

**Vulnerability of labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan to engagement with violent  
extremist groups in Russian Federation**

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## **Abstract**

A number of scholars, including Noah Tucker in his USAID research report claim that migration is "the single most important factor for Central Asian recruiting to the Syrian conflict". Evidences given by such scholars often refer to a broader category of Central Asian migrants or to ethnic Uzbek and Tajik migrants. Little discussion exists in the literature on Kyrgyz migrants. This research asks to what degree the migrants' radicalization hypothesis is applicable to migrants from Kyrgyzstan? The research is based on interviews with 30 experts from various countries and with 15 migrants who are practicing Muslims. The report is rather discursive: it contrasts the opinions of experts supporting the Tucker's view and those opposing it. After "weighing" the arguments on both sides and taking into consideration experiences of interviewed migrants, the research comes to the conclusion that this hypothesis is not applicable to migrants from Kyrgyzstan. The research reveals ten strong factors that make Kyrgyz migrants more resilient to engagement with radical ideologies in Russian Federation. However, it also discusses some factors that do make migrants more vulnerable. The report then produces some recommendations on the basis of these findings.

## **Radicalization in Central Asia: definition and trends**

When we speak of radicalization in Central Asia, problems emerge already on the level of definitions. Olimova (2016), writing about Tajikistan, suggests that there is no consensus on the definition of radicalism: it usually implies intensified religiosity, emergence of new religious movements and political Islam, but, according to her, these are just elements of religious revival, not radicalization. Alimzhanov (2016) says that in Kyrgyzstan, different groups interpret radicalism differently: secularists and security forces associate radicalism with Islam, religious practitioners defend Islam and point to other more destabilizing factors, e.g. politics. He thinks that the lack of proper definition often results in conflicts between different groups in the society, between religion and state, and negatively affects the response measures and policies. Heathershaw and Montgomery (2015) further problematize the connection between religion and radicalism in the region. They suggest that radicalization in Central Asia is a myth, created and manipulated by the state to crack down on opposition and justify authoritarian policies and measures. They believe that the vast majority of religious clerics and practitioners are moderate and that linking growing religiosity of predominantly non-violent religious piety movements and traditional Islamic practices with radicalization creates and reinforces stereotypes and this is very counterproductive (2015). Olimova (2016) also thinks that stereotypes – particularly those about radicalization of migrants or about young people as potential extremists do not help; on the contrary, they make it difficult to understand the radicalization phenomenon.

Further problems with radicalization emerge when we look at statistics. The most commonly discussed figures when it comes to radicalization is the number of Central Asians who migrated to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The nature of research into such sensitive and secretive practices like violent extremism make it very difficult to produce reliable figures. Accordingly, what we get in various reports on radicalization in Central Asia varies greatly. Every country in the region has its own estimations of the number of radical groups and individuals. Reports by international researchers also vary quite significantly.

Noah Tucker (2015) proposes that overall, there are 20,000 foreign fighters in ISIS and they represent more than 90 nationalities. This is much larger than the number of foreign fighters in previous

conflicts<sup>1</sup>. Estimations on the number of Central Asian fighters range from 2,000 to 4,000 people. Lynch, et.al. (2016) suggest that Central Asian Muslims make only 5% of all Muslim population in the world, but they account for 20% of all foreign fighters in Syria/Iraq. Yet, they claim, "the per capita foreign fighter flows from Central Asia are lower than those from the states of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): Kazakhstan (1 in 72,000), Kyrgyzstan (1 in 56,000), Tajikistan (1 in 40,000), and Uzbekistan (1 in 58,000)" (p.9). Compare this to "Lebanon (1 in 6,500), Tunisia (1 in 7,300), Saudi Arabia (1 in 18,200), and Morocco (1 in 22,000)" (Tucker, 2015, p.9).

In Kyrgyzstan, the statistics on radicalization are produced by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) and State Committee of Religious Affairs. The IOM report (2016) refers to MIA statistics:

"In the ten months of 2015, according to representatives of law enforcement agencies, 294 cases of extremism were detected, 7,331 pieces of extremist material were confiscated and 239 individuals linked to extremism were identified and detained. At present, the departments of internal affairs have files on 1,846 individuals known for their extremist views. About 2,000 citizens in Kyrgyzstan support extremist ideology popularized by international terrorist organizations." (p.145)

IOM also refers to statistics on the number of Kyrgyzstani citizens who traveled to Syria or were engaged in recruitment:

"Eighty-six cases of recruitment of Kyrgyz nationals for participation in hostilities in Syria were identified in 2014, but in 2015 their number went up to 266. Furthermore, in November 2015 the Prosecutor General of the KR Indira Djoldubaeva reported that almost 500 Kyrgyz nationals, including 122 women, were in international terrorist organizations in Syria; however, in August 2016 the State Committee for National Security of the KR released the official information that the number of Kyrgyz citizens taking part in military conflict in Syria had reached 600 people." (p. 145)

Are these numbers high? Perhaps, they could tell us something if they were comparable to statistics from other Central Asian republics. However, as several authors believe, the figures produced by the national governments (including those in Kyrgyzstan) cannot be reliable because they often serve the agenda of the governments: in some cases, they are overestimated to justify strict measures, in other cases they are downplayed to show that everything is well in the country. So, in this report we prefer to cite some estimations, but not come to specific conclusions. As Heathershaw and Montgomery (2015) propose, it is better to acknowledge that we don't know, rather than pretend that we do.

### **Radicalization of Central Asian migrants**

One category of people claimed to be vulnerable to radicalization is labor migrants. According to Deniz there are several connections between migration and radicalization: extremism can be the cause of forced migration (direct or less direct); refugee/IDP camps can become fertile grounds for radicalization: recruiters can exploit local conditions/difficulties and refugees' limited mobility; and failure to integrate in the host country can lead to marginalization and then radicalization (2016). Sarkorova (2013) refers to Rahnamo who emphasizes the importance of identity search among Central

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Soviet-Afghan war brought to Afghanistan 5,000 foreign fighters, war in Chechnya 1,000, post-2001 Afghanistan 1,000, and war in Iraq 4,000 (Tucker, 2015).

Asian labor migrants in Russia, making them more inclined to affiliate themselves with a distant Islamic State in Syria.

Tucker (2015) argues that migration is "the single most important factor for Central Asian recruiting to the Syrian conflict" and "... recruits come almost exclusively from outside the borders of the Central Asian states" (p.11). Tough conditions for migrants in Russia and easy travel to Syria via Turkey from Russia make Central Asian migrants easy target for ISIS recruiters. Tucker argues that while at home, there are many mitigating factors that restrict radicalization. However, this changes with migration, which "breaks important community bonds for the migrants and removes them from positive mitigating factors – family, community, religious leaders, – that all work to prevent militant mobilization at home." (p.11). Migrants lose the traditional social control institutions and become vulnerable to other influences, including those of radical groups.

Lemon (2015) gives the figure of 80% of Tajik fighters as recruited in Russia. IOM study (2016) describes that Central Asian migrants are often recruited by migrants from the Northern Caucasus (Chechnya and Dagestan) whom they meet in the mosques or working places. Report claims that Chechens and Dagestanis can provide some form of protection for Central Asian migrants and this is an important factor in the hostile Russian environment. Often, such protection comes with engagement in some form of criminal activities, which also eventually might lead to radicalization (IOM, 2016). Deniz (2016) suggests that Central Asians feel excluded both at home and in Russia and this makes them vulnerable. She too argues that migrants are mostly recruited by Chechens and Dagestanis.

Fahsutdinov refers to Olimova's study showing that Tajik migrants get exposed to radical ideas in various study circles in the Russian mosques. He argues that there are two main local Islamic groups in Russia: Tatars and Northern Caucasians; Tajiks usually join the Northern Caucasians, among whom there are recruiters, like a group "Imarat Kavkaz" connected to ISIS (2015). Sometimes, the merging of religious and criminal activities can be observed where religion justifies or legitimizes criminal actions. Also, criminals often become religious inside the juvenile system in Russia. Radicals recruit criminals to use their criminal potential (IOM, 2016).

IOM report (2016) shows that particularly since 2014, migrants in Russia were exposed to a number of stresses and risks, such as economic crisis, partly caused by the European and American economic sanctions against Russia, and re-entry bans for violating the migration law. The report emphasizes three kinds of migrant vulnerabilities: rights-based/legal, economic and social. The three, the report claims, are interconnected and reinforce each other. In addition, material poverty, low education, and limited migration experience make migrants more vulnerable. Vulnerabilities push them to search for new ways of dealing with these stresses and, supposedly, one of such ways is to engage with radical religious ideas (IOM, 2016).

Radical ideology becomes activated when it resonates with existing concerns. This is how the authors of the report explain the mechanism at work: deterioration of economic status due to lower incomes in Russia, deportation and lack of income opportunities at home lead to a diminished sense of self-worth and alienation from various social institutions. The isolation and despair lead to the sense of social injustice and uncertainty of future. When this is affected by some radical messages at home or abroad, it can lead to radicalization (IOM, 2016). Migrants are vulnerable to radicalization because of

unresolved psychological and economic problems, resentment towards people around, isolation from traditional networks, and desperate situation inviting ideas for change. Jihad becomes a path to salvation in the context of injustice (IOM, 2016).

