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Information flows and Radicalization leading to violent extremism in Central Asia

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With the word of thanks to the individuals, who participated in this research project, this report is dedicated to all ordinary people of Central Asia, who are living with hopes of peace, security and stability in their daily lives.



Information flows and radicalization leading to violent extremism in CA

Executive summary and Key recommendations

This research was conducted as a part of the larger project “Contributing to stability and peace in Central Asia through media literacy, improved reporting and regional cooperation” implemented by Internews and funded by the European Union. The project is focused on national and regional efforts to prevent radicalization in Central Asia through increasing the capacity of journalists, civic activists, and media professionals (through training activities, workshops both on the national and regional level, and innovation laboratories) in the production of high-quality media content and raising the level of critical media consumption of representatives of civil society, decision-makers, and the public.

Within the scope of the present study, the aim was to identify and analyze the local drivers of extremist sympathies, the pertinent information flows, the trusted sources of information; and the support needed to amplify respected, moderate local voices.

The study is comprised of three main parts: a desk study of available and accessible material – reports, documents and media material; a qualitative study comprising over 200 interviews with ordinary people, experts, and persons with direct experience with RVE; and a quantitative component consisting of national surveys of people’s information consumption habits. For the desk study, the effort was made to gain as broad a picture as possible, that is, to cover all five countries of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. However, predictably and unfortunately, Uzbekistan and especially Turkmenistan proved difficult cases to study in full.¹ For both the qualitative and quantitative field research activities, for several reasons, only the first three countries were included. As a result, this study is able to report most robustly on these three countries and propose observations regarding Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan only to a limited extent.

Based on the desk study, the drivers of extremist sympathies as established in existing research have been political grievances (injustice from state structures; identity-based discrimination; oppressive political regimes, etc), economic difficulties (unemployment; indebtedness; poverty; and desire for quick and greater income) and ideological motivations (resentment of false values; striving for the singularly just and true life; for reward in a perceived afterlife). To these push and pull factors are added a range of enabling factors, such as migration, young age, gender (women), and means of communication. All these drivers of RVE need to be treated with caution, as stressed by various authors and suggested by evidence gained in field research.

A general observation, gained from the desk research and supported by evidence in both qualitative and quantitative field studies, was the difference among the countries in degree of control over the information space, or the degree of hegemony over public discourse. Of the three most fully studied countries, hegemonic discourse was the strongest in Tajikistan, followed by Kazakhstan, and the least in Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan, analyzed to a limited extent, would be closer to the extreme of Tajikistan, whereas Turkmenistan was too closed to make reasonably robust observations. Hegemonic discourse, depending on how strong it is, would determine how much pluralism there is in terms of information sources, which sources are trusted, what people hear and see, and so on. Hence, answers to the specific questions of the

¹ See ‘Limitations’ section for a discussion of these challenges.

present research tended to reflect the different levels of hegemonic public discourse in the respective countries.

On the drivers of extremist sympathies in Central Asia, while literature suggests a wide array of answers, the findings of field research in the three countries revealed that political drivers – mostly push factors – were pronounced in Kyrgyzstan, while economic and especially ideological drivers were the more prevailing explanations in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. But in all countries, besides these larger structural factors, several enabling factors were strongly present in respondents' views – lack or poor education (especially in matters of religion), the vulnerabilities of youth (inexperience; unemployment; weakening family bonds; etc.), enabling linkages (radicalized relatives; friends and good acquaintances), and the internet (as a tool of communicating radical ideas and messages). Interestingly, labor migration and gender did not emerge as strong drivers of violent extremism.

The pertinent information flows were varied, but differing across the countries. The more hegemonic a regime, the more restricted, controlled and narrow the channels of information flows. The less hegemonic a regime, the wider and more varied the spectrum of pertinent information flows.

Trusted sources of information, correspondingly, also vary along a similar line. While in all countries, trust toward official government information is strong, other sources of information vary more widely: there is greater trust toward internet-based information and social media in Kyrgyzstan, and less of that in Tajikistan. In Tajikistan, greater trust is given to information from acquaintances and prominent people, as well as to books (in terms of religious information). In Kazakhstan, more moderate levels of trust are given to a wide variety of information sources, from government information to online media, to social media. Newspaper readership is, predictably, low in all countries, but, of the three, Tajikistani respondents read relatively more and are more trusting toward newspapers, despite all three having similar high literacy rates.²

Given all the above, the question of how to amplify local moderate voices is both relevant and complex. Especially in Tajikistan – and given their similarities, in Uzbekistan, let alone Turkmenistan – the question is firstly what those local moderate voices are, besides the government. Since the government and its affiliated institutions are closely engaged in the information ecosystem of the country and are especially controlling the information space in terms of PVE/CVE,³ any effort to amplify local moderate voices would need to be in coordination, if not cooperation, with the government. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, such efforts can involve both government-affiliated and independent actors and media. However, at least in Kazakhstan, even with independent agents, government acquiescence would be necessary for such efforts to succeed. The ways to amplify moderate voices boil down, mostly, to giving greater publicity to and engaging people with popular moderate imams and clerics, as well as improving and diversifying media products aimed at PVE/CVE, particularly with counter-narratives to extremism that highlight real stories of real people from the communities.

One important observation that pertains to all questions of the present study, and to RVE more generally, is the necessity to develop a more effective and careful language in media and public discourse about

² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.1524.LT.ZS?end=2001&locations=KG-KZ-TJ&start=1997&view=chart>

³ Preventing violent extremism (PVE) and countering violent extremism (CVE) are internationally accepted references to policies, activities and other efforts aimed, respectively, preventing violent extremism that has not yet materialized and countering violent extremism that has already taken place. For a brief explanation, see: <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism.html>

religion as opposed to radicalism and violent extremism. In each of the societies observed, there is a growing presence of religion in social life, which is welcomed strongly or moderately by the majority of all respondents of in-depth interviews. At the same time, nearly all respondents, expressed a strong rejection of radicalism and violent extremism, and view such events as alien to their religion. Similar observations could be inferred from the survey results (albeit no question directly addressed such views of respondents) and echoed in reviewed existing studies. These two points must be viewed together and must inform any PVE/CVE efforts correspondingly.

Highlighted recommendations for the media, for governments and other relevant actors.

For the media:

- Media outlets and journalists in Central Asia require training in conflict-sensitive coverage of news and topics on religion and radicalization. While newsworthy material is what media would generally cover, such coverage should not lead to feeding social tensions and cleavages.
- Media outlets and journalists need more training on religious matters, as well as more cooperation with relevant experts, so as to avoid writing in clichés and ill-informed tone, let alone inaccurate information about religion.
- Media and journalists can be essential in promoting transparency and the rule of law by effective coverage of legal cases against persons charged with extremism. This is an area where serious problems continue, creating grounds for grievances. Training in investigative journalism will be very essential here.
- Media coverage and discussion of pernicious social problems, such as problems of discrimination, inequality, injustice and abuse by law enforcement bodies, in a language that gives voice to the more vulnerable groups and encourages government to take positive action, is necessary.

For governments, donors, and researchers:

- There is need for particular care in defining ‘target populations’ of PVE/CVE activities. In this as well as some previous studies, as a category of population, labor migrants have not been established as particularly prone to radicalization. The same can be said about women.
- It is essential to provide rationale and to carefully design government control mechanisms of information space to avoid unjustified restrictions on freedoms of information, press and speech. While extremist groups’ messaging can be a legitimate target for control, such controls have often gone beyond the necessary levels of restriction.
- Education, in a broad sense, continues to be a problem in all Central Asian countries. Better education, notably Media and Information Literacy (MIL)⁴ is essential for responsible consumption of any information; it is also essential for the ability of the society to uphold pluralism and tolerance.
- For international donor and research communities, it is necessary to consider the likely policy and political effects of every project and research output; it is worth devising a ‘political impact

⁴ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/media-development/media-literacy/mil-as-composite-concept/>

evaluation' procedure⁵ for any project that would assess any risk of it instigating further restrictive or coercive government policies. Further, repression of citizen freedoms and curtailment of their civil and human rights would be a cure worse than the disease.

For further study and work:

- One area is to study the formation of public discourse⁶ on religion more closely – that is, what particular actors and which institutions, by what language and through what channels of communication, get to shape public ideas, understandings and attitudes regarding religion.
- Another area to explore, related to the preceding point, is to go beyond causality studies in CVE/PVE and to focus on communication. As so much research so far attests, establishing the veritable causes of RVE is extremely difficult and always open to debate. However, how such ideas and ideologies get articulated and communicated, when, where, by whom and to whom, are questions less explored.
- A third area that merits studying is the question of secular politics and government. A potential new line of contention in many societies – especially post-Soviet Central Asian societies – is the line between secularists and the religious. This tension, if it develops further, can turn into another potent aspect of radicalization, let alone a more general social cleavage.
- A last point, directly based on the present study, is the need to follow up on this study with more substantive and longer-term research. This is especially relevant to Uzbekistan – the largest country in the region. Access to Uzbekistan, which has opened up considerably in the last two years, may be further facilitated by teaming up with local research institutions there.

⁵ This is a suggestion based on concerns from this study, but more specific elaboration of the suggestion is somewhat beyond the scope of work possible presently.

⁶ 'Discourse'/'public discourse', in this report, are used in this report in their plain meanings, as referring to public communicative processes wherein common meanings of publicly salient phenomena – such as religion – are created, shared or debated. The strict criteria for the terminology, found, for example, in works on and by Michel Foucault or Jurgen Habermas, are not invoked in this report.

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Introduction

Subject of study

Central Asia, having contributed a large number of recruits to the fighting in Syria in Iraq, became the locus of sustained concern for threats of radicalization, violent extremism, and terrorism.⁷ The war in Syria has subsided for the time being, and the Islamic State (IS) – the main terrorist group that drew thousands of fighters from around the world – has reportedly lost much of its territory and splintered. The problem of Central Asians enrolling to fight in Syria or elsewhere in the ranks of groups like IS, therefore, is not as urgent of a problem in 2019 as it was even two years ago. However, the return of fighters back to their home region, radicalization of new people, activation of new groups, and their turning to destructive and violent paths remain salient threats for the region.⁸

On a daily basis, local news reports events or incidents involving extremist or radical action. New articles appear regularly in the media, offering analyses of radicalization. Regularly, some important meeting of state officials, international institutions, experts and/or military officers is reported to be taking place somewhere in Central Asia, each of them leading to resolutions, agreements and future plans.⁹ Radicalization and related topics, clearly, remain on top of the agenda of Central Asian countries and their partners, of most media institutions, and with numerous experts and institutions.

This study has been designed to bring a critical reassessment of and a practical and constructive approach to the challenge of radicalization and violent extremism which leads to terrorism in countries of the Central Asian region: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. A central theme of the study is information and communication: the underlying theory in the study and the larger project behind it is that people – individuals and society in general – to a significant extent form their ideas, opinions and perceptions, arguments, and preferences based on what they hear, read, and watch. Governments and other actors, including groups that recruit people to join certain causes, also operate on that understanding. They design, calibrate and deliver their information and arguments so as to influence people's thoughts and actions. That extremist and terrorist groups have understood and acted upon that understanding has been amply evidenced by the multiplicity of videos and other forms of messaging by the Islamic State (ISIS), analyzed and documented in a number of works.¹⁰

⁷ Actual numbers of fighters from Central Asia are not known for sure, and estimates vary widely, from about 2000 to over 4000; count by individual countries varies in similar ranges. Establishing definite numbers of fighters not being necessary or possible here, what is certain is that Central Asia has certainly been accepted as a major region of origin of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. For often cited estimates, see Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees", The Soufan Group, October 2017, at: <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>

⁸ See International Center for the Study of Radicalization, "Beyond ISIS and Al-Qaeda: The Long Tail of Global Islamist Violence", 2018, for a brief survey of still active but often overlooked extremist groups.

⁹ A notable such recent event was the high-level conference on countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism, held in Dushanbe, and co-sponsored by the UN, the OSCE and the Government of Qatar, among others. See: <http://www.dushanbeconf2018.tj/about-conference>

¹⁰ Noah Tucker, "Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging", CERIA Briefs Nos. 11-15, February 2016; SFCG, "Messages, images and media channels in youth radicalization in Kyrgyzstan", January 2017; UNESCO, "Youth and Violent Extremism On Social Media: Mapping the Research", 2017

Specifically, the study project has been tasked with identifying and analyzing:

- local drivers of extremist sympathies;
- pertinent information flows;
- trusted sources of information; and
- types of support needed in order to amplify respected, moderate local voices.

In other words, the study aims to inquire into and understand what is relevant to preventing violent extremism in the sphere of information and communication. Government and relevant civil society groups' counter-narratives efforts have been an area of busy activity in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (PVE/CVE).¹¹ Counter-narratives has been viewed as a better, more legitimate response than law enforcement and potentially repressive measures that many governments, especially in Central Asia, have prioritized before. It has also been deemed a much less costly and faster intervention compared to responding to a wide variety of structural claims, such as discrimination, economic difficulties, poor education and lack of knowledge of religion in particular, that people – potential targets of extremist recruitment – have been subject to. However, the effectiveness of counter-narrative activities – their success in preventing radicalization; in shaping the most effective as well as accurate and legitimate narratives on relevant subjects; in reaching the critical masses of audience and engaging them – is extremely difficult to assess.¹²

This study has aimed, then, to cast a new and broader look at communication and information as they relate to radicalization, extremism, and the prevention thereof. The aim is to outline and understand the *information ecosystem*, or information landscape, that is in place in the relevant societies and that characterize all aspects of information and communication flows. In the present usage, information ecosystem or landscape is not the narrow technical term used in communication studies, but a broad reference to: the range and variety of sources of information; the variety of formats and content of information; the actors that shape information and their strategies of communication; the patterns and preferences in consumption of such information and communication; the feedback to such communicative and information strategies from users – the society; and the effect of such strategies on how people think and act in relevant situations. In other words, the information ecosystem concerns all elements comprising that ecosystem and their interaction patterns.

Having a clearer and more critical understanding of the information ecosystem would afford a stronger position for further policy making and design of programs that aim to positively contribute to socially desirable objectives such as PVE/CVE, deradicalization, and rehabilitation, as well as to promote healthy and informed understanding of relevant subjects such as religion, tolerance, and secularism.

The results of the study suggest that this goal of the project, understood from the critical vantage point as outlined above, has been well accomplished. After several months of broad-based and in-depth examination of previously published literature and media publications, of in-depth interviews and representative public surveys on the subject of information ecosystems and how they interacted with issues of radicalization and extremism, it is possible to say that a comprehensive picture of the current

¹¹ See SFCG, "Social Media to P/CVE: Toolkit for Practitioners", 2017.

¹² See UNESCO, "Youth and Violent Extremism On Social Media: Mapping the Research", p. 36-37 on existing doubts regarding the effectiveness of this strategy, and also SFCG, "Social Media for P/CVE: A Toolkit for Practitioners", p. 22-23 for a more optimistic but still hedged advice.

information ecosystem in Central Asia – primarily based on the cases of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan - has been derived.

Some general and more interesting results of the study are worth highlighting here, in six broad points. These observations reinforce the urgency of accurate analysis and understanding of drivers of RVE in Central Asia, and highlight the important variations and tendencies among the societies covered as to sources and flows of information, information consumption habits and trust in information by respondents, and not least, respondents' attitudes toward religion in their societies. These points are primarily drawn on interviews and survey research, which were only carried out in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, so they relate primarily to these three countries.

