



SECURITY ACADEMY

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM ORGANIZED BY
EUROPEAN VALUES CENTER FOR SECURITY POLICY
IN COOPERATION WITH STRATPOL AND SSPI INSTITUTES

Radical voices: Fighting radicalization in
Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan applying
gender-sensitive approaches

MICHAELA ZELEŇANSKÁ

Author:

Michaela Zeleňanská

Proofreading:

Matúš Jevčák

Marián Maraffko

Michaela Ružičková

Expert Supervisor

ambassador Peter Burian



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RADICAL VOICES – FIGHTING RADICALIZATION IN KYRGYZSTAN AND TAJIKISTAN APPLYING GENDER-SENSITIVE APPROACHES

Michaela Zelenánská

Abstract

In August 2021, after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the departure of US troops, Central Asia became the center of attention of the international security community and revealed the danger of radicalization. The response to the emerging challenge has been overwhelmingly focused on men and boys and has not shown tangible results. Using the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, we argue that including women and girls in countering terrorism/preventing violent extremism policies should become a priority for the local and international policy makers. The EU is uniquely positioned to strengthen the focus on gender mainstreaming in the regional policies and contribute to the peace and security in Central Asia. Subsequently, the EU can reinforce its regional position vis-à-vis traditional “hard” security actors such as Russia and China, and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can benefit from comprehensive gender-sensitive interventions and the diversification of their foreign policy.

Keywords

Central Asia; Kyrgyzstan; Tajikistan; women; gender; extremism; radicalism; resilience



LIST OF ACRONYMS

CSO	Civil society organisation
CT/PVE	Counter terrorism/Preventing violent extremism
FTF	Foreign terrorist fighter
GAP	Gender action plan
IcSP	Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace
LEICA	Law enforcement in Central Asia
MIP	Multiannual Indicative Programme
NAP	National Action Plan
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
STRIVE	Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council resolution
VEO	Violent extremist organization
WPS	Women, peace, and security

INTRODUCTION

In August 2021, after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the departure of US troops, Central Asia once again became the centre of attention of the international security community. The US withdrawal prompted discussions about the weak character of Western democracies and the rise of China and Russia. At the regional level, these events shed light on violent radicalization and extremism in Central Asia and brought the international community's attention to a region that rarely makes it to the headlines. The topic has been increasingly important since the defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq when approximately 3-5 thousand foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) sought to return to their home countries. Central Asian governments thought that the events in 2021 in Afghanistan would attract a new wave of FTFs and destabilize the regional security situation. While experts agree that the Central Asian republics are used to the close presence of the Taliban and that violent extremist organizations (VEO) are unlikely to spread their influence beyond the Afghan borders, the danger of radicalization remains high.

Governments and international organizations apply diverse approaches to hinder the increase of radicalization; yet these strategies sometimes lack a holistic character that would include the whole society, including women. Some international organizations led by non-EU countries push for repressive policies, ignoring the international consensus on the importance of human rights-focused approaches. Local policymakers are still reluctant to explore gender-sensitive approaches, ignoring the evidence of VEOs specifically targeting women to conduct acts of terror and spread radical ideologies, as well as the role of women in preventing further radicalization thanks to their specific position in families and communities. We argue that applying gender-sensitive policies would benefit the local population, as the current state policies lack tangible results. Therefore, including women in the design and the implementation of the countering terrorism/preventing violent extremism (CT/PVE) policies should become a priority for the government and civil society.

The EU has never considered Central Asia as a region of vital interest, and its presence has started increasing only recently. Nevertheless, after the recent events in Afghanistan, and in the wake of the region's growing importance, the EU is increasingly looking for avenues to develop a comprehensive regional strategy. In this essay, we examine the EU's potential to address radicalization, analysing the case studies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The EU is uniquely positioned to successfully promote gender mainstreaming in its work in the region and thus strengthen its position. We argue that this engagement would benefit both parties. The EU can contribute to the peace and security in Central Asia and reinforce its regional position vis-à-vis traditional hard security actors such as Russia and China. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can ultimately benefit from comprehensive gender-sensitive interventions and the diversification of their foreign policy.