The report argues that not poverty, but relative deprivation and the inability to handle it fuel radicalization. Deportation of Central Asian labor migrants and the re-entry ban make them stuck in transit/unemployment back at home. They become more and more isolated and stop using their community networks. This increases the risks of harassment and trafficking – all leading to the loss of self-esteem, anxiety and finally resulting in the state of limbo. This is when they become subjects to deception and manipulation by recruiters.

Connection between labor migration and radicalization is the main interest of this paper. We would like to explore this connection further on the basis of interviews with experts and practicing Muslims in Kyrgyzstan who have labor migration experience. **Research objectives and methodology** Research reports mentioned in the previous section make strong argument about the vulnerability of Central Asian migrants to engagement with radical groups in Russia. What is interesting is that these reports usually refer to a broader category of Central Asian migrants or to Uzbek and Tajik migrants. Hardly any reports mention Kyrgyz migrants. The UNDP office in Bishkek having discussed this with the Government of Kyrgyz Republic, expressed their joint interest in exploring to what degree the radicalization hypothesis is applicable to the citizens of Kyrgyzstan, who have labor migration experience in Russian Federation. Thus, the main question driving this research is:

***Does labor migration to Russian Federation make Kyrgyz citizens more vulnerable to radicalization and engagement with violent extremist groups?***

The second question evolves from the first question:

***What factors make labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan more vulnerable to radicalization and engagement with violent extremist groups and which factors make them more resilient?***

Unfortunately, the scope of the study and resources available for this research did not allow the completion of lengthy fieldwork in Russian Federation with the main research subjects. That is why, the main source of information became interviews with nearly 30 experts from Kyrgyzstan, Russian Federation, USA, UK, and Turkey. The list of experts included researchers, academics, government officials, security officers, spiritual leaders, and religious practitioners with long Russian experience. The researcher had a chance of spending few days in Moscow as a part of his other research project and interviewing some experts and Kyrgyz labor migrants there. The research also incorporated the analysis of 15 interviews with Kyrgyz labor migrants who were practicing Muslims. Some of these interviews were conducted in Russia and others in Kyrgyzstan – with migrants who returned home (some temporarily, others permanently). The results of the interviews analysis are presented in the following chapters.

### **Radicalization of Kyrgyz migrants in Russia and assessment of radicalization hypothesis**

The larger half of interviewed experts agreed that the ‘radicalization of migrants’ argument given by Tucker and other scholars did make sense to them in application to Central Asian migrants in general, but not always in regards to labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan. However, there were also experts who disagreed with the hypothesis. Let us look at some of their arguments.

Speaking of Central Asian migrants in Russia in general, Sergei Abashin<sup>2</sup> argues, that it is not an easy question. There are facts proving that migrants from Central Asia do join radical groups and go to Syria. However, in comparison to the overall number of nearly four million migrants (2 mln Uzbeks, 1 mln Tajiks, more than half a million Kyrgyz), the percentage of those who traveled to Syria, even by highest estimates (e.g. 4,000), makes only 0.1%. The remaining 99.9% do not radicalize. In his opinion, they work and earn money from morning to evening and these daily matters of survival and earning concern them much more than abstract ideas of social justice in the utopian state. Of course, even if it is only one tenth of a percent, it is still problematic, but the matter might be overblown in its importance and might have wrong implications. Religious practices can change, he suggests: some migrants do become more religious, but not necessarily radical. It is growing religiosity, not radicalization. Many things for migrants are easier to solve in reference to Islam, which becomes a normative framework not affected by the state policies. Islam helps them regulate their life and everyday events, including moral challenges in a foreign place. So, according to Abashin, it is not radicalization, on the contrary, it is normalization of Islam.

Abashin also does not agree with the Tucker's thesis about how migrants get out of control of family, community, etc. Most of them, in his opinion, remain inside strong social networks: relatives, neighbors, friends, and *zemlyaki* (people from home-places). Even in Russia, the majority remain under the strict control.

Eric McGlinchey<sup>3</sup> too, questions the causal mechanisms of radicalization hypothesis. He doesn't believe that being in Russia is the main factor that pushes migrants towards radicalization. There is a correlation between migration to Russia and travel to Syria, but just because there is a correlation, it does not mean that this is the main reason. There might be an underlining omitted variable, he suggests. There is something common about the population who get radicalized, which is common not only in Russia, but even at home. What makes someone more likely to go to Russia, also may make someone more likely to go to Syria (adventurousness, willingness to travel, extreme economic necessity). So, it may be that it is not Russia that makes people militant, but drivers they had before they went to Russia. Russian experience might be also adding to radicalization, but Tucker, in his view, might be overreaching the argument: it is problematic to lay the whole radicalization process to some kind of acculturation story of Russian experience; it is too convenient and simple of an answer.

Ahmet Yarlykapov<sup>4</sup> is also skeptical of the strength of migrants' radicalization argument, particularly in regards to numbers. He suggests that realistic sampling is impossible. One has to go to Turkey and Syria to understand everything properly. For him as for an anthropologist, Tucker's hypothesis intuitively makes sense, also because his own research data on internal migrants from the Northern Caucasus to the Russian North similarly shows that many of them do radicalize there because of marginalization and various social injustices. However, to speak of percentages and whether this is majority or minority is difficult. There is a need for more serious research for that, but most of such research subjects are outside of experts' reach. Thus, Yarlykapov suggests that it is impossible to give

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<sup>2</sup> Sergei Abashin, anthropologist, expert on migration, professor at the European University, Saint-Petersburg, Russia

<sup>3</sup> Eric McGlinchey, political scientist, expert on religion, professor at the George Mason University, Washington, USA

<sup>4</sup> Ahmet Yarlykapov, anthropologist, expert on religion, Institute for Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Science

fair percentages on Syrian fighters who radicalized in Russia, there are simply no statistics. In Russia, they have numbers for the citizens of Russian Federation, and even they are very approximate: from 2,500 to about 10,000. For the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan, in Russia, there is no such research, while in his opinion it is true that there are many people who go to Syria.

Ikbol Mirsaitov<sup>5</sup> thinks that it is impossible to apply the radicalization hypothesis to all Central Asian migrants equally. Their paths, situations, professional niches are very different. Not only every ethnic group, every person has his own path, fortune, case. In addition, there is a lot of differentiation across various regions in Russia.

David Montgomery<sup>6</sup> in some ways agrees with Tucker's hypothesis. He refers to Durkheim who wrote about high suicide rates due to lack of social integration. For Kyrgyz migrants in Russia, there were two contrary ways of dealing with problems of social integration: one was to buy into all the vices (alcohol, drugs, prostitution), versus the other – to become more religious, and the second is usually more preferable. Religion becomes a way of managing moral obligations. When society is ruptured and migrants are not integrated, people look for integration elsewhere. Migrants go to Russia, some become radicalized and Islam is blamed for that. But there is nothing wrong with Islam, he says. Policy makers and analysts do not ask what caused migration in the first place. Structural factors are being ignored. People want the sense of well-being and that includes the moral framework.

This is what some experts think about the strength of radicalization hypothesis in general. Let us see what they say about its application specifically to migrants from Kyrgyzstan.

### **Statistics on radicalization in Kyrgyzstan**

Bakyt Dubanaev<sup>7</sup> gives following figures for Kyrgyzstan: 524 confirmed and about 200 unconfirmed fighters in Syria. Mirsaitov mentions an important trend – statistics for 2016 show significant reduction in the number of people who left to Syria. Kadyr Malikov<sup>8</sup> says that security agents are happy about such reduction, but he is on the contrary concerned: it means that radicals might be remaining in Kyrgyzstan with the purpose of acting locally. Mametbek Myrzabaev<sup>9</sup> argues that it is impossible to give real statistics and he mentions the need for clarification: there are ethnic Kyrgyz migrants and there are migrants from Kyrgyzstan, who include migrants of other ethnic groups, the largest of which are ethnic Uzbeks. This distinction is important, because when in Russia, he says, ethnicity often becomes more important than citizenship. Mirsaitov disagrees: he argues that we need to use the term “migrants from Kyrgyzstan” and not refer to ethnicity, because there are many artificial ethnic stereotypes, which are counterproductive. Ethnic component in the case of Kyrgyzstan, in his view, does not play a very important role. People become radicalized and recruited not because of their ethnicity, but because of their religious beliefs. Similarly, groups in Syria, in his opinion, are not formed on ethnic basis. So, when security forces in Kyrgyzstan put the finger on specific ethnic group, such as

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<sup>5</sup> Ikbol Mirsaitov, expert on religion, Search for Common Ground, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

<sup>6</sup> David Montgomery, anthropologist, expert on religion, visiting professor, University of Pittsburg, USA

<sup>7</sup> Bakyr Dubanaev, expert on religion, CIS anti-terrorism department

<sup>8</sup> Kadyr Malikov, expert on religion, director of analytical center “Religion, law and politics”, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

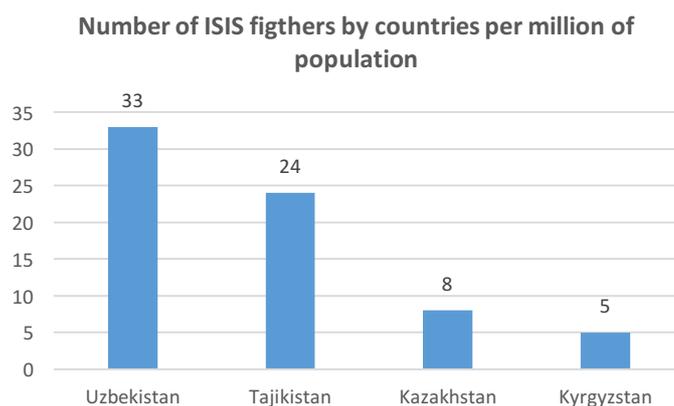
<sup>9</sup> Mametbek Myrzabaev, expert on religion, director of the Research Institute for Islamic Studies, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Uzbeks, this is not right, because it creates the image of enemy and makes life very difficult for this ethnic minority in Kyrgyzstan.