Thus, first, previous studies and inquiries have failed to effectively distinguish between radicalization/extremism and peaceful practices and ideas of Islam. Relatedly, there has been a certain tension between secularist ideas and groups and the practicing religious groups. Governments and other relevant agents have often contributed to such tension, rather than propose a sustainable regime of coexistence of religion and secularity in these ideologically strained post-Soviet societies.¹³

Second, having said the above, the overwhelming majority of respondents of various ages and backgrounds – held favorable views regarding the growing role and presence of religion in their societies, arguing that religion's growing place in society was based on religion's positive influence on social morals and behaviors. Few people expressed views that were of the opposite stance.

Third, in all three countries studied in full there was a wide variety of information sources and content. However, there were differences in people's preferences and information consumption habits, and in the effectiveness of various information sources in garnering viewership. These differences appeared to be related most directly to the prevailing regime of public discourse – often hegemonic and government-dominated regimes shape public views and discourse on religion, radicalism, and terrorism. A clear range of three levels was identifiable, where Tajikistan presented the most hegemonic discursive regime, Kyrgyzstan appeared the least hegemonic, and Kazakhstan took a middle position somewhat closer to that of Tajikistan. Based on the more limited data available, Uzbekistan and especially Turkmenistan both appear to tend more toward a more hegemonic discursive regime.¹⁴

Fourth, there were somewhat mixed results concerning people's trust in media. In all three countries, many in-depth interviews suggested that people consumed information critically and even skeptically, showed awareness of systematic biases in various media, and yet at the same time, in both in-depth interviews and the surveys, the majority seemed to trust government-run television channels and official news information. This discrepancy might be explained by the fact that people are sensitized to the need to use information critically and that biased information was everywhere, but they are not always able to follow upon that awareness, partly due to a lack of critical thinking skills, partly due to a lack of choice, and partly due to having already internalized certain government messaging.¹⁵

Fifth, virtually all respondents of the study rejected radicalism – that was the term used in interviews – and other negative outcomes related to it. However, they were generally unable or unwilling to define it, taking

¹³ See David Levy, "The Impulse to Orthodoxy", *Religion, State and Society*, 2018, for a critical discussion of politically-motivated state discourses on religion.

¹⁴ Without the field-based research, which was not carried in these two countries, it is not possible to propose strong and specific conclusions on information consumption and discourse there.

¹⁵ This is a hypothesis based on observed patterns and correlations, however it requires more focused research for substantiation.

it as simply extreme views, trespassing of certain boundaries, fanaticism, and so on. Salafism and Wahhabism were typical definitions of Islamic radicalism used by respondents.

Sixth, in suggesting the factors and drivers of radicalization, respondents mentioned the following factors the most: economic, political, ideological, as well as contributing factors such as young age, poor education, poor understanding of Islam, and the role of recruiters. Also, in respondents' views, labor migrants and women were never mentioned as particularly vulnerable. Very few people mentioned the internet and availability of radical messaging as factors of radicalization. People with direct experience of extremism mentioned that online communication was an instrument, not a causal factor, and that direct personal contact or knowledge between recruits and recruiters preceded online communication.

Radicalization is a complicated issue involving many factors and the work of preventing and countering violent extremism is clearly not a straightforward task. It is worth reiterating that a critical and possibly the most effective area of effort in this area is information and communication. Strengthening the work of both traditional and new forms of media and information, understanding and shaping information ecosystems so as to enhance the resilience of communities and individuals, emphasizing the development of critical information consumption habits of people – these appear to be the most workable and realistic approaches to the work of preventing radicalization. The present study, and the larger project led by Internews and funded by the European Union in all five Central Asian states behind this report, is a move in that direction.

The logic behind the project is, as noted here, that PVE/CVE requires, alongside many other efforts, engagement with the populations, the radicalizing agents and messages in the information and communication space. The results of the present research, given in the pages below, give support to this approach and indicate ways in which effective work in information and communication against radicalization can be undertaken.

Methodology of the study

This research project, given the main questions stated above – drivers of extremist sympathies, pertinent information flows, trusted sources of information, and the role of local, moderate voices - has essentially aimed at elucidating the interconnection of two large subjects: radicalization and information ecosystems. The objective has been to understand the factors and drivers of radicalization and extremist sympathies, the relevant information flows that contribute to radicalization or resilience to radicalization, and issues of trust, preference and patterns of information consumption among people. As noted above, the theory behind such a study is that, to a significant extent, radicalization happens as a result of information that persons get to consume (read, watch, hear) and PVE/CVE, correspondingly, must involve making available such information as can respond to people's needs, answer the questions and solve the puzzles they have, give voice to concerns and problems they experience, and amplify moderate, tolerant voices amongst the society.

Within the report, terms such as radicalization and violent extremism (and the acronym RVE) are used as the basic reference to the problem in discussion. RVE is broad and neutral enough, to capture the variety of problems meant to cover. The term (and problem of) terrorism is not implied in RVE and it is mentioned by its own name, where necessary. In addition to RVE, however, the text will sometimes just say 'radicalization' or 'radicalism'. The word 'radicalism' (in its Russian form, радикализм) has been used in interview questionnaires as a relatively simpler word that an average person can understand. Concepts (and acronyms) like preventing and/or countering violent extremism (PVE and CVE) are used in their accepted meanings, and often used together, reflecting the remaining debates on these two concepts and approaches.

Further, the word religion is used in this study, unavoidably. The word is used here mostly to denote the social phenomenon, practice and subject of ordinary people's discussions in the interviews. Usage of the word does not claim any pretense of discussing theology, religious doctrine and philosophy, which is well beyond the scope of the present work.

Lastly, for the purposes of ensuing discussion, it is worth remarking on the term 'target audiences' or 'target groups'. As has been revealed in this study, substantively, a group that is viewed as a target group for particular PVE/CVE attention can actually be open to debate as being such a "target". In methodological discussions in studies similar to this, it is habitual to speak of 'target groups'. Such language, unfortunately, is capable of stigmatizing certain groups and categories of people, even if with best intentions. For the researcher community, it is particularly important to avoid such stigmatization. This term is used in the report, only for the purpose of being understood by the reader but, often, instead of 'target groups', in speaking about the bulk of in-depth interview participants, this report also interchangeably refers to "the ordinary respondents", "the main group of respondents" or "the non-expert respondents".

Having clarified this basic terminology, some detail of the methodological decisions in this study follows. The geographical scope of the study would have ideally encompassed all five Central Asian states, but considering the likely difficulties in two of the countries – Uzbekistan and especially Turkmenistan¹⁶ – it was focused more on the three remaining countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. To the extent that information and sources on Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan could be accessed without field presence there, they were included in the desk research component of the project.

The study comprised three main parts of research work: a comprehensive desk research; qualitative interview research; and quantitative survey research.

The desk research undertook a critical analysis and outline as well as state of affairs on radicalization in Central Asia and an overview of media and information ecosystems as relates to coverage of radicalization and related issues. The aim of the desk research was to: establish the existing explanations and causes of radicalization in Central Asia; addressing of the problems; to establish and outline the scope and variety of relevant information and its sources; and understand the prevailing characteristics of the information ecosystems in these countries. The period of overview for the general literature was over 2013 to 2018, that is, since ISIS recruitment became a major concern in Central Asia. For media analyses, for reasons of feasibility and wanting to cover what is most salient, the period was shorter, over 2015 to 2018.

The qualitative interviews, carried out in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan consisted of over 60 in-depth semi-structured interviews in each country, a total of 201 interviews.¹⁷ The bulk of the interviews – 155 – were conducted with lay, non-expert respondents, with particular attention to sampling from three main categories: youth, women, and labor migrants. Each of these categories is a broad swath of population in itself, and the respondents interviewed reflected such diversity, by age, socio-economic status and gender. In Kazakhstan, which is not a major source of labor migrants abroad, respondents sampled under this category were mostly internal migrants. The selection of respondents for these interviews was based on snowball and convenience sampling approaches, partly purposively (to cover the above three groups) and partly randomly. The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview

¹⁶ Both countries regularly appear among the worst offenders in the world in terms of human rights, civil and political freedoms and rule of law. For example, both scored full 7.0 (the worst) in *Freedom in the World 2018* report by Freedom House, compared to Tajikistan's 6.5, Kazakhstan's 6.0 and Kyrgyzstan's 5.0.

¹⁷ Breakdown of this number into different groups and by countries is provided in the introduction to Chapter Two.

tool.¹⁸ Any quantified form of presentation of results in these interviews, it is argued, would risk to seriously mislead the reader and to mischaracterize any social pattern in question.¹⁹

In-depth interviews were also carried out with experts in all three countries (researchers, government or public officials, religious/theological experts, journalists) and persons with direct experience with extremism – either themselves or family members having been involved in extremist activity and/or charged or convicted for such activity in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The expert interviews, 27 in total, were aimed at getting more critical and informed views of these respondents on questions such as drivers of violent extremism, government policy in PVE/CVE, the role of media and information, and other outstanding issues. The expert interviews were selected by researchers in each country based on the record of the relevant expert’s previous works and public views.

It was only possible to conduct the interviews with people who have had experience with extremism-related activity and/or charges, or more shortly, people implicated in extremism/extremist activity (PIE), in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. No such opportunity was available in Kazakhstan. Not all PIE respondents were themselves involved in extremism – for a number of cases, the respondents were family members of such persons. The interviews with PIE respondents focused mostly on getting their stories of extremism, radicalization, motivations and causes behind such activities, and to some extent, their experience with the consequences of such activities. They were not asked about their attitudes toward religion, toward government and politics, and other issues, both because such answers were most likely to be subject to self-censorship and because these interviews needed to be kept focused and brief.

The third component of the project was a series of surveys – 600 people were surveyed in each Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – on their information consumption habits, information source and access preferences, trust toward information, and habits with information about religion.²⁰

The sample details of the surveys, with main demographic breakdowns, are provided in the introduction to Chapter Three. Generally, the samples were diverse and reflective of the general populations geographically and demographically, albeit possibly not strictly statistically representative due to use of opportunity and snowball sampling methods. Three variables – geographic (location of interview), education level and occupation type - being non-dichotomous nominal labels, would render the statistical significance of results very suspect in samples of only 600 respondents in each country. The more statistically sound and empirically more interesting results were possible to see in three other demographic parameters – the rural vs urban residential areas, gender, and the ordinal scale of age. The latter, while non-dichotomous, is a continuous variable for which the results can be grouped, read as tendencies, and dichotomized (into “younger” vs “older” age groups). Therefore, in discussion of the survey results, these latter three parameters were applied to highlight particular patterns of interest. But the most systematic, and ultimately revealing the most variation, was the aggregate national level analysis in which similarities and differences between the three countries were most evident.

Altogether, then, this research project has been based on a multi-method, comprehensive methodological design. Such a design has allowed for a good level of cross-checking and triangulation of findings on an

¹⁸ The interviewing tools for all of the three groups of interviews – non-expert, expert, and PIE respondents – are provided in the Appendix to this report.

¹⁹ See an explanation of this reasoning under the Limitations section below.

²⁰ The questionnaire used for the surveys is provided in the Appendix.

admittedly very sensitive subject of research. But as with most complex and large-scale research designs, certain limitations were evident and require examination.

Limitations

It was planned to cover Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan without field presence there, and – in Uzbekistan’s case – an expert was contracted to assist with the desk study on the country. With that expert joining the project only partially and at a late stage, it proved difficult for him to provide a full-scale contribution on Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan remains an extremely closed society, admitted by nearly anyone who has attempted to study the country. Uzbekistan, a country that has somewhat opened up to international cooperation since mid-2016, deserves serious in-country research but remains difficult to study from the outside. It is clearly an issue to try to capture such a large and important case from a distance, let alone to generalize the findings of a study mostly based on three other countries to this country as well. Therefore, one of the key recommendations for further study here is to study Uzbekistan in a more comprehensive manner.

Another limitation, springing out of the limited time and resources available in the project, has been to limit the sizes of the national surveys in the three countries to 600 respondents. While this number is a valid size for aggregate studies on such general social phenomena as information use, it is too small for more detailed cross-sectional analyses and open to risk of unjustified generalizations.

Another revision of methodological plans had to do with geographical targeting in conducting in-depth interviews and producing initially planned ‘field reports’ from, or profiles of, particular target locations. While even two or three years ago it might have been justified to speak of particular locations that were most suspect in terms of breeding extremism, currently a number of evidences and testimonies suggest that such specific targeting would be not very meaningful.

The problem of measurability of certain issues of interest has been another challenge. Some level of precision has been reached in regard to measuring information source usage, preference and trust patterns by the conduct of three nationwide surveys. What they do not specify is the content of information, as well as the sensibilities and discursive models that people hold in their minds while consuming information. The latter is provided by in-depth interview analyses, where the measure comes not in quantitative but in qualitative form. Namely, in the in-depth interview component, the report adopts more of an interpretive and verbal approach to analysis and puts the greater burden on the author for accurate and cautious presentation of findings. Upon careful reading and note-taking across the transcripts of the interviews that underwent a primary and broad level of thematic coding, the author generalized and highlighted the observations relevant to the subject of study in a language that joins together direct speech with recurring patterns. Such patterns are then reported as answers and views shared by “few” or “many” or “most” and other verbal expressions of recurrence. This way, the qualitative element of the report is able to avoid putting into hard numbers and arbitrary precision what is always subject to fluctuation and interpretation. To reiterate, these notes apply to the qualitative component of this study, and not to the quantitative.

One last point to be noted as a methodological limitation here, as possibly any study on the topic of RVE, is the sensitivity of the subject and corresponding caution required in reading, interpreting, and generalizing the findings. The researchers in the field were instructed, and had good experience previously, to make the respondents at ease and comfortable speaking to them without compromising the objectivity of their answers.

To maximize the accuracy and honesty of answers to posed questions, the in-depth interviews were also mostly conducted with respondents selected by convenience and snowball samples, and often with persons who felt comfortable to speak to our researchers on such topics. As is the generally recognized limitation of this type of non-probability sampling, it is important to remember that the in-depth interview samples are not nationally representative nor purely random samples. But even with such a selection of respondents, as evident in many transcripts, interviewees were not fully transparent, and sounded guarded and reserved. In future similar research, there need to be still more effective methodological ways of overcoming the barriers posed by the sensitivity of the subject, including possibly participant and non-participant observation and non-intrusive methods of study.

Despite these limitations, the end result of the present study is considered clearly of value for further design of more effective and better conceived, constructive and comprehensive interventions – and specifically, communicative and informational strategies – towards gaining stronger resilience among the concerned societies against RVE and terrorism, that could lead to such activities.

From the broad and critical perspective of the present study on the problems of radicalization and violent extremism, it becomes clear that the most realistic policy objective must be toward building resilient communities, citizens, and families. Countering all occurrences of violent extremism or preventing every single case of individuals falling into violent extremism, is unrealistic. What is realistic is building up still stronger, unflinching resilience in communities, which in turn could enable them – as communities, families, friends, and individuals – to stop dangerous forms of radicalization from spreading. The question of how to build resilience, RVE, in turn, leads to the information ecosystems and their place in forging discourses, communication, understandings, and attitudes that are conducive to resilience. Most of the findings in the present study suggest ways of working with information and communication to enhance the situation in all the relevant societies of Central Asia.

Chapter One: Desk Study

This part of the report outlines the main themes and issues found in the existing knowledge about radicalization and extremism in Central Asia. Conceived as a review of the state of affairs in the subject, the section outlines the current situation with RVE in the region, key challenges and the main characteristics of state approaches to P/CVE, and then briefly discusses the main drivers of RVE in Central Asia as identified in recent studies and the information ecosystems of the Central Asian states – how the information flows, and sources function and are structured in each of the given state. In all these tasks, the objective is not so much to supply an exhaustive review of all relevant literature and documentation, as it is to provide an outline of the relevant research and state of affairs, so as to inform the further analysis of the material gained in field research activities for this study. All parts of this section viewed cumulatively help gain an initial framework of the information ecosystems in the region’s countries as pertains to RVE and PVE.

