitivity of PVE implementation at the local level.”⁹⁸

There are also many actors who are aware of concerns regarding C/PVE but who seek to have a positive peace and development impact using C/PVE funding. Saferworld’s own community policing and community security work in Kyrgyzstan falls into this category, with its focus on positive and constructive partnerships between donors, authorities and civil society; community, youth and women’s empowerment; the identification and resolution of local security needs; and intra- and inter-communal dialogue.⁹⁹

Footnotes

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Header photo: Morning prayer starts the Orozo Ait (Eid ul-Fitr) holidays, the end of Ramadan month in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan © Evgeni Zotov/Flickr



The process of threat inflation

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The prominence of the C/PVE agenda in Kyrgyzstan can be seen as the result of a process we call ‘threat inflation’. In the context of global efforts to combat terrorism, decision-makers identified the threat of people supporting or leaving to fight for violent groups, which generated pressure to respond. Despite unresolved confusion over the true extent of the threat and its causes, perceived urgency to act led authorities, external actors and implementing organisations to push for rapid action and results through counter-terror and C/PVE initiatives.

As these different groups engage with each other, each interprets the initial threat of ‘violent extremism’ in its own way, adjusting the agenda to match its own interests. Indeed, authorities around the world have used counter-terror and C/PVE to consolidate power and control opposition.¹⁰⁰ For foreign governments, C/PVE has been a way to appear tough on terrorism, while cementing strong ties to host governments who naturally welcome the agenda.¹⁰¹ For many implementing organisations, it usually means agreeing to prioritise the threat posed by ‘violent extremism’, while doing so in a way that justifies funding for future projects.

Such dynamics are a familiar feature in many insecure and conflict-affected contexts, yet the process of threat inflation in Kyrgyzstan is an interesting example. Here, the rush to respond to what remains an amorphous threat has underpinned responses that aren’t always based on solid analysis and data. Although some may help address conflict drivers, others appear superficial at best – and harmful at worst.

All the while, research initiatives seeking to understand the threat can be used by those stakeholders with an interest in justifying their existing work by reaffirming or further inflating the initial threat. This leads to some research findings being disregarded, and others – more convenient – becoming accepted, internalised and repeated by those who wish to maintain a strong consensus regarding the severity of the threat and the necessity of response. This contributes to further streams of funding, to access which applicants seek to show the relevance and effectiveness of their responses – while again reaffirming the threat. This is not unique to the field of C/PVE or to Kyrgyzstan. Many organisations, including Saferworld, have biases that distort the lens in which they approach research, no matter how well-intentioned they are. Nonetheless, it seems to be a factor in explaining the prominence of C/PVE in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere.

However, this dynamic makes it hard to undertake a credible or evidence-based assessment of the salience of the initial threat or what should – or shouldn’t – be done in response. Scrutinising how political and financial interests may have distorted the analysis and strategies of all those involved is a difficult and thankless task. What’s more, challenging the primacy of C/PVE in Kyrgyzstan and affirming other more urgent priorities is incredibly difficult. Thus the few dissenting voices get drowned out by those whose interests are served by the agenda.

For these reasons, the pragmatic option of integrating action on issues like governance, marginalisation and ethnic relations into C/PVE strategies may seem like the only way forward. But in light of its inefficiencies outlined in this paper, a better solution would be for those working in Kyrgyzstan to conduct an objective assessment of the conflict dynamics at hand and explore the possibility that a wider peacebuilding and prevention

lens could be more appropriate. Ultimately, threat inflation is likely to remain a persistent and damaging phenomenon unless a conscious effort is made to reframe engagement and refocus on more holistic and sustainable approaches to promoting peace, security and development.

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Footnotes

100. This dynamic is explained by a recent report by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism: Human Rights Council (2019), 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism on the role of measures to address terrorism and violent extremism on closing civic space and violating the rights of civil society actors and human rights defenders', A/HRC/40/52, advance unedited version, 15 February (https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session40/Documents/A_HRC_40_52.docx)

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Header photo: Geneva Conference on Preventing Violent Extremism in 2016, Geneva, Switzerland © UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré



Conclusion: Reframing towards peace

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For national authorities, international donors, UN agencies and CSOs that want to build a more peaceful, just and inclusive society in Kyrgyzstan, our analysis warrants reflection and frank discussions around options for the future. This would involve clear-sighted analysis, shifting the framework for response away from over-emphasis on C/PVE and refocusing on communities' needs and concerns – including all forms of violence.

Establish stronger principles on issues of concern

Many organisations in Kyrgyzstan maintain that “C/PVE allows us to do our peacebuilding work”, and our research highlighted that there are examples of positive and conflict-sensitive interventions framed in C/PVE terms.¹⁰² But the risks of undermining progress on issues of public concern, closing down space for truly inclusive dialogue, and reinforcing heavy-handed treatment of suspected ‘radicals’ should prompt serious reflection about the compatibility of this agenda with peace and development work in Kyrgyzstan’s national and public interest.