The reason for his contestation of the use of ethnicity is in the official statistics offered by Kyrgyzstan's security agencies. For example, Dubanaev states that the number of ethnic Kyrgyz fighters in Syria is only between 50 and 100, while the remaining majority (about 500 people) are ethnic Uzbeks from the Southern Kyrgyzstan. Erlan Bakeev<sup>10</sup> confirms these figures. However, there is a number of experts who do not trust them, including Mirsaitov himself. McGlinchey too, does not believe the numbers given by security agencies in Kyrgyzstan, because on one hand, these things are hard to measure, and on the other hand, because security agencies in Kyrgyzstan, in his opinion, are biased against ethnic Uzbeks. Expert K.<sup>11</sup> too suggests that there is political reasoning behind such statistics: the police that makes raids is composed of ethnic Kyrgyz only and most of them make these raids only in Uzbek mahallas and villages. There is a pure ethnic bias, and police, in his view, is programmed to see what they want to see. Once announced, McGlinchey says, these numbers get a life of their own, being quoted and re-quoted again and again by various experts and media.

We understand the contestation of the use of ethnicity in the radicalization analysis of migrants from Kyrgyzstan. However, considering that many interviewed experts made a distinction between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan, in some parts of our analysis, we need to look at these two groups separately.

If we believe the above mentioned statistics at least in regards to ethnic Kyrgyz, we could say that they are the smallest ethnic Central Asian group in Syria. Many experts explain this difference simply by referring to a smaller number of ethnic Kyrgyz in the world (6 mln vs 30 mln Uzbeks). However, if we look at the number of fighters per capita, we can see that even if the absolute numbers are questionable, the per capita figures for fighters from Kyrgyzstan are five-six times smaller than those of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The following graph is composed of figures offered by ICSR<sup>12</sup>.



<sup>10</sup> Erlan Bakeev, expert on religion, officer, 10<sup>th</sup> Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

<sup>11</sup> K., expert on religion from Kyrgyzstan, who preferred to remain anonymous

<sup>12</sup> Radio Free Europe refers to the statistics offered by the International Center for Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, last accessed at <https://www.rferl.org/a/foreign-fighters-syria-iraq-is-isis-isil-infographic/26584940.html> on Apr-15-2017

In addition, many experts make arguments about why ethnic Kyrgyz migrants and migrants from Kyrgyzstan might be less vulnerable to radicalization compared to other ethnic groups from Central Asia. There is a number of factors and reasons given for this. While some of them are applicable to ethnic Kyrgyz only, others are applicable to all migrants from Kyrgyzstan. Let's look at these factors individually.

### **Factors that make Kyrgyz migrants more resilient to radicalization**

Experts have offered a variety of interesting views on factors that make Kyrgyz migrants more resilient to radicalization. In this report, they are grouped and discussed in ten following subsections, not necessarily in the order of importance.

#### Eurasian Economic Union and better legal, economic and social position of Kyrgyz migrants

Several experts mentioned that Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union has significantly improved their legal, social and economic status in Russia. Kyrgyz migrants work in somewhat more prestigious sectors than other Central Asians; they are more legalized; it is easier for them to rent apartments; there is less need for them to hide; and police lately became more lenient to Kyrgyz migrants (Abashin). Many Kyrgyz work in the sphere of services; they can integrate better in Russia. By now, Kyrgyz migrants have a better social status in Russia compared to Uzbeks and Tajik (Malikov). Experts believe that better socio-economic position of Kyrgyz migrants makes them less vulnerable to recruitment to radical groups.

#### Better education and stronger Russian language skills

Some experts mentioned that Kyrgyz migrants have better education and stronger Russian language skills. On one hand, this eases their integration to the Russian society and results in better attitude of local Russian population and authorities towards them. On the other hand, some experts believe that better education is a factor that in general reduces the vulnerability to radicalization. However, there are other experts, who believe that education does not stop people from the interest in radical ideas and that among those who fight in Syria, there are also people with higher education. So, this conclusion is less straightforward.

#### Demographics

Abashin mentions another important factor: 40% of Kyrgyz migrants are women. Female figures for Uzbeks and particularly for Tajiks are much smaller. In addition, up to 60% of married migrants travel to Russia with their spouses. Such demography suggests that migration for Kyrgyz is structured in different ways: it better recreates family structures and there are more married couples from Kyrgyzstan. Accordingly, there are fewer Kyrgyz who live in purely male collectives (which is more common for Uzbeks and Tajiks), but more often as families. Such organization of everyday life also prevents radicalization.

#### Staying busy

Ravshan Eratov<sup>13</sup> suggests that Kyrgyz migrants were traveling to Russia for the last 25 years, but they did not radicalize much. They work, socialize, help each other, and do not engage with the forms of Islam, which can be dangerous. Dubanaev argues that many Kyrgyz migrants work hard in Russia, earn

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<sup>13</sup> Ravshan Eratov, expert on religion, head of Fatwa Department, Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

good money, but they send all of it home and have little left for themselves. So, they don't have financial resources or time available for them to join radical groups. Zakir Chotaev<sup>14</sup> states that usually it is people who are not happy with their conditions and who are lost, become vulnerable to radicalization. Kyrgyz migrants, in his view, go to Russia with a very specific purpose – to earn money and they often work at several places to earn as much as they can. Thus, they have little time left for radical ideas. Myrzabaev agrees: his interviews with migrants show that they have very little free time in Russia, since most of their daily hours are spent at work or at home. One of the informal Kyrgyz religious leaders in Russia describes that Kyrgyz migrants do not spend much time in the mosques of Russian capitals: they just come to pray and then leave, while other migrants, he observed, tend to spend more time socializing in the mosques.

#### Socio-cultural characteristics and religious engagement

M.<sup>15</sup> states that there are many Kyrgyz migrants, who are not practicing Muslims and that their lifestyle is quite far from Islamic. Nazira Kurbanova<sup>16</sup> says that historically, Kyrgyz were never fanatic in their following Islam due to nomadism. Ibragim Havaj<sup>17</sup> (himself ethnic Chechen) says, the largest number of post-Soviet fighters in Syria are Dagestanis and Chechens, who, according to him, have very tempered personalities. He thinks that Kyrgyz are different – their personalities are much softer. Kurbanova also explains that Russians in Russia have better attitude towards Kyrgyz compared to Tajiks and Uzbeks, because in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan the anti-Russian sentiment was stronger than in Kyrgyzstan and because Kyrgyz look like the folk from the Northern Russia. Nurlan Ismailov<sup>18</sup> states that Kyrgyz migrants also radicalize, but in smaller numbers, because Kyrgyz have strong networks of relatives and connections, even in Russia, which affirms the system of social control, and because Kyrgyz nomadic culture is very adaptable, there are no strict rules and principles and this affects mentality of Kyrgyz: they are less fanatical. He gives example of Hizb ut-Tahrir: there were many Kyrgyz in it at the beginning, but with the passage of time, many of them left the group. Kanat Murzakhilov<sup>19</sup> suggests that for Kyrgyz, there is a big difference between urban and rural population: in their mentality and lifestyle. Rural youth is less vulnerable because they have strong traditions, respect to elders, to parents. In his explanation, Kyrgyz began to come to Islam only in 1990-s and this also played role. Even practicing Kyrgyz Muslims, today often retain some atheist or pre-Islamic practices.

Montgomery criticizes such explanations. He does not think there is anything unique about ethnic Kyrgyz in this respect. He says, experts talk how Kyrgyz are less religious than Uzbeks or Tajiks, because they have shorter Islamic history. What they neglect in this argument, is that people become religious within their lifetime. A person can become religious in a very short period. So, Kyrgyz for that reason, are no less vulnerable compared to other groups. There is nothing preordained about Kyrgyz identity. However, what worries Montgomery in this discussion, is the focus on radicalization, on the Islamic part of it. He thinks, it is a popular place to draw attention, because it is possible to set one group apart from another and certain political forces try to portray one way of Islam as good and another as a threat, and this is counter-productive.

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<sup>14</sup> Zakir Chotaev, expert on religion, vice-director, State Committee on Religious Affairs, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

<sup>15</sup> M. – religious practitioner from Russia, who currently resides in Kyrgyzstan

<sup>16</sup> Nazira Kurbanova, expert on religion, professor at the Arabaev State University

<sup>17</sup> Ibragim Havaj – religious practitioner from Russia, who currently resides in Kyrgyzstan

<sup>18</sup> Nurlan Ismailov, expert on religion, professor at the Ala-Too University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

<sup>19</sup> Kanat Murzakhilov, expert on religion, Research Institute for Islamic Studies, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

### Islamic practices of Kyrgyz migrants

Madeleine Reeves<sup>20</sup> states:

“My own anecdotal observation is that it became easier for Kyrgyz migrants in Moscow to express their religiosity. In 2017, even compared to 2014, more Kyrgyz women wear hijab, more people stop to pray during their working day. I read this as a positive sign that members of Kyrgyz community in Russia feel more comfortable expressing their identity.”