State of the matter: concepts, challenges, policies

- Treading through disputed conceptual terrain

This report does not aim to enter the debates about the concepts of radicalization and extremism and many others surrounding these. But since the subject of the research is what these concepts cover, acknowledging these debates and explaining the terminology used here is necessary. Most importantly, the concern is with linkage between religion, and Islam in particular, and all issues related to radicalization.

An episode in this regard in the Central Asian context was when a group of academics, mostly in Western universities, took issue with publications on radicalization in Central Asia by the International Crisis Group (ICG).²¹ The criticism to ICG’s publications were several-fold, but the main conceptual criticism was the tendency to draw a number of empirically unjustified and normatively and politically harmful linkages – the linkage between peaceful Islamic practice as such and radicalism associated with violence, between political regimes (authoritarianism) and Islam as an ideological opposition to regimes, and more basically, suggesting that the growing practice of Islam in Central Asian societies necessarily meant the growth of radicalization as well.²²

A related, though not similar, debate has famously occurred between two prominent French scholars of political Islam, Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel in 2015 regarding the place of Islam in a series of terrorist acts

²¹ ICG, “Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia”, January 20, 2015, at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/syria-calling-radicalisation-central-asia> and “Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalisation”, October 3, 2016, at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/kyrgyzstan-state-fragility-and-radicalisation>

John Heathershaw and David Montgomery, “The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics”, Chatham House, November 2014, at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/20141111PostSovietRadicalizationHeatHershawMontgomeryFinal.pdf>, and Open letter of Central Asia scholars, with ICG response, “Understanding Islamic Radicalization in Central Asia”, *The Diplomat*, January 20, 2017: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/understanding-islamic-radicalization-in-central-asia/>

²² Heathershaw and Montgomery, “The Myth of Muslim Radicalization in Central Asia”, CEDAR papers, 2016

that engulfed France.²³ To use Roy's helpful posing of the matter, they differed on whether it was the radicalization of Islam (Kepel's position) or the 'islamization of radicalism' (Roy's argument). Kepel argued that radical strands of Islam were bringing people together and mobilizing under radical and violent messages of ultimate justice, and hence, that radicalism and extremism were found within Islam.²⁴ Roy, on the other hand, argued that Islam was only used as the banner, a mobilizing and articulating tool for those individuals and groups who had grievances and radical ideas independent of Islam. "They do not become radicals because they have misread the texts or because they have been manipulated. They are radicals because they choose to be, because only radicalism appeals to them," wrote Roy in his book.²⁵ The Roy-Kepel debate is arguably reflected in opposing views of Islam's place in radicalism and violent extremism in Central Asia, too.²⁶

The principal issue in both debates above is the relevance of religion, and of Islam specifically, in discussions about radicalization and extremism. Without taking a position between ICG and their critics, or between Kepel and Roy, which is a difficult question anyway, this study accepts that religion is a major presence and cannot be ignored or suppressed from radicalization discussions. Ignoring or suppressing it would be either arbitrary or disingenuous, or both. What is important, however, is to be critical in considering causality between Islam and radicalization. Therefore, to be able to see where religion and radicalization meet, and where they do not, this study systematically focuses on religion – not on religious doctrine and theology, but on religious practice and attitudes toward religion and religiosity among informants of the study.

Besides the issue of religion, many issues and numerous terms abound with how to name the problem itself (if it is a single problem, that is).²⁷ In this report, as a compromise in the interests of convenience in the text, neutrality between debating sides, inclusiveness of all aspects of the problem, and understandability for readers, radicalization and violent extremism (shortened RVE) is adopted as the standard reference. RVE is used along with just radicalization or violent extremism, or 'radicalization leading to violent extremism', when one of those terms would be a better fit, and the term radicalism (in Russian "радикализм") was used in interview questionnaires as the most familiar term for an average respondent in Central Asia. In using any of these references, the intention in the present text is not to endorse a particular position but rather to capture the subject at hand in the most understandable manner without misleading the reader. Alas, fully clearing conceptual challenges is not quite possible.

- RVE in Central Asia – the current challenges

Since about 2017, the flow of terrorist fighters and supporters going from Central Asia to the Middle East has seriously subsided, as IS and other terrorist organizations there have been embattled by Syrian, Iraqi,

²³ Adam Nossiter, "'That Ignoramus': 2 French Scholars of Radical Islam Turn Bitter Rivals", *The New York Times*, July 12, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/world/europe/france-radical-islam.html>; Cecile Dumas, "Olivier Roy et Gilles Kepel, querelle française sur le jihadisme", *Liberation*, April 14, 2016: https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/04/14/olivier-roy-et-gilles-kepel-querelle-francaise-sur-le-jihadisme_1446226

²⁴ E.g. Gilles Kepel, *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West*, Princeton UP, 2017

²⁵ Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State*, Oxford UP, 2017, p. 42.

²⁶ Catherine Putz, "Kepel vs Roy: Arguing about Islam and Radicalization", *The Diplomat*, July 14, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/kepel-vs-roy-arguing-about-islam-and-radicalization/>

²⁷ See, e.g. Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories", *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol 4, No 4, 2011; Erica Harper, "Reconceptualizing the Drivers of Violent Extremism: An agenda for child and youth resilience", WANA Institute, 2018, at: https://www.tdh.ch/sites/default/files/tdh_wana_pve_en_light.pdf

and international anti-terrorist operations. If the concern of a few years earlier was the numbers of people going to Syria, more recently the concern has been about the return of those fighters back to the region.²⁸ With their war experiences and skills, possibly damaged psychological states and hardened extremist views, the returnees could pose major threat to the home societies.²⁹ However, while many fighters have indeed returned – the numbers of them are very difficult to establish – there have been no reported cases of violence or terrorist acts carried out by returnees in the region.³⁰

A broader concern, however, is with domestic terrorism and violence and other negative phenomena resulting from radicalization that lead to such behavior. The case of Danghara tourist killings in Tajikistan is a prime example of what remains a concern.³¹ Reports of averted terrorist plots appear in regional newscasts with some regularity, suggesting that the problem remains an active one even though not prominent in the daily news because such acts are not taking place.

There has been a change in the domestic geographies of radicalization, too, albeit at a level of threat that is much lower than a few years ago. If in the initial years of large-scale recruitment of fighters from Central Asia to Syria and Iraq – up to 2015-2016 – there were particular locations of recruitment, most recently such geographical concentration has given way to diffusion across different parts of each country with no singular location remaining active source of recruits and violent radicals. Such de-concentration may be explained by a number of plausible reasons: state security services taking the erstwhile locations under close scrutiny and thus closing down any locally based recruiting groups, the lower occurrence of radical recruitment due to external factors (e.g. fall of IS), and – possibly – the evolution of recruitment tactics that have become less localized and more mobile. To be stressed again, however, is that such geographic spread has been concurrent with an overall decrease in radical recruitment.

Besides these, there is a concern with relocation of some IS fighters to Afghanistan, and of organizing disruptive and terrorist activities aimed at Central Asian states from there.³² In Afghanistan itself, reportedly, IS has been challenging the Taliban and/or Afghan government for control of various locations, leading to another potential line of conflict and violence.³³ While Afghanistan remains increasingly unstable and increasingly taken by Taliban and other groups, it will continue to be a great source of security concern for all the Central Asian states.

²⁸ E.g., Damon Mehl, “Converging Factors Signal Increasing Terror Threat to Tajikistan”, *CTC Sentinel*, November 2018, at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/converging-factors-signal-increasing-terror-threat-tajikistan/>

²⁹ See Richard Barrett, “Beyond the Caliphate”, The Soufan Group, 2017

³⁰ See, on returning fighter threat: David Malet and Rachel Hayes, “Foreign Fighter Returnees: An Indefinite Threat?”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2018: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2018.1497987>

³¹ Four foreign bicycle tourists were killed in an attack by reportedly four young men near the village of Danghara in Tajikistan on July 29, 2018, a news that renewed concern for terrorist threats in the region. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack, but Tajik government also insisted on the involvement of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party. See: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-terrorism-possible-attack-four-foreign-cyclists/29398154.html>

³² Arkadiy Savitsky, “ISIS in Afghanistan: Central Asia Faces Risk of Spillover”, *Strategic Culture*, July 2018. At: <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2018/07/26/isis-afghanistan-central-asia-faces-risk-spillover.html>

³³ See “Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K)”, CSIS, 2018: <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/islamic-state-khorasan-k>

Another concern, which is not new but is growing more salient, is the question of political and social impact of the spread of Islam and the backlash it has generated among non-Muslims and atheists.³⁴ Some cases of fundamentalist families keeping their children out of school and controversial policy suggestions voiced by prominent Islamic clerics, when reported in the media from polar positions, have contributed to the emergence of a growing cleavage between practicing Muslims and atheists. Due to this, suspicion on the role of Islam in society, as observed especially clearly on social media platforms, has grown more prominent.

- **State Policies toward CVE/PVE**

Central Asian countries have long been actively persecuting extremism (the main legal term), and for a long time, Uzbekistan had been noted for having thousands of people held in prison on charges of extremist activity.³⁵ Extremism has been one of three main security concerns of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in which all Central Asian countries, except Turkmenistan, are members.³⁶ Since the developments in the Middle East with the Syrian war and the rise of the Islamic State, however, the countries have developed mostly new or updated and more complete ranges of policies.

On the broadest level, all countries have recognized extremism and terrorism as a major, if not the most important, source of threat to their national security and have correspondingly proceeded to outline rather broad ranges of state activity to counter the threat. Review of the body of state policy documents of all these countries (with Turkmenistan's case to a lesser extent), together with a wide range of commentary and critique of these policies, leads to a number of observations regarding the general trends and accents in the countries' approaches.

- *Securitization and the focus on repressive measures*

Despite effort to get away from it, all state policies continue to be noticeably driven by reliance on law enforcement and security institutions, mostly led by relevant state security agencies. Extremism continues to be viewed primarily and heavily as a security problem and, specifically, a problem that requires countering by force, police power, surveillance, arrests, and so on.³⁷ It is within the language and tools of state policies that the conflation of religion, on the one hand, and radicalism and extremism, on the other hand, has taken place.

³⁴ See ICG, "Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalization", October 2016. Also, Emil Dzhuraev, "Religious and Secular Radicalism in the Kyrgyz Society", Cabar.Asia, September 2018: <https://analytics.cabar.asia/ru/religioznaya-i-svetskaya-radikalnost-v-kyrgyzskom-obshhestve/> and "On Secular Radicalism Against Religious" (in Russian), Radio Azattyk, November 2016: <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28134307.html>

³⁵ Mansur Mirovalev, "Thousands of Uzbek Muslims Jailed for 'Extremism'", Al Jazeera, January 8 2016: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/thousands-uzbek-muslims-jailed-extremism-160107110149439.html>
For a brief overview on Uzbekistan, see Counter Terrorism Project, "Uzbekistan: Extremism and Counter-Extremism", n.d.: https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/country_pdf/UZ-01082018.pdf

³⁶ "Interview: Fight against 'three evil forces' remains main task of SCO", XinhuaNet, July 11 2017: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/11/c_136435641.htm

³⁷ This approach is visible, unsurprisingly, throughout the respective national strategies on countering extremism and terrorism – Kazakhstan's state program for 2018-2022, Kyrgyzstan's government decree for 2017-2022, Tajikistan's national strategy for 2016-2020

- *Preventive education policies*

To a greater extent than in the past the Central Asian countries have turned to working more with legitimate institutions of religious governance, the Muftiates, and their subordinate networks. This work has been often coordinated through the respective agencies for religious affairs of governments, and involved state institutions for education, police, security, local governance, and so on. Working with the Muftiate and other institutions has been part of the strategy to promote legitimate and “traditional” religious practice, to develop better understanding and education of all involved personnel and institutions on matters and doctrines of religion, and – not the least – the pursuit of better regulation and oversight over the activities of religious institutions, such as mosques and medreses.³⁸

- *Media and propaganda work*

State agencies responsible for official CVE work have also recognized the necessity of working with media in promoting anti-extremist, moderate views as well as raising awareness about the dangers, misinformation and disenchantment that joining the extremist groups involves. In all countries, propaganda against extremism through media has been recognized as a key part of the work. To varying degrees, governments in all countries have appeared to invest in, or support, media projects and educational and communication work, including TV and radio stations and programs, websites and print media.³⁹

- *Traditional and non-traditional Islam*

Another emerging approach in all countries has been to draw a principal line of distinction between what they have called “traditional” and “non-traditional” forms of Islam.⁴⁰ The distinction has been a strategy of avoiding wholesale targeting of Islam, which would be a losing game anyway, instead designating only some forms and practices of Islam as suspect and therefore subject to close control, ban, or persecution. Thus, in all countries the Hanafi school of Islam has been declared to be *traditional Islam*, to some degree supplemented with elements of local appropriations of it. The non-traditional Islam has included a wide variety of groups and movements, from Hisb-ut-Tahrir,⁴¹ to Wahhabism, Salafism, Tablighi Jamaat⁴² (except in Kyrgyzstan), and others.

- *Authoritarian politics*

An underlying difficulty in effective PVE/CVE work in all countries of Central Asia is the authoritarian, dominant role of the state and political leadership in society at large and over institutions in particular. Successful implementation of any constructive, cooperative, innovative work in CVE has been hampered in an environment where independent initiative can lead to punishment, where the state habitually orders

³⁸ See, for example, *The Modern States in Countering Extremism: Challenges and Solutions in the example of Kyrgyzstan*, State Commission on Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, Bishkek 2017

³⁹ All this is written out in the respective state documents on countering extremism, listed in fn 22 above.

⁴⁰ ‘Traditional Islam’ is a problematic, contested term, especially among Islamic scholarship. However, it has been used frequently in official and expert language in Central Asia. See, for example, *State Policy in Religious Sphere: Legal Foundations, Conception and “Traditional Islam” in Kyrgyzstan*, State Commission for Religious Affairs, Bishkek 2015; and “Traditional Islam ‘Kazakh-style’ Against Wahhabi Ideology”, a Kazakh expert’s interview, October 28, 2016: <https://camonitor.kz/26016-tradicionnyy-islam-po-kazahski-protiv-vahhabitskoy-ideologii.html>

⁴¹ ‘Hisb-ut-Tahrir’ is banned as an extremist organization in all five Central Asian states.

⁴² ‘Tablighi Jamaat’ is banned as extremist in four countries of Central Asia – that is, all except Kyrgyzstan.

institutions and their leaders – such as the formally autonomous Muftiates – to perform particular tasks, and where restrictive and repressive state operations go together with a lack of the rule of law and legal defense as well as rampant corruption.⁴³

Thus, policies and general approaches of the Central Asian states have been a somewhat dynamic, growing area of government efforts. The countries have been participating in numerous international and regional discussions on issues of PVE/CVE, and doubtlessly, many positive changes – such as greater focus on education, media work and communication – have been at least partly the result of such engagement.⁴⁴ The prominent role of the law enforcement agencies, however, under the conditions of weak rule of law and problems in delivering justice remain key problems, across these countries.⁴⁵

Prevailing Explanations of Radicalization and Extremism

The ultimate objective of most studies, research and discussions of radicalism and extremism in Central Asia – as anywhere – has been to establish the causes or drivers of such phenomena. Over the recent years, several direct and proximate causal factors have been put forward as the most compelling in the bulk of literature on the subject, as listed next. These are presented here, to be sure, not as fully persuasive but as prevailing, driving factors, all of them having their critics and counter-arguments. One could, of course, enumerate still more explanatory drivers that have been raised here and there.⁴⁶

- a) Economic explanations: recruits were offered or promised very generous rewards, and in pursuit of easy and big payouts and/or in seeking to repay their loans, improve living conditions, they took the bait.⁴⁷ For economic factors to explain radicalization, there is presupposition that there are recruiters who make the offers, agents who are able to pay (in full or partially), and the recruited target who is in serious need of money.
- b) Political explanations: people radicalized and joined extremist groups as a way of protesting bad, unjust, oppressive political regimes or discrimination and unequal treatment in public offices and by state agencies.⁴⁸ This would be a plausible explanation for many cases of radicalization among Kyrgyzstani citizens of Uzbek ethnic origin in the post-2010 period, whereas for citizens of Tajikistan

⁴³ See Edward Lemon, “Building Resilient Secular Citizens: Tajikistan’s Response to the Islamic State”, *Caucasus Survey*, Vol 4, No 3, 2016

⁴⁴ E.g. the high level meeting in Dushanbe in 2016, which outlined a number of issues and approaches. At: http://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/dam/rbec/docs/Dushanbe_Report_Final.pdf

⁴⁵ For a critical discussion of overall state policies in Central Asia, see Sarah Lain, “Strategies for Countering Terrorism and Extremism in Central Asia”, *Asian Affairs*, Vol 47, No 3, 2016.