Some organisations get around this tension by simply not telling communities that their projects actually fall under C/PVE.¹⁰³ But pretending not to be part of a flawed agenda for ‘beneficiaries’ while buying into it for donors in private has ethical implications and can cause further harm.

There are elements of C/PVE that can be compatible with peacebuilding and development priorities if implemented in a way that is sensitive to conflict and gender dynamics and is human-rights-compliant. While many complex issues come together under the C/PVE umbrella, it is crucial that they are objectively analysed. The real test for peace and security programmes is the extent to which they tackle key drivers of under-development and conflict in Kyrgyzstan: power imbalances, injustices, a lack of access to resources, opaque and unrepresentative decision-making, exclusion and marginalisation, sexual and gender-based violence – rather than simply the narrow objective of preventing people from becoming ‘violent extremists’.¹⁰⁴ As ICG has pointed out, Kyrgyzstan’s biggest challenges would be much clearer under strategies configured around peace, rights and development, rather than those with C/PVE as the starting point: ‘a conflict prevention or peacebuilding lens makes more sense than framing the response as “CVE”, a term that may alienate the communities needing help and give an excuse for more repressive policies if reconciliation fails’.¹⁰⁵

The potential tensions between peacebuilding and C/PVE aims in Kyrgyzstan is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the UN PPP, with its overall aim to ‘[support] efforts by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic to prevent radicalization potentially leading to violent extremism’.¹⁰⁶ These words commit the UN to challenging radical ideas even if they have only a potential connection to violence. This is worrying in the context of the government’s overly broad definition of the problem, and serves to downplay any state responsibility for conflict and violence.

In this sense, shifting away from a focus on C/PVE and in particular those areas where this agenda risks undermining social cohesion – while refocusing on the real needs of Kyrgyzstan as articulated by communities and in analysis of conflict dynamics – would

give the UN and others a better chance to contribute to peace and avoid the risks of doing harm. All work in Kyrgyzstan on human security, rights and governance priorities should be based on inclusive conflict analysis, community security or peacebuilding needs assessments – ideally conducted jointly with or informed by consultations with local communities – and lessons from past interventions. Our research suggests that donors, multilaterals and their implementing partners have not sufficiently built their programmes around locally-grounded analysis – allowing their assessments and strategies to become distorted by externally driven priorities – a significant oversight in light of the known risks of doing harm.¹⁰⁷

Reconfigure strategies around development, rights and justice goals

In light of these risks, donors, UN agencies and other implementing organisations should move beyond the C/PVE agenda, and could consider making greater use of other more constructive international frameworks. These should be tailored to the context at national, sub-national and local levels as a way to shape collaboration between government, donors, multilateral agencies, INGOs and civil society. Three immediate options exist:

I. The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): The parts of the 2030 Agenda that deal with peaceful, just and inclusive societies – primarily SDG16 – offer donors, INGOs and domestic civil society an excellent framework within which to pursue the country's most pressing priorities together with the government. The SDGs contain a range of targets that would enhance public well-being, help prevent violence and reduce support for violent groups – without narrowly defining all support as serving C/PVE objectives.¹⁰⁸

The Kyrgyzstan government has committed to achieving the 2030 Agenda, and specifically to work on 'good governance, rule of law, human rights and gender equality' under the 2018–2022 UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), which also aims to make institutions 'more accountable and inclusive, ensuring justice, human rights, gender equality and sustainable peace for all'.

II. Youth, Peace and Security: Most C/PVE work targets young men as a demographic at risk of joining violent groups. But those at risk represent a tiny proportion of young people, and organisations working on peace and development issues need to avoid generalisations about the threat posed. The 2018 global study on Youth, Peace and Security stressed the importance of investing in the positive role of youth as agents of peaceful, progressive change.¹⁰⁹ As the study observes: 'concerns about youth and violent extremism result in policy responses that denigrate and often repress the legitimate participation of youth in political processes, social movements, peaceful protest and expressions of dissent'.¹¹⁰ This need not be the case in Kyrgyzstan. The progress study offers a range of recommendations for organisations working with youth to take the initiative to change engagement away from seeing youth as a threat, and instead seeing them as a demographic with potential to build peace.¹¹¹

III. Women, Peace and Security: The Kyrgyzstan National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security offers another valuable entry point to extend support to women and girl victims of violence, including through cooperation between national and local authorities and civil society. The ambitious 2015–2017 NAP¹¹² was not fully implemented because of a lack of capacity, resources and resolve among some state actors.¹¹³ While updating the NAP is under discussion,¹¹⁴ it is important that the government redouble its efforts to meet its commitments. Given the risks of compromising organisations working on peace and women's rights by drawing them into C/PVE,¹¹⁵ donors could safeguard their integrity by supporting more work on sexual and gender-based violence as well as gender equality throughout the country.¹¹⁶

Ensure strategies address communities' concerns

The above policy frameworks work best when focused on creating positive and inclusive change across societies through people-centred processes. Given the risks of C/PVE being prioritised in response to external and domestic national security agendas, engaging with communities without pre-conceived notions about the relative importance of C/PVE is crucial. It is also important to scrutinise the evidence base for any concerns that communities raise regarding 'radicalisation' and 'violent extremism' in the wider context of 'threat inflation'.

