

UN peacebuilding projects and preventing violent extremism in Central Asia

A paper presented at the *Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) Annual Conference, University of Regina, Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, May 30 - June 1, 2018.*

Chuck Thiessen¹

Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University

Abstract

This paper examines the consequences of the recent adoption of ‘preventing violent extremism’ (PVE) as the overarching conceptual framework for the development of UN peacebuilding projects in Kyrgyzstan (referred to here as the ‘PVE turn’). Emerging peacebuilding projects in Kyrgyzstan are aligned with the UN Secretary General’s ‘Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism’ (2016), and are moving away from previous efforts to improve majority-minority ethnic relationships following the violent clashes of 2010 towards countering the involvement of citizens in global terrorism and ISIS. This paper’s discussion contributes to an evolving body of scholarship on the transference of peacebuilding norms across levels of intervention and whether global prescriptions for PVE align with conceptions of peace and security held by local governments, civil society, and populations in conflict-affected countries. This paper bases its findings upon a collaborative ‘learning history’ process of reflection and interviews with policy-makers and implementers of PVE at UN Headquarters in New York and in Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek & Osh city/region). A ‘learning history’ process brings the history of UN project development and implementation to life as it charts and dissects the experiences of those involved. Data analysis has revealed significant definitional ambiguity inside the PVE turn, competing perspectives regarding the perceived impetus for the PVE turn, and uncertainty over the explanatory drivers of radicalization and violent extremism within the UN system and its governmental counterparts in Kyrgyzstan and New York.

Introduction & context

Following the violent rebellion in April 2010 that deposed the Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the Kyrgyz transitional government struggled to stabilize Kyrgyz politics and society. This instability was partially responsible for the June 2010 violence that broke out in southern Kyrgyzstan and left hundreds dead and forced tens of thousands to flee. Southern Kyrgyzstan borders Uzbekistan, and is home to a significant Uzbek population, Kyrgyzstan’s largest ethnic minority.² Motivating the violence were social exclusion and inequality, ethnic divisions, ineffective governance, and disruptive competitions for power in the southern regions and cities.³ Following the June 2010 events local society has remained deeply divided

¹ Chuck Thiessen, Research Fellow in Peacebuilding – Email: chuck.thiessen@coventry.ac.uk; chuck.thiessen@gmail.com

² In 2014, the demographics of Kyrgyzstan were approximately Kyrgyz - 73%, Uzbek - 14%, Russian - 6%.

³ Megoran, N., Satybaldieva, E., Lewis, D., & Heathershaw, J. (2014). Peacebuilding and Reconciliation Projects in Southern Kyrgyzstan (Working Paper): SIPRI/Open Society Foundations.

along ethnic and regional lines with lingering social division, mistrust, and segregation. Further, local and central governments (including the law enforcement and justice structures) continue to struggle to regain the trust and confidence of local populations across Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the south.⁴ The memories of the 2010 events continue to affect the daily lives of citizens, and a sense of injustice prevails.

As part of a broader international response to the violence, the UN system, through the Immediate Response Facility (IRF) of the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), implemented a suite of projects during 2010-13 aimed at youth empowerment, women's networks, and water user associations to help prevent a relapse into violent conflict. In 2011 further funding was approved by the Secretary General which contributed to projects aimed at justice administration, media capacity, water-based resources and reconciliation, women and youth, and 'infrastructures for peace'. Then in November 2012 the UN Secretary-General approved a request from the President of Kyrgyzstan to provide additional support through the PBF under its Peacebuilding and Recovery Facility (PRF) to engage with lingering long-term peacebuilding needs, and a large programme was implemented during 2013-16. PRF projects focused on preventing the resumption of inter-ethnic conflict by supporting local dispute resolution, reducing violence in local communities, police and oversight group reform, ensuring representation of youth, women and ethnic minorities in police and governance institutions, encouraging youth mobilization across ethnic lines, establishing citizen's trust in local governance institutions, police, and national state institutions, working with religious leaders and national media and facilitating the development of positive dispositions between citizens with different ethnic identities.

Concurrent to the implementation of the PRF projects, important national and international changes have occurred – first, there was a growing awareness of deepening Islamic religiosity across the country - especially amongst the minority Uzbek population. These perceptions coincided with perceptions of heightened threats of violent extremism across Kyrgyzstan. Most prominently, Kyrgyz government authorities claim 803 citizens of Kyrgyzstan have travelled as foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq (often through Turkey or Russia) and continue to return. Further, several prominent terrorist attacks in Kyrgyzstan, the United States, Turkey, Sweden and Russia have been committed by citizens of Kyrgyzstan⁵ or by individuals who have spent significant time in the country. In most cases, perpetrators were shown to be from the minority Uzbek population in the southern region of the country.

In response, and in contrast to previous PBF programming, the UN system has decided to continue its PBF-funded programme of peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan (2018-2021) and has adopted a framework of 'prevention' or, more specifically, 'preventing violent extremism' (PVE) as a driving strategic guideline inside its broader 'sustaining peace' initiative. The UN system in Kyrgyzstan has, thus, detected local areas 'prone to violent extremism' to implement projects that build community resilience to violent extremist ideologies, including those exploiting faith/religion, through education-based programming, all with a special focus

⁴ It is also important to note that Kyrgyzstan has developed along different trajectory than its Central Asian neighbours – it operates as a functional parliamentary democracy that has become known for an open political climate that allows for political dissent, and has witnessed largescale collective citizen action, especially at the central political level, motivated by necessary political reform and removing leaders.

⁵ We need to be careful with labels here – citizens of Kyrgyzstan are not necessarily ethnically Kyrgyz.

on women and children. UN PVE programming aims to better equip state authorities to structure their PVE policy actions and build their expertise on violent extremism in the law enforcement sector and in the judiciary, including the inclusion of women at the senior levels of the national security architecture. In related fashion, programming will also focus on prison system reform including preventing radicalization inside prisons by separating ‘extremist’ prisoners from the rest of the prison population and bolstering rehabilitation and re-socialization/probation programmes to prevent recidivism.