⁴⁶ An interesting though potentially misleading factor hypothesized in Diego Gambetta’s book, *Engineers of Jihad*, is the type of training or profession that recruits have: among those recruited in the Western societies, in his analysis, particularly many were people who had engineering training. Based on such findings, of course, it would be easy to jump to conclusion that all engineers are a suspect group. That would be seriously wrong.

⁴⁷ See Mohammed Elshimi et al, “Understanding Factors Contributing to Radicalization Among Central Asian Labor Migrants in Russia”, RUSI, April 2018: https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201804_op_understanding_radicalisation_in_central_asia.pdf; IOM, “Migrant Vulnerabilities and Integration Needs in Central Asia”, Astana 2017.

⁴⁸ ICG, “Syria Calling”, op. cit.

or Uzbekistan this factor would apply in its aspect of escaping a repressive political regime, rather than ethnic discrimination.⁴⁹

- c) Ideological explanations: radicalization was the outcome of a person's acceptance of some very intolerant and fundamentalist strand of religion that denied coexistence with those who did not share the same viewpoint and moreover, saw other points of view, value systems and ideologies as corrupting one's own newly adopted faith and thus, harmful to it.⁵⁰ This would be the view that Gilles Kepel holds.

To these broad and main factors that would explain why some become radicalized and join extremist groups, it is possible to add several contributing causal factors. Contributing factors here are referred to as such because in and of themselves, these would not plausibly be sufficient to lead a person to radicalization leading to violent extremism.

- d) Youth: This is the broadest and most readily accepted contributing factor.⁵¹ To any of the above key factors – economic, political or ideological – the youth are arguably the most susceptible. Lack of life experience, youthful “maximalism” and so on – there are enough aspects of being young that make for plausible scenarios of susceptibility to getting recruited.
- e) Labor migration: this category has been much hypothesized as also susceptible to radicalization.⁵² Conditions such as being far away from home (meaning both loneliness and free from any control), subject to systematic difficulties and abuse, the precariousness of living and working conditions have been cited as explaining migrants' vulnerability to recruitment.
- f) Gender: Women have been hypothesized to be vulnerable to radical recruitment in particular ways that men in Central Asia are not.⁵³ Women's social status in the patriarchal cultures of these societies, it has been argued, made joining radical and extremist causes a liberating escape. At the same time, however, there has been evidence both of women leading men (and other women) into extremist groups and women following their husbands or male relatives into such groups.

⁴⁹ E.g., see Julia Ioffe, “Why Does Uzbekistan Export So Many Terrorists?”, *The Atlantic*, Nov 1, 2017: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/uzbekistan-terrorism-new-york-sayfullo-saipov/544649/>

⁵⁰ ICG, “Syria Calling”, op. cit.; Erlan Karin, *Soldiers of the Caliphate: The Anatomy of a Terrorist Group*, Astana, 2016.

⁵¹ E.g., Elshimi et al, “Understanding Factors Contributing to Radicalization”, op. cit.; SFCG, “Messages, images and media channels in youth radicalization in Kyrgyzstan”, January 2017; Seraphin Alava et al, “Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research”, UNESCO, 2017; Edward Lemon, “Profiling Tajik Fighters in Syria”, September 2014: <https://excas.net/2014/09/profiling-tajik-fighters-in-syria/>; Erica Harper, “Reconceptualizing the Drivers of Violent Extremism: An agenda for child and youth resilience”, WANA Institute, 2018

⁵² E.g., Noah Tucker, “Islamic State Messaging to Central Asian Migrant Workers in Russia”, February 2015: <http://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/6982> ; IOM, “Migrant Vulnerabilities and Integration Needs in Central Asia”; Elshimi et al, “Understanding Factors Contributing to Radicalization”, op. cit.; Edward Lemon, “Profiling Tajik Fighters in Syria”.

⁵³ E.g., Anna Matveeva and Bahrom Faizullaev, “Women and Violent Extremism in Tajikistan” UN Women, June 2017; Anne Speckhard et al, “The Roles of Women in Supporting, Joining, Intervening In, and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan”, UN Women, June 2017; Uran Botobekov, “Central Asian Women in the Frontline of Jihad”, *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2017: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/the-central-asian-women-on-the-frontline-of-jihad/>

- f) Education: Weak or lacking education makes people vulnerable to recruitment to radical and extremist causes.⁵⁴ As a contributing factor, education has been viewed in two parts: conventional (secular) general education, and religious education. Lacking conventional education made a person devoid of critical thinking skills, communication skills, and more specifically, less attractive for employment to good jobs. Lack of understanding of religion made a person unable to assess what they were told, prone to cede unquestioned authority on the matter to another person (a recruiter).
- g) Linkages: A strong factor of radicalization, in Central Asia as elsewhere, has been found to be the personal connections – the family members, friends, acquaintances and associated groups of a person would be crucial in recruiting the person into extremist groups and activities.⁵⁵
- h) Information and communication: Lastly, but not exhaustively, a major contributing factor were the means of communication and information, and more specifically, the Internet.⁵⁶ To the extent that radicalization is about planting and instilling certain ideas and worldviews into a person, it is a process of communication and information. The omnipresent easy access to information via internet and phone, it has been argued, has facilitated the transmission of radical recruitment messages and the establishment of communication with potential recruits.

Each of the above factors, both the key factors and the contributing ones, have been put forward based on corresponding evidence of persons being recruited. However, in every case, there have been a number of potential (and observed) ways in which a particular factor seemed to be denied, contested or blurred.⁵⁷ One basic challenge is that all causal explanations are attempts to explain the occurrence of a tiny number of cases of radicalization and extremism for a population category of which a vast majority do not get radicalized. Thus, economic difficulties, political oppression, and ideological differences are experienced by large numbers of people in every society, however only a tiny minority of people from those societies become radicalized. The same point applies to all other causal factors. Moreover, many actual cases of radicalization featured persons who belied the proposed causal factors: people with no particular economic difficulties, no serious political grievances or ideological fervor, people with good education, people who are not young, men as well as women, non-labor migrants as well as well-settled labor migrants, and so on. So, the ultimate recipe of radicalization has not been found.

Most of the studies cited above, in putting forward some or other sets of causal explanations of radicalization, have done so with caution and reservations. Indeed, speaking from a stricter methodological rigor, it would be near impossible to pin down any definitive sets of necessary causes of radicalization. While continued research into such causes can be of benefit for understanding cases that already did take place, or for furnishing programs for rehabilitation of returning former extremist fighters, they would probably be of limited value in devising PVE and CVE measures. A more workable approach would be, instead, to aim at raising resilience against radicalization across whole societies. The present project,

⁵⁴ E.g., Elshimi et al, “Understanding Factors Contributing to Radicalization”, op. cit; Edward Lemon, “Profiling Tajik Fighters”, op cit.

⁵⁵ Elshimi et al, op cit;

⁵⁶ E.g., Seraphin Alava et al, “Youth and Violent Extreme on Social Media”, op cit; Noah Tucker, “Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging”, CERIA Briefs Nos 11-15, February 2016: <http://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/9287>; SFCG, “Messages, images and media channels”, op. cit.

⁵⁷ For a comprehensive review of many hypotheses involving most of the above drivers, see Harriet Allan et al, “Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review”, RUSI, October 16 2015: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf

focusing on the information ecosystems, and hence, on the communication aspects of RVE as well as PVE, is one approach that can prioritize resilience.

Public Discourse and Information Ecosystems

If causality is so challenging to pin down in radicalization, and if communication is to be viewed as an alternative and workable approach to building resilience to radicalization and violent extremism, then what is needed is an effective, viable information ecosystem in which such resilience-forging communication and discourse can happen.

Both the rise of the role and place of Islam in the Central Asian societies, on the one hand, and the topic of radicalization and extremism, on the other hand, are matters of public discourse. Discourse here is used in the simple sense of communication or discussion in the public space. How something is understood or perceived in public discourse, in what light a subject is discussed, what meanings are created, and other peculiarities of the discourse tend to be shaped and directed by participants with higher position, broader reach, and/or more authoritative voice – such participants, by default, especially in authoritarian regimes, are the governments. Besides the government, the media is another group that tends to wield such power. The media not only transmits the meanings and messages created by others – governments, public intellectuals, clerics – but also create, shape, tone, and otherwise affect the discourse substantively. To reiterate from the introductory notes, the totality of all the ‘ingredients’ that form the public discourse – the actors, the media outlets, the non-media transmitters of information, the interaction and power dynamics among them, and the variety of topics around which information is produced and spread – is what is referred to here as the information ecosystem. The information ecosystem is what shapes public discourse, both its content and its reach.

To the extent that in a particular case, public discourse is characterized as fragmented, non-hegemonic, diverse and pluralistic, it is possible to assume there is a lack or weakness of players with discourse-formative powers. Conversely, when all public discourse is shaped through a restrictive and closely controlled information ecosystem, and correspondingly, features little to no debate and tends to be unanimous, it is described as (highly) hegemonic. How hegemonic or non-hegemonic the public sphere where discourse on radicalization is happening has important implications for what kind of an information ecosystem exists in a given country and what can or cannot work in such an environment in terms of information flow interventions.

In the Central Asian states, public discourse on Islam and on radicalization is alive and growing, and like the tendency to automatically merge these two topics in scholarly and expert writings and discussions, they become intertwined in public discourse, too. The rise of Islamic practice and its growing visibility is viewed, more often than not, through the prism of the problem of radicalization and, conversely, radicalization and related challenges are discussed, habitually, with the assumption of *Islamic* radicalization and related challenges.⁵⁸ To be sure, such conflation is committed generally by those parts of the public who themselves do not practice Islam and do not strongly identify with Islam. Alternatively, those who are

⁵⁸ An example of that is the analytical article with a strong title, “Islamization of Kyrgyzstan is uncontrolled and fast: experts” at: <http://inozpress.kg/news/view/id/53189> ; see also Aidai Masyllkanova, “Radicalization in Kyrgyzstan is No Myth: Kyrgyzstan’s slow arc toward Islamization and radicalization”, *The Diplomat*, June 22 2016: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/radicalization-in-kyrgyzstan-is-no-myth/>

practicing and self-identifying Muslims tend to draw a line between the two topics when necessary, but primarily focus on theological, practical, educational and other aspects of Islam, without going into the topic of radicalization or political Islam in general.

Among the several countries concerned – primarily, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – there are clear differences in the public discourse on Islam and radicalization.⁵⁹ Here, in the following few pages, very brief overviews of media and coverage of the topics of religion and radicalization are provided – the supply side of information, so to say.⁶⁰

To begin with the most hegemonic case of public discourse of the three – Tajikistan. As outlined above, Tajikistan has gone through a complicated and costly path, that began with a civil war and its long after effects, the constant factor of sharing a long border with turbulent Afghanistan, and the existence until 2015 of the only legal Islamic party in Central Asia. The process of public discourse formation on Islam and radicalization in Tajikistan is an element of the larger process of political stabilization and regime consolidation under the presidency of Emomali Rakhmon. Hence, to date, all public discussion on Islam and radicalization stays within acceptable political language: dutiful reference to the government policy and specifically to the ‘Leader of the Nation’, focus on threats and dangers that uncontrolled Islamic practices hide within them (a very prominent example here being the now-banned Islamic Renaissance Party), and generally raise these issues only when something has happened.

The somewhat independent, and usually neutral, reporting on the topics of both religion and radicalism tend to be the non-state-owned online media, such as Asia-Plus, Ozodagon, and Dialog.tj. The print versions of the first two tend to be more guarded in tone than their online editions. The more state-controlled or state-aligned newspapers (Sadoi Mardum, Tojikiston, Hovar), predictably, tend to closely follow the official line and thematic focus. Generally, it is difficult for even independent media to stay neutral on government issues, as could be witnessed in the fall of 2015, when agencies such as Asia-Plus and Ozodagon, too, contributed to publishing about the Islamic Renaissance Party and its leadership in very negative tones. The Tajikistan services of several international media outlets, such as IWPR, RFE/RL (Radio Ozodi), Sputnik.tj and Tajik Telegraph Agency also frequently publish on these topics. There is some diversity of approaches among the latter, but they share a common priority interest in the topic of radicalization rather than Islam in Tajikistan per se. While the Western-associated outlets tend to have a mostly critical viewpoint on Tajik government policy of tight regulation of both religious affairs and of the media and expression, the Russian and/or CIS-associated media – Sputnik.tj being a prime example – maintain neutrality or a mildly approving tone of government policies.

On the opposite end from the most hegemonic case of Tajikistani public discourse lies the case of Kyrgyzstan, with its comparatively least hegemonic, rather fragmented, and egalitarian discursive space. Kyrgyzstan’s path of regulating the religious sphere began from a very liberal, almost laissez-faire regime in the 1990’s, to an ever-increasing regulation to date – but in the end, still remaining a considerably less regulated regime than its neighbors. Correspondingly, public discourse in Kyrgyzstan about religion as well as radicalization includes a diverse variety of perspectives and actors, from those who have recently been viewed as radical secularists to those who freely advocate for a still greater role for religion in public life.

⁵⁹ Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are discussed in a more limited scope here due to more limited access to the full range of media there.

⁶⁰ The data of the next few pages are compiled by at least four persons – each responsible for a country – with the instruction to provide a general verbal overview, as described in the Methodology section above.

The government's recent attempt to channel religious practice by introducing the distinction between traditional Islam and non-traditional has had limited substantive effect on public discourse.

In the media sphere of Kyrgyzstan, there are many outlets that specialize on religious information or that regularly publish on religion. While most such media, especially the private ones, claim to stick to the mainstream, traditional school of Islam, the Hanafi school, and focus on education of the public about Islam, most of them tend to have some prominent patron or funding source standing behind them, setting their agendas. The state, or its particular agencies, have little influence over such outlets' programs, except to remind that extremist programs would be punished under law. These and other outlets are frequently visited by a number of prominent Islamic clerics – such as Jalilov, Narmatov, or Abdyldaev, to name a few – who speak very independently from any government control, and sometimes propose controversial ideas.⁶¹

Besides outlets, which focus more on religion and not so much on radicalization issues, there are media (mostly internet-based) that regularly publish about the problems of radicalization – and often for them the rising number of practicing Muslims is a topic eligible for coverage under the rubric of radicalization – including Azattyk (radio and internet), IWPR, 24.kg, and many others with less frequency. While religion or radicalization is not a main topic for any of these, they regularly pick up these topics, with varying degrees of sensitivity and from somewhat different angles – from a human rights or freedom of religion perspective, or from a security and radicalization threats perspective. It is noteworthy that significantly fewer publications regarding radicalization and extremism appear in Kyrgyz-language media (except Azattyk, whose main language is Kyrgyz).