WOMEN AND RADICALIZATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Women's participation in terrorist activities is not a new phenomenon. Women were closely linked with pioneer terrorist organizations in Russia already in the 19th century. The fight against oppression and inequalities, including those related to gender, continued in the 20th century when women were leaders of VEOs, for example, in Northern Ireland or Spain (OSCE 2019) or even created women-only VEOs in Germany (Bloom 2017). Their role has changed with the religiously-led terrorists coming from conservative backgrounds (Bloom 2017). Nevertheless, organizations quickly discovered the supposed advantages of deploying women suicide bombers, notably because of their ability to blend in with the environment. This topic remains relevant for the EU as 17% of European foreign fighters today are women (EP 2018). As women are generally less visible in the leading roles of such organisations, they are often perceived as only passive victims without agency, thus, unimportant and invisible for CT/PVE policies. This perception is not only misleading but also dangerous, as VEOs might use the image of peaceful women to achieve their objectives.

Women's motivations to join VEOs can be similar to those of men, yet there are some gender-related differences. The general triggers are grievances about social, economic, and political conditions, desire to create a change, attraction to politics, or personal tragedy and the following grief. Other motivations may include a desire for action or adventure, drive for power, commitment to a cause, ideology, or religion (EP 2018). Some specific factors related to women's radicalization often include factors related to gender-based inequality such as violence against women and a lack of educational opportunities. For some women, terrorism can be a way to exercise their political and economic rights, especially in societies where these rights are denied. Finally, some might be attempting to join VEOs based on romantic perception and traditional gender roles, or, on the opposite side, as a way to gain freedom from a conservative restrictive environment. The VEOs are aware of these factors and actively exploit them (OSCE 2019).

The Council of Europe defines gender mainstreaming as “the (re)organisation, improvement, development, and evaluation of policy processes so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policymaking” (Council of Europe n.d.). The concept reflects the belief that women and men have different needs and living conditions, and that policies and circumstances affect them in different ways. If policies are designed mostly by men, who have traditionally been in the position of power, they tend to ignore other marginalized groups, including women. The security sector has been slow to recognize the importance of gender in securing international peace and stability.

The women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda and the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 challenged the dominant narrative and introduced gender in the security debate. Concerning terrorism, it was only in 2015 that the UN adopted UNSCR 2242, which urges member states and other key actors to integrate the WPS agenda in their counter-terrorism agendas. Today, after years of activism, it is unquestionable that terrorism is a gendered phenomenon experienced differently by women and girls and men and boys.

VEOs use diverse strategies specifically targeting different groups, such as European Muslims or the local population, to exploit the above-mentioned factors. VEOs have adapted to the lack of gendered policies and now specifically target women to perform particular roles, including the spread of violent content or recruitment, within the organizations. Mia Bloom suggests that between 1985 and 2008, female suicide bombers committed 230 attacks, about a quarter of the overall number of attacks (Bloom 2017). Given women's participation in VEOs, the recognition of their agency in preventing violence and building peace is a necessary requirement for sustainable policies. Gender mainstreaming is a tool to solve hidden inequalities and consider women's agency in the policies. It requires integrating a gender equality perspective at all stages and levels of policies and programmes, and addressing the low representation of women in security-related areas.