This turn towards PVE programming is not unique to Kyrgyzstan - this strategic focus aligns with the UN Secretary General’s *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* (2016)⁶ and with current priorities in international interventions that are imagined to address the growing threat of terrorism undermining Western conceptions of peace, security and development.⁷ Flagship UN agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have begun to integrate PVE as a foundational concept into their development programming.⁸ The PBF is, apparently, on a similar journey to UNDP and other UN humanitarian and political agencies. UN evolutions also align with numerous national-level debates across the globe over the promotion of PVE to address perceptions of increased extremist violence – including the UK’s PREVENT policy initiatives and sister initiatives in most other Western nations.

Understanding this turn towards PVE programming across the UN peacebuilding architecture is the primary objective of this paper. I root my qualitative exploration of the PVE turn in one national case study – UN peacebuilding project development in Kyrgyzstan in 2017-18. I next outline my underlying research questions, followed by a brief outline of some components to the theoretical background behind this investigation of the PVE turn in peacebuilding. Next, I describe the methods used to access the perceptions and beliefs of those closest to the action in the UN system – peacebuilding leaders at multiple locations in Kyrgyzstan, and (upcoming – April 2018) at UN Headquarters in New York. Finally, I present the initial findings followed by some discussion and conclusions, paying special attention to the contradictions of UN PVE interventions for the promotion of positive peace inside the lingering ethnic disparity in Kyrgyzstan.

Research questions

This turn towards PVE-focused international peacebuilding intervention is certainly curious, and has yet to be explicitly problematized in the academic literature on international peacebuilding. Is PVE a new tangential path being travelled by the international intervention community in its quest for civilian protection, or does PVE simply provide clarity to the necessary (and predictable) evolution of the (neo)liberal peacebuilding path as it journeys into deeper forms of protection of Western interests and security?

⁶ *Plan of action to prevent violent terrorism, Report of the Secretary-General*, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674, accessed 16 March 2018.

⁷ According to the Institute for Economics and Peace report *Global Terrorism Index: Measuring and understanding the impact of terrorism* (2017) two-thirds of countries across the globe experienced a terrorist attack in 2016.

⁸ UNDP, 2018, *Improving the impact of preventing violent extremism programming: A toolkit for design, monitoring and evaluation*, Oslo: UNDP Oslo Governance Centre.

I will begin the journey towards understanding this turn from inter-ethnic issues towards PVE by featuring the following question:

How do peacebuilding leaders in Kyrgyzstan and New York connected to UN project work (those closest to the action) understand, theorize, and justify the shift in UN peacebuilding intervention strategy away from an explicit focus on the inter-ethnic discord/violence and towards PVE as a basic priority (henceforth known as the ‘PVE turn’)?

To answer this question, I have followed the strong lead of my participants, who revealed a variety of variables that they believe are essential for understanding the peacebuilding turn to PVE. The following questions will be used to structure the presentation of findings later in this paper.

- What is the nature of the definitional ambiguity regarding key themes inside the PVE turn - radicalization, (violent) extremism, and terrorism?
- What is the impetus for the PVE turn in Kyrgyzstan? Where does the strategy/idea come from?
- What are the explanatory drivers of radicalization and violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan?

Theoretical Background (incomplete – summaries only)

This section backdrops the data analysis to follow with a summary of some theoretical literature that speaks to the PVE turn in international peacebuilding policy and practice. In grounded theory fashion, these areas of theory will be expanded according to the findings that emerge from the research below.

The growing critique of liberal interventionism – This body of literature problematizes the commissioning (by liberal democracies in the North/West) of external military, development, peacebuilding and statebuilding interventions in conflict-affected countries.⁹ In relation to this paper, this body of literature provides a philosophical critique of the underlying values of the (neo)liberal peacebuilding project and its cohabitation and support for the War on Terror and new modes of influence including countering and preventing violent extremism (CVE/PVE) that have “given liberalism an aggressive face in global politics”¹⁰ and spurred on questions as to its ability to legitimately carry conceptions of human rights and security into ‘unruly’ contexts. Further, War on Terror, CVE, and PVE modes of influence have motivated another critique – that North/Western peacebuilding intervention continues the colonial and imperialist project in the developing world, albeit masked by the language of ‘rescue’ as they use local security intervention to secure their home countries in the North/West.¹¹ As such, liberal interventionism achieves, at best, a

⁹ Mac Ginty R. 2013, *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding*. London: Routledge; Mac Ginty R. 2012, 'Routine Peace: Technocracy and Peacebuilding' in *Cooperation and Conflict* 47: 3: 287-308; Richmond O. 2010, *Palgrave Advances in Peacebuilding: Critical Developments and Approaches*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan;

¹⁰ Lidèn K., Mac Ginty R. & Richmond O. 2009, 'Introduction: Beyond Northern Epistemologies of Peace: Peacebuilding Reconstructed?' in *International Peacekeeping* 16: 587 - 598.