In Kyrgyzstan, a nuance that is not so pronounced in the other countries, is the presence of a sizeable and relatively concentrated population of Uzbek ethnicity in the south of the country. This community has been a major point of interest for RVE studies given the relatively high number of foreign fighter recruits among them, and the broadly recognized factor of discrimination and unjust treatment of this community by state institutions as causal for the many cases of radicalization and members of this community joining violent extremist organizations. The Uzbek communities, as could be best established, rely mostly on the internet as their source of information, where they access either Uzbek-language or Russian-language information. Additionally, there is a high level of viewership of Uzbekistani TV channels among this community. Not the least, in addition to Jalilov and other Bishkek-based clerics, there are a few Uzbek-language prominent religious speakers who are popular among Uzbeks.

Between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, somewhat closer to the former along a spectrum, lies the case of Kazakhstan – a country that has always and in many spheres, from political, to economic, to religious, tended to occupy a middling position. Unlike Tajikistan, there is a relatively free and vibrant public discourse on Islam and religion in general in Kazakhstan, albeit under the government's watch, and there are frequent discussions in different forums of issues such as radicalism, extremism, and related matters. The state-controlled TV channel Asyl Arna is dedicated to Islamic religious programming; there are state-sponsored internet sites such as www.islam.kz and www.azan.kz. There are also popular religious speakers, such as Arman Kuanyshbaev, who gather large crowds offline and online for their lectures. The Mufti and other top Islamic clergy of Kazakhstan relatively actively engage in the public space, speaking about relevant issues in tones very loyal to state policy.

⁶¹ Some of Jalilov's resonant statements in recent years have included, e.g., the desirability of separate schooling for boys and girls, making Friday lunch-breaks longer to allow people to go to mosques for the Friday prayer (and then verbally attacking an MP when the latter opposed such a bill), defending polygamy, and so on.

The last point is where Kazakhstan is different from Kyrgyzstan. In Kazakhstan, the relatively frequent and apparently free discussion on Islam and/or radicalism in any sphere is, nonetheless, strictly in compliance with state policy and mostly in support thereof. This contrasts with the weak congruence of discourse in Kyrgyzstan, while falling short of the state's tight grip as in Tajikistan. The level of religiosity among Kazakhstani citizens has been growing – it having been the least religious of the five states in Central Asia from the beginning – and, correspondingly, there has been much change toward greater visibility and normalization of Islam in daily life in Kazakhstan. It is this rise of religious practice happening alongside the growing salience of extremism and terrorism, on which the state has kept a close watch. Most recently, as of this writing, the state's close watch was on display in the denial of entry into school for dozens of schoolgirls who arrived wearing hijabs in a Tajik-populated community in south Kazakhstan.

There are two remaining countries of the region, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, of it is possible to comment only to a more limited extent at present due to limited access to, and availability of, information on them.

In Uzbekistan, the country with deeper historical roots of Islam in the region, having faced the political challenge of organized Islam in the early 1990s, the government of President Islam Karimov began its hardline policy toward control or repression of Islamic organizations the earliest and – arguably as a result thereof – saw the creation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), led by several denizens of the Ferghana regions of Uzbekistan, carrying out terrorist acts in Tashkent and elsewhere in the 1990's and early 2000's. In 2005, a major bloodshed in Andijan was also a result of the government's repressive policy toward what it designated as extremist Islamic activities.⁶²

After Karimov's death, the changes in this sphere under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev have been quite substantial, making the country considerably less restrictive in religious matters than before.⁶³ A 2018 Human Rights Watch report is cautiously optimistic about signs of relative freedom of speech and media in the post-Karimov period, highlighting positive changes along with remaining concerns and doubts.⁶⁴ The media freedom in coverage of religious topics, based on limited observation, appears to be still mostly in line with government policy, focused on reporting of operations and policies against extremism and terrorism. Besides printed newspapers, which were not possible to access, there are several online news media that have been publishing material on RVE and PVE, such as uza.uz (website of state information agency), gazeta.uz, nuz.uz, tribuna.uz, and more. A private information website specifically dedicated to PVE material, stopterror.uz, is an interesting feature not found in the other countries. In the realm of moderate, "traditional" Islamic practice, there have been reportedly growing numbers and variety of publications, public events, and coverage thereof. Mirziyoyev personally has been reported to encourage competitions in Quran recitals.⁶⁵ Websites like Islom.uz and Islomnuri.com are accessible and provide educational and informational content about Islam. Along with these and other signs of positive change, however, some counter-signs of unfulfilled expectations or backsliding of recent liberalization are also

⁶² For a critical analysis of Karimov's explanation of Andijan events, see Nick Megoran, "Framing Andijon, Narrating the Nation: Islam Karimov's account of the events of May 13 2005", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol 27, No 1, 2008

⁶³ See Svante Cornell and Jacob Zenn, "Religion and the Secular State in Uzbekistan", *Silk Road Paper* June 2018

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch, "'You Can't See Them, But They're Always There': Censorship and Media Freedom in Uzbekistan", March 28, 2018: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/03/28/you-cant-see-them-theyre-always-there/censorship-and-freedom-media-uzbekistan#>

⁶⁵ But these, by reports difficult to confirm, have most recently been curtailed again.

present, as seen in the case of detention of “at least four” online bloggers who had posted critical opinions regarding religious topics (such as banning hijabs).⁶⁶

Turkmenistan, however, has not seen any comparable change, and has remained nearly as severely closed and restrictive in all respects as it was in the times of its first president, Saparmurat Niyazov.⁶⁷ Then and to date, Islam was incorporated – and subordinated – to national identity narratives in which the main focus has been on the presidents, first Niyazov and now Berdymukhamedov. The media in Turkmenistan is fully controlled and censored by the state. Critical and independent coverage of Turkmenistan is done by outlets based outside the country. Access to such independent information inside the country is severely restricted by serious control of internet access.

All countries in Central Asia are sensitized to the question of radicalization and how to deal with it; the information ecosystems of each – as the quick glances above suggest – are distinct, and they reflect the character of the public discourse found in each country on religion and on radicalization-related topics. The role of media in promoting constructive, moderate, and resilient discourses of religion, of Islam in particular, and on problems of radicalization is important, however it is closely related to the level of government control over media and information.⁶⁸ When government is less controlling, as in the case of Kyrgyzstan, it leaves greater responsibility for the media agents to produce content that contributes to moderation, dialogue and resilience to radicalism, and not the opposite.⁶⁹

Conclusions

Central Asia has become, unfortunately, recognized as one of the few regions in the world that is subject to heightened risk of religious extremism and terrorism, as a result of significant numbers of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria – estimated at more than 4000 – coming from this region.⁷⁰ This recognition has led to debates about religion and radicalization in Central Asian societies as well as scholarship, to expansion of government policies and activities in PVE, and to dynamics related to RVE issues and PVE objectives in information ecosystems. Some brief conclusions of the foregoing are in order for developing the discussions of field research data in the next two chapters.

What causes or drives radicalization in Central Asian countries remains a question with multiple and debated answers. In a series of three reports, the International Crisis Group has proposed that political, ideological and some degree of economic drivers explained much of radicalization and violent extremism in Central Asia, but these reports have been met with criticism by a number of scholars for lacking sufficient

⁶⁶ “Uzbekistan arrests at least four bloggers over posts on religious issues”, Committee to Protect Journalists, September 6 2018: <https://cpj.org/2018/09/uzbekistan-arrests-at-least-four-bloggers-over-pos.php>; see also Sardor Salim, “Uzbekistan: how can the state find a ‘happy mean’ in the field of religion?”, Cabar.Asia, January 9, 2019: <https://analytics.cabar.asia/en/uzbekistan-how-can-the-state-find-a-happy-mean-in-the-field-of-religion/>

⁶⁷ Only the US State Department publishes a report on Turkmenistan along with other countries, with no discount for the closed-ness of the country; see “Country Reports on Terrorism 2017: Chapter 1. Country Reports: South and Central Asia”, at: <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2017/282845.htm>

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Edward Lemon, “DAESH and Tajikistan: The Regime’s (In)Security Policy”, *RUSI Journal*, Vol 160, No 5, 2015

⁶⁹ Negative media coverage of Islam has been discussed as possibly contributing to radicalization of some Muslims; see, Katharina Neumann, “News and Islamist Radicalization Processes”, *Mass Communication and Society*, Vol 21, No 4, 2018

⁷⁰ Andrew Barrett, “Beyond the Caliphate”, op cit; ICG, “Syria Calling”, op cit.

evidence and for suggesting unsupported linkages between different issues. Labor migration has been one of the popular and specific drivers, featured in several studies recently, but it has not been found to be a singular causal driver but rather as a condition of vulnerability, where other drivers could together lead to radicalization. Age – or the vulnerability of the youth – has been a prominent driving factor which most researchers converged on, but it, too, generally came in tandem with other factors to result in radicalization. Personal connections have been a stable part of most reports, standing prominently next to most other causal factors. Similarly, mixed, non-singular roles as drivers of radicalization would apply to such other factors as gender, internet/information channels, education, and so on. What remains, in the end, is to recognize the compound, non-singular drivers of radicalization in each case, the difficulty of pinning down any single such driver, and the need to read evidence with caution.

Radicalization and violent extremism remain a top priority in security agendas of the Central Asian countries. How has that priority been reflected in the information space of each country? All countries could be placed along a spectrum, from the most hegemonic to the least hegemonic public discourse on RVE and PVE. Corresponding to the strength of hegemonic discursive order, the information ecosystem of a country would be restricted, dominated by government agenda, and not feature independent coverage of issues. That has been the case among the Central Asian countries, with Kyrgyzstan at the least hegemonic end, to Kazakhstan at the middle-level, to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan possibly competing for the stronger hegemonic order between them, and Turkmenistan debatably the most restrictive of all.

Kyrgyzstan's information ecosystem represents a terrain of diverse and occasionally competing players, with government-controlled and private, local and international (American, Russian and Uzbek), Russian-language and Kyrgyz- and some Uzbek-language media, wherein views along the governmental policy as well as critical of government, religious as well as secular are featured. Kazakhstani information ecosystem is somewhat similar in structure to Kyrgyzstan's, however, the role of government is acknowledged and recognized in all parts of media, and contestation of government positions on topics such as violent extremism and P/CVE, is generally not to be seen. In Tajikistan, the environment is still more restrictive than that of Kazakhstan's, with government-controlled media dominating the landscape (with the possible exception of online media), and the government agenda being widely reproduced in media. That said, some independent internet-based media outlets are functioning. Uzbekistan's recent liberalization has indicated that more open discussions of religion, RVE and PVE would be possible in media there, however, much of that freedom – if true – remains untested.

It remains then, based on these general outlines of what the information ecosystems look like, to see how the users, or residents, of these ecosystems reflect on them. In the following two chapters, the report presents the results of, respectively, qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys.

Chapter Two: Interviews

What do people – residents of the Central Asian countries – have to say about drivers of extremist sympathies, pertinent information flows and information ecosystems, and about moderate local voices? This chapter reports the observations gained from the analysis of a total of 201 qualitative interviews carried out in the months of June, July and August 2018 in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The interviews were anchored on several broad questions that sought to capture the respondents' views on the above-stated concerns of this study while keeping questions clear and straightforward. Namely, how they viewed or experienced the processes of social and political changes in the recent period, what they thought of the growing place of religion in their societies, how they understood radicalism and its causes, where and what information they consume and how they receive it, what they could suggest for how to prevent radicalism, how to make sure people are heard, and what their government could do. The questionnaire for the main group of respondents was the most extensive, whereas the questions for the expert interviewees and for PIEs were fewer and more narrowly focused.⁷¹

A range of interesting observations were gained from each of the countries covered, some of them showing similarities and common processes in all countries, and others indicating differences. On most questions, the views, preferences and practices of the respondents reflected the political system of the relevant country, and hence, the commonalities and differences found in the interviews paralleled those regarding how governments worked in these countries. The governance regime of the country was the main defining factor of how the information ecosystem was shaped and operated in a country, how people understood relevant issues, and how they acknowledged the government's own presence and work in informational-communicative planes.

Next to characteristics of political systems, another broadly present explanatory factor was the historical and cultural background and experiences of a country. While all three countries simultaneously emerged as independent states from the collapse of the Soviet Union, at the current stage they have come to elicit nationally specific outlooks and attitudes. Such experiences included both the long-existing cultural patterns and more recent events and processes that have impacted people's views.

This chapter is arranged so as to highlight the observations from all three countries, comparatively, along three broader themes – respondents' views on society, politics and government, their perceptions of religion and radicalism, and their views on and use of information sources. As remarked under Methodology and Limitations sections above, the chapter reports on respondents' answers to admittedly sensitive, difficult questions. As such, the observations from the interviews are presented in the form of representative and illustrative quotes and cautious verbal generalizations. It would be a misleading exercise to present observations from this material in quantified form: such precision is too likely to come at a cost to accuracy.

⁷¹ The three questionnaires are provided in the Appendix.

Views on society, politics and government

The respondents' views on society, politics and government help reveal some of the basic differences among the countries in review, and they set up the larger context of an information ecosystem. With this broader context, questions of trusted information, relevant information flows, and voices of moderation become easier to see.

In the case of Kazakhstan, there were no notable signs of strong grievances, anger, or dissatisfaction with the performance of government institutions regarding social problems, or in the life of the respondent him/her-self, that might draw interest. Whether that was due to some form of detachment from politics among respondents, or their way of avoiding a subject where critical views involve risks to a person, remained unclear. There is a noticeably greater freedom in expression of political and socially sensitive thoughts among the Kyrgyzstanis, and especially, the absence of any discernible ideological narrative or language that they reflect.⁷² Most respondents in Kyrgyzstan evidently feel quite free to discuss the issues raised in the interviews, including questions about politics, government, and radicalization.

A third way is found in Tajikistan, where on more sensitive topics, it is frequent to hear the interlocutors speak much in the same way as their government media would speak. Overall, very few respondents in Tajikistan expressed any criticism of the government's work (unlike in Kyrgyzstan); many of them mentioned the government – and specifically, the president of the country (unlike in Kazakhstan) – and as a rule, they did so very supportively and even thankfully.

Speaking of problems or negative changes in society, many Kazakhstani residents view society and local communities themselves as the source of problems. For example, a respondent (Zhezkazgan_woman_6) tells of city infrastructure and recreational improvements, and complains that “the people don't really understand it, use everything without appreciation, break things down quickly, and paint over objects”. Another respondent (Aktobe_male_26), takes a philosophical stance as he puts the burden more on society, noting that the volume of information has been a challenge: “Well, the state of social life constantly changes depending on what information our compatriots get. It all depends on the education and upbringing of a person. One must admit – life has become more complex in a moral sense due to the large amount of diverse information flows.”

Such prevailing views of the respondents in the main group of respondents are echoed, with slightly more critical observations, among the expert interviews. The critical remarks among the experts regarding government performance, and about government efforts in PVE in particular, are frequent especially among interviewees in the provinces such as Aktobe and Zhezkazgan, and among experts who work in the sphere of religious affairs and regulation (e.g. experts Zhalgas, Zhappar and expert_3). However, even the expert critical views tended to be not directed at any specific institution, rather moderate in language, and especially clear of implicating the president of the country.

Most of the problems that respondents in Kyrgyzstan raised had to do with issues of infrastructure – roads, electricity, water, and so on – that they lacked, and the government failed to provide. A respondent in an outskirt of Bishkek says (Bishkek_woman_20): “We live in need, providing for ourselves; as soon as elections start, they will start running to us and campaigning to vote for them.” Among expert responses, there is overall agreement on weak government performance, be it in provision of services, keeping law and order, or guaranteeing justice.

