


# Civil Society Perspectives: Engagement in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism in South-East Europe

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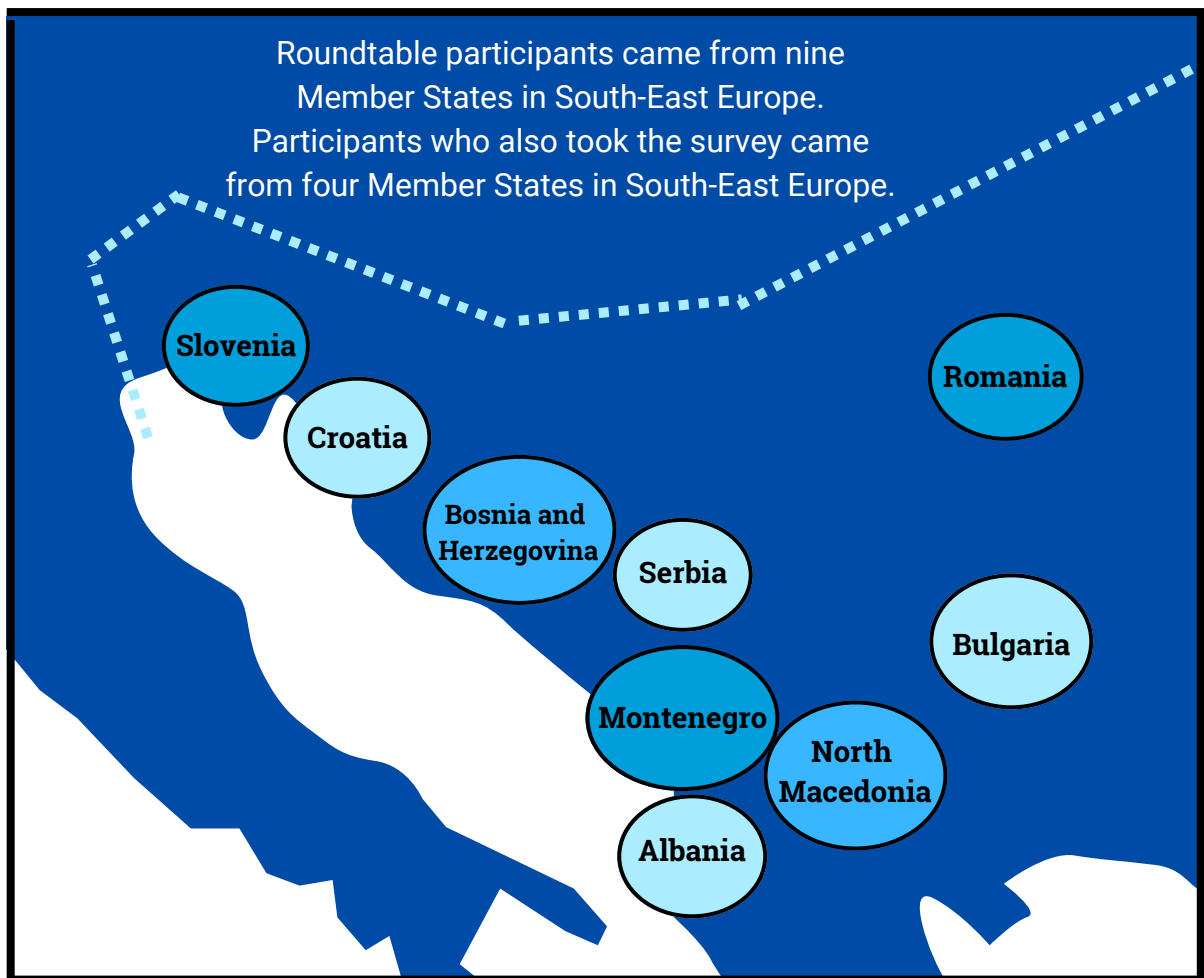
*The present report reflects the outcome of a hybrid roundtable on civil society organization (CSO) engagement in countering terrorism and violent extremism conducive to terrorism in South-East Europe, organized by the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) on 29 June 2022. Roundtable participants primarily consisted of CSO representatives from the region, who also provided inputs via a written questionnaire. The findings of this report do not necessarily represent the views or official positions of CTED, the Counter-Terrorism Committee, or any Committee member.*