VIOLENT RADICALISM IN KYRGYZSTAN AND TAJIKISTAN

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have witnessed growing levels of inequality and weak governance. While research so far has failed to establish a direct link between socio-economic factors and violent radicalization, they are among the common pull and push factors. People also feel disconnected in the secular society and look for solutions in the religious groups. Between 2008 and 2018, only 19 attacks by actors labelled as terrorists occurred in Central Asia, causing 142 casualties (Lemon 2018). Nevertheless, the official narrative in the region and the securitization of terrorism are likely to add to the further radicalization based on grievances and bad governance. What is more, as the role of women in VEOs in Central Asia is understudied, policies rarely consider the different effects of radicalization on women and girls. Governments of both countries often see women as voiceless followers of their male family members, ignoring the collected evidence of cases when women took an active role in recruiting other women at the local markets or were otherwise actively engaged in the work of VEOs (Pierobon 2021). Currently, an increasing number of women and children are returning from Syria and Iraq to Central Asia and hundreds are still in prisons or in unknown locations, with the total number reaching up to 5,000 people (Khamidov 2022). The governments will therefore be under growing pressure to address women's radicalization. The two countries were chosen as they experience one of the highest numbers of radicalized citizens per capita in the world, coupled with specific social, economic, and institutional challenges specific to the region.

Kyrgyzstan has not witnessed any major terrorist attack since its independence in 1991. Yet, the country is well-known to the international community, as Kyrgyz nationals carried out an attack on the 2013 Boston Marathon and masterminded several attacks around the world in 2017. The unstable political environment and economic hardship open the arena for alternative sources of influence, beyond the government. People, and specifically the younger generation, do not trust the corrupt government and seek changes. As a result, Kyrgyzstan experiences a growing number of young people sharing radical views, providing a pool of candidates for radical recruiters. Another important factor is the ethnic divide and the local authorities reinforcing the stereotypes about the extremism within the Uzbek community.

Furthermore, the country is in a dire economic situation, with 31.3% of GDP coming from remittances (WB 2022). The national economy provides only limited educational and labour opportunities for young women and men. At the same time, Kyrgyzstan experiences an increased interest in Islam - there has been a nearly 60-fold increase in registered mosques since the independence (2,300 in 2016 compared to 39 in 1991) (ICG 2016). Civil society leaders link the growth of Islam in the country with the failure of the government to provide essential services as well as the generally low level of education and the lack of job opportunities (ICG 2016). As the special forces monitor religious spaces, alternative spaces for recruitment are being explored. Many people are being radicalized while working abroad, especially in Russia, where the Kyrgyz government has little power to address it.

About one-fourth of the radicalised fighters that left Kyrgyzstan by 2016 were women (185 women and 83 children out of 863 people in total) (Matveeva 2018). Other sources argue that the numbers are higher, claiming that at least 450 women and children are currently being held in detention camps in Northeast Syria (Khamidov 2022). Women joining VEOs can be placed in three groups based on their motives (Matveeva 2018). Some women follow their husbands and the conservative social norms. Some women join VEOs of their own accord while their husbands are working abroad. The third group is women who believe that they can find a better life outside the country, mostly due to a dire economic situation or a lower social status that doesn't allow them self-realization - single mothers or widows make up a large part of this group. These women are more vulnerable to radicalization due to widespread domestic violence, perpetrated by men and older women. VEOs also use women to distribute leaflets and actively recruit other women, playing on the fact that women are often invisible in the realm of peace and security (UN Women 2017).

Women are also underrepresented in the administrative bodies; they only hold 20% of seats in the national parliament of Kyrgyzstan (Speckhard et al. 2017). Although the government has introduced quotas for women in the government, many religious women do not feel represented in the secular structures. The strict social norms and lack of female role models leave women particularly vulnerable to radicalization within the family. In 2018, Kyrgyzstan approved its already third [National Action Plan](#) (NAP) to implement the WPS agenda. The NAP specifically mentions women's radicalization as one of its priorities; however, no specific budget is allocated to achieve it. Besides that, the government developed multiple documents and plans to deter radicalization, including the [Government Program of the Kyrgyz Republic on countering extremism and terrorism for 2017-2022](#) or the [Action plan for the implementation of the State Policy Concept in the religious sphere for 2021-2026](#). These documents, though they tackle radicalization, do not include gender-sensitive language.