¹¹ Jabri V. 2010, 'War, Government, Politics: A Critical Response to the Hegemony of the Liberal Peace' in: Richmond O (ed.) *Palgrave Advances in Peacebuilding: Critical Developments and Approaches*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan: 58-73; Williams A. 2010, 'Reconstruction: The Missing Historical Link' in: Richmond O

virtual peace – recognized primarily by donors to the intervention system while void of meaning for many in the conflict-affected context.¹²

The securitization of peacebuilding and development – This body of literature problematizes the securitization of external liberal interventions across the globe – specifically the way that external governments project aid, development and peacebuilding intervention as fundamentally political in nature.¹³ Conceived of as a political project, international intervention assistance is reformed and constructed to align with the imperatives and values of the liberal global governance order in service to North/Western wealth and power advantage. Thus, a focus on PVE radicalizes interventions as it attempts to regulate the radicalization of ‘unruly’ and ‘dangerous’ local populations by ‘getting inside the head to govern the hand’.¹⁴

Norm formation/diffusion – The literature on the formation and cascade of international norms (such as the PVE turn in peacebuilding) in world politics considers the way local agents accept, revise, or delete foreign norms to fit local contexts and consciousness – referred to as localization, or the manner in which contested norms are settled at the local level.¹⁵ This body of literature discusses how international norms pass through a predictable life cycle on their journey towards meaningful influence.¹⁶ Further, the ‘liberal democratic peace package’ dropped into conflict-affected contexts through peacebuilding interventions relies on effective norm diffusion inside encounters between international actors and domestic counterparts that are shaped by the power relations between these actors.¹⁷

Theories of radicalization – The research on ‘radicalization’ speaks to the PVE turn in international peacebuilding by differentiating between lines of inquiry that focus on extremist beliefs and others that focus on extremist behaviour.¹⁸ The definitional ambiguity between belief and behaviour foregrounds current debates amongst peacebuilding

(ed.) Palgrave Advances in Peacebuilding: Critical Developments and Approaches. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan: 58-73.

¹² Richmond O. & Franks J. 2007, 'Liberal Hubris? Virtual Peace in Cambodia' in *Security Dialogue* 38: 27-48.

¹³ Duffield M. 2002, 'Social Reconstruction and the Radicalization of Development: Aid as a Relation of Global Liberal Governance' in *Development & Change* 33: 5: 1049; Duffield M. 2007, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples*, Malden, MA: Polity; Monaghan J. 2016, 'Security Development and the Palestinian Authority: An Examination of the ‘Canadian Factor’' in *Conflict, Security & Development* 16: 2: 125-143; Weiss T.G. 1999, 'Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action' in *Ethics & International Affairs* 13: 1: 1-22.

¹⁴ Duffield M. 2002, 'Social Reconstruction and the Radicalization of Development', p.1067.

¹⁵ Acharya A. 2004, 'How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism' in *International Organization* 58: 2: 239-275.

¹⁶ Finnemore M. & Sikkink K. 2005, 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change' in *International Organization* 52: 4: 887-917.

¹⁷ Björkdahl A. & Gusic I. 2015, '‘Global’ Norms and ‘Local’ Agency: Frictional Peacebuilding in Kosovo' in *Journal of International Relations and Development* 18: 3: 265-287; Björkdahl A. & Höglund K. 2013, 'Precarious Peacebuilding: Friction in Global–Local Encounters' in *Peacebuilding* 1: 3: 289-299.

¹⁸ Neumann P.R. 2013, 'The Trouble with Radicalization' in *International Affairs* 89: 4: 873-893.

practitioners in Kyrgyzstan as reported in this paper. This research also complexifies debates around the diversity of paths individuals and groups travel toward extremist violence.¹⁹

Methods

To answer the overarching research question above, I have adopted a qualitative ‘learning history’ methodology that also relies upon face-to-face semi-structured interviewing. During October-November 2017 I visited Bishkek and Osh, Kyrgyzstan to conduct the first phase of data gathering, with a special emphasis on new PBF-funded peacebuilding projects being developed at the time. I entered the research process not knowing about relevant strategic shifts inside proposed peacebuilding projects, but very quickly realized the ‘hot’ nature of the PVE turn in the UN system. I, thus, revised my questionnaire accordingly. To begin with, I conducted 32 semi-structured face-to-face interviews, that included 42 people from the UN system, Kyrgyz government counterpart institutions and civil society implementing partners

The second part of data gathering incorporated a ‘learning history’ process of reflection in the form of a participatory workshop to which most UN and NGO interview participants were invited. This workshop served two purposes, to validate my initial interpretations of interview narratives and, second, to allow these participants to reflect upon initial findings and provide further insights as they reflected upon their personal and institutional experiences with the themes under investigation.

There are some limits to the data and interpretation utilized in this paper since data gathering is not yet completed. A 2nd phase (April 2018) of data collection gathered the perspectives of the UN peacebuilding staff in New York to situate and compare the experience of peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan with global peacebuilding perspectives across numerous conflict-affected contexts. Interview questions focused on international peacebuilding norms and their influence in local contexts and the emergence of PVE as an important peacebuilding theme at multiple levels.

Findings

The objective of this research is to contribute to a better understanding of the ‘PVE turn’ in international peacebuilding and how this shift in priorities affects the multi-level formation (international, national, regional, local sites) of peacebuilding projects in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere. In particular, the presentation of findings in this section will explore the manner in which UN peacebuilding project development processes in Kyrgyzstan have grappled with evolving thematic priorities of the UN peacebuilding system, broadly construed.

1. Theoretical and definitional ambiguity

I start by reporting on an issue that weaves its way through other thematic areas below, perhaps putting the entire peacebuilding enterprise on shaky ground. The issue is that various actors, at multiple levels, define and conceptualize key themes inside the PVE turn in a variety of ways. This issue was highlighted by a strong majority of respondents in Kyrgyzstan who, before reflecting on examples of definitional ambiguity, described a

¹⁹ Borum, R., 2011. Radicalization into violent extremism I: A review of social science theories. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 4(4), p.7; Clark McCauley & Sophia Moskalenko (2008) *Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism, Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20:3, 415-433, DOI: 10.1080/09546550802073367

peacebuilding milieu unprepared to engage with the (naturally) wide variation in how actors understand fundamental themes inside the PVE turn.