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# I. Executive Summary

- Most States in South-East Europe – defined as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia – have adopted comprehensive national counter-terrorism strategies. Several of these existing strategies in South-East Europe recognize the importance of civil society actors for their implementation. During the roundtable discussion, participants shared a wide range of responses on the nature, scope, and scale of engagement during strategy development. Overall, there is increasing engagement and openness among Member States in the sub-region to engage with CSOs, sometimes under the influence of external donor agencies.
- However, this engagement remains quite uneven, with significant room for progress. Participants mentioned an insufficient number of consultative sessions during strategy development, inadequate local representation, and little opportunity to influence the content of policies and frameworks, all of which underscored the perfunctory nature of CSO engagement in some States.
- Some Member States have incorporated a multi-stakeholder approach in developing national strategies. International agencies and donors have provided training and capacity building for local CSOs, encouraging their participation in national strategies. In this regard, the role of the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) is worth highlighting, due to their ongoing engagement with civil society and respective Governments in the sub-region.
- Several States have developed a range of good practices in engaging with civil society actors in the last couple of years, which can be adapted as good practices both by other States in the sub-region and States outside the sub-region. These practices can be especially relevant for States in the sub-region with little engagement with CSOs on their national counter-terrorism strategies.
- Some Governments in the sub-region have increasingly recognized the role of CSOs in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts. P/CVE has become an integral part of discussions on national strategies – largely due to the scale of the foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) issue – demonstrating a shift in some States from their previous over-securitized counter terrorism approach. In these States, CSOs continue to participate and often lead projects on P/CVE, helping to prevent radicalization to violence, and delivering rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.



- Participants highlighted the importance of efforts to address terrorism in all its manifestations, including violence motivated by xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance, or in the name of religion or belief (XRIRB), and for that threat to be adequately reflected in national strategies. Ignoring the nature of this domestic threat is the biggest shortcoming in several States' National counter-terrorism strategies and Action Plans in the region.
- The misuse of counter-terrorism and countering terrorist financing laws has led to adverse effects. Participants mentioned facing an additional threat of surveillance from State institutions, investigations on countering finance of terrorism issues that impede access to funding, and a lack of due diligence in judicial processes. Some of the CSOs in the sub-region have been subject to investigations without a clear legal basis, which they felt were aimed at limiting the activities of civil society.
- Gender equality can increase resilience against violent extremism and radicalization to violence. It is essential to adopt holistic prevention measures which address the root causes of terrorism and violent extremism and engage key stakeholders through a whole-of-society approach.



## II. Background and Introduction

1. Drawing from three separate data sources (roundtable discussions, anonymized survey responses, and CTED's engagement with Member States in the region during assessment and follow-up visits conducted on the Committee's behalf), this report provides a snapshot of experiences and expertise from CSOs on the ground and identifies challenges and gaps in the development and implementation of national comprehensive and integrated counter-terrorism strategies in South-East European Member States.

2. CTED has been at the forefront of engaging with civil society and other partners to ensure a whole-of-society approach in countering terrorism and violent extremism. The report has been prepared in accordance with Security Council resolution 2617 (2021), in which the Council notes the importance of engagement with civil society entities, including community-based civil society, youth, women, and cultural, educational, and religious leaders, in preventing and countering terrorism, increasing awareness about the threats of terrorism, and effective ways of tackling them. Several Security Council resolutions have continued to affirm that States must ensure that any measures taken to counter terrorism



Participants in the OSCE Leaders against Intolerance and Violent Extremism training.  
Photo: OSCE

comply with their obligations under international law and uphold relevant human rights obligations. Based on this guidance, this report presents perspectives from women, youth, minorities, and human rights defenders and advocates, highlighting the necessity for inclusion of these groups in drafting national strategies.

3. The report will inform the preparations for the Counter Terrorism Committee's (CTC) Open Briefing on South-East European Member States' implementation of Council resolutions and the Committee's visit recommendations where key findings from the report will be presented. The report will also be presented and discussed in the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Compact inter-agency Working Group on national and regional counter-terrorism strategies, informing the work of relevant United Nations offices and related partner entities.