A representative of the Russian Muftiyat<sup>21</sup> suggests that there is a big difference between Kyrgyz jamats and Russian jamats: the former usually do not speak about politics, they follow their own mazkhab, and they are quite unnoticeable on the religious scene. Young people who come to Russia from Kyrgyzstan, in his opinion, often have some basic preparation, they follow the guidance they receive from their scholars in Kyrgyzstan and do not divert significantly from that. This helps them and in some ways saves them from radicalization. As a part of his job, he works with prisoners in Russian juvenile system and he observes that Kyrgyz migrants are also less involved in criminal activities, compared to many other ethnic groups. They are more law-abiding. One of the informal religious leaders of Kyrgyz migrant community in Moscow<sup>22</sup> argues that Kyrgyz migrants try to keep the religious teachings, which they bring with them from home and, almost in every apartment, there are regular lessons, talks, reminders. These are mostly apolitical, often based on the teachings of Tablighi Jamaat – apolitical movement popular in Kyrgyzstan, and these circles keep Kyrgyz migrants alert to radical influences.

### Role of Islamic scholars from Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyz Muftiyat

Reeves argues about the important role of Kyrgyz Muftiyat, which seems to work very actively in Russia. She mentioned how in March, 2017, there was a big event in the Crocus City Hall in Moscow with participants of Kyrgyz scholars. She observes a strong effort by the Kyrgyz authorities and by Kyrgyz Muftiyat to make sure that Kyrgyz migrants have access to more moderate forms of Islamic teaching. The event brought together nearly 6,000 listeners, most of whom were Kyrgyz. Representatives of Kyrgyz Muftiyat argue along similar lines. Eratov states they have two representatives: in Siberia and in Moscow, which give consultations to Kyrgyz migrants, perform Islamic rituals and give lessons. Muftiyat arranges the regular trips of famous Kyrgyz scholars to Russia to meet our compatriots and give lectures with question and answer sessions. Bilyalidin Saipiev<sup>23</sup> suggests that migrants of other ethnic groups also come to listen to the talks of Kyrgyz scholars and they say that they wish their scholars too could come and visit them in Russia. Kyrgyzstan’s Muftii himself goes to Russia two-three times a year; he meets Kyrgyz migrants and he was able to establish very good cooperation with Russian Muftiyat.

Aziz Ismangambetov<sup>24</sup> suggests that Kyrgyz scholars usually do not give talks on religious knowledge and do not criticize anybody, even Wahhabis. Instead they talk more on *hidayat* – motivation to lead a more religious lifestyle, a significantly less conflicting topic. In his view, for Kyrgyz scholars, their

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<sup>20</sup> Madeleine Reeves, anthropologist, expert on migration, professor at the University of Manchester

<sup>21</sup> He preferred not to indicate his name

<sup>22</sup> He also preferred to remain anonymous

<sup>23</sup> Bilyalidin Saipiev, expert on religion, head of the Department for preaching and working with various religious movements, Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan

<sup>24</sup> Religious practitioner, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

inner orientation (ideology) matches their outer appearance (sunnah, clothing, lifestyle, family, etc.). This creates trust. Kyrgyz scholars are visible and accessible.

Bilyalidin Saipiev extends this argument further back into the recent history. He suggests that the major contribution to the spread of religion in Kyrgyzstan from early 90-s were made by such scholars as Abdusatar domla, Moldo Sabyr domla, Rahmatullo aji domla, Shakir dolmla, Nadyr domla. From the very beginning they were preaching peaceful Islam, which was not opposed to the government, and they helped Muslim communities and all their students to unite. With their help, today, Kyrgyzstan has a system of madrasas formed all across the country. Aman Saliev<sup>25</sup> states that the more people are familiar with Islam, the better they are protected from radicalization. Yarlykapov, however, is skeptical of this explanation. He says, if we look at the example of Muslims in Russian Federation, we can say that cultural factors do not explain the vulnerability. It was expected that in Dagestan the strong Islam and good Islamic knowledge would make it difficult for recruiters to recruit Dagestanis. Unfortunately, this did not happen and today Dagestanis are the largest group from Russia in Syria and Iraq – nearly 5,000 fighters. The second largest group is Chechens – 500-3,000. They also have strong Islamic knowledge. So, the knowledge hypothesis, in his opinion, does not work.

Eratov says, Kyrgyz migrants in other countries also can ask questions directly from the Muftiyat: every week the Department of Fatwah there receives 20-30 online questions or phone calls, which are answered by three people who work in this department. So, in his view, Kyrgyz migrants feel that they do not need to ask scholars from other ethnic groups. Ismailov agrees that Kyrgyz Muftiyat is good at offering information to those who come to them, but they are not very active in reaching out to people. He suggests, that they should be more active in the regions of Kyrgyzstan and online. Lately, however, in Ismailov's opinion, the Muftiyat started working much better than it used to. It cooperates well with the State Committee, security forces, international organizations. These main institutions were able to overcome the barrier of mistrust and now they support each other. In his wording, they stopped pulling in their own directions, but instead, work together, especially when they see one enemy – radicalization. Muftiyat works, even with international organizations (such as Search for Common Ground, UNDP, UNFPA), who also make important contribution to preventing radicalization. Finally, Muftiyat also started working with various jamats and use their potential for the good of society. McGlinchey suggests that the role of the agency – of a particular Muftii, might have made all the difference.

Chotaev is a bit more skeptical. He says that some of our scholars who travel to give lectures in Russia, simply promote their own ideas. In his vision, this is more like populism to expand the audience. The recent trips of Chubak aji and Abdushukur aji were not agreed upon with the State Committee on Religious Affairs. In his view, having representatives of Muftiyat in Russia can be positive, but this depends on how successfully they preach traditional Islamic values and become sources of proper knowledge. Yarlykapov too is skeptical of the effect of such large gatherings to listen to Kyrgyz scholars. He says it is possible to bring 6,000 people together, but that does not mean that all these people will keep connection with these scholars.

Another critique of Muftiyat comes from Saliev. He says that Muftiyat is all Kyrgyz-speaking. Today, most of the literature, particularly on ISIS, is in Russian and English. Due to language limitations, many

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<sup>25</sup> Aman Saliev, expert on religion, Institute for Strategic Analysis and Prognosis

Muftiyat workers have no basic understanding of these issues. In his opinion, Muftiyat has the position, which is no less significant than that of our security forces. If this structure is managed by uneducated people, it is a tragedy, because a person with a limited worldview cannot see the large picture. Considering that Salafism in Kyrgyzstan is spreading particularly high among the Russian-speaking Kyrgyz, this issue has a special significance.

Finally, there is a demand from Jamal Frontbek kyzy – female Muslim activist and leader of Mutakalim Foundation – to open an office for Muslim women in the Muftiyat. Today, Kyrgyz women, who do not feel comfortable talking to men in Muftiyat, particularly on the questions specific only for women, do not have an official place to go to.

#### Role of state and security agencies in Kyrgyzstan

Kurbanova mentions the effective work of Kyrgyzstan's state and security agencies: the 10-th department, State Committee on National Security, CIS anti-terrorist department. Bakeev describes that the 10<sup>th</sup> department uses preventive strategy instead of repression: in his opinion, it is easier, cheaper and more effective. Bakeev also states that the 10-th Department has very good cooperation with Muftiyat. They have achieved agreements on various levels and questions. There is also close cooperation in the frames of CSTO with security agencies from other Central Asian countries and Russian Federation. The State Committee on Religious Affairs has also been actively engaging with questions of radicalization. Experts suggest that in the last three years it has become more constructive and less conflicting.

#### State policy towards religion and religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan

Malikov states that the fact that we don't have repression of religion in Kyrgyzstan, makes it difficult for radical ideas to spread. We did not have any terrorist attacks on local Muslim population or on the State: "You can't blame the state if the state is tolerant", he says. Eratov says that legislation in regards to religion is just and not oppressive, so young people have easy access to information about Islam and this is important in preventing radicalization. Dubanaev suggests that in other, more restrictive countries, where many people are imprisoned, they return from prisons strongly radicalized, they often become *taqfirists* (people who believe they can call other Muslims non-Muslims) there. In his view, the more closed society is, the more vulnerable people are to radicalization. Compared to other CA countries, situation in Kyrgyzstan is much better. Even in Kazakhstan, the policy, in his opinion, is too strict. Kyrgyzstan's president had a big role in this. Kadyberdiev explains: "If you close a lid, the pressure will build up; if we also close the lid and get to have this kind of pressure, we will have radicalism too". According to Murzakhilov, some religious practitioners who experience repression, might feel offended and become more vulnerable. This does not happen in Kyrgyzstan. Reeves explains:

"In the context when people feel that their faith is being controlled and any expression of religiosity is seen as index of extremism, when people feel that their actions are being politicized by the state, the context then becomes such where people might feel more militantly attached to religious aspects of their identity, as opposed to contexts, where people feel free to express it."

