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Policy Brief

Prevention of Violent Extremism through Education in Central Asia

Education has a powerful role to play in long-term prevention of violent extremism by equipping learners with the right skills and competencies, increasing employment opportunities and empowering youth. This policy brief aims to provide a better understanding of Preventing Violent Extremism through Education (PVE-E) and the relevant policy interventions that could be taken.

What is PVE-E?

PVE-E consists of building learners' resilience to violent extremism and making sure that educational environments do not become a breeding ground for radicalization. In practice, PVE-E programmes consist in strengthening the capacities of national education systems—through the development of policies, educational content (curricula), teachers' competencies and teaching methodologies, as well as learning environments and strategic communications—so that they are able to build safe environments as part of national prevention efforts.¹

Key concepts

There is no agreed-upon definition of violent extremism. Defining the phenomenon remains complex, and in Central Asia is understood within the context of the **Shanghai Cooperation Organization** and Collective Defense Treaty policies. Moreover, a number of terms—violent extremism, extremism, radicalization and terrorism—are often used

interchangeably and understood differently by various entities. The following interpretations¹ offer general guidance towards these terms.

Violent Extremism

Beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals. Typically, 'violent extremism' also identifies an enemy, or enemies, who are the object of hatred and violence.

Extremism

Belief in and support for ideas that are very far from what most people consider correct or reasonable.

Radicalization

The processes by which a person adopts extreme views or practices to the point of legitimizing the use of violence.

Terrorism

A particular strategy adopted to achieve a political goal, which is singularly the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear.

Source: UNESCO (2017a)

The Global Education Agenda

The importance of education in Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) is highlighted within the global education agenda—Education 2030 or Sustainable Development Goal 4. In particular, Target 4.7 on Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Education is directly relevant to PVE-E, as it focuses on learners' acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies that can promote a culture of peace and non-violence.²

¹ UNESCO. 2017a. *Preventing Violent Extremism through Education. A guide for policy-makers.*

² UNESCO. 2016a. *Education 2030. The Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action.*

Globally, the importance of PVE is also highlighted in UNESCO and the wider UN's international normative frameworks including:

- **UNESCO Executive Board decision 197EX/ Decision 46** on education as a tool to prevent violent extremism.
- **UNSG's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism**, presented in December 2015 (A/70/674).
- **UN General Assembly Resolution on the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review** (A/RES/70/291, July 2016).
- **UN Security Council Resolutions 2280, 2159, 2347 and 2354.**

UNESCO's role

UNESCO's role with regard to PVE has focused on supporting countries to create the conditions for learners to build resilience against extremism and strengthen their commitment to non-violence and peace. This includes advocacy, policy guidance and capacity building. UNESCO is also represented in the working groups of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact,³ where it co-chairs the Working Group on PVE.⁴

In education, UNESCO's approach to PVE can be found in the very heart of its **constitution**—to develop peace in the minds of men and women—which has continued throughout the organization's history through initiatives and programmes on themes such as Peace and Human Rights Education, Learning to Live Together, Culture of Peace, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and Global Citizenship Education (GCED).

Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Asia

The drivers of violent extremism are diverse and multi-layered, however they can generally be grouped into two categories. First, push factors which refer to vulnerabilities and the external conditions that are conducive to terrorism and violent extremism.

Examples include poverty and unemployment, distorted knowledge about religion, misinterpretation of information and news, political disillusionment, and social exclusion. Though evidence also shows that a significant number of foreign terrorist fighters are from middle-income families, and have received education at upper secondary level and above.⁵ Second, pull factors which refer to the opportunities, individual motivations and rationales attracting potential recruits and which may be used to legitimize their use of

violence.¹ Examples include financial incentives, sense of political belonging and social acceptance, serving an influential and charismatic leader, and heroism.



In Central Asia, a number of these drivers have often been found to be combined among perpetrators of violent extremism. Those considered to be particularly prevalent in the sub-region include: identity, youth alienation and marginalization, social inequality, unemployment, low living standards, discrimination and humiliation, low levels of education and skills, corruption, and the political situation.