**"Human rights civil society organizations and defenders have a crucial role in integrating a human rights perspective in the violent extremism risk assessment underlying counter-terrorism strategies. As such, they can contribute greatly to the assessment of security threats and potential for human rights abuses."**



CTED hybrid roundtable on CSO engagement in countering terrorism and violent extremism conducive to terrorism in South-East Europe  
Photo: CTED

### III. Civil society perceptions on comprehensive and integrated national counter-terrorism (CT) strategies



Participants in the OSCE Leaders against Intolerance and Violent Extremism training. Photo: OSCE

#### CSO ENGAGEMENT, THREAT PERCEPTION AND ASSESSMENT

4. Given the current realities in South-East Europe, which faces various forms of violent extremism and radicalization to violence, the importance of CSO engagement in identifying and taking preventive actions towards countering terrorism is widely recognized. CSO representatives highlighted the differences among and within different Member States in the region related to the drafting and implementation of national counter-terrorism strategies. While in some States, CSOs contributed to the strategic and institutional framework in such strategies in varying capacities, in some

they were barely consulted during the process. Other States had typically taken security-sector focused approaches, although participants felt that they had made progress in being more inclusive and open towards CSO participation in recent years. Regardless of the scale and scope of engagement, CSO representatives at the roundtable were well-versed with field realities and the challenges faced by their societies, especially in countering terrorism and violent extremism.



5. Compared to other regions of Europe, South-East Europe has largely been free of terrorist attacks in the last five years. However, the recruitment of FTFs has been a cause of concern for some Member States in the region, with some countries having the highest concentration in Europe of returned FTFs and their families from the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq. Several Member States in the sub-region have focused on developing a range of comprehensive and tailored prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returnees. However, the threat perception and policies are not uniform in the sub-region. For example, the rate of prosecutions of Da'esh-affiliated women has varied across States. There have been different approaches in policies and programmes assisting and rehabilitating returning children of FTFs, which appear to reflect domestic political realities.

6. It is important for Member States to define the threat and develop risk assessments that reflect the realities of the ground. Groups associated with terrorism motivated by XRIRB are proliferating in the region, and the threat of homegrown terrorism and radicalization to violence remain high. However, in several States, including Serbia and Bulgaria, the Government's understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism and violent extremism has often been reductionist. In these States, the predominant focus is on highlighting (real or perceived) external threats from Da'esh or Al-Qaida related groups. Minorities from South-East Europe and migrants from conflict-affected regions, primarily the Middle East, are also deemed suspicious by association.



Participants in the OSCE Leaders against Intolerance and Violent Extremism training. Photo: OSCE

7. Survey participants also alluded to the influence of XRIRB-affiliated groups on the public discourse and in some instances, tolerance of state institutions towards these groups. As a result, these groups receive little attention when they incite hatred and discrimination against minorities and commit violent acts. However, a few States have made some progress on this issue, including in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where CSOs successfully advocated for the inclusion of XRIRB in the new draft national strategy, which was awaiting adoption at the time of the roundtable.

**"Religious communities have their own strategy to address violent extremism and have been a true partner in the process for many years."**

[1] Helsinki Committee, 2022: The rise of the right; The case of Serbia.

## CSO PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING NATIONAL STRATEGIES

8. Some Member States have made significant strides in engaging CSO and other partners in the development of national counter-terrorism strategies. In this regard, several positive aspects were mentioned by participants, especially in relation to gender mainstreaming. The involvement of a broader range of stakeholders – including youth, women, minorities, victims, ethnic and religious minorities, and local governance bodies – is seen to be crucial in developing a comprehensive strategy, given the unique expertise of, and potential contributions from, these groups.

9. In a few States, CSOs were also integral to the implementation process, where they brought a diverse range of expertise, including research on terrorism and violent extremism, capacity building of stakeholders, and service provision, while ensuring impartiality and accountability to all relevant stakeholders. CSO representatives from these States suggested that they can voice their opinions freely to the government on counter-terrorism issues. However, in certain political environments, there is little appetite or willingness to address all forms of extremism, improve existing strategies using evidence-based findings, or invest in combatting it.

10. According to participants, an institutional and legal framework within which comprehensive strategies and action plans can be designed, and the participation of motivated CSOs – who often have a strong understanding of key drivers and root causes of terrorism and violent extremism – are essential for successful CSO engagement. In this regard, it is not enough to conduct the process of drafting and implementing a strategy by Government agencies, but rather, develop a strong understanding of the evidentiary basis driving terrorism and violent extremism, probe strengths and potential shortcomings of the strategy in that regard, and apply it in the process of engagement with the community, in collaboration with CSOs.

**"If the human rights organizations had been consulted, the consideration of extreme nationalism originating on our soil would not be missing in the strategy."**

## OPPORTUNITIES, GAPS, AND CHALLENGES

11. Some CSOs reported that during consultations on the development of a national counter-terrorism strategy, they got an opportunity to present their field-based knowledge and evidence-based research, as well as bring new perspectives to enrich the process. As such, their current programmatic activities are in greater alignment with the respective national strategies and contribute to the achievement of the indicators of the action plan. CSOs also reported their intention to consult the relevant national strategy when designing and implementing activities related to preventing and countering violent extremism, and rehabilitation and reintegration issues.