I begin with one of the strongest findings of the research - a strong majority of respondents highlighted the struggle to define key themes and move forward with common understandings of how to use the terms radical/radicalization, extremist/extremism, violent extremism, and terrorist/terrorism. Each of these terms held a wide range of meanings as expressed by interviewed intervenors – dissonance was especially noticeable between the UN respondents and local government counterparts. The following table provides a sample of some of the definitional ambiguity that the research uncovered:

Table 2: A definitional spectrum: Some representative examples shared by respondents

	Radicalization	Extremism/ radicalism	Violent extremism	Terrorism
UN	A process of changing beliefs	An ideology/belief that is held freely; however, programming may aim to alter beliefs	Acting violently upon extremist beliefs	Uses selectively since meaning is politically loaded; prefer the term violent extremism
Government	Changing religious beliefs	An indictable offence (and can be evidenced by holding ‘religious’ literature); actively recruiting to ideology; inherently has destructive/violent consequences	A tautology; makes no sense	An act of destruction against the government.
Local populations (reportedly)	‘Travelling to Syria’	‘Being a terrorist.’		A public violent act that injures/kills people or destroys property.

Some salient examples of disagreement are evident in the interview narratives. Numerous respondents (UN, government and NGO) opined that the term ‘violent extremism’ (as it is used in English and in translated Russian equivalent terms) does not resonate with government project partners, who dismiss the term as a simple tautology; government respondents insisted that extremism is naturally violent. To them, extremism (itself) has violent and destructive connotations – and indicates active recruitment of others to a radical ideology and violent actions that these ideologies insist upon. Thus, extremism, itself, is indictable in some cases (especially if religious extremism in traditions that have proven supportive of violence at previous times or in other contexts). To contrast, UN respondents sometimes framed their responses in terms of human rights, and were much more cautious/tentative in judging beliefs held in confidence by Kyrgyz citizens as violently extremist or indictable. Thus, they argued that a person shown to be extremist based upon their choice of beliefs should not be coerced to change or indicted. UN system viewpoints of

violent extremism overlapped with government viewpoints of terrorism. This certainly points to deep contradictions within the intervening peacebuilding community – how do they respond to extremism and extremist beliefs? Can and should intervening actors expect to coerce the viewpoints of citizens in areas that are outside the ‘norm’? Are citizens free to hold the beliefs they choose? And can citizens expect to be free of security services pressures if their beliefs do not result in violent acts?

As another example, respondents shared a variety of viewpoints on the association between religious beliefs and violent extremism. UN respondents were quite careful to temper their viewpoints to either omit references to ‘religious extremism’ or ‘Islamic extremism’ (keeping in mind that Kyrgyzstan is a majority Muslim country). To contrast, government respondents regularly revealed a distinct concern with deepening religiosity, especially amongst the ethnic minority Uzbek population in southern regions, and often discussed this religiosity in relation to violent extremism. However, it should be noted that this line of discussion was very sensitive to most respondents, and some carefully avoided the topic. The conflation of deepening religiosity with radicalization is a major finding of this research.

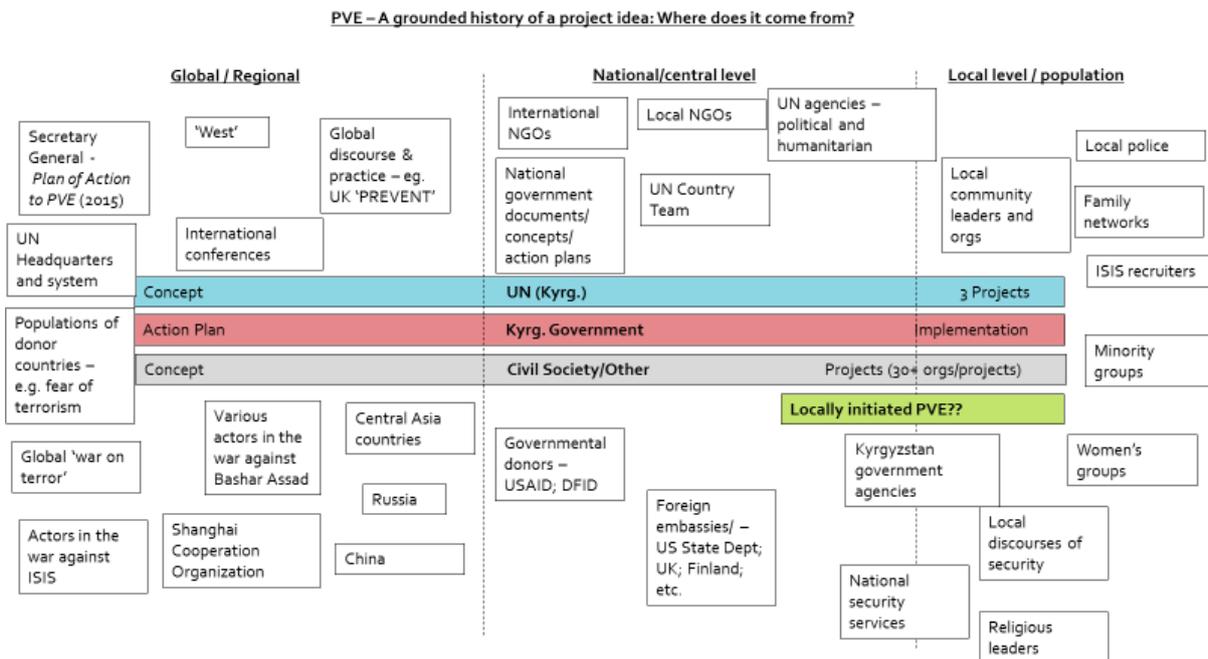
The accusation of Muslim radicalization is receiving a strong reaction in the extant literature. In a series of responses by John Heathershaw and David Montgomery to the International Crisis Group’s framing of violence in Kyrgyzstan as ‘religious’ in nature, they call into question whether ‘Muslim radicalization’ is a valid explanatory variable in the country or region.²⁰ They propose that there is an “international security discourse of post-Soviet Muslim radicalization in Central Asia” that is not borne out by reputable evidence. Instead, the myth of Muslim radicalization propagates the view that isolated counts of violent extremism are somehow related to non-violent forms of political Islam and accompanying forms of deepening piety, which serves to justify government repression of segments of the population choosing to become more pious in their expression and practice of faith.