⁷² E.g. Murzakulova and Schoeberlein article

Many respondents from Tajikistan thought that affairs of the country were improving over the years, and not many had any serious complaints to raise; most problems they would cite, when asked, were very local-level issues, such as neighborhood governance, utilities problems, and sometimes – general economic difficulties. There were no notable ideas or feelings of social conflicts, except the case of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and its leaders: in that case, respondents as a rule echoed government narrative that IRP was a negative factor in the country's stable development and supported the ban. This case was, indeed, a theme looming large in any Tajikistani discussion of political issues generally or radicalism and extremism specifically, as related in the review chapter above.

Some level of more critical views were found in the opinions of experts. All of them, except one who represented a central government agency, noted the overly restrictive policies of the government in the religious sphere, the overly controlled media space, and even perceptions of injustice. But much like among Kazakhstani experts, the critical views were not very specifically addressed to any particular state body, let alone the president of Tajikistan, but would mention 'government' generally.

The memory of the civil war, and the sense of the fragility of peace, seems present in responses among Tajiks – something that is specific to the country's recent history. The government today is, in this sense, regarded as the guarantor of peace. This discursive trope has been observed in Tajikistan. Despite over 20 years having passed since the onset of the peace accord, it appears to be strong in public perceptions as observed in many interviews. This quote from an interview in Shaartuz (Shaartuz_male_11) is very illuminating: "...My brothers fought in the war and we lost one of them. Sometimes as I sit and wait for my child to come home from school, I think to myself, 'What a great woman my mother was, how brave she was to sit and wait for six of us to come from school during the war.'" Whether remembering the recent civil war, or simply being loyal to the government, a respondent (Shaartuz_male_14) confesses being happy about something about which most people under different circumstances are not so happy – the news that new housing will be given to police and military servicemen.

Thus, in their attitudes toward their governments, the course of politics in general and processes of social changes, the respondents from the three countries revealed three different general stances. In Kazakhstan, a somewhat muted and generally critical tone is never quite directed at any specific official body; in all the interviews from the country, there was not a single open mention of the country's president. In Kyrgyzstan, as expected, critical language toward the government was unrestrained, as people also spoke of how they and their communities autonomously worked to resolve their problems. The respondents from Tajikistan were very muted on any criticism of government, but also more willing – than Kazakhstani respondents – to speak positively of the government, and frequently enough, of the president of Tajikistan specifically. In all three countries, the expert interviews elicited somewhat greater extent and more elaborate substance of critical remarks, while they still echoed the non-expert respondents' overall patterns in the restraint of criticism.

Perceptions of religion and radicalism

In reading and generalizing the interview data from the three countries about attitudes toward religion and radicalism, it is worth discussing each country case in turn. Some telling differences emerged in this block of the questions, much in line with the pattern in the above section. One strong point on which respondents in all three countries concurred was their universal rejection of violent jihadist action, viewing it as contrary to the religion of Islam as they knew it. That said, some variations are present.

In Kazakhstan, there is a slight difference noticeable in the opinions about religion's role in society among those who practice religion and those who do not. The former tends to speak with much greater interest and much more positively about the role that Islam plays in social life and how it leads to improvement of morals of the youth. For example, a practicing respondent (Astana_man_5) says: "... I myself pray, religion affects our life very positively in this life and in the afterlife. Without religion, a person is just wasting time. Allah Almighty has shown us through religion what we must do and what we mustn't, what he likes and what he disapproves of". The non-practicing respondents show less enthusiasm in their answers. However, notably, they in general do not cite any problems or negative observations with Islam. For example, an elderly city woman (Astana_woman_4) speaks thus: "Yes, we listen to the lectures on the "Asyl Arna" channel, they show nice sermons there. They say Muhamedzhan Tazabekov established that channel. They give good teachings on family, on children's upbringing, and so on... I think it is possible to get good experience and information from there."

This is not to suggest that no Kazakhstani respondent had misgivings or a negative attitude toward the spread of religion in their society. Some did think religion was slowing down social progress, a regressive factor; some thought it was an archaism. A number were neutral about religion, neither positive nor negative. But numerically, such respondents were clearly a minority.

In other words, whether practicing Islam or not, most respondents hold positive attitudes toward the role and place of Islam in Kazakhstani society, and all of them sharply distinguish between the "normal," "traditional," Hanafi Islam, which they all approve, and the alien, "imported," "radical" streams of Islam which they describe as "losing the way," "being confused," and other mistaken, misled practices.

Generally, to the question about why radicalization happens, most respondents propose the usual common-sense explanations based on what they have heard and thought. Among such explanations are: young age and ignorance; social disorientation in the post-Soviet period, and the ideological vacuum that has been filled with imported, and often radical, religious ideas; poverty and life challenges for which radical recruiters offer easy or persuasive solutions; weakness of character, and gullibility of some people to of recruiters.

The interviews with Kazakhstani experts – theologians, researchers, government-employed analysts and educators – reiterate the same general views observed among the ordinary interviewees, only with greater elaboration. Several experts draw attention to unfounded tendencies to castigate Salafism as almost a synonym of extremism, but others do precisely that in describing the spread of extremist views in the country – that Salafist views were spreading, or that government and Muftiyat efforts were aiming to contain the spread of Salafism. Speaking of the drivers of radicalization, the experts mention the whole range of factors specified in existing literature in the desk study above. Those include economic reasons (unemployment, lack of opportunities, social inequality and marginalization), political (weak government control of religious sphere, primarily) and ideological (recruitment for extremist causes, protest against wrong government policies, mostly explained by weak or lacking understanding of religion).

The Kyrgyzstani respondents, in an overwhelming majority, revealed a very positive attitude toward religion as it has been practiced and spreading in recent years. Many answers went beyond the usual rationalization that religion was part of being Kyrgyz or that it only taught good things and ideas, the way it could be observed among the Kazakhstani respondents. Many respondents in Kyrgyzstan would casually throw in Arabic words – something observable as part of the influence of the da’waatist movement (Muslim missionary practice) Tablighi Jamaat,⁷³ and something that is not seen in the interviews in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

At the same time, there seemed to be much that was relatively superficial, based on short and basic learning as opposed to knowledge through sustained study. Increased prominence of religion in social life was appreciated by many respondents for its beneficial effects on the behavior of people: many respondents cited examples of family members, neighbors and others becoming better persons, more caring, relieved of bad habits. This disposition on religion’s benefits is also reflected in the findings of the quantitative study (presented in the chapter below), where most people in all three countries preferred sermon topics and styles of preachers and clerics that were most conducive to teaching good behavior, good manners, and not so much the doctrine of religion.

The topic of appearance and dress is highly pronounced among Kyrgyzstani respondents, both male and female. One respondent (Bishkek_woman_17) tells this: “There was [a picture of] a young lady sitting on a horse wearing elechek [traditional Kyrgyz women’s head gear], I really liked [and posted] that photo and I captioned it “no Arab dress,” that comment got 17 thousand “Super”⁷⁴ [in Odnoklassniki].” Both the number of likes the respondent reports and the negative attitude to Arabic dress among the Kyrgyz is quite telling. On the topic of dress, Kyrgyzstan is – much like in other things – the least restrictive of the Central Asian states, and possibly because of that, the frequent sight of men and women in what is considered Arabic garb makes Kyrgyzstanis very cognizant of this issue.⁷⁵

As in Kazakhstan, there were respondents who were not supportive of religion’s rise; very few of them did. A respondent from Nookat (Nookat_male_10) speaks in the manner of a disenchanting seeker: “[I used to] listen to lectures of well-known clerics, but in recent times I have stopped taking interest in such lectures and information... [Religion] plays a negative role. Religion slows the development [of society].”

That said, understandings, explanations, and rejections of extremist practices and activities in the name of Islam are very similar among respondents of all three countries. People reject extremism and radicalization that leads to it as alien to, or abusive of, proper Islam, as phenomena that occur generally with people who do not have much knowledge of Islam, and that they generally take place as a result of various social and economic difficulties and discrimination.

In the latter aspect – discrimination, and even abuse – Kyrgyzstan is different from the other countries: many respondents, mostly from southern regions and of Uzbek background, explain cases of radicalization, including people going off to fight in Syria, as a result of police and other authorities’ discrimination against and persecution of Uzbeks in the post-2010 period.

⁷³ ‘Tablighi Jamaat’ is banned as an extremist organization/movement in the four other countries in Central Asia; it is not banned in Kyrgyzstan.

⁷⁴ The equivalent of “Like” in the Odnoklassniki.ru

⁷⁵ Discussion of dress – Arabic vs Kyrgyz – became the subject of a controversy involving ex-president Almazbek Atambayev. See Emil Nasritdinov and Nurgul Esenamanova, “The War of Billboards: Hijab, Secularism and Public Space in Bishkek”, in *Being Muslim in Central Asia*, edited by Marlene Laruelle, Brill, 2018

Beyond the problem of ethnic discrimination in Kyrgyzstan, the fact that respondents from all countries hold generally similar ideas in regard of extremism may be at least partly explained by the generally poor understanding of extremism, its causes and mechanisms including government agencies that deal with them. Most ordinary people have not personally experienced cases of extremism and radicalization. What they end up saying, therefore, is what they hear and discuss among their communities, and what seems to make sense. And what makes sense to a vast majority of people who feel loyalty to Islam, is that extremism and violence in Islam's name is wrong and is not supported by any tenets of Islam.

This is generally supported by the expert interviews in Kyrgyzstan, too. Besides the perceptions or experiences of injustice being a factor driving people to radicalization, many of them note poor understanding of Islam, and as a consequence, easily falling prey to extremist recruiters. Speaking of anti-extremism policies, since about 2015, several experts note (KG_expert_1, KG_expert_3 and KG_expert_6) the policy of the Kyrgyz government has improved considerably, giving much greater attention to preventive efforts, working with media, and producing or facilitating preventive educational content. "They understood that hard policies don't work," explains expert_3, a lawyer.

Of the three countries, Tajikistan is the most closed environment in this regard as well – people reveal the least freedom to discuss issues of radicalism and extremism. When the interviewers asked question on the topic, very often the Tajikistani respondents became subdued, although what they did say was very critical and disapproving of radicalism. They offered very few, if any, elaborations on what they think the reasons for radicalism might be and how radicalization might occur. The few possible reasons cited include being young and misled, being recruited by extremists, and poverty and other economic or financial difficulties in a person's life. Among the 8 PIE interviews, all of them explained their (or their family member's) experience of getting recruited for ideological reasons (becoming fanatical about a radical Islamic ideology) and/or poor understanding of religion and falling prey to recruiters. None of them mentioned economic reasons or political (government persecution or similar) motives, which may of course be either genuine answers or self-censored ones.

Tajikistani respondents rarely, if ever named any religious figure by name, or mentioned any particular institution related to religion. This is likely due to the possible sensitivity surrounding any public person except the president, and more specifically, the recent downfall of the Islamic Renaissance Party. The official discourse on topics of radicalism and terrorism has recently been almost exclusively linked to mentions of IRP and its leaders, as observed in the case of the July killing of tourists in Dangara – predictably and with little known evidence, the government declared IRP as the main suspects.⁷⁶

A respondent, explaining where she gets her information on religion, speaks revealingly (Dushanbe_woman_7): "Mostly, I look for answers in books. If something is not clear to me, I ask knowledgeable friends and people around me. I never turned [with my questions] to religious leaders and do not intend to do so. My friends also seek their information in books and on the internet. Personally, I often look into the website <umma.ru>." This demonstrative rejection of religious leaders' authority is very probably based on the political unacceptability of most known religious leaders in Tajikistan, the most prominent example being the case of the leader of IRP, Muhiddin Kabiri.

On radicalism, there is no equivocation among nearly all Tajikistani respondents: it is something that is contrary to true religion and those who fall on that path are people troubled in some way or another. A particularly eloquent respondent who knew the case of his neighbor's radicalization is exemplary (Kulyab_male_15): "They used to live near us, then went to Russia, and then to Syria. They were linked to

⁷⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajiks-accuse-familiar-foe-despite-is-claim-in-attack-on-cyclists/29401482.html>

the Islamic State, [w]ere sending videos to everyone via social media. [Name] ... wanted to serve the faith. But he caused so much suffering for his family.” Asked what kind of a person [Name] was, the respondent replies: “Young, stupid, carefree. Even before going to Russia, he used to read dangerous stuff. But in Russia he got even worse. Now no one knows where he is, whether he is alive or dead.”

The government has been generally quite effective against radicalism, in the opinion of most respondents. Respondent from Kulyab (Kulyab_male_23) says it in a way that sounds similar to the tone of general government narrative: “Lately I think [they have been working] effectively. But still, sometimes one can hear complaints about being offended, that beards had been cut off, that robes had been taken away. [But] today, the government has decided on the democratic, secular and law-based path. So, take it, follow the laws. You have been given mosques, go and pray there.”

The expert interviewees concur that government policy has been strong and instilled considerable control in the religious sphere, albeit observing this not necessarily in an approving tone. The one government-affiliated expert, while noting achievements, notes continuing lack of common understanding and coordination among relevant state institutions, particularly when it comes to the work of law enforcement agencies who implement the policy. The independent experts – one of them a journalist – express concern that government policy had been overly restrictive and top-down, one of them describing it as “political radicalism.” One issue raised is the problem of blaming only external factors for the problem of RVE in Tajikistan, “no internal factors, it is all coming from outside,” in the government’s view. Another expert, a researcher, by way of recommendation, stresses the need to depoliticize law enforcement efforts in PVE, so that they are not used by the government for its political purposes.

Thus, on balance, there is agreement among both non-expert and expert interviewees that the government of Tajikistan has been strong on control of the religious sphere and in countering radicalization and violent extremism, however, as the experts say – except the expert from a government institution – such effectiveness of the government has come at a price. It should be understood, again, that even experts might be expressing their critical remarks not to the fullest.

[Views on and use of information sources](#)

The interviews asked respondents about their information use habits and the sources of their information, including information about religion. In the following pages, brief summary findings on these questions are presented for each of the three countries.

Kazakhstani respondents in general reveal a rather well-developed critical sense toward information and sources of information. There is a good level of doubting and critical reception of information in Kazakhstan, as elicited in interviews from different locations with a diversity of respondents.

Speaking of TV programs – found as the most trusted and used source of information in all three countries according to survey results presented in the next chapter - a respondent (Astana_woman_17) puts her skeptical assessment in a humorous way: “I do not watch much TV, mostly in the evenings and I watch all sorts of silly stuff, or some soap opera, just to let my brain shut off for a bit. I don’t trust any analytical, informational programs anymore, because information provided on those channels or programs is all very well-processed material.” Then, less humorously she goes on: “Never will state channels, and not even opposition channels, go against the present government. Even if a program is presented as oppositional, it is clear – based on the facts out there – that it is all theater. Such a program was just what was allowed to go on screen.”

Most Kazakhstani respondents elicit caution and show skepticism about information being forwarded by messenger services and social media networking sites. Most of the respondents said that they use such information sources for entertainment, business, or family communications, but not to get their information about religion.

Their discerning use of information is not only about religion – they also understand which media outlets would be biased in favor of government policy, which ones tend to be more independent and critical, and which outlets tend to be trivial and all about entertainment. For example, the following remark by a respondent (Astana_male_5) is quite representative: “Take the TV Channel Kazakhstan, since it is a state outlet, it is clear that it will never report negative news [about the government].”