The state of Violent Extremism in Central Asia

Central Asia has faced varying levels of violent extremism over the last two decades.⁶ Between 2012 and 2016 for instance, there were 30 incidents in the sub-region, including eleven cases in Kazakhstan, ten in Tajikistan, and eight in Kyrgyzstan.⁷



More worrying is the growing number of foreign fighters recruited in Central Asia by extremist groups such as ISIS or Daech, with the latest available data

3 Formerly known as the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF).

4 UNESCO. 2018a. *Preventing Violent Extremism through Education in Central Asia: A Sub-Regional Capacity-Building Workshop*.

5 World Bank. 2016. *Economic and Social Inclusion to Prevent Violent Extremism*.

6 Kangas, R. 2018. *Redefining Extremism in Central Asia*.

7 Global Terrorism Database. 2019. *Search the Database*.

showing evidence of up to 4,000–5,000 fighters in total.⁸ In response to the phenomenon, Central Asian countries have developed national strategies for countering violent extremism,⁹ as well as adopting similar approaches such as offensive operations, law enforcement and information campaigns.⁸

Why is PVE-E an important approach to education in Central Asia?

Youth are the most at risk when it comes to potential radicalization as they are the main targets of recruitment strategies by extremist groups.¹ Youth currently make up over half of the population in Central Asia. Just under 10 per cent—one out of ten—of those of secondary school age are out-of-school.¹⁰ They also face a number of chronic issues in the sub-region, such as youth unemployment, alienation and disempowerment. Yet PVE-E not only benefits at-risk populations such as youth, it should target the majority of the population as well.

In addition to access to education, its quality also plays an influential role. The education system inherited from the Soviet Union includes teaching methodologies that are fundamentally built upon exclusion, along with outdated curricula and textbooks that do not promote the development of crucial skills and competencies.¹¹ Quality education is key to long-term prevention of violent extremism. Educational institutions and systems can have a dramatic impact on these youth, as they can create the conditions to stop the proliferation of extremist ideologies, while also increasing learners' resistance to indoctrination by groups espousing violent extremism. Schools are the most important place of socialization for children and youth to learn to live together peacefully, while teachers represent important role-models with a direct impact on the development of learners' minds, values and narratives.

How can education help address VE in practice?

Education is crucial to addressing violent extremism, with immediate and practical education interventions highlighted in UNESCO's **publications and guidelines**, developed both for **policy-makers**¹ and **teachers**,¹² which can be taken to tackle its urgent challenges.

Key to PVE-E is enabling learners to develop transversal competencies¹³ that will allow them to contribute to

building more peaceful societies. Within the context of PVE-E, some competencies can be considered as particularly crucial.

Transversal competencies that contribute to preventing Violent Extremism¹⁴

Cognitive	Socio-Emotional	Behavioural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical Thinking • Active Listening • Media and Information Literacy • Collaborative Problem-Solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy and Tolerance • Appreciation of Diversity • Self-Awareness • Emotional Regulation • Open-Mindedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assertiveness and Refusal Skills • Cooperation and Teamwork • Conflict Management • Non-Violent Resistance

Source: UNESCO (2017a)

For instance, developing the competencies of empathy and tolerance will make learners more understanding and respectful of others, while developing the competencies of critical thinking and perseverance will make them more resilient and less vulnerable to indoctrination. The ability to analyze information objectively, and through responsible use of new technologies, will also enable learners to better evaluate information to form their own views. These competencies will allow learners to also be more resilient outside of school where they may be exposed to a more complex environment.

Of particular interest in the information age is the role of **Media and Information Literacy (MIL)**, which constitutes a group of competencies as well as a competency in itself. MIL enables learners to critically



8 Fainberg, A. and Azani, E. 2017. *Central Asia Jihadism: Home and Abroad*.
 9 UNRCCA. 2011. *Joint Plan of Action for the Implementation of the United Nations Global Counter Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia*.
 10 UIS. 2017. *Rate of out-of-school adolescents and youth of secondary school age*.
 11 UNESCO. 2018b. *UNESCO Sub-regional strategy for Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. 2018-2021*.
 12 UNESCO. 2016b. *A Teacher's Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism*.
 13 These competencies have been given different names: 21st Century skills, soft skills, transversal competencies etc. For UNESCO's framework please see *UNESCO's report on Assessment of Transversal Competencies*.