A study conducted by UN Women showed that implementation lags behind and gender-sensitive approaches remain on paper (UN Women 2017). What is more, local authorities see the inclusion of gender perspective as an "additional burden" to the policies (OSCE 2020). As a result, only local and international NGOs are involved in gender mainstreaming in the PVE. Since 2016, the international donor community has invested more than US\$42 million in Kyrgyzstan under the UN's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism

(Pierobon 2021). Nevertheless, local NGOs claim that the implementation of the current PVE programs is largely inefficient as they are misunderstood at the political level and applied selectively at the local level (Tricot O'Farrell and Street 2019).

In **Tajikistan**, 26% of the country's GDP came from remittances in 2020, compared to 44% in 2008 (Lemon 2019). Approximately 2.5 million Tajiks, or 25% of the entire population, enter Russia to work there annually (Najibullah 2011). Labour migration negatively affects communities and families headed by women and children living in single-parent households. What is more, 88.4% of the population that is not in employment, education or training is made up of women (WB 2020). Migrant workers, together with youth and women, are generally considered the most vulnerable ones and the government has few protectives for them. The position of women in society is dire - almost one-fourth of women between 15-49 have experienced physical violence, which adds to the feeling of grievances and injustice economic difficulties and strict social norms that often do not allow a woman to abandon her husband and choose her individual path. Societies both in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan operate under conservative norms that leave a limited space for women to oppose the will of their male relatives, while at the same time place women in a position to have a positive influence on the children.

According to the official statistics, since 2011, 1,899 Tajik citizens have joined terrorist groups in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, which is the highest rate among the Central Asian republics and makes Tajikistan the top supplier of foreign fighters in the world (WB 2020). Approximately 400 of them were women. Tajikistan is one of a few Central Asian countries where terrorist attacks took place within the territory of the country - most notably in 2018 when two Dutch cyclists were killed. With 99% of the population Muslim, Tajikistan opted for strict policies against (potentially) radical Islamist groups. Youth under 18 are prohibited by law from attending religious education or mosques, and hijabs are banned from educational institutions and government agencies. The infamous beard-shaving of 13,000 men made it to international headlines in 2018 (Aljazeera 2016). Consequently, many radicals are not able to return to Tajikistan but continue their activities abroad, outside the government's control. Labour migrants are particularly vulnerable in this case, as they can be approached by such radicalized members of the migrant community. Nevertheless, a growing number of violent events taking place in Tajikistan and new cases of public displays of radical ideology suggest that the trend has shifted, and that radicalised women and men do not always join VEOs abroad. Radicalization and recruitment are often carried out along the 1,400-km border with Afghanistan.

The Tajik civil society and foreign experts criticize the securitization of Islam by the government as coercive towards any form of opposition. The official discourse does not distinguish between violent and non-violent forms of Islam and an increasing number of organizations are banned. The PVE laws are often politically motivated and only the state narrative, often overly militarized, is allowed. Judicial decisions on extremism are classified in Tajikistan, while Kyrgyzstan is the only country in the region with a transparent online database of such decisions (Internews 2018). The government does not cooperate with the

civil society on these issues, although it proved to be a successful path in other countries, including Kyrgyzstan.

In 2016, Tajikistan was the first Central Asian country to adopt a National Strategy on preventing extremism. It recognizes extremism as a complex problem that encompasses ideological, socio-economic, legal, and institutional factors. What is more, the Strategy highlights the importance of the participation of civil society, the private sector, and each individual citizen in its implementation. Nevertheless, the implementation, while anchored in local action plans, has not been carried out properly in many instances (Rizoyon 2019). The Tajik government argues that the majority of the women that joined a VEO followed their husbands (CABAR 2018). This is a typical misconception where women are identified in relation to men - as wives, widows, or sisters.

Another challenge cited by researchers is the increased interest in extremism by NGOs, due to the urgency of the issue and the fact that they tend to have more funding available. However, an expert network of NGOs is yet to be formed (Rizoyon 2019). Tajikistan has approved its third [WPS NAP for 2019-2022](#). The document broadly covers human rights, development, and education, but makes no reference to WPS or radicalization. The National Strategy and the WPS NAP do not speak to each other, but merely coexist without enriching each other's agenda.