Many respondents also reveal how they consume information selectively and avoid what is not trustworthy. Thus, a respondent (Kostanay_man_10) from Kostanay, somewhat more tech savvy than most, speaks very discerningly about spam information that can circulate on messenger services: “Discussing spam, that it... well, with mail it’s already quite contained, there are special anti-spam programs, but with messengers like WhatsApp, Viber and others, then it’s all the same, and Telegram, there is a lot of spam there and they have not yet come up with effective programs to block it. So for me, all of this is quite disconcerting.”

All respondents who spoke about religious information - and education, since religious information is considered mostly in its educational aspect – both practicing believers and those who do not practice stressed the need for better quality educational programs and interaction in different venues.

That said, more informed respondents, such as an expert interviewee from Zhezkazgan, noted that the content of media programming was often open to confusions and manipulation, including that of “Asyl Arna” – he claimed sometimes Salafist content was broadcast on that channel. This, however, needs to be taken together with debated comments on Salafism itself by several experts who note that there is poor understanding and a broad-brush castigation of Salafism as an extremist doctrine, whereas it is in fact an internally diverse and generally legitimate doctrine of Islam which happens to have more radical streams within it.

In terms of their trusted sources of religious information, as noted in the preceding section, many respondents named a number of respected religious leaders and speakers as their preferred sources of information about Islam, including the names of Anuar Kuanyshbaev and Abdylida Smanov.

It is often said in public discourse that a strategy toward promoting more moderate Islamic views is to counter it with local, national culture and values, which is partly what is suggested under the concept of ‘traditional Islam’ in Central Asian states.⁷⁷ In Kazakhstan, this strategy has included making Abay (Kunanbaev), a celebrated 19th century poet, a central authority in defining the right sort of Islam for the Kazakhstanis, as evident in discussions of several experts. But such localization, when done too crassly, is not the best or most persuasive strategy, as some respondents’ views suggest.

The Kazakhstani experts, asked about the role of mass media and journalists in preventing radicalization, highlight a number of relevant issues and concerns. They generally agree about the lack of adequate understanding of religious matters by journalists and media outlets, and the requisite level of caution in writing about religion, leading them often to conflate religion and extremism by default. Suggestions by the experts in terms of strengthening media efforts in PVE include greater mobility and quick reaction to

⁷⁷ For example, see expert interview, “Traditional Islam “Kazakh-style” Against Wahhabi Ideology”, *Central Asian Monitor*, at: <https://camonitor.kz/26016-tradicionnyy-islam-po-kazahski-protiv-vahhabitskoy-ideologii.html>

ongoing developments (e.g., KZ_expert_3), more innovative and interesting media content, such as production of films, stories, live debates, etc. (e.g. expert Zhappar, KZ_expert_8 and KZ_expert_13), and engaging popular imams and preachers in production of PVE material. As expert Zhappar, himself a theologian and working in an analytic and information office of a province administration, highlights the difficulties they have faced in producing materials aimed to prevent radicalization – a lack of well-qualified experts to produce content, a lack of financial resources and time, the high level of scrutiny and criticism any material has to face, and so on. The latter point appears to be a broader problem in Kazakhstani media – a point also observed in Tajikistan – namely, the unwillingness of media outlets to cover the topic of extremism and related things due to it being a “taboo” (KZ_expert_13) topic which had to meet the scrutiny of government agencies and religious experts. Life for them is easier without engaging such topics, in a word.

Kyrgyzstani respondents, both in Bishkek and in more rural locations, discussed their information source preferences in some detail and discriminatingly. The overall picture in this regard was in keeping with the expectation that in Kyrgyzstan there would be a greater freedom and critical outlook in discussing information given that the political climate itself permits such critical views.

The most often mentioned preferred media outlet was “Azattyk” – Kyrgyz service of RFE/RL,⁷⁸ and its three modes of delivery – internet, radio and television – were all mentioned as preferred by many. As a young respondent (Bishkek_male_21) said: “If we take Azattyk, they raise very good ideas for public discussion, and they discuss good topics.” In this and other examples, many people shared that they preferred opposition-minded or generally more critical and independent information agencies rather than the information outlets controlled by the government. This is somewhat distinct from what the survey research of the project revealed where more people appeared to trust official governmental information and where the KTRK – the main TV channel of the country, controlled by the government – was found to be the leader among the most trusted TV channels. This discrepancy could be explained through several reasons – that people may still watch what they do not necessarily prefer (due to convenience, availability, timing, etc), that respondents in the survey were going by what was most familiar (KTRK is the most widespread full-time TV channel in Kyrgyzstan) whereas in in-depth interviews respondents got to reflect more in their answers, or, indeed, that the much smaller sample in in-depth interviews featured more critical consumers of information than the larger sample in the survey.

Many respondents, citing a generally suspicious or distrusting attitude toward information, shared their approaches to how they checked or when they trusted information.

Among many respondents, TV prevailed as the main or as the most trustworthy source of information.

Regarding their sources of information about religion, very few to none responded that social media platforms or messengers served that purpose. The important exception to this was YouTube-based personal channels and posted videos of lectures and sermons from popular clerics – among the Kyrgyzstanis, these are generally very popular, as it is also revealed in the survey. Some of the most popular sources of religious information were the mosque and the imam of the mosque, books or videos by authors the respondents knew of and respected, some television or internet channels (such as Nasaat Media and Ayan TV), and knowledgeable friends and relatives. Notably, many respondents thought there was need for more information and education about Islam.

⁷⁸ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, a US-funded international media network operating in country branches. “Azattyk” in Kyrgyz means “liberty”.

At the same time, a respondent from Osh (Osh_woman_1) notes the need to be careful with information about Islam: "... I am also interested in religious topics. But I try to avoid deep immersion into the topic of religion because I am afraid of becoming victimized by religious streams that I do not know. I read the book by Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf (a late famous Uzbekistani religious leader and mufti)⁷⁹, I trust that book."

Several experts in Kyrgyzstan welcome the fact that recently there has been improvement in media coverage of religious topics aimed at PVE – supplying educational programs on religion, showcasing illustrative examples of extremist activities and their harm, or providing dispelling information about extremist groups and the conflicts in the Middle East. But at least one expert (KG_expert_6), him/herself a religious expert working in the media industry on the topics of religion and RVE, also notes of occasional problems with accuracy, journalists' rushed reporting on extremism or terrorism cases with little evidence. On TV, the same expert says, there is the problem with moderating discussions on religious topics – the moderator either himself holds radical views (speaking of a specific journalist on a religion-focused TV channel) or is too much of a secularist, rebuking guests for "wearing Arabic dress."

Learning about the channels of religious information used by PIEs would be highly interesting, and the interviews tried to tease that out. However, it proved rather difficult partly because several PIEs interviewed in Kyrgyzstan were not, strictly speaking, consciously radicalized agents but rather victims of chance implication in such charges – such as two persons arrested for "keeping extremist banned literature" of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, although, as they maintain, such literature appeared in their possession without their awareness, left by other persons. Two persons charged – and convicted – with membership in an extremist organization, both very reserved in their answers, appear to have learned about religion during tours of *da'wah* – lectured by tour leaders and reading literature while at mosques.

Some of the most valuable answers came from three other cases: in all of them, the primary sources of radical recruitment were their close relatives, and when not in face-to-face contact, such relatives would use different means of contact to share information – WhatsApp, Odnoklassniki, or simply share videos via phone. One PIE, originally recruited by a close relative, explains that he used to watch videos and other material on the internet, "on Youtube, Google, everywhere." "You just write 'violence' and it comes out, about them... So, just like that, you type 'violence about jihad' and it comes out, all sorts of stuff." He describes a near-addicted experience of watching and listening to such material until he was guided to prepare to leave for Syria, at an age below 20. Again, in all this experience, this person tells of being closely guided – recruited, essentially – by an adult relative who himself wound up in Syria and possibly died there.

Tajikistani respondents appeared to be generally quite guarded in their answers regarding information use and sources, just as with other topics. Overall, more Tajikistani respondents appeared to seek information – including religious information – from people they knew, their relatives, friends, knowledgeable people, rather than on the internet or other media. This pattern was especially noticeable among respondents in provincial parts of the country – that is, everywhere outside Dushanbe. Still, of course, they cited a variety of media they used, with various levels of trust and frequency of use. Of social media and messenger services – which are used mostly by Dushanbe residents – the most frequently used were Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram (not necessarily in that order), as well as WhatsApp, Viber, and Zello. While the former were cited mostly as places respondents got their information and entertainment, the latter were

⁷⁹ For an appreciative profile on Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf (name spelled in many different ways in English texts), see: <http://voicesoncentralasia.org/the-last-soviet-mufti-of-central-asia-muhammad-sodiq-muhammad-yusuf/>

mentioned as means of communication with family and friends. These observations and some others below are generally supported by the survey in Tajikistan, too, as seen in the next chapter.

Many respondents spoke loyally about the government-sanctioned or state-run media, and at the same time openly or by implication reported that they did not trust independent or foreign sources of information.

Conversely, when independent or opposition media sources are concerned, respondents become more critical, as this one (Dushanbe_male_6): “There are sources which I sometimes trust and sometimes I don’t, for example, Asia-Plus, because sometimes they present news where they seriously exaggerate. Opposition sites deserve little trust. [Why?] Because they only have one thing in mind – to criticize someone or something.” Another respondent, Dushanbe_woman_4, echoes this respondent in distrusting Asia-Plus – the most prominent and popular independent information agency in Tajikistan – saying that they falsely reported something, and how she felt very angry about that, although she was unable to recall what it really was about and why she got angry.

As noted above, the internet is still used by some respondents – mostly by residents of the capital, Dushanbe, and they mention mostly social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, as their choices of information source.

It is possible that many of the Tajikistani respondents were guarded in their answers, speaking in line with the overall situation in the Tajikistani information ecosystem, which is the most hegemonic of the three considered. This is indicated by the reservation in answers of lay interviewees regarding information, expressing distrust in internet-based and independent media, while appearing to trust state and official media more. The surveys indicated that they also prefer to get information from people they know, rather than from the media. This suggestion arises especially given how the Tajikistani experts, who are relatively freer in their answers, address the same questions.

In fact, most experts note that the internet and online media are highly popular and widely used sources of information in Tajikistan. Indeed, one expert, a researcher who has researched media issues as well, believes there has been too much of a move toward online media platforms, to the detriment of more traditional media.

Generally, all the experts mention several independent media outlets as the most popular in Tajikistan and read: Asia-Plus, Ozodagon and Faraj. Most experts also notice improvement among some government-controlled media, among which the newspaper “Sadoi Mardum” is mentioned as having the largest subscriber base. Still, despite financial and professional improvements, one expert – the media researcher – underscores, the government media are closely controlled as to what content they can publish. While these outlets are cited as popular in general, they do not cover the topics related to radicalization and PVE so regularly, an expert notes. To the question “why,” he answers shortly, “it is too sensitive.”

Noting the improvements in government-controlled media, the experts generally still note ongoing shortcomings of RVE-related coverage in Tajikistani media, the poor knowledge of the subject by journalists, and the lack of freedom in media space to write on such subjects. One expert, as mentioned above, points out the overly high focus on electronic, internet-based media, and relative inattention to print and TV media where – he believes – more effective work and improvement could reach broad audiences. Another recommendation, sounded by at least three experts, was the desirability of closer cooperation between media and the experts, especially on the subject of PVE.

Comparative observations

The cases of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, as discussed above, reveal both some common patterns and some diversity among them regarding the issues of interest in the present study. One overarching principle by which the three countries are different from each other is the level of government hegemony in public discourse generally and – correspondingly – over discourses on religion and RVE. Reading the interviews from each of the countries as a reflection of the regime prevailing in the respective information ecosystem, it is possible to reinforce the characterizations proposed in the preceding chapter: that Tajikistan stands as the most hegemonic-discourse regime, Kazakhstan in the middle, and finally Kyrgyzstan – the least hegemonic public discourse case. Much of the differences in details in derived answers to the questions of the present study may be traced to this difference between the three.

There are several common drivers of radicalization and extremist sympathies in all three countries. One is the ideological attractions of certain radical ideas (usually referred to as “Salafism” in all three countries): the narratives that depict the world as one of Muslims fighting the infidels, the rewards of becoming a warrior of *Jihad*, the dreams of living in a Caliphate, and so on. Another related point shared in all countries is the problem of poor understanding of religion among people, and weak programs of education in religion. Indeed, these drivers of radicalization are corroborated in the stories of PIE respondents in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – the unrepentant few speak in highly ideologically motivated language when explaining their positions, and the majority who regret having been misled into radicalism and extremist activities confess not knowing what they were going for. In critical remarks of experts in this regard in all three countries, the governments are held as the primary culprits (especially in Kyrgyzstan) for failing to control what people learn. In all countries, indeed, expert respondents highlight somewhat improved but still deficient understanding of religion and related topics by relevant government agencies and their officers themselves, which in turn translates into poor ability of the government to pursue PVE policies.

Next to ideological factors, respondents in all countries mention a general push factor – the economic difficulties that people experience, wherein some individuals end up finding respite in extremist activity. Poverty, unemployment, inability to provide for their families and in some interviews – promise of generous monetary rewards for joining extremist groups – are some of the reasons mentioned in all three countries. This set of factors is not found so much in the stories of PIE respondents. Only one such respondent, a young man from Kyrgyzstan, tells a relevant story mentioned above: how his uncle became interested in, and then went to, Syria at a time when he was bankrupt and indebted, and how he sent money back to family from Syria a few times. However, there is a significant level of ideological motivation in this story as well, as the person tells how he and the uncle, and then he by himself when the uncle left, would watch jihadist videos on the internet.

Political drivers of radicalization are mentioned less often in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, and when mentioned, state that corruption of various government agencies is a push factor for persons as a way of protest. In Kyrgyzstan, this factor is raised as possibly the most important driver. More specifically, the Kyrgyzstani respondents – both many non-experts and most of the experts – specify political grievances such as injustice and discrimination as the main ones pushing people into radicalization. The group primarily identified with these grievances are the Uzbek ethnic communities in the south of Kyrgyzstan, but other groups – religious groups especially – are also mentioned. The salience of political push factors is found in the stories of few PIE respondents from Kyrgyzstan as well as in a couple of stories of radicalization related by ordinary respondents.

Vulnerabilities of labor migrants, women, and youth to radical recruitment – as studied in many previous studies and as implied originally in the present study – did not emerge as distinct important factors, at

least, not as self-sufficient causal conditions. Among the PIE respondents, there were indeed cases of radicalization while in labor migration in Russia (three Tajikistani cases and one Kyrgyzstani case), radicalization involving women (women either following a male relative or, conversely, leading the way, to Syria), and radicalization of youth – at least four in early twenties and a couple teenagers. However, besides the concern for representativeness of the sample in PIE respondents, every case appeared to involve a combination of multiple factors leading to radicalization. Among ordinary respondents in all countries, youth were most frequently mentioned as the most vulnerable to radicalization, due to poor education, lack of life experience, unemployed/idle life and so on. However, such hypotheses appeared largely to be based on what people have heard, rather than on evidence.⁸⁰ This is not to reject the fact that each of these categories – labor migrants, women, and youth – indeed have vulnerabilities particular to that condition; however, such vulnerabilities do not appear to be sufficient by themselves to lead a person to radicalization. In the interviews of respondents representing these categories, there was no particular pattern that would suggest their openness to radical ideas.

An important last point regarding drivers of radicalization, as highlighted by several experts and stressed in various studies, is that radicalization toward violent extremism is a complex, multi-factor phenomenon which cannot be credibly reduced to any single driver as sufficient and causal.⁸¹ Every individual case of radicalization is likely to be different and any larger category of people is most likely to be subject to a complex of possible factors.