2. Impetus: Who is driving the PVE turn in peacebuilding?

A second line of inquiry explored the respondents’ understanding of how the PVE turn in peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan (and sometimes elsewhere, globally) came about. What are the components to the impetus behind the (new?) focus on PVE? The responses of participants revealed a picture of the impetus behind this emergent project focus. The following discussion relates directly to the body of literature mentioned in the theoretical background that explores the transfer of norms through the international system (deletions, acceptance, revisions, etc.)

Respondents painted a complex and nuanced picture of impetus (summarized in the graphic below) – that was derived from international, regional, central government, and more local sources of influence. However, strong trends were evidenced in the narratives – as illustrated in the following graphic. Four streams of PVE activity are considered, with three clusters of ‘impetus’ that are discussed in turn, below.

²⁰ International Crisis Group 2015, ‘Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia’ in Europe and Central Asia Briefing: 72: 20; International Crisis Group 2016, Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalisation; Heathershaw J. & Montgomery D.W. 2014, The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics: Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs.



a. Global North/West/donor country impetus – A confident finding of this research is that UN peacebuilding practitioners and their government and implementing counterparts view the PVE turn as largely driven by external forces. Viewpoints of the external nature of influence zeroed in on the UN Secretary General’s dictates (as mentioned earlier) - a norm creation experience that has cascaded down through the UN system and spilt over into the broader intervention community. The UN system carries significant weight in contexts of intervention, and influences implementing partners and a wide variety of other actors. As a related example, a couple respondents believed that international conferences held in Central Asia that were sponsored by Western donor countries had helped shape the turn to PVE in peacebuilding policy and practice.

However, several participants viewed the cascade of PVE norms through the UN system as another strand of evidence of the weight of Western influence in Kyrgyzstan, and Central Asia more broadly. Western influence was viewed as serving the status quo of the global hierarchy of power and part of the external struggle for influence in Kyrgyzstan between the West (strongly represented by the U.S.) and Russia. Kyrgyzstan, now enjoys being labelled a ‘middle-income’ nation, which affords it more clout with international donors, but still remains dependent on external aid and has been cautious to jeopardize this flow of financial aid.

Western influence was also viewed as motivated by donor country security self-interests – primarily their concern for travelling and returning fighters for ISIS in Syria. In this regard, the PVE turn is the evolution of the global War on Terror and allows Western nations to bolster their national security through peacebuilding/development action in contexts prone to conflict. The scale and reach of recruitment of foreign fighters has alarmed donor countries, who are wanting to quell the phenomenon and confront returning fighters. As an example, one respondent believed the UN system was easily hijacked by the permanent 5 nations of the Security Council to do the ‘soft part of the dirty work for them’.

The PVE turn was viewed as ‘donor-driven’ by several respondents. A leader of a UN implementing partner NGO stated:

(translated text): I think because donors give money for that and everyone writes projects on that topic. Everybody now is writing projects on religion, even if they are not experts and not enough knowledgeable because donors are focusing on this topic.

The threat of travelling fighters and terrorism were seen to be motivating donor countries to invest in PVE across the globe. Then, these donor countries have been pushing for UN soft power PVE programming inside countries whose citizens were travelling as foreign fighters abroad and committing terrorist attacks across the globe. In related fashion, the PVE turn was viewed as motivated by the perceptions of tax-payers and constituents within donor nations – often motivated by fears of foreign terrorist attack.

b. Regional impetus – A couple respondents noted that the PVE turn in Kyrgyzstan was partially motivated by regional security agreements – a prime example being within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a Eurasian political, economic, and security organisation founded in 2001 that includes China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. As such, the security issues in regard to extremism within Kyrgyzstan can be understood in relation to concerns in the region – China’s business and infrastructure interests in Central Asia and its heavy-handed oppression of its minority Muslim Uighurs in neighbouring Xinjiang; Kazakhstan’s significant investments in the country and its own concerns with terrorist action on its soil and traveling fighters to join ISIS; Russia’s geopolitical manoeuvring in the region in relation to both China and the US and its ongoing pressure for pro-Russian policies in Kyrgyzstan; and Uzbekistan’s shared border with Kyrgyzstan in the Ferghana Valley, traditionally a hotbed for anti-government sentiments and action.²¹

c. National/Central governance of Kyrgyzstan – Another commonly referenced impetus for the PVE turn was the national government of the country. According to some participants, the national government has shown its concern for deepening religiosity and apparent radicalization (particularly in the southern regions) along with the stigma of being the source nation for significant numbers of travelling fighters for ISIS and international terrorist action by developing its *Action Plan To implement the Program of the Government of Kyrgyzstan on countering extremism and terrorism for 2017-2022*. This plan has been mostly developed in isolation from the international community, and lays out a plan for deepening its understanding of extremism and terrorism and effective countermeasures, addressing the risks of radicalization inside religious education and from missionary activity, capacity building for state authorities, improvement of preventive work with key target groups, the improvement of legislative mechanisms to counter terrorist and extremist activity, and the organization of counter-extremist/terrorist activities.

d. Local impetus – The last line of impetus recognizes local motivations for PVE action. Several respondents believed that local populations were broadly concerned with terrorist activity, travelling fighters and, more broadly, deepening religiosity in the country. Two participants also noted that there may (tentatively) be locally-inspired PVE activity

²¹ Zenn J. & Kuehnast K.R. 2014, Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan: Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace.

inside Uzbek communities that was entirely detached from international influence. In this, the respondents superficially recognized the complex web of actors at local levels – religious leaders, ISIS and other extremist recruiters, local police, family networks, community leaders, women’s groups/gatherings, and youth groups. One respondent raised an interesting point - international support for human rights activists and other ‘secular radicals’ may be inspiring religious extremist backlash.