Tajikistan is currently carrying out a number of gender-sensitive projects focused on radicalization, often with the support of international organizations. The president himself believes that women have a specific role to play in CT/PVE due to their role in society, sometimes pressuring them to adopt a conservative secular stance (Lemon and Thibault 2018). The UNODC provides technical assistance to the Ministry of Justice to develop specific and gender-sensitive strategies to address radical narratives within the prison system (UNODC n.d.). This project, largely hailed as a success, has been sponsored by the EU. Some NGOs work with mothers, leveraging their specific role in society. The "Mothers Schools" project empowers mothers who have unique proximity to their children to detect suspicious behaviour and prevent radicalization (Von Martius 2013).

Organisations working in the region suggest that it is the right time for an early intervention to prevent a future crisis and the establishment of new centres of radicalization and terrorism, as in the case of Nigeria or Pakistan, to name a few (SFCG 2016). The harsh militarized CT/PVE measures on the state level in Tajikistan are already showing negative consequences, as overcrowded prisons became fertile ground for recruiters (Djuma 2020). Coercive measures, often accompanied by human rights abuses and unnecessary victims are often based on simplistic assumptions. The lack of agency traditionally attributed to women limits the government in designing gender-sensitive CT/PVE measures that ultimately benefit the whole society.

EU INVOLVEMENT IN COUNTERING WOMEN'S RADICALIZATION

A major target of terrorism after 9/11, the EU has been interested in CT/PVE initiatives. This trend has been reflected in the establishment of new tools, such as the Internal Security Fund, or increased budgets of existing mechanisms and agencies, including Europol. Building community resilience against radicalization and terrorism became one of the priorities in the context of a growing number of FTFs fleeing Syria and Afghanistan. This interest goes hand in hand with the EU's growing presence in Central Asia, primarily for its strategic location between two major powers of the region, Russia and China, and in close proximity to Afghanistan.

The EU had gradually strengthened its presence in Central Asia since 2005 when it appointed its first Special Representative to prepare the ground for closer cooperation. In 2007 it launched the first Central Asia Strategy for a New Partnership. Amid the deteriorating security situation in neighbouring Afghanistan and regional conflicts within and between the Central Asian republics, the EU defined security as the key concern of the partnership. In 2013, the parties confirmed this path by establishing the EU-Central Asia High-Level Security Dialogue. A new strategy was adopted in 2019, this time with more concrete objectives, but with security still playing a key role (CoEU 2019). The strategy mentions countering extremism and radicalization as areas of future cooperation, and names human and women's rights its priority. In 2019, the EU also held the first EU-Central Asia Forum aimed at civil society actors, who form the critical implementing body of the EU strategy in the region.

Although security is the central topic, the EU opted for a soft approach. Hard security remains the domain of Russia via the Collective Security Treaty Organization and China through the growing influence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These organizations have a different approach to CT/PVE, relying on repressive measures that copy the suppressive policies from Russia and China. They are in striking contrast with the EU-led approach based on creating synergies among values-driven organizations. In Central Asia, the EU applies its traditional strategy for regions outside its proximate neighbourhood - tackling environment, human rights, and non-security-related issues, balancing the focus on regional dialogue and country-specific programmes. Today, the EU is the first regional trade partner for Central Asia, accounting for about one-third of trade flows. It is also the largest aid donor in the region, with €1.1 billion donated between 2014-2020 (EC 2022).