To be effective, peace and development work needs to be grounded in the real concerns of communities and build on their ideas and initiatives. As such, donors should support local organisations to work on the issues that matter to communities and ensure they have access to safe spaces to express their concerns and engage in genuine dialogues with national authorities. It is crucial that donors and their partners recognise that political freedom and participation, freedom from fear and insecurity, fair access to justice, services (including security and justice services), livelihoods and resources, as well as transparent and accountable governance for all members

of society – regardless of gender, age, economic and social background, ethnicity or religion – are crucial to preventing violence and building peaceful societies. There are no shortcuts.

“

To be effective, peace and development work needs to be grounded in the real concerns of communities and build on their ideas and initiatives.

There may still be a need for focused interventions that engage those who support or join violent groups. However, authorities should be cautious about taking measures that can alienate communities if their grievances are not taken seriously and efforts are not made to generate trust through reform. Even if the propaganda of violent groups may appear ideological, in order to recruit members it feeds on isolation and marginalisation, discontent fuelled by injustice and corruption, trauma and exposure to violence, as well as feelings of victimhood, powerlessness, and purposelessness.¹¹⁷ Regardless of whether these grievances come from real experience or are perceptions, interventions that do not take the wide range of community concerns seriously, treat communities across the country as monolithic, or do not engage them sufficiently, are likely to fail.

It seems clear that interventions are needed to create a society that is more tolerant, celebrates diversity, and promotes intra- and inter-communal dialogue, as well as collaboration and joint problem-solving between communities and authorities. But they must take place outside of the C/PVE agenda to ensure that they are designed and implemented objectively and sensitively, and that they protect minorities' rights and freedoms. And while we have come across instances of concern in communities about the spread of conservative religious views and practices, reframing programmes away from C/PVE would not entail trying to ignore such concerns – on the contrary. To handle them constructively, and navigate sensitively the need to respect freedom and diversity while upholding laws and rights that protect and safeguard the equality of all individuals, it seems that there is a higher potential to resolve tensions and insecurity generated by such concerns outside a framework that too readily conflates them with risks of 'terrorism'.

In Kyrgyzstan, Saferworld's focus has been to improve community security and community policing to help reduce local tensions and conflict. Like other organisations in the country, we try to bring communities and authorities together to help them identify their security concerns and develop joint responses to addressing them in order to improve a distrustful state-society relationship. Through our work, the platforms we support have identified a range of security concerns including intolerance to diversity, harmful gender norms and domestic violence, and abuse of power by authorities – issues that have also been identified as potentially contributing to individuals joining or supporting violent groups. Assistance to authorities and community groups to identify and understand the various drivers of violence and insecurity allows for better consideration of conflict and gender sensitivity in subsequent responses.

In addition to supporting more positive, empowering and conflict- and gender-sensitive community-driven initiatives, donors, multilateral agencies, INGOs and their partners also need to do more to recognise and mitigate the risks posed by C/PVE interventions. Where funders call for activities that could cause harm, the UN and INGOs should be prepared to challenge this or refuse to apply. The adoption of collective 'go' and 'no-go' funding principles could be a positive step for peacebuilding and development organisations – something that Saferworld has pushed for globally, so that organisations in Kyrgyzstan have a shared understanding of how to engage with the C/PVE agenda and advance locally-led peacebuilding alternatives. This would require some willingness to question donor agendas, but the benefits of building a new consensus on matching international investments and initiatives with communities' concerns could benefit all involved – not least Kyrgyzstan's people.