Liberal policy, says Chotaev, reduces vulnerability to radicalization, especially for those who are undecided: "Why would you radicalize if you can practice religion freely?"

Saliev considers religious freedom as the most important factor. He believes that liberal policy in Kyrgyzstan is the key reason why people do not go to Syria. People feel comfortable, not repressed, they have time to think, they don't hate the system. Yes, he says, life is difficult, but it is difficult for everyone. So, the question of injustice is not personal and not connected to religious beliefs and convictions. In the time of corruption and poverty, according to Saliev, it is only democracy that keeps people alive and motivated, and if Kyrgyzstan becomes authoritarian, the result, in his opinion, will be a collapse. Any authoritarian ruler will endanger the society. Pluralism helps people survive.

Montgomery is a bit more cautious about such optimism. Liberal policies and not repressing people is an important thing for the society broadly, he says. It gives people opportunity to be productive and helps them manage their life in the structure that is helpful and repressing it would be problematic, because people might then express it in more repressed internalized ways and that may lead to the opposition to the state because of that forced internalization. Kyrgyz policies in comparison to other countries in Central Asia are more productive, they give the space for people to be religious and express themselves. This is productive step, but, he argues further, there is a need for other things. State should still fulfill its functions in regards to more structural factors. Islamic extremism problems are often used to mask other failures of the state. People recognize there is nothing wrong with the way they practice their religion, but it is the state that does not deliver. So, the freedom of religion by itself is not sufficient to keep people from opposing the state.

Chotaev makes an interesting argument in relation to migrants: in Kyrgyzstan, there is no pressure on Muslims and our migrants have the opportunity to return home any time and practice religion freely. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, there is more pressure and less opportunity for migrants to return and practice religion. Montgomery again does not agree: he says, the opportunity to return to Kyrgyzstan matters, but it depends on how long migrants are away from home. Some migrants do not return for years at a time. So, for them, the freedom at home means little, because they spend most of their life in Russia, where policies are much more restrictive and they cannot practice religion in the same way as they do it in Kyrgyzstan. Fundamentally they are not as included and thus they remain vulnerable to radicalization.

Most experts appreciate the tolerant religious policy in Kyrgyzstan, but there is also some critique. Aslanova suggests that policies to some groups, like Hizb ut-Tahrir are inadequate. People get arrested for having one HT page and that arrests themselves can lead to radicalization. She also makes an interesting argument that the state's policy of propagating secularism as opposition to Islam pushes practicing Muslim away from secularity. Secularism must be based on the principle of tolerance, not opposition to religion. Secular radicalism can be very aggressive, for example, in regards to hijabs. As a response, women in hijab also become aggressive. Finally, she argues that the freedom of religion in Kyrgyzstan stops at the gates of Uzbek *mahallas* (traditional neighborhoods), that religious freedoms for such ethnic minorities as Uzbeks, are much more limited and the levels of religious oppression for them are much higher than for ethnic Kyrgyz.

Murzakhilov also argues that Kyrgyzstan's state policy is not very effective. Many programs remain on paper, except for some work done by the Yiman Foundation. In the past, there used to be a good practice of engaging religious authorities in various projects, such as AIDS and drugs prevention. A whole generation grew attending such seminars. Educational programs gave its positive results, but today, the education is lagging behind and the government does not provide funding for such

initiatives. It could engage international organizations for these kinds of seminars. There used to be Central Asian forums, inter-confessional committees. He says that our state officials are strongly dependent on the President and do not take any initiatives by themselves.

#### Freedom of religion and role of progressive/pacifist jamats

Freedom of religion in Kyrgyzstan is often discussed in connection to the activities of Islamic groups, which are often described as apolitical, progressive or pacifist, and which are quite popular and influential in Kyrgyzstan. Malikov thinks that religious diversity is good because these various groups do not hide and the government can try to find consensus with them. The negative side: there is no scientific discussion among leaders about the future trajectories of Islamic development. As a result, all these groups see each other as competitors and this leads to division. According to Malikov, Muslims in Kyrgyzstan do not start with “Salam aleikum”, but with “Which jamaat do you belong to?” “This is sectarianism and fragmentation of *ummah* [the social body of all Muslims] into groups competing and not accepting each other.” Saliev agrees: in Kyrgyzstan, Muslims are too fragmented.

These groups usually include various groups of Turkish origin, such as Nurjuler, Sulaimanchiler, Hizmet, and group that has Indian origin – Tablighi Jamaat or Davatchiler, as they are called locally. These groups are banned in most of Central Asian countries and in Russia. The common argument among experts is that because these groups are legal and popular in Kyrgyzstan and because they are apolitical, they pull local Muslim population away from more radical groups towards more peaceful Islamic practices. Many experts believe that this is one of the main reasons why population in Kyrgyzstan is less radicalized in comparison to its neighbors and Russia. Let’s see what experts say about this, particularly in connection to migration.

Ismailov appreciates the liberal policy of Kyrgyz government towards religion. He suggests that our government was able to distinguish dangerous groups from the peaceful ones, friends from enemies. These friendly jamats played very important role in preventing radicalization. If we were to close them, we would open the field to radical groups. He says: “When you close the door to moderate groups, you open it to radicals”.

Malikov suggests that the apolitical Tablighi Jamaat has strong control of regions in Kyrgyzstan. It fills the vacuum, which otherwise would be filled by Salafis and Hizb ut-Tahrir. He sees Tablighi Jamaat as a huge mass of people who help preventing the spread of extremist ideas. Official religion cannot fill the void, so it is the Tablighi Jamaat, according to him, that is now preventing radicalization. M. states that there are more than four thousand mosques in Kyrgyzstan and hundreds thousands of davatchis. They are doing all the main work spreading peaceful Islamic ideas and they are not a threat to the constitution. On the contrary, he assures that they invite people to be law-abiding citizens and preserve family and social values.

Eratov describes that davatchiler are doing the main “dirty work” delivering the basic message of Islam to the doors of people. They give basic information to people about traditional forms of Islam based on Hanafi maskhab, and Matrudi akyda. They also explain the dangers of extremism and dangers of going to Syria. This is also discussed during their meetings and travels. This way, Eratov believes, they give people good answers to important questions and by doing this, they prepare our citizens, so that when the latter travel to Russia, they already have the basic foundation, that protects them from radical ideas.

Bilyal Saipiev – the head of Department of Preaching and Working with Various Movements in the Muftiyat – the department that is in control of the activities of Tablighi Jamaat, describes that by now *davaat* has become almost a tradition. In every mosque, there is some *davaat* activity going on. Since the very beginning, this work was only making positive contribution to the country's development. He confirms that *davaat* activity in Kyrgyzstan is under very strict control: by the Muftiyat, by the 10-th Department, by the State Committee on Religious Affairs. He states that Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambaev also supported the movement stating that its activity is being monitored and that so far it only had positive effect on the population.

Murzakhalilov too says Tablighi Jamaat has strong effect on rural youth. Kyrgyz migrants who go to Russia mostly from rural areas go there with this pacifist foundation. M. brings the analogy with vaccination: people in Kyrgyzstan receive this “vaccine against radicalization” at home, thus, they are protected from it while abroad. In Russia, Chechens have the authority and migrants can easily fall under their influence. He says that Kyrgyz do not get influenced by Chechens: 25 years of Tablighi effort in Kyrgyzstan, in his opinion, created a whole generation of people with pacifist belief system and practice. He adds that Salafis have been active in Kyrgyzstan for the last 10 years and if Tablighi Jamaat gets banned, Salafi influence will grow very fast.

Bakeev says Tablighi Jamaat is forbidden everywhere, but not in Kyrgyzstan. Ministry of Internal Affairs' approach is based on the principle that any action can bring reaction. Therefore, he says: “If we ban them, they will go underground and become uncontrollable. Now they work with Muftiyat and they slowly become a part of Kyrgyz culture”. However, he points that today, Tablighi Jamaat in Kyrgyzstan must make effort towards quality, not quantity. Majority of Tablighis today, he says, simply repeat what they hear. Imams and other participants in the movement must obtain religious education. Tablighi Jamaat, he thinks, has done very good service for the country, but potentially it can bring some harm due to lack of competency in religious knowledge.

Chotaev too is a bit cautious. He says, Tablighi Jamaat is apolitical, but some members who have political mood, leave the movement and join more radical groups. The big problem with Tablighi Jamaat in Kyrgyzstan today is the group called *Yakyn-inkar*. They act by themselves, without control and in his view, they break the law, because only officially registered organizations can preach. In 2017, the *Yakyn-inkar* group was officially forbidden in Kyrgyzstan. It is important that Tablighi Jamaat acts within legal frames and under close control of Muftiyat: with the agreement of family members, imam from local mosque, and the 10-th Department.