Since 2016, the EU has been approaching violent radicalization systematically via different programmes, focusing on the whole of society approach, capacity building, and a close cooperation with regional actors. The EU works with international organizations, such as the OSCE or the UN, and provides funding to existing initiatives, leaving the implementation stage on its partners. The CT/PVE issues are predominantly covered by the Law Enforcement in Central Asia (LEICA) programme focusing on building law enforcement capacities. Another related projects are the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) and the Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP), which used to be implemented by the UNDP and with the EU as the primary sponsor. The EU

also supports the work of recognized international NGOs, such as Saferworld or Search for Common Ground, with a long tradition of presence in the two countries, working with the local communities, women and youth. In 2016, the EU organized a regional conference about preventing violent extremism in Bishkek, where actors from the public and private sectors came together to provide recommendations for policymakers. CT/PVE remains at the centre of the annual EU-Central Asia High-Level Security Dialogue and is increasingly reflected in the generous budget dedicated to the development programs in the region (1.2bln for 2014-2020).

Regarding the prevention of radicalization, the EU has specific instruments applied in foreign policy and relies predominantly on “soft tools”. In general, the EU aims to promote local ownership and empower local actors throughout the implementation of the programs. Until 2021, the main instrument in Central Asia was the Development Cooperation Instrument and the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) with its program Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism (STRIVE), realized in cooperation with the UN. Under the STRIVE project, a consortium of international actors assisted Tajikistan with the development of the national counter-terrorism strategy and action plan, with Tajikistan accepting 80% of their recommendations (UNCCT 2020). Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan participated in the Global Programme on Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration, receiving support to develop a national strategy in this issue. The strategies will be crucial in the upcoming years, given the increased number of returnees from Syria and Iraq, both women and men. In Tajikistan, additional training targeting returning children was conducted. In Kyrgyzstan, among other activities, the UNCCT supported the development of the Counter-terrorism Law. Both countries also cooperated on the border management projects realized under STRIVE. What is more, numerous projects are executed with EU funding by UN Women, the OSCE, or other international organizations. These include seminars in Jalalabad to educate women about the threat of violent extremism (Hedayah Center n.d.), roundtables organized by the EU in Tajikistan or seminars promoting the empowerment of young women (UN Women n.d.).

At the same time, the EU made a specific commitment to mainstream gender in its foreign policy. Since 2008, when it launched the Comprehensive Approach to the EU Implementation of UNSCR 1325 and 1820 on WPS, the EU has adopted several important documents. The most recent ones are the EU Action Plan on Gender, Peace, and Security (2019-24) and the EU Gender Action Plan (GAP) III, a comprehensive vision on WPS integration in the EU External Action. In 2015, seeing that this issue needs a further push, the first-ever EU-EEAS Principal Advisor on Gender was appointed. The EU attempted to show its leadership in this regard by adopting the resolution on Gender Equality in the EU’s foreign and security policy in 2020. These documents are supposed to show the internal EU commitment to gender equality and the external communication with its partners. Notably, they are a reaction to a critical study commissioned by the EU Parliament in 2017, criticizing the lack of concrete actions and budget for implementing the commitments (EP 2017).

In Kyrgyzstan, the EU plans to focus between 2021-2027 on human development, economic wellbeing, public administration, and transformation of the development system. In the current [Multi-annual Indicative Programme \(MIP\) 2021-2027](#), the gender components are incorporated in multiple objectives, and one objective focuses specifically on gender equality. The EU and its member states do not plan interventions in the CT/PVE and leave this thematic area to other actors, notably the UN, the OSCE, and the UK. This is in a striking difference compared to the previous [MIP for 2014-2020](#), where gender equality was mentioned as a cross-cutting issue and not as one of the specific objectives. In 2014, radicalization was omitted as well.

In the case of Tajikistan, sustainable economic development is named the number one priority for the [MIP 2021-2027](#). Gender is mentioned concerning educational and labour opportunities for girls and women and to close the existing gender gap. It further mentions the geostrategic importance of the country, notably the implications of its proximity to Afghanistan. As in the case of Kyrgyzstan, the EU is not the implementer. The objectives remain similar as in the [2014-2020 MIP](#). Security and violent extremism are notably missing from both documents.