14 UNESCO. 2018c. *Preventing violent extremism through education: effective activities and impact. Policy Brief*.

evaluate, assess, use and create media and information sources in a safe way.¹⁵ This is particularly crucial with regard to the Internet and social networks, the latter of which are increasingly being used for propaganda, recruitment and fundraising.¹⁶

Regardless of the terminology used to describe them, these competencies are all cross-cutting competencies for sustainable development, and have long been identified as the key to translating concepts such as a culture of peace, global citizenship, and of course PVE, into teaching and learning practices as well as outcomes.

Policy Context: what kind of policy interventions help prevent violent extremism in education?

Incorporating PVE in education requires policy-makers to mainstream transversal competencies at all levels of the education system through relevant policy interventions. UNESCO identifies key action areas for the effectiveness of PVE-E policies: policies for inclusion and diversity, pedagogies that strengthen resilience and constructive engagement, safe and supportive school environments, targeted measures for learners at risk, and stakeholder cooperation. The modalities of implementation for these action areas include approaches that are sector-wide, whole-school and curriculum-based, also involving teacher training and support, non-formal education, the community and partnerships.

In Central Asia, national strategies for countering violent extremism all recognize the role of education.⁹ However, a number of specific programmes and interventions have also sought to address PVE-E in various capacities. This includes the 'Kyz Zhibek Programme' for the prevention of extremist ideas amongst youth in **Kazakhstan**; piloting of lessons focused on MIL in secondary schools, media democracy camps, youth discussion clubs, and theater forums in **Kyrgyzstan**; a recommendation to establish a special course on 'Countering Extremism and Terrorism' at the S. Aini Tajik Pedagogical University in **Tajikistan**; and initiatives for youth development and realization of their full potential in **Uzbekistan**.

Notable examples from other parts of the world¹⁴ have also proven to be particularly successful, mainly due to the **effectiveness** of the pedagogies they have applied, and could potentially also be adapted to a Central Asian context.¹⁷ In **Germany**, the 'HEROES Programme' held workshops for young men from immigrant backgrounds to address issues including gender equality, violence and identity, resulting in improved competencies such

as critical thinking. In **Finland** the 'KiVa Koulu Anti-Bullying Programme', which uses lessons with role-play and discussions, was found to decrease bullying by over 50 per cent as well as creating a positive and safe school environment. In **Kosovo**,¹⁸ the 'Youth for Democracy and Peace-Building' programme trained five youth-focused NGOs to increase awareness of democracy and human rights among a 15-to-22-year-old population.

Policy Recommendations

There are a number of ways that countries in Central Asia can work to incorporate PVE-E as part of their education policies. UNESCO works closely with Member States to build resilience against violent extremism through policy interventions at all levels of the education system, and as part of dedicated projects and programmes. At a system-wide level, such policy interventions include:

- a. **Policy:** developing policies that mainstream transversal competencies in learners at all levels of the education system, as well as nation-wide career guidance and orientation programmes to empower youth and facilitate their path to employment.
- b. **Curricula:** integrating transversal competencies relevant to PVE (e.g. critical thinking, empathy, tolerance and perseverance) in curriculum content and textbooks, learning objectives, and extra-curricular activities.
- c. **Teacher-training and Teaching Methods:** ensuring that teachers are equipped with transversal competencies, and are able to transmit them to learners through experiential and engaging teaching and learning methodologies.
- d. **Learning Environment:** ensuring school-level initiatives that create a safe and positive school and classroom climate while involving parents and the local community, as well as initiatives for non-formal education.
- e. **Assessment:** ensuring that transversal competencies relevant to PVE are valued and assessed as learning outcomes.

At a sub-regional level, a number of policy options could also contribute towards PVE-E:

- Developing **country-specific plans** on PVE-E measures and approaches, along with sub-regional follow-up on their development and implementation.
- Creating a **sub-regional platform** for discussions and exchange of expertise on PVE-E.
- Creating a **sub-regional partnership programme** between schools and international organizations, within the context of UNESCO associated schools and clubs.

¹⁵ UNESCO. 2016c. *Media and information literacy: reinforcing human rights, countering radicalization and extremism*.

¹⁶ UNESCO. 2017b. *Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media*.

¹⁷ For more detailed information of these case studies, please see UNESCO's *Policy Brief* on effective activities and impact in PVE-E.

¹⁸ References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999)