Speaking of relations between groups, Saliev argues that it is due to Tablighi Jamaat that Salafis could not become as popular as they became in Kazakhstan, where Tablighi Jamaat was banned four years ago and as a result, the level of Salafi influence has increased enormously. He claims that today, there are Parliament deputies in Kazakhstan, who are Salafis and the question of salafism/wahabism in Kazakhstan is much larger than in Kyrgyzstan. It is the ISIS Kazakhs who are among the most active Syrian fighters and promoters. They even called and threatened Kyrgyzstan's Muftii because he was preaching against ISIS. With Kadyr Malikov, ISIS went beyond threats and actually attacked him<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Sputnik (09.06.2016) Напавший на Кадыра Маликова осужден на пожизненное лишение свободы, last accessed at <https://ru.sputnik.kg/society/20160609/1026348471.html> on 14.01.2018

Some Russian and Western scholars are somewhat skeptical about the benefits of religious diversity. Yarlykapov agrees that these groups might be apolitical, but that does not mean that their members are going to be like that forever. The reality in Russia is that the situation is very dynamic and the mosaic of these various groups and influences changes very fast. Young people move from a group to group; new leaders emerge on the scene. When he looks at Muslims from the Northern Caucasus, who back at home also were very apolitical, he sees how when they come to large Russian cities, they join various groups, including the ones, which are quite radical. So, he doesn't see the connection between the so-called "vaccination" and vulnerability to radicalization. If this was the case, he says, it would be easy to come up with the solution, like making everyone Tablighi.

Montgomery too questions this hypothesis but using a different basis. His arguments extend beyond Tablighis or Nurjuler, to a wider discussion about how we perceive all these various groups, including the more political ones. He says, there is haphazardness in how we encounter particular groups of people. It varies over time and location. We often tend to think that there is no collaboration between the groups, while in his view, various Islamic groups have many things in common, even though they might think about things differently. People move around a lot and the division is not so rigid. "Sometimes we put too much Islam in Islam", he says, while people live much more fractured lives and it is very hard for them to be consistent over long period of time. Seeing groups as internally consistent is problematic too. Religious life is complicated and characterizing Salafi and Tablighi by their teaching and activities, means to dehumanize individuals. He suggests that we focus on the ideological traditions instead of looking at the underlying struggle within those groupings. So, one can attack Salafis and believe that this is right, but that is not going to solve the problem. "We try to control people's thoughts, but we can't." So, instead of trying to solve ideological problems, we need to resolve how these groups can live together.

In this part of the paper, we discussed various factors that make migrants from Kyrgyzstan more resilient to the influence of radicalization. It seems that all of them: from Kyrgyzstan's joining the EEU to the activity of popular peaceful Islamic groups have some significance and contribution. Next, we will look at some factors that, according to experts, make migrants more vulnerable to radicalization.

### **Factors that make Kyrgyz migrants more vulnerable to radicalization**

Several factors were discussed by experts. Just like in the previous section, the expert opinions are far from homogenous.

#### Ethnicity

Some experts argue that ethnic Uzbek migrants from the Southern Kyrgyzstan are more likely to accept radical message because they experienced ethnic conflicts in 2010, they are still discriminated in many ways and have limited opportunities. So, they are discriminated at home in Kyrgyzstan, they cannot go to Uzbekistan because they are not welcomed there, and when discriminated in Russia, they, supposedly, thus become *izgoi* (outlaws) and often opt to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, which promises them justice. However, this argument seems far too simplistic giving the priority to structures and diminishing the role of a rational agency. As K. points out, yes, ethnic Uzbeks do not have many prospects in Central Asia, but Russia is quite a safe and promising place. Having the Kyrgyzstani passport makes their life in Russia much easier compared to ethnic Uzbeks from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, because Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU and this gives them more opportunities.

So, once in Russia, the situation of Uzbek migrants from Kyrgyzstan is in no way different than the situation of ethnic Kyrgyz migrants. That is why this hypothesis does not stand.

Ismailov suggests that there are many Uzbeks who work in Turkey and he claims that they become recruited by the Turkish special forces to fight in Syria because Turkey is interested in the overthrow of Syrian government and helps with recruitment and transportation of fighters to join ISIS. Mederbek Kadyrov, expert on religion who has recently completed his PhD in Turkey and lived there for ten years, thinks that such claims have no basis whatsoever.

McGlinchey says there might be a confirmation bias in regards to ethnic Uzbeks. In the US, when there is mass shooting by the white person, it is usually dismissed as a psychological problem. When something like that is done by a Muslim, this is terrorism. He wonders, if there is also a similar confirmation bias in Kyrgyzstan in regards to Uzbek militants. He did research on Osh events in 2010, and comparing his findings to the reports by Kyrgyz security services, he saw how these were two completely different stories. Ever since then, he has very little confidence in their statistics and stories.

Religious expert from the Southern Kyrgyzstan argues that statistics on Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan are very controversial. Security forces frequently include into the extremist list those migrants who have been to Turkey. But being in Turkey does not mean being in Syria. Many ethnic Uzbeks just try to earn money there. However, once the rumor goes around, family members warn migrants not to return due to the fear of imprisonment. So, they are stuck in Turkey, they cannot come back. That is why there is selective bias in this and he too doesn't believe the official numbers. He observes how many ethnic Kyrgyz also come back from Turkey, but they are not included in this list.

We can conclude that the question of vulnerability of Uzbek migrants from Kyrgyzstan to engagement with radical groups is quite debatable.

#### Regional difference and language

The official MIA's position (as mentioned in the introductory part) is that there are more people recruited to radical groups from the Southern Kyrgyzstan. However, several experts criticize that statement and perceive stronger growth of radical ideas in the Northern provinces, particularly among the Russian-speaking youth, among whom Salafism is becoming more and more popular.

Malikov believes that most of recruitment happens in Russian language and that Kyrgyz who go Syria are mostly Russian-speaking youth from the Northern Kyrgyzstan: Kara-Balta, Bishkek, Issyk-Kul, Naryn. He suggests that ethnic Kyrgyz in the South are less radicalized. Chotaev's argument is similar: in the past, radicalization was mostly in the South. Nowadays, the North is also vulnerable. Muslims in the North are exposed to radical literature in Russian language from Russia and Caucasus.

One reason why Salafi ideas are becoming popular in the North these days is the shortage of Russian-speaking Islamic scholars and imams. There are 70-80 active madrasas in Kyrgyzstan, but not a single madrasa where subjects would be taught in Russian. Even in the capital, Bishkek, there is no single mosque, where *hutbas* (sermons) would be given in Russian language. As a result, when many ethnic Kyrgyz, who speak only Russian become interested in Islam, they cannot obtain information from traditional locally trained imams, and instead rely on the information from internet or Russian speaking friends who sympathize with Salafi ideas.

### Internet and media

Several experts argue that internet is one of the major sources of radical influence. Abibilla Kadyberdiev<sup>27</sup> blames internet for many bad things. In his opinion, if people do not have solid religious foundation, they can become very vulnerable to internet sources. Interestingly, Myrzabaev and Aslanova argue that people can radicalize in Kyrgyzstan as well; one does not have to go to Russia since local internet is quite strong too.

Ibragim Havaj says, nobody is safe from being recruited: education and economic status are not important factors. He says that a skillful recruiter can find appropriate paths to any person's heart. They can speak on the language of people's profession and social status and they successfully use a huge amount of video-materials produced by ISIS and available on the internet. For example, there are videos that show the cruelty of Alawites: how they rape women, humiliate elders, and then how they are executed by ISIS. Scenes from battlefields are also very popular. Videos with strong imagery have powerful influence on people's feelings. Recruiters use all possible means and then refer to Quran and Hadith to convey the message of jihad.

Bakeev states that extremist internet imams play very important role in recruitment and to successfully combat them, we need to work on the internet and social media to produce counter-narratives. ISIS produces 3-5,000 video materials every year, while Security forces in Russia last year produced only 200 episodes.

### Salafism

Malikov says Salafism is very attractive: it is aggressive, informal, black and white. This is dangerous: it can bring division within Islam and conflict with the secular part. He thinks, Salafi is radical to everything, including Islam, but it is impossible to fight Salafism with repression. He believes it is to be fought with ideology. He thinks that Salafism is the seed, from which *Havariji* can grow. Now it is becoming popular among women, among the security forces, even among the government officials. M. explains that Salafis do not work in groups. They work one on one and via internet. It is difficult to reveal them. Recruiters often just give newcomers links to certain sheikhs on internet.

Dubanaev says Salafis in Kyrgyzstan do not recruit to Syria, however, they are not going to bring any good. Bakeev says the roots of extremism can be found in Salafism. He distinguishes three types of Salafism: classical (moderate), neo-modern and Taqfirist/jihadist. Salafism is about politics. In his view, it is not an organization, it is ideology. He referred to one Kyrgyz Salafi imam Shamsuddin Abukalyk, who published a book "Sabl and subl". In this book, he calls Muslim following mazkhabs "dogs following the imam". The 10-th Department classified it as an extremist book with incitement to hatred. He believes that such Salafis are very dangerous for society. Saipiev suggests that Salafis are dangerous only if they call other Muslims unbelievers. If they are moderate and do not do that, then, there is no harm in them.

### Age

Some experts mentioned the importance of age. Ismailov suggests that usually it is young people, just after the 9-th or 11-th grades of school who go to Russia. They have not been formed as personalities yet and often become more religious in Russia because of their search for identity. As such, they

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<sup>27</sup> Abibilla Kadyberdiev, expert on religion, Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan

become more vulnerable to radicalization. Chotaev says: if a person is in religion for a long time, he is not likely to radicalize; it is the neophytes, who are most vulnerable. Saliev argues that the age from 17 to 25 years old is the period when young men are not afraid of death. In the Soviet time, people used to shape their male personalities in the army. Today, some go to fight on the streets. Others go to Syria.