3. (Mis)understanding the drivers of radicalization and violent extremism

A third area of inquiry that helps illuminate the way peacebuilding leaders in Kyrgyzstan understand the PVE turn is the engagement of these leaders with the ongoing (local and global) debate over the most relevant drivers of radicalization and violent extremism and the way UN agencies and their local government and civil society partners should respond to these drivers. This area of inquiry is significant given the necessity of identifying, negotiating, and agreeing on a theory of change to guide UN peacebuilding projects inside the UN system in Kyrgyzstan. Uncertainty regarding what is driving radicalization towards violent extremism results in project planning that may entirely miss the mark in terms of recognizing key social, economic and political factors that need to shape project activities and the indicators used to measure these activities. Respondents engaged with numerous potential drivers. I will, here, survey respondents’ narratives in four areas – discussed in order of their prevalence in the data.

a. Deepening religiosity and radicalization – A strong majority of respondents (UN, government, and NGO) grappled with whether religiosity²² is a reliable indicator for radicalization. While there certainly was some tentativeness regarding the nature of this relationship, respondents were certainly willing to consider the connection between religiosity and radicalization. It is important to condition the discussion that follows and point out that the phenomena of deepening religiosity is somewhat conflated with the problem of ongoing ethnic-based tensions since the Uzbek minority population is perceived to be more readily adopting conservative forms of Islam, which has created tensions with other segments of the population who remain attached to ‘secular’ versions of government and society. Thus, while inter-communal accusations of radicalization may be actually motivated by ethnic discord, accusers may, rather, scapegoat segments of the population who are adopting increasingly conservative tendencies (e.g. conservative clothing). In other words, religiosity becomes problematic as opposed to ethnic discord.

The narratives of UN respondents based in the capital Bishkek were out of sync with some of their colleagues in the southern regions of the country and with their government counterparts on this issue. Several UN respondents were careful to explain that ‘radical’ religious beliefs do not, in most cases, result in violence. According to these peacebuilders, radicalization was not primarily a religious experience. For example, one respondent shared:

²² Respondents were primarily referring to Islamic religiosity. However, one respondent (NGO) did report that there were some cases of radicalized Orthodox Christian teachings for youth in reaction to perceived Islamic extremism in the south of the country.

I think this is a sensitive issue. For example, [her UN agency] will not accept the term ‘religious radicalisation’, never ever, because they think this is the stigmatization of a particular group or a particular religion.

As I have reflected upon the conversations I had during the field research, this concern for avoiding stigmatization, while certainly important, is also suppressing important conversations within the UN system. For example, many respondents were careful to avoid the topic of ‘religious’ extremism, but as conversations progressed I sensed that ‘religion’ was, in fact, an important variable in the respondent’s conceptual framework regarding the experience of radicalization in Kyrgyzstan. Further, these conceptual frameworks often relied upon the overlapping of religiosity with ethnic tensions. Some respondents were willing to discuss the fact that the propensity towards religious conservatism and resorting to violence to achieve political change (including international terrorism and traveling as a foreign fighter) was centred within the Uzbek ethnic minority. A couple UN respondents who worked in southern Kyrgyzstan were willing to link religion and radicalization. These respondents observed a noticeable increase in openness to Islam as an alternative political framework for meeting the needs of minority ethnic populations in Kyrgyzstan. However, most UN respondents carefully avoided this conversation to prevent the stigmatization of particular identity groups.

Conversely, government respondents were often very willing to restrict the discussion of radicalization to ‘religious’ concerns. This points to an important area of dissonance with their UN partners. Government respondents’ narratives in relation to security, policing, prisons, and community action often centred around engaging with deepening religiosity of local populations, especially Uzbek populations in the south of the country.

b. *Ethnic discord and radicalization* – A discussion of radicalization and extremism in relation to ethnic majority-minority relationships builds upon the previous section on religion. We have, again, significant conflation of drivers here – this time between the ethnicity variable and the issue of political, economic, and social marginalization. Further, there was, once again, significant divergence in opinions between UN and government counterparts. One UN senior official summarized as follows:

Frankly speaking, I believe that there is State unwillingness to recognize how much the violent extremism is driven by ethnic unresolved issues. Myself, I worked for many years in [another UN intervention] and I have been shaped by everything under an ethnic and minority point of view. Here the perception of minority and ethnic rights is very limited. It is not a coincidence that the majority of foreign fighters or people radicalized are of a certain ethnic minority. I think there is a connection.

UN respondents described how perceived discrimination of ethnic minorities following the 2010 violence continued to drive members of these minority groups towards violent ideologies. These respondents mentioned disparities in justice services (e.g. most prisoners indicted for ‘extremism’ are Uzbek), inclusion in the police and military, and in terms of basic service provision. Some respondents felt that this disparity was more pronounced in mono-ethnic communities that sat right on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In response to these perceived disparities, ISIS recruiters leverage these perceptions to exploit vulnerabilities in local communities – to convince individuals (and sometimes their spouse and children) to contribute to the creation of the *Caliphate*.

c. Migration and the recruitment of foreign fighters – A third driver for radicalization and violent extremism is only beginning to be seriously considered by the intervention community in Kyrgyzstan – the fact that many citizens of Kyrgyzstan who eventually travel as foreign fighters with ISIS first travel as migrant workers to (mainly) Russia. This viewpoint represents a growing viewpoint in the literature and in research on Central Asia. For example, John Heathershaw has commented on the citizen of Uzbekistan who committed a terrorist attack in the New York in 2017 ²³:

We can't assume that someone seven or eight years ago left their home country with an intention of joining a militant group and launching an attack ... I think where we need to look for an explanation are some specific recruitment networks within Central Asian migrant communities and diaspora communities. Clearly something is going on there ... When migrants from Uzbekistan are stigmatised in their new country [Russia], especially when they have lost the family environment they once had, then they can be recruited more easily by militant groups.