Under IcSP, the official website lists 8 projects realized in Kyrgyzstan and 7 in Tajikistan. Nevertheless, only one project in Kyrgyzstan is listed under the category CT/PVE, and none fit the WPS theme. While these classifications are simplified and do not necessarily reflect the true nature of these projects, they serve as an illustration of what many experts have been claiming - on-the-ground implementation is lagging behind policy commitments, the number of concrete initiatives coming from the numerous documents remains low and the policies do not reflect the local realities (Desmidt, 2021). In addition, there are no monitoring mechanisms, and not all implementing actors agree on the priorities (Almqvist, 2021).

On a practical level, in compliance with the EU objective to support a resilient society, the CSO in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the key implementers of the national strategies. The EU in Central Asia notably funds PVE-related and PVE-relevant activities: in other words, activities that are not directly linked to security and focus on development instead. This explains the lack of security-related activities in the MIP. Instead, it focuses on development and education, providing output gender indicators. This strategy is likely to be successful - on the one hand, the EU stays in its comfort zone of normative power, leaving hard security issues to Russia and China. On the other hand, it does not confront the governments that often prefer a vague, yet repressive CT/PVE legislation that might go against EU values and principles (Djuma 2020). Most importantly, an approach based on long-term economic growth and stability is likely to be successful in the long term, if the policy dialogue between the EU and the governments is successfully launched.

It should come as no surprise that despite the inclusive narrative, local CSOs have little agency vis-à-vis the donors (Pierobon 2021). Research from both countries shows that local actors adapt and reinterpret their objectives to meet the requirements of the EU funding mechanisms (Pierobon 2021). While this is a general challenge experienced in any context, the EU has a chance to change it. It was announced in 2021 that a new financial instrument NDICI-Global Europe would replace and merge the previous external financial instruments

that the EU used until 2020. Together with the new GAP, they open new possibilities for new gender-specific CT/PVE activities funded or implemented by the EU. Finally, the EU should lead by example and make sure it puts its words into action also internally.

CONCLUSION

A gender-inclusive approach is central for designing preventive measures, as it provides insights into the different experiences men and women have facing radicalization. Such a perspective sheds light on the differences in opportunities, constraints, resources and positions in the power structure that can turn into drivers of radicalization. Acknowledging women's agency - their active participation beyond victimhood - is crucial for designing preventive measures.

We argue that a gender-sensitive approach should be better incorporated in the existing CT/PVE strategies. The whole of society approach that includes women in the design and the implementation of policies is a unique and sustainable way to prevent radicalization. We further argue that the EU's involvement can be beneficial for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as well as for the EU itself. The two Central Asian republics can benefit from funds aimed at stimulating civil society and preventing an increase in radicalized youth that can be an important obstacle to security and development. For the EU, it is a possibility to balance out the presence of China and Russia in the region of their traditional dominance and to offer a new perspective on security and PVE - the so-called soft, or non-coercive perspective.

The deteriorating security and humanitarian situation since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan shed light on the challenge of fighting radicalization in the region. Radicalization is a complex process with multiple triggers of political, economic, ideological, religious, social, and psychological character. The effective countermeasures encompass development and governance components, but most importantly, both women and men. Moreover, meaningful participation of women in CT/PVE policies, be it during the design phase or as participants, is the only way to fight radicalization caused by marginalization, injustice, and socio-economic inequalities. Appointing women in decision-making positions can further decrease radicalization and open new avenues for CT measures.

The ongoing war in Ukraine is already having repercussions on the situation in Central Asia, as the regional economies are closely linked to the Russian one. The economic crisis caused by Western sanctions will spread to Central Asian economies. What is more, labour migrants in Russia will not be able to support their families as much as in the past. The upcoming economic hardship can lead to political instability that serves as a fertile ground for further radicalization and extremism. Meaningful and timely intervention, targeting both women and men, can prevent further deterioration of regional stability and bring sustainable peace and security. Continuing instability in the region is likely to prove that long-term strategies based on soft security and the whole of society approach will bring tangible solutions.

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