**"Funding opportunities from the international community really helped mobilize civil society, who became more involved and vocal in sending their messages, concerns and the challenges in their local communities."**

12. In some States, participants suggested that while CSOs are expected to support the implementation of strategies, there are not enough opportunities to contribute in a meaningful manner during the development stage. Often, the strategy was not released by the Government for public consultation and feedback from all interested parties, thereby excluding several key stakeholders. Examples mentioned included instances where organizations were consulted very late in the process or not enough, making the engagement pro forma; times when CSO expertise on field-based realities was ignored and not reflected comprehensively in national strategies; and instances in which CSOs, including women's groups and human rights defenders faced harassment and intimidation.

13. Countering terrorism finance-related procedures and anti-money laundering measures have created significant challenges for CSOs, including by restricting their access to financial resources.[2] CSO representatives also raised concerns around issues of transparency as well as surveillance conducted by the Government, which were often emblematic of bad faith engagement or a lack of trust.

[2] Council of Europe: Expert Council on NGO Law, Non-Governmental Organizations and the Implementation of Measures Against Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (2022).

14. Participants highlighted how in several Member States, distrust between CSOs and national institutions has resulted in CSOs being excluded from engaging on national counter-terrorism strategies. The United Nations has repeatedly expressed concerns in this regard, including in relation to reprisals against human rights defenders, documented misuse of counter-terrorism measures against CSOs, and stigmatization of human rights defenders for engaging with United Nations bodies.[3] There is little understanding of the consequences, damages, and harms this might cause, which has impacted the overall engagement of CSOs with the Government.

15. Participants mentioned how international funding has enabled capacity building of CSOs in the sub-region, and as a result, organizations have been more involved and engaged in the process in recent years. Some also highlighted the varying dynamics between European Union (EU) and non-EU members in the development and implementation of national counter-terrorism strategies. The availability of funding is a determinant of the extent and nature of CSO engagement. However, this is often directed by international donor-led engagements and is sometimes not in alignment with the priorities recognized in the national frameworks.[4]



Participants in the OSCE Leaders against Intolerance and Violent Extremism training. Photo: OSCE

[3] Report of the Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights, Promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism, (2020).

[4] RUSI, Lessons learned from Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Western Balkans (2021).



## IV. Perspectives from women's and youth organizations

16. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by terrorism, violent extremism, and abuses related to counter-terrorism measures. There has been progress in unpacking the gendered dimensions of violent extremism and adopting a gendered lens in national strategies and action plans, a marked difference between the old strategies of a few States in the sub-region. There is a need to continue to conduct research to explore and understand women's complex roles in promoting violent extremist ideologies, especially among the XRIRB affiliated groups in the region.

17. Participants mentioned how women's organizations have been engaged in multiple capacities, especially related to rehabilitation and reintegration of FTF returnees, countering violent extremism and radicalization to violence in society, and ensuring gender mainstreaming in national strategies. Some CSOs in select Member States are actively engaged in developing this perspective and helping Governments in the implementation of National Plans.

**"We let right-wing extremism under the radar, and it is a threat to the society in South-East Europe."**

18. Some participants highlighted how in several countries, the national strategy neglected to bring in voices from organizations representing women, youth, or religious minorities. However, this is slowly changing in some States. For example, although gender dimensions were not included in the current North Macedonian strategy, authorities are trying to involve women's perspectives and be more active in including the gender perspective in the next iteration of its counter-terrorism strategy.

19. To promote a whole-of-society approach, integrating voices from organizations engaged in local levels of governance, as well as religious groups, ethnic minorities, women, and youth, would ensure proper representation and bring many of the crucial issues to the forefront, which are often local in nature. This would promote accountability and enhance empowerment of these stakeholders. Currently, several aspects of counter-terrorism measures in the sub-region can lead to greater discrimination and stigmatization of select ethnic and religious minority groups, which should be avoided in future strategies.

## V. Perspectives from human rights organizations

20. While highlighting the importance of integrating human rights in national counter-terrorism strategies, several roundtable participants believed that CSOs working on human rights issues have not been adequately consulted during the development of national strategies in South-East Europe. This has led to gaps in these strategies and an increased risk of human rights violations in counter-terrorism measures. As such, stronger efforts are needed to involve human rights actors, and harassment and intimidation of human rights advocates must be addressed. Survey participants also noted that CSOs should be able to engage in the implementation of the strategy at all levels, including capacity building of relevant authorities through promoting human rights education.