The radicalization of economic migrants is a development issue in Kyrgyzstan – it is possible that if (primarily) young people did not feel the need to pursue the economic advantages of employment in Russia and, rather, remained at home due to beneficial economic opportunities, then the problem of radicalization and foreign fighting with ISIS would be significantly stymied. However, this theory of change was difficult for UN respondents to engage with. For example, one senior UN official said:

What is the implication of the fact that people joining to violent extremist groups are mainly migrants, what's our role on that? Are we as development agency going to Russia and try to do something that may not make a sense?!

His views were affirmed by other respondents, who noted that current peacebuilding projects do not explicitly consider how to extend their influence across borders and into Russia. Relatedly, respondents were unclear if the national government even tracked migrants that travelled for work abroad.

d. Poverty, economic marginalization and radicalization – A fourth driver is woven through the previous three drivers, but deserves some attention on its own – the role of poverty and/or economic inequality in motivating violent extremism. I begin this discussion by noting that the external research and commentary on the linkage between poverty and inequality and radicalization is contentious, but is beginning to evidence greater agreement that poverty cannot be considered a primary driver for radicalization in most cases. However, the situation is different for inequality – where a lack of economic, social or political opportunity may be a motivating factor leading toward violence. For example a recent UN report has concluded that marginalization by state authorities and resulting inequality is a significant tipping point that drives people toward violent extremism on the African continent.²⁴ This perspective is largely supported by the nascent research on Kyrgyzstan that shows that most traveling fighters do not emerge from impoverished situations, and sometimes are from better-off families and are well educated. However, respondents did

²³ BBC, 1 Nov. 2017 - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41834729>

²⁴ UNDP, 2017, Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment, <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/en>

combine their analysis of this driver with the ethnicity variable (again), to argue that ethnic disadvantage and economic and political inequality may be driving forces for violent extremism. There are, however, dissenters to this viewpoint. Some respondents working for humanitarian agencies within the UN system argued that poverty can be a driving factor, while the development and peacebuilding oriented agencies argued for a more nuanced viewpoint that did not directly blame poverty. This conceptual disunity within the UN system represents a significant barrier in front of developing a unified theory of change for future peacebuilding project work.

Discussion and conclusions - UN intervention, PVE and ‘positive peace’

This paper has taken an exploratory line of inquiry, inquiring how peacebuilders, themselves, understand and theorize the PVE turn in peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan. Some initial conclusions are possible at this point, with special attention given to the consequences of the PVE turn for the realization of ‘positive peace’²⁵ through international intervention.

Overall, the findings reveal the unstable footing on which the PVE turn in peacebuilding is based. This unstable footing is evident in lingering **definitional ambiguity** in terms of key terminology. When considered in the context of critiques of liberal interventionism, I note that definitions can justify or delegitimize foreign goals (and thus carry power), and extending ambiguity may facilitate the self-interested injection of international conceptions of peacebuilding, even when faced by disagreement by local counterparts. The findings featured disagreement between UN intervenors and government counterparts, which is quite concerning since Kyrgyz government counterparts can take a strong lead due to institutional capacity in this case. This phenomenon points to unfinished data analysis in relation to the literature on the cascade of norms through the international intervention system, and the way definitional ambiguity is resolved (or not), and the benefits/disadvantages for external intervenors and their domestic counterparts in extending or resolving ambiguities.

Definitional ambiguity, and especially the ongoing debate around targeting the intervention at ‘violent extremism’ as opposed to ‘extremism’, reveals deeper uncertainty over the scope and license of external PVE interventions. How far can external interventions shape the interior of transitioning individuals and cultures - local ideologies, religious beliefs, identities and other ‘matters of the mind’? Or should external influence be restricted to the behavioural exterior of transitioning individuals and cultures such as outward direct violence, in this case?²⁶ In other words, there is uncertainty over what the UN is up to – changing the beliefs that individuals hold, or restricting itself to preventing violence that may result from these beliefs. The government of Kyrgyzstan has made up its mind – it is regularly arresting individuals based on little else than having a religious pamphlet in one’s home that is written in Arabic.²⁷ Conversely, UN rhetoric stances are also quite clear – the system is concerned about ‘outward violence’ and not beliefs. But as I analysed the respondents’ narratives, I noticed a strong sense of the ‘right’ to shape minds, society and politics shines through.

²⁵ Galtung, Johan. *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996.

²⁶ McGuigan R.J. & Popp N. 2016, *Integral Conflict: The New Science of Conflict*: SUNY Press.

²⁷ An example of problematic police action in relation to radicalization shared by a couple respondents.

The willingness of the UN system to operate with definitional ambiguity reveals a willingness to compromise positive peace according to the logic of the PVE turn – an instrumentalist and prescriptive turn in intervention strategy that is fundamentally shallow in nature and is shy to address religious and ethnic disparity and injustice.²⁸ Rather, a ‘donor peace’ is cascaded along with PVE norms through the UN system down to local communities across the globe. This donor peace inside the PVE turn uses soft and sophisticated systems of pacification²⁹ that aim to reduce the supply of foreign fighters to conflict in the Middle East in order to bolster the (perceptions of) security inside donor nations. As a result, meaningful local peace becomes less of a priority. For example, there is very little evidence that radicalization or violent extremism is a dire concern for Kyrgyz society or politics (especially with the realization that radicalization may often be occurring in Russia inside migrant communities). Rather, the Kyrgyz government is primarily interested in dealing with returning fighters, which remains a minor issue across the country. Thus, the PVE turn may, ironically, project a more honest face to international intervention, whereby global theories of change for protecting the interests of Western donor countries openly embrace counter-terrorism/PVE strategies as they shape emerging development and peacebuilding programming in Muslim countries such as Kyrgyzstan. For example, a ‘donor peace’ in Kyrgyzstan is less interested in the political struggle of ethnic minorities than with the way these struggles threaten donor country security interests.