### Structural factors

Kurbanova states that migrants in a foreign environment lose the sense of belonging; they are not integrated, doing dirty work, detached from home and relatives, encountering injustice, not getting paid, having difficult psychological conditions, and lacking proper living arrangements and family relations. All this can be used by recruiters. Chotaev too says that migration is one of the paths towards radicalization. Lack of socialization, pressure from local security forces, and bad living conditions push migrants towards religion as a source of social and psychological support. However, because many of them lack religious knowledge, they can be influenced by radical groups.

Kurbanova also argues that the main reasons of radicalization are economic. If there were jobs in Kyrgyzstan, people would not go to Russia or Syria and would not radicalize. She does not agree with experts who think that economic factor is not important. Such position is convenient for the government, she says, since it makes them less responsible. Difficult living conditions and poor economics do play role. Bakeev disagrees and suggests that the main motivation is ideological, not economic. Today, he says, nobody believes that people can earn good money in Syria; ISIS media technologies play much more important role than economic incentives. Chotaev also thinks that lack of education, repression and lack of opportunities for self-realization are more important than economic factors. Ibragim Havaj explains that people are going to Syria because they do not have solid foundations, they don't ask Islamic scholars, but rely on information from the internet instead.

Malikov mentions other reasons, such as loss of trust to the state and to the official religious institutions. On one hand, we have a systemic crisis: poverty, corruption, unemployment. On the other hand, our official religion cannot respond to contemporary challenges, that is why people look for answers elsewhere, outside. As a result, we now see the emerging and growing system of jamats. However, he argues, none of these jamats are responding to the questions of social and political justice either. Most of them are concerned with religious questions. This is why ideology of ISIS, based on the protest against the state and official religion, is becoming popular in Kyrgyzstan. Young people are looking for solutions to the systemic crisis. If the government does not provide answers to these issues through religious institutions, ISIS will speak to them.

### Religious policy and religious practices in Russian Federation

As Yarlykapov argues, the liberal policy hypothesis works only in the territory of Kyrgyzstan. When Kyrgyz and Uzbek migrants come to Russia, the policy is totally different. The Russian state policy towards Islam is very controversial. On one hand, Islam is acknowledged as one of the four main religions of Russian Federation. On the other, there are still many raids, and strong security measures. This, in his view, can alienate migrants and it can play its role in the radicalization.

In the view of M., the Russian government is playing with different groups: they banned many pacifist groups, but closed eyes on others, which are more radical, like Salafis. Young people in Russia are very much in the need of guidance. The imams are often unapproachable and that is why many young

people fall victims to Salafis. Once they do, they never go to imam again and obtain all of their information on the internet. The level of Salafization in Russia is very high. He describes: "We once prayed namaz in the mosque in Kazan and there were about fifty people praying together. Once namaz was complete, everybody stood and left [this is often what Salafis do]. Only three people remained: imam, his assistant and me!" He says the most vulnerable to Salafi influence are Dagestanis, Chechens, Ingushes, Kabardino-Balkarians, and then Uzbeks and Tajiks. Kyrgyz are not that affected, because there is strong apolitical preaching work going inside the community.

Yarlykapov describes Salafi jamaats in Russia as very diverse, mosaic like. There is no one form of Salafism, groups are quite fragmented. Most of these groups operate on a semi-legal basis, in the official mosques and in their own prayer rooms. There are many virtual jamaats, centered around a scholar, who can be somewhere else. So, there are these young people, whose jamat is not people who pray with them in the mosque, but thousands of kilometers away. In Moscow, the situation depends on the mosques. Sobornaya mechet in is considered liberal and Ravil Gainutdin, the imam of this mosque is known to be able find common language with Salafi groups. These contradictions are typical for Russian state policy towards religion and towards Salafism.

Ibragim Havaj shares how he had seen Sayeed Buryatskii personally in the mosque in Moscow. The latter always preached jihad, had his own group and he preached freely. His main target group were people from the Northern Caucasus, not Central Asians. Among his followers were not only poor, but also quite wealthy people.

Yarlykapov, thinks that engagement of Central Asian migrants with Salafi groups, is quite serious, especially in large cities and in the North. Central Asians easily find common ground with Muslims from the Northern Caucasus, who have strong Salafist orientation. In his view, there is no big difference between Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz migrants in the degree of engagement. His intuitive feeling is that Tajiks are more active, but Uzbeks and Kyrgyz also participate.

Ismailov has a very strong opinion. He thinks that radicalization in Russia is a result of very poor religious policy. Russian government has restricted the activities of progressive Islamic groups, labeling them as radical without doing research of their teachings. These groups include various Turkish movements, like Nurjuler, and Indian movements, like Tablighi Jamaat. Closure of such groups opened the doors to radicals, which always work underground. He still does not understand what was the legal basis for closing the moderate groups. He thinks that until Russia forms solid religious policy, its problems will only keep increasing. Young people in Russia, who regularly come across such injustices, will only have hatred toward the state.

We could not collect much information on Turkish groups in Russia, but had some information on the Russian Tablighi Jamaat. Ibragim Havaj says Tablighi Jamaat in Russia exists, but it cannot operate. Security forces in Russia understand its positive influence, but they are afraid that one day, the group's orientation might change and if the leaders give instructions, members can become aggressive. But then he asks: Why there is no single Tablighi in Syria? His answer: because the core of its teachings strictly forbids violence and it has been like that for the last 100 years. So, in his view, in Moscow and in the regions today, Tablighi Jamaat is the only factor that could realistically stop people from going to Syria. M. describes that before Tablighi Jamaat was closed, there were many Tablighi circles in Russian mosques and there were no Salafis. Now, Tablighis are banned, and Salafis have taken their

places. He also thinks that security officers understand the harmless nature of the movement, but still arrest Tablighis because they need statistics to advance in their careers. He suggests that the main institution interested in banning Tablighi Jamaat is Russian Orthodox Church: they are afraid of all groups that preach because they perceive Islam as their main competitor.

In this section, we reviewed a number of factors that make Kyrgyz migrants more vulnerable to engagement with radical ideas and radical groups. Both of these sections – one that described resilience of Kyrgyz migrants and one, which focused on vulnerability were based on the discussions with experts. What about the voices of migrants themselves? These are shared in the next section.

### **Stories of Kyrgyz migrants**

To fully understand the experience of migrants' radicalization, one has to hear the stories of migrants who were radicalized. Unfortunately, the scope of this research was limited and we could not arrange to interview migrants with such experience. Instead, interviews were conducted with Kyrgyz labor migrants who are practicing Muslims and who are currently in Bishkek; only two interviews were conducted in Moscow. Migrants were of different age and family status. We cannot introduce all of their stories here and included short summaries of seven of them.

J. lived in Perm, a small Russian city, and the number of Kyrgyz migrants was insignificant. He lived there with his relatives. They rented an apartment. There was a small mosque and he and his uncle used to go there for Friday prayers. They were the only people among his relatives who prayed. The rest did not. Nobody ever approached him with any kind of religious agitation. Most of his life in Perm, just like the lives of his relatives and friends, was divided between work and home. He did not experience any discrimination by the police or security officers.

N. lived as a labor migrant in Moscow. He shares how in the past, they used to live with 20-25 people in one apartment, but nowadays, it became easier: they share it with 10-12 people and they don't necessarily pay more than they used to. Only two-three people in his last apartment prayed. He didn't have much time left for socialization: it was all about work and rest. He usually goes to Russia seasonally between studies and he is trying to utilize his time in Russia as efficiently as possible working in two and, sometimes, three places. He did not notice any signs of radicalization among Kyrgyz migrants or among Tajiks and Uzbeks. The majority of Salafi members were from the Northern Caucasus.

B. worked in Surgut, city in Siberia with the population of 350 thousand people. He used to see many Salafis, most of whom were from the Northern Caucasus and also Bashkirs. Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek migrants did not join Salafi groups much. Nobody ever approached him with any kind of radical ideas and he did not see many study circles in the mosque. He worked as a taxi driver and this made it easier for him to pray, but it was still difficult to pray all five prayers and he often combined two afternoon prayers and two evening prayers. Out of ten boys he lived with, five or six used to attend the Friday prayer and only two (including himself) prayed five times. There was only one mosque and it was very far from where they lived, so usually they just prayed at home. He also did not see many Kyrgyz girls or women wearing hijab. He did not receive any local information on Islam, except for Friday sermons in the mosque. Instead, he watched YouTube videos of Kyrgyz scholars. His favorite scholars are Chubak aji and Abdushukur domla [both preach traditional forms of Islam].

N. lived in Moscow in 2011-2012 and used to deliver various food products to shops. He never experienced any significant problems. In his opinion, Kyrgyz have better education and Russian language skills; it is easier for them to find some common ground with locals and with employers and to find better jobs. He suggests that Uzbek and Tajik migrants had many more difficulties with registration, FMS, and police. They were arrested more often than Kyrgyz, and not only arrested, but also jailed. Russian prisons might be one place, where, in his opinion, they get exposed to radical ideas. He also knew several Kyrgyz Salafis; interestingly, they also had some juvenile experience. He observed that Kyrgyz who go to Russia with some form of established religious practice, tend to preserve it, while those who are not practicing Muslims, retain very secular lifestyle there.