Footnotes

102. Interview with multilateral agency and INGO representatives, Bishkek, May 2018-February 2019.
103. Interview with INGO representatives, Bishkek, May 2018-February 2019
104. Attree L (2017), op. cit.
105. International Crisis Group (2016), op. cit.
106. The full paragraph reads: 'The new PPP will aim at supporting efforts by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic to prevent radicalization potentially leading to violent extremism. The expected outcomes of the PPP will be an increased resilience of target communities against radicalization and its pathway to violent extremism and improved state institutional capacity to address the most pressing drivers of violent extremism. The ultimate purpose is aimed at decreasing the number of the Kyrgyz citizens leaving for Syria or other countries as Foreign Terrorist Fighters as well as the number of extremist and terrorist cases through the strengthened state partnership with the public and religious communities.' 'Peacebuilding Priority Plan – Kyrgyzstan 2017-2020', op. cit.
107. Interview with donor, multilateral agency and INGO representatives, Bishkek, May 2018.
108. The Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the United Nations in the Kyrgyz Republic (2017) 'The United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) for the Kyrgyz Republic 2018-2022', May (https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/operact/Technical_Cooperation/Delivering_as_One/UNDAF_country_files/UNDAF_files_2015-2020/UNDAF_Kyrgyzstan_18052017_eng_fin.pdf)
109. Simpson G (2018), op. cit.
110. United Nations General Assembly (2018), 'The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security (A/72/761-S/2018/86)', 2 March (http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/AFR/images/ProgressStudyonYouthPeaceSecurity_A72_761_S_2018_86_ENGL.pdf)
111. For more information, see the webpage of Saferworld's work on youth empowerment in Kyrgyzstan: <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/kyrgyzstan/empowering-youth>
112. UNDP (2015), 'Кыргызская Республика утвердила Национальный План Действий по Резолюции 1325 Совета Безопасности ООН о женщинах, мире и безопасности', 28 December (http://www.kg.undp.org/content/kyrgyzstan/ru/home/library/womens_empowerment/follow-your-voice1.html)
113. UNDP (2015), 'National Action Plan on Gender Equality is approved by the Kyrgyz Republic', 28 December (http://www.kg.undp.org/content/kyrgyzstan/en/home/library/womens_empowerment/follow-your-voice1.html)
114. For instance see '26 ноября будет обсужден план действий по реализации Резолюции ООН «Женщины, Мир и Безопасность»' (<http://kenesh.kg/ru/news/show/6548/26-noyabrya-budet-obsuzhden-plan-deystviy-po-realizatsii-rezolyutsii-oon-zhenshtini-mir-i-bezopasnosty>)
115. Möller-Loswick A (2017), op. cit.; GAPS (2018), op. cit.
116. For instance, see: Putz C (2018), 'A Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan Ends in a Young Woman's Death', June (<https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/a-bride-kidnapping-in-kyrgyzstan-ends-in-a-young-womans-death/>)
117. For instance, see: Miller G, Highman S (2015), 'In a propaganda war against ISIS, the U.S. tried to play by the enemy's rules', The Washington Post, 8 May (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-propaganda-war-us-tried-to-play-by-the-enemys-rules/2015/05/08/6eb6b732-e52f-11e4-81ea-0649268f729e_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.982013da70f9); Saferworld (2016), "A better state of peace": American strategy beyond the limits of warfare', October (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1088-aa-better-state-of-peace-american-strategy-beyond-the-limits-of-warfare>)

Header photo: Changing of the guard in Ala Too Square, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. © Maureen Barlin/Flickr



Methodology

A threat inflated? The countering and preventing violent extremism agenda in Kyrgyzstan

I. Introduction

II. Taking root: the C/PVE agenda

III. Impacts of C/PVE on Kyrgyzstan

IV. Why does C/PVE predominate despite the risks?

V. The process of threat inflation

VI. Conclusion: Reframing towards peace

Methodology

Drawing on our work in Kyrgyzstan since 2010, we conducted an extensive literature review (mainly of sources written in English or with English translations) prior to and following key informant interviews carried out in Bishkek. In May 2018, interviews were conducted with prominent Kyrgyz and international civil society members, western donors, multilateral agency and Kyrgyz government officials. During these meetings, we asked about the main threats to peace and security in Kyrgyzstan, the responses employed by national and international actors to address these threats, the potential benefits and risks that such responses offer, and what is needed to support peace and security in the long term. To protect the anonymity of respondents, we only refer to the type of organisation they work for.

In addition, mindful of political sensitivities and time limitation, we were unable to interview all relevant actors operating in this sphere. We did, however, ask interviewees about different actors' perspectives and were able to collect data on a range of opinions. Additional data was gathered through participation in national and regional conferences on related topics and through regular exchanges with thematic and regional experts in Bishkek between September 2018 and February 2019. Our work to improve cooperation and understanding between communities, different ethnic groups, the police and local authorities – and in particular our work with women and young people in southern Kyrgyzstan – served as secondary data. We strived to reflect the views of our partners and the people we work with, although we did not specifically interview people at the grassroots level as part of this research.

Despite the aforementioned issues, this paper does not seek to claim to have all the answers to what are very complex issues; it aims to raise important questions and make a constructive contribution to existing discussions around C/PVE in Kyrgyzstan. In this framework, the findings of this paper will be especially useful for international actors and experts working on the C/PVE agenda as they look to conduct further research and develop new activities that relate to this field of work.

Header photo: An elderly woman in Issyk Kul, Kyrgyzstan. © Ronan Shenhav/Flickr