The respondents’ discussion of **impetus for the PVE turn** reveals a broad perception that it sits firmly in the lap of ‘the international’, and is formulated, propagated, and injected in local contexts in service to the security concerns of donor countries. As such, the PVE turn may be conceptualized as the soft underbelly of the War on Terror and other more coercive measures deep inside local contexts (including altering individual minds, and local cultures and systems) around the globe that, purportedly, improves the odds of ‘security’ for nations at the top of the global hierarchy of power/wealth.

However, the respondents do reveal a more nuanced and complex picture – significant impetus emerges from within local governments to suppress religiosity as an affront to traditional Kyrgyz society that remains attached to secularism, and suppress minority ‘extremist’ resistance to facilitate the dominance of ethnic Kyrgyz society. Government impetus is supported by local impetus - populist fears of uprisings by ethnic minorities - which is translated into government policy and action and, who, in turn, search for external intervention support for these populist fears. These two goals are intricately intertwined since the Uzbek minority population has shown itself increasingly open to adopting more conservative forms of Islamic society and politics. Dominant ethnic Kyrgyz society and politics has struggled to integrate this minority population that satisfies the tenets of ‘positive peace’, and the potential of political insurgency is viewed as an affront to national security interests and the dominance of ethnic Kyrgyz groups in controlling the direction of the country. Thus, international intervenors such as the UN peacebuilding apparatus may easily be co-opted to join in on the mission to quell the potential for political action on the part of disadvantaged minority groups, which serves to cement the status quo of power relations in the country. And, not surprisingly, this suppression of minority insurgence, can be easily

²⁸ Hagmann, T., 2014. Revisiting Peace and Conflict Studies. Challenges of Peace Research, Swisspeace, p.7.

²⁹ Hagmann, 2014, Revisiting Peace and Conflict Studies.

justified in terms of donor country security since most Kyrgyzstan citizens who commit acts of terrorism abroad are ethnically Uzbek.

Thus, we can conclude that the PVE turn has preferred top-down impetus, and drawn upon approaches that benefit the security of donor countries. This has required conceptions of peace that do not support subordinate groups to challenge the powerful, which does not bode well for justice for disadvantaged or minority groups. Conversely, intervention for positive peace supports challenges by subordinates – whose political struggles benefit from legitimization by the intervention community. But the PVE turn in peacebuilding values inherent blindness to the struggle of minority populations, and only addresses their plight with a concern for pacification to reduce the odds of minority group members joining jihadist groups abroad or joining jihadist groups planning terrorist activity on Western soil. Thus, the struggle of minority populations becomes commodified, and PVE intervention responses are inherently biased toward central government control, power and pacification. In this way, UN PVE peacebuilding project activity bolsters the central government in suppressing minority uprisings as opposed to constructively supporting the reduction of marginalization, inequality, and religious stigmatization. Thus, the meaning of positive peace is lost in the PVE turn – succumbing to the inherent contradictions of supporting dominant ethnic politics.

The findings presented above on the perceived **drivers** of radicalization and violent extremism is also unsettled – revealing competing, contradicting, and overlapping justifications for targeting religion, ethnic disparity, economic migration, and economic struggle as part of the PVE turn in UN peacebuilding. Most drivers cannot be isolated from others, but feed off each other, and a nuanced analysis is essential. For example, the conflation of ethnicity and religiosity is a recurring theme in the findings. But, in similar fashion to my discussion above on ambiguous definitions, uncertainty and disagreement in understanding these drivers may serve donor self-interests in service to the War on Terror – allowing cherry-picking and the convenience of targeting drivers that may cement the status quo of power and political advantage inside this ethnically divided country. The ability to prioritize convenient drivers allows for deeper securitized interventions that are less concerned with local positive peace than with the security of donor nations.

As an example, the government has chosen to wipe its discourse clean of considering unresolved ethnic tension as feeding radicalization and extremist activity. The UN peacebuilding system has followed suit, and public communication from UN agencies carefully avoids the topic of ethnic discord (although several respondents were willing to raise the issue behind closed doors) in the name of avoiding the stigmatization of ethnic or religious groups. However, this avoidance represses important conversations that need to occur before issues of disparity can be rectified. Once again, intervention for positive peace is hindered by UN mandates to support local governance and, thus, subtly supports local politics of exclusion. Ironically, UN-supported intervention is (partially) circumventing what local populations really need – active engagement with central government authorities on issues of religious conservatism, access to political services, and exclusion in the civil service, military and police. This circumvention may be motivated by an unwillingness to openly engage with contentious issues that may disturb the status quo – cold, negative, unsustainable peace.

The above argument is, somewhat, legitimated by the recognition of some respondents that the real locus of radicalization may not even be on Kyrgyzstan's territory, but is mostly occurring abroad amongst diaspora economic migrant communities (mostly) in Russia. Despite growing evidence for this driver, UN peacebuilding projects have struggled to justify concerted efforts to engage effectively with it. This reticence to instigate needed cross-border project activity further supports my argument that the fundamental contradictions of external intervention for PVE preclude the realization of positive peace for minority ethnic/religious communities in Kyrgyzstan and, in the worst-case scenario, fire further radicalization and anti-Western sentiment in (especially southern) Kyrgyzstan. Instead, as donor countries support securitized/violent peacebuilding methods of countering extremism (including killings, arrests, invading privacy, and surveillance) they hinder local societies in defining for themselves what peace looks like. Only by taking seriously the concerns of minority society and its religious needs in relation to the central government and its local representatives, can positive peace be realized. Unfortunately, it does not look like the PVE turn carries this interest.