M.'s experience and observation is slightly different from N.'s. He first went to Novosibirsk in 2012 after he completed his school and since then he goes there seasonally. His parents live there, while he is completing his studies in Bishkek. His main observation is that people lose their religious practices in Russia. He speaks of his own experience: in Kyrgyzstan he would start praying and attending the mosque, but every time he goes to Russia, it becomes difficult for him due to work and various forms of distraction. His circle of friends there likes to party and drink and he gets influenced by them. He says that Kyrgyz in Russia are much less religious than Uzbeks or Tajiks. He shared how once upon his arrival in Novosibirsk, security officers in the airport took him and a bunch of other Kyrgyz to a room, where they had tens of portraits of extremists. He says that judging by their names, majority were from Kazakhstan, but there were also Uzbeks and Tajiks, not many Kyrgyz. Officers asked if they knew any of them, then interviewed every person individually, warned them about extremism and eventually let them go.

T. went to Russia for one year (2014-2015) to study on an exchange program at the Moscow State University of Construction. He went there with eight other students from Bishkek: five boys and three girls. Interestingly, out of eight only two used to pray, but after one year, three more students (two boys and one girl, including himself) started praying five times. He used to attend a study circle organized by a Tajik scholar, who used to teach them the basics of religion according to the Hanafi Mazhab. This scholar used to warn them against radical ideas, so T. thinks he was more or less prepared when he came across some Salafis who tried to influence him. During this one year, he never experienced any repression. Police used to check his documents, but since he was a student, he never had any difficulties with them. He has several Kyrgyz friends who had Tablighi Jamaat experience from Kyrgyzstan and they used to talk to him and also warn him about radical ideas.

U. lived in Moscow for nearly ten years. He lives with his family. He has Tablighi experience from Kyrgyzstan. He usually joins Tablighi practices when he returns to Kyrgyzstan, but in Russia he cannot do it because this practice is banned. He however, tries to maintain his regular prayers and keeps in touch with other Kyrgyz migrants. He observed that lately, one could see the increase of Salafi activity in the Moscow mosques. He suggests that they preach openly and nobody says anything. He observes more and more Tajiks and Uzbeks joining such Salafi circles. He does not see many Kyrgyz joining. Recently, he went for a Tablighi trip to India directly from Russia and he was deported to Kyrgyzstan by security agencies upon his return to Moscow because of that. He took his family back to his home-place in the South of Kyrgyzstan.

Stories of Kyrgyz labor migrants, shared in this section, show the "safer" form of religious practice in Russia. of course, if we were to introduce stories of labor migrants with more radical experience, the

picture could be quite different. Nevertheless, these stories too allow us to see some trends and general characteristics. What was shared by almost all respondents, was that the percentage of Kyrgyz who practice religion (pray regularly and attend mosques) is rather insignificant. The majority retain very secular lifestyle, keeping busy with several jobs, and having little time left for religion. Many respondents acknowledge the presence of Salafi groups, but mostly link them to internal migrants from the Northern Caucasus. The number of Kyrgyz reported as joining Salafi groups is very small. Most of respondents never experienced pressure from security agencies for their religious practices, except for U. who was deported for his trip to India. If religious practices in Russia varied from respondent to respondent, most of them always had more religious lifestyle upon their return to Kyrgyzstan.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The main objective of this research report was to answer two main questions:

- 1) Is Noah Tucker's hypothesis about radicalization of Central Asian migrants in Russia applicable to migrants from Kyrgyzstan?
- 2) What factors make migrants from Kyrgyzstan more vulnerable/resilient to radicalization and engagement in violent extremist groups?

The simple answer to the first question is NO – Noah Tucker's hypothesis is not very applicable to them. Little evidence can be found that shows how Kyrgyz migrants are recruited to extremist groups in Russia. Neither there is much logic that would make us think they are. On the contrary, available statistics and reasoning offered by experts argues for the contrary: Kyrgyz migrants are the smallest group in Syria (both in absolute and per capita numbers) and they are much less vulnerable to radicalization than migrants from other Central Asian countries.

Factors that make Kyrgyz more resilient to engagement with radical groups include following:

- 1) Kyrgyzstan's accession to EEU contributed to a better legal and socio-economic status of Kyrgyz migrants.
- 2) Better education and stronger Russian language skills of Kyrgyz migrants ease their integration and increase their opportunities in Russia.
- 3) Demographics: 40% of Kyrgyz migrants are women and up to 60% of married migrants travel to Russia with their spouses. This helps recreate traditional family structures.
- 4) Kyrgyz migrants in Russia usually stay extremely busy, often working several jobs and their life is divided between home and work with little time left for radicalization. In this aspect, Kyrgyz are not very different from other Central Asians in Russia.
- 5) Partly due to the previous factor, Kyrgyz migrants' religious practices in Russia are quite modest or even non-existent. The percent of migrants who maintain their religious practices is relatively small.
- 6) Yet, those who practice, experience normalization of their religious life, not radicalization.
- 7) Islamic scholars from Kyrgyzstan regularly visit their compatriots in Russia and organize lectures, where they preach traditional Islamic knowledge and warn migrants about dangers of radicalization.
- 8) The Muftiyat of Kyrgyzstan has its representatives in Russia and stays in close connection with Kyrgyz migrants and with the Muftiyat of Russian Federation.

- 9) Muftiyat also works productively in Kyrgyzstan and collaborates closely with various state and security agencies and with international organizations.
- 10) Kyrgyzstan's security services are very active inside Kyrgyzstan and their main strategy is focused on the prevention of radicalism, rather than repression.
- 11) Kyrgyzstan's religious policy is the most liberal policy in Central Asia. It is also based on prevention instead of repression. Our government was in the past criticized for its liberal approach, but today, years later, the results show that it was much more effective than repressive policies in neighboring countries and in Russian Federation.
- 12) Due to its liberal policies, Kyrgyzstan is the only country in Central Asia that did not ban moderate Islamic groups, such as Hizmet, Nurjuler, Tablighi Jamaat. These peaceful moderate groups today play very important role in pulling the practicing Muslim population away from the more radical and extremist groups. The government has chosen the model of strict control of these groups' activities and using their resources in the struggle against radical groups.

Now, let us list factors that make Kyrgyz migrants more vulnerable to radicalization.

- 1) Although liberal religious policy is beneficial, it is not sufficient. The major structural socio-economic and political problems in the country related to unemployment, corruption, poor social provision by the government can push Kyrgyz citizens, including labor migrants to search for justice elsewhere.
- 2) Social injustices and discrimination by the security services towards ethnic Uzbek population in the South of Kyrgyzstan.
- 3) One of the groups most vulnerable to radicalization today is the Russian-speaking Kyrgyz youth in the Northern regions of Kyrgyzstan. The country has a very strong shortage of Russian-speaking Islamic scholars. Almost all madrasas and Kyrgyzstan's Muftiyat are Kyrgyz-speaking.
- 4) Many of these young people in the Northern Kyrgyzstan are exposed to the growing Salafi influence. Salafism in Kyrgyzstan is believed to have fairly moderate forms. Still, many experts find the Salafi influence dangerous.
- 5) Internet nowadays becomes a source of radical information. Variety of available graphic materials (video and images) are skillfully used by recruiters to promote radical ideas.
- 6) The controversial religious policy in Russian Federation that bans peaceful moderate Islamic groups, but closes eyes on the activity of potentially radical groups.

What can we recommend on the basis of this analysis? There are few recommendations that we feel strongly about.

- 1) It is absolutely crucial that Kyrgyzstan preserves its liberal religious policy. Democracy and pluralism are its main comparative advantages built over the last quarter of the century. Kyrgyzstan's Central Asian neighbors and Russian Federation lack this advantage. Their religious policies are based on prohibition and repression of religious groups and individuals, which, in our opinion, has proven to be counterproductive and led to the radicalization of a large number of their practicing Muslim population.
- 2) Similarly, it is recommended to retain collaboration with peaceful moderate Islamic groups (including Hizmet, Nurjuler and Tablighi Jamaat) and continue using their potential and

resources in drawing people away from radical ideas and groups, under the close monitoring of Muftiyat, security agencies and State Committee on Religious Affairs.

- 3) Although addressing such structural factors as unemployment, corruption and poor social services is a difficult and very long-term task, unless steps are taken in this direction, these negative phenomena will remain among the main factors pushing people towards radicalization.
- 4) Kyrgyzstan urgently needs Russian-speaking Islamic scholars. Currently, there is a pilot project by the State Committee on Religious Affairs to open a theological college certified by the Ministry of Education as an alternative to traditional uncertified madrasas. Perhaps a program in Russian language could be developed and introduced in such colleges as/if their numbers increase.
- 5) Muftiyat too needs Russian-speaking specialists who can actively engage with Russian-speaking youth. Muftiyat also needs to have a female representative and office, where women could come with questions and concerns.
- 6) We are not in the position to advise/recommend the governments of other countries on how they should shape their policies towards religion. Yet, we may suggest that they could benefit from the positive experience of Kyrgyzstan, which today shows the least vulnerability of its population to radicalization and violent extremism. Our Central Asian neighbors and Russian Federation could perhaps see on our experience that the policy of tolerance and collaboration is much more productive than the policy of prohibition and repression and that instead of trying to “kill” religious diversity, prohibit peaceful religious groups and push them into one official version of Islam, it is better to allow these moderate groups to function under the strict control as the counterbalance to more radical Islamic movements and practices.

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