**"The legal framework for human rights organizations is there. What we need is a unified approach in its implementation."**

21. CSOs working on human rights are in a unique position to advise Government institutions on the nature of the terrorist threat (both external and internal), community responses to the same, risk assessment, including calibrating threats from overlooked groups, as well as advocating for individuals potentially targeted by disproportionate counter-terrorism measures. Such organizations can collaborate not only on planning and implementation of national strategies, but in monitoring, evaluation, and identification of lessons learned. However, the roundtable discussion highlighted how this kind of comprehensive engagement with human rights CSOs is rare in (and outside of) the sub-region and needs to be enhanced.

22. In a few States in South-East Europe, there is a lack of trust among public institutions in CSOs, including human rights organizations. In these contexts, any engagement on national strategies is rare, with participants feeling that any engagement was focused on optics, pleasing international partners, and aimed to silence criticisms from CSOs on the lack of engagement. The strategies are often security-centric and shrouded in secrecy and stakeholders are excluded from meaningful participation. As such, CSO representatives from those States reported being excluded during the process and facing hostility from State institutions at times.

## MEMBER STATE EXAMPLES

CSOs are essential for the effective examination of the root causes of terrorism and violent extremism as well as existing grievances in society, combat radicalization and promote resilience through their programming, enable public consultations of diverse groups, and foster social change.[5] Experiences from the ground highlighted the divergent range of cooperation between CSOs and Government institutions:

**Female representatives from Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina were positive about gender mainstreaming efforts and the nature of their engagement in the process, especially in the space of counter-narratives and the inter-linkages between toxic masculinity and violent extremism.[6]**

**In Bosnia and Herzegovina, recent years have seen robust engagement in national strategy development from various stakeholders, including religious communities (especially Muslim communities) and women's organizations, who have brought local expertise in developing the new strategy.**

**In Albania, CSOs with diverse backgrounds have good levels of cooperation with Government institutions. Several groups (including academic institutions) have engaged with the Government to work directly on PVE efforts and contributed towards the new national strategy.**

**Some States, including Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, have also conducted training of families of FTFs and successfully rehabilitated families returning from the Syrian Arab Republic. In some States with limited engagement, there seems to be positive recent developments, as more CSOs (including academics) have been involved, especially in the prevention pillar of PVE strategies.**

**One Serbian representative elaborated on their efforts to promote youth engagement in the decision-making process and promote inclusive and tolerant ideologies. Further, civil society was engaged to provide comments on national strategies, but only towards the end of the strategy development process.**

### **Shortcomings in engagement on national strategies included the following:**

- In one Member State, participants reported that only two CSOs had been involved in the development and implementation of the national counter-terrorism strategy.
- In another Member State, CSO involvement was not considered to be substantive enough.
- In one Member State, human rights organizations were not consulted in developing the strategy, which led to significant omissions with regards to radicalization in society.
- CSO representative from one State was not aware of any CSO engagement in the development of national strategies.

[5] OSCE, The role of civil society in preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism: A Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe (2018).

[6] Atlantic Initiative, Gender Ideologies: How Extremists Exploit Battle over Women's Rights and drive Reciprocal Radicalization (2021).

## VI. Recommendations

- National counter-terrorism strategies should be sufficiently comprehensive and integrated to cover, inter alia, all forms of radicalization to terrorism, based on the different ideologies and violent extremism present in the country.
- Developing and implementing national counter-terrorism comprehensive and integrated strategies should employ an inclusive process that engages all stakeholders in the society.
- Developing good practices that can provide guidelines on how CSOs can work collaboratively with Government agencies – while moving away from a securitized approach solely through a counter-terrorism lens – is crucial.
- CSOs need to be better protected and free from reprisals, their fundamental freedoms and the right to work freely upheld, and they should be treated as equal partners.
- National counter-terrorism strategies need to have embedded safety mechanisms to protect CSOs from harassment, undue pressure from law enforcement, or other forms of reprisals. CSO representatives suggested the UN should incorporate additional standards and procedures to ensure human rights due diligence in CT policies and programmes, including capacity building and monitoring and evaluation.
- CSOs bring a wealth of expertise and ground-based knowledge and can be a collaborative partner of the Government in its goal to counter terrorism and violent extremism. It is crucial for Member States to cultivate and strengthen that partnership.





**United Nations Security Council  
Counter-Terrorism Committee  
Executive Directorate (CTED)**



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