Regarding pertinent flows of information, there are again some differences among the three countries corresponding to the level of hegemonic discourse. In Kyrgyzstan, channels of information flow are diverse and not closely controlled, sometimes even featuring TV show anchors who themselves may appear to sympathize with radical ideas and chastise secularist guests for being such, as mentioned above. In Tajikistan, conversely, the overall observation from all interviews suggests that the government has established tight control over any relevant channels of information, with many respondents preferring to look to government-controlled or otherwise official sources of information, such as television and newspapers.

In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, there are several information channels – TV and online-based – that are specialized on religious information and education, which are popular in both countries. Within and outside such specialized information sites, there are several popular clerics in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that are followed by many respondents and serve as key sources of religious information. In Tajikistan, neither such specialized media outlets, nor prominent clerics were identified. In all three countries, however, a number of online media outlets were identified as popular sources of general information, including Tengrinews, 365info, Zakon.kz, etc (Kazakhstan), Azattyk and Akipress (Kyrgyzstan) and Asia-Plus, Ozodagon and Faraj (Tajikistan). Additionally, an important channel of information, especially about religion, identified in all countries were the respondents' personal communication with people they know, rather than mass media.

Various social networking and media platforms as well as messenger services are also generally used as relevant channels of information, although with some degree of skepticism among many respondents in each country. Namely, information forwarded via messenger services such as WhatsApp or Viber is something respondents often ignore; they themselves use such services for communicating with family

⁸⁰ Youth vulnerability is, of course, an issue much studied and evidenced. But see a critical review, linking youth radicalization to ideological drivers and enabling networks, in Erica Harper, "Reconceptualizing the Drivers of Violent Extremism: An agenda for child and youth resilience", WANA Institute, 2018

⁸¹ E.g., see Harriet Alan et al, "Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review", RUSI, 2015.

and friends, or for work, and for forwarding interesting and entertaining content. For more substantive information, including information about religion (such as viewing their favorite preachers' lectures) respondents in all three countries mention both Facebook and YouTube. Instagram is also a popular platform with many respondents, although mostly for socializing and entertainment.

In regard to trusted sources of information, some of the patterns from the above get repeated. Thus, in Kazakhstan, several sources of general information emerge as trusted, albeit none with emphatic approval – 365info and Tengrinews among online media, Kazakhstan TV (state TV corporation with many channels), KTK (an independent TV channel) and Khabar among television channels. With most of these, Kazakhstani respondents also show awareness that they report within frameworks that are politically feasible, or simply, as approved by the government. Trusted sources of information about religion in Kazakhstan are Asyl Arna channel (TV and online) and clerics such as Anuar Kuanyshbaev and Abdylida Smanov.

In Kyrgyzstan, somewhat like Kazakhstan, there are several generally trusted sources of information (Azattyk by far the most popular), but there is also awareness of most media being biased in some ways. The KTRK (government-controlled main TV channel) is popular but respondents are aware of its bias to state perspective, NTS (an independent TV channel) is popular with some others albeit seen as serving the interests of its stakeholders (it is owned by Omurbek Babanov, a major political and business figure). Several sources of religious information are popular with many Kyrgyzstani respondents, although without the level of popularity that Kazakhstan's Asyl Arna appears to enjoy; those include Ayan TV and Nasaat Media, as well as video lectures of popular clerics Chubak Jalilov and Abdylshukur Narmatov.

As with general channels of information, Tajikistan is somewhat different in terms of trusted sources of information, too. While part of the respondents – mostly urban and expert respondents – appeared to trust several independent media outlets such as Asia-Plus, Ozodagon and Faraj, as well as the “not national” Radio Ozodi, another part of respondents – mostly rural respondents – expressed greater trust in government media and newspapers, rather than the independent outlets. For their information about religion, Tajikistani respondents do not cite any specific source as trusted, instead generally mentioning books, knowledgeable people, and the internet.

Given the above observations, the question of strengthening moderate local voices points to somewhat varied answers in the three countries. Given the varying levels of government hegemony over public discourse, it was not always straightforward as to what the moderate local voices were. In Tajikistan, especially, it appeared the government fully covered public discourse space and no other voices were needed. But still, in some topics and issues raised, such as the memory of the civil war, or the current large-scale labor migration, in some information sources, including local mosques and independent online sources, some additional channels of strengthening voices of moderation and resilience emerge. Discussing the issues raised that concern citizens, through information channels that they trust, would be a potential start. In Kazakhstan, in the slightly more open information space, some voices of moderation needing to be amplified more were the imams and other respected voices on religion: several expert interviewees from provinces felt the ability of such agents of moderation was too stifled by restrictive regulation of the religious sphere. Greater freedom of independent media to publish on matters related to problems of radicalization would be another necessary condition to support resilience. The pronounced perceptions of injustice and discrimination in Kyrgyzstan's southern region suggest that local voices in those communities need to be given a hearing. Without such an opening, the Uzbek communities are likely to remain vulnerable to more radical ideas and action. Several popular religious figures have been voices of moderation and enlightenment – the role of such respected voices in building resilience to radicalization would need to be acknowledged and their reaches amplified.

All the above general observations, coming from qualitative research based on interviews, do not come with numbers, percentages and other measures of precision, because the data in the research are not geared toward such presentation. The numeric precision of relevant data, primarily regarding sources of information and trust in information, across the three countries, is presented in the following chapter. As will be noticed, there is consistent general agreement between the observations from qualitative interviews in the present chapter and the survey results in this study concerning the information use patterns of respondents as reported in the next chapter. It is to that data that we turn next.

Chapter Three: Surveys

A series of sociological surveys in three countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – were carried out during the month of August 2018. The surveys were carried out with the objectives of: complementing the qualitative data presented in the preceding chapter; providing precision and quantity to various observations there; cross-checking the reliability of various findings in the qualitative research; and generally to gain a nationally representative picture regarding some of the topics that are of particular interest in the project. As evident below, all main patterns regarding information sources and use highlighted above are supported by the surveys. Additionally, the broad observations above are given greater detail that could not be captured and generalized in in-depth interviews.

In designing the survey questionnaire, it was decided that a more important and necessary focus would be information use patterns and the information ecosystem generally. While the in-depth interviews, as observed above, provide many clues and directions in this regard, it is the quantitative measures and ranges drawn on nationally representative samples that would give a more solid ground to making generalizations regarding information use and ecosystem. Due to the sensitivity and complexity of drivers of extremist sympathies, which are more suitable for qualitative research and interpretive analysis, and the logistical challenge of an extensive and lengthy survey question bank, specific focus on such drivers was not included. Questions regarding drivers of extremist sympathies were examined in the qualitative research and were also researched amply in existing literature as part of the desk research.

The questionnaire for the survey was simple and relatively short, with 22 semi-closed questions in addition to 8 demographic questions and was designed in a way and using language that would be easily and accurately understandable by respondents.⁸² Questions regarding local sources of information or other items that vary from country to country were, correspondingly, modified to reflect such country-specific information. The response rate, therefore, was very strong, at close to 90% overall.

Sampling was done, first, by selecting regions within a country,⁸³ second, towns and villages within the selected regions, and third, of respondents aged 17 years and older applying a mixture of opportunity and snowball sampling. In Kazakhstan, territorially a large country, respondents were sampled in eight administrative units in all parts of the country, including the two capital cities, Astana and Almaty. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, sampling was done in all administrative-territorial units of the countries, including the capital regions. The breakdown of the samples in each country by three key demographic variables – type of residential area (urban/rural), gender and age groups – is presented below in tables. Other variables, such as occupation and education levels, are not presented, and not used in the analysis below, because variation on information use along those variables was not found to be great and, given the relatively small samples of about 600, it would be even undesirable to break down the samples into so many parameters.

⁸² The questionnaire is provided in the Appendix

⁸³ In fact, all regions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were surveyed.

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

	Kazakhstan		Kyrgyzstan		Tajikistan	
	Count	% ⁸⁴	Count	%	Count	%
Gender						
Male	252	41.9%	280	47.5%	315	54.6%
Female	348	57.9%	308	52.3%	256	44.4%
Missing (not declared)	1	0.2%	1	0.2%	6	1.0%
Total ⁸⁵	601	100%	589	100%	577	100%
Age						
17-21	229	38.1%	188	31.9%	113	19.6%
22-32	166	27.6%	176	29.9%	159	27.6%
33-43	107	17.8%	110	18.0%	131	22.7%
44-60	69	11.5%	156	13.6%	139	24.1%
61+	21	3.5%	20	3.3%	31	5.4%
Missing (not declared)	9	1.5%	19	3.3%	4	0.7%
Total	601	100%	589	100%	577	100%
Residency						
Urban	349	58.1%	337	57.2%	300	52.0%
Rural	252	41.9%	252	42.8%	262	45.4%
Missing (not declared)	0	0%	0	0%	15	2.6%
Total	601	100%	589	100%	577	100%
Occupation						
Housewife/holder	56	9.3%	81	13.8%	41	7.1%
Farmer	8	1.3%	16	2.7%	22	3.8%
Handyman	45	7.5%	26	4.4%	45	7.8%
Entrepreneur	55	9.2%	48	8.1%	40	6.9%
Labor migrant	47	7.8%	43	7.3%	44	7.6%
Medical worker	27	4.5%	32	5.4%	33	5.7%
Teacher	45	7.5%	36	6.1%	59	10.2%
Public officer	54	9.0%	27	4.6%	38	6.6%
NGO worker	17	2.8%	16	2.7%	8	1.4%
Lawyer	13	2.2%	6	1.0%	6	1.0%
Student	120	20.0%	157	26.7%	111	19.2%
Unemployed	44	7.3%	27	4.6%	70	12.1%
Pensioner	18	3.0%	17	2.9%	26	4.5%
Other	47	8.6%	10	1.7%	32	5.5%
Missing (not declared)	5	0.8%	47	8.0%	2	0.3%
Total	601	100%	589	100%	577	100%
Education						
Higher with academic degree (PhD or equivalent)	22	3.7%	7	1.2%	18	3.1%
Higher (specialist, bachelor, master)	240	39.9%	128	21.7%	176	30.5%
Incomplete higher	78	13.0%	121	20.5%	118	20.5%
Secondary vocational	133	22.1%	63	10.7%	68	11.8%
Complete secondary	109	18.1%	174	29.5%	154	26.7%
Incomplete secondary	12	2.0%	68	11.5%	27	4.7%
No education	1	0.2%	17	2.9%	12	2.1%
Missing (not declared)	6	1.0%	11	1.9%	4	0.7%
Total	601	100%	589	100%	577	100%

⁸⁴ Percentage totals do not account for rounding

⁸⁵ Total count discrepancies due to respondents failing to declare answers (missing data)

Thematically, the surveys sought four sections of questions about information use patterns: sources of information used, trust toward sources of information, social media and messengers usage patterns, and interest toward religious information. These largely aim at giving detail to the two principal questions of the study – pertinent information flows and trusted sources of information. Below, the findings of the surveys are presented along these four blocks of data among all three countries in a comparative key.

Of note, concerning certain questions there is a significant amount of missing data due to respondents failing to answer. To account for this, where applicable, percentages are calculated as ‘valid percentages’ which are calculated based upon actual responses (N) as opposed to sample sizes. This assumes that missing data (non-responses) are Missing at Random (MAR) and therefore those cases with the missing data are omitted and only the remaining data have been analyzed, justified as complete case (or available case) analysis.

Sources of information – preferences and habits

The interviews, past the demographic questions, began with the question of what sources of information the respondent mostly used. The options were provided in a list of most-likely answers, from which the respondent could pick one they preferred the most. **Table 1** shows the distribution of most preferred/used sources of information in each country.

TV news programs were identified as popular in all three countries – most popular in Kazakhstan (30%) and Tajikistan (almost 35%), and second most popular in Kyrgyzstan (27.6%, as compared to 27.8% preferring Social media). The popularity of TV is somewhat surprising in an era of “fake news” and propaganda debates, which are particularly relevant for TV. As it is explained by a number of respondents in in-depth interviews, however, especially in Tajikistan, TV is actually viewed as the least likely to report fake information, because it is where the official – that is, original and therefore trustworthy – information gets reported and because – in some responses – it is about seeing and believing. Still, there might be other explanations that would require more in-depth research into TV viewership habits.

Table 1. Sources of information used⁸⁶

	RK	KR	RT
TV news programs	30.0%	27.6%	34.9%
Radio	5.0%	6.1%	8.8%
Social networks (Odnoklassniki, Facebook, etc)	27.2%	27.8%	16.3%
Information sites/portals	11.6%	10.4%	8.8%
Messenger group messages (WhatsApp, etc)	15.3%	16.5%	2.2%
Newspapers	5.1%	5.1%	12.9%
Other people (relatives, friends, officials, etc)	5.7%	6.5%	16.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

When TV news program and Social media usage are examined, some predictable demographic patterns emerge. Respondent preferences on these clearly differ by age – the younger the respondents, the more they tend toward social media and away from TV news. Only in Tajikistan, while the pattern across the age

⁸⁶ Here and further, instead of literally translating the question (which was posed to respondents in five different languages and not in English), only the meaning is provided.

groups holds, TV News viewership remains more preferable to Social media even among the younger groups.

Table 1.1 TV News Program vs Social Media usage by age groups

	17-21 (17-22)	22-28 (23-29)	29-37 (30-42)	38+ (43+)
Kazakhstan – TV	46.8%	46.9%	59.1%	81.0%
Social Media	66.5%	55.8%	53.0%	30.6%
Kyrgyzstan – TV	49.5%	50.9%	62.7%	76.9%
Social Media	79.3%	67.2%	59.1%	34.6%
Tajikistan – TV	78.4%	72.5%	85.2%	93.8%
Social Media	52.5%	50.0%	44.5%	17.5%

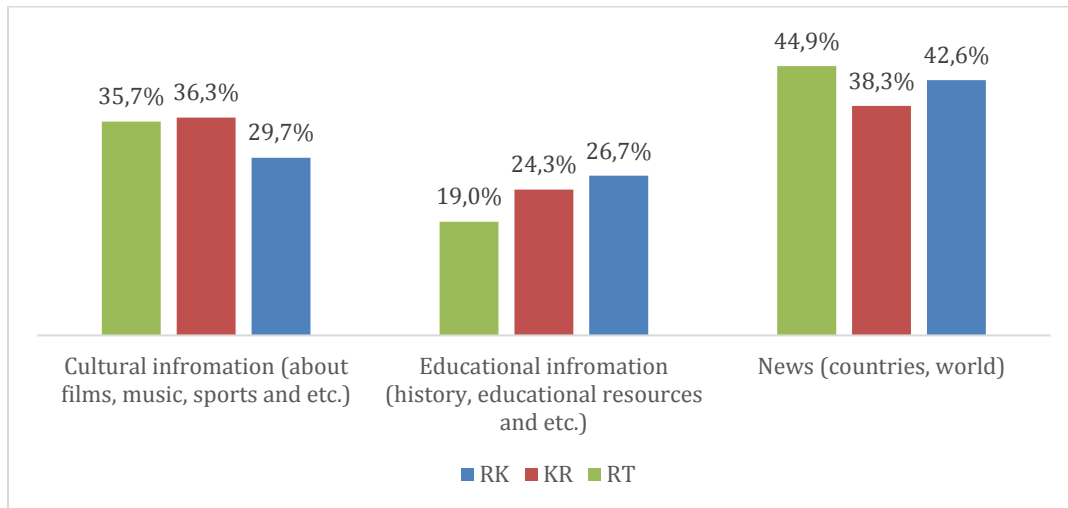
Internet-based social media sites are actually the most popular information sources in Kyrgyzstan. Given that Kazakhstan is where internet penetration is higher than in Kyrgyzstan,⁸⁷ the fact that internet-based sources of information are equally widely used in both countries at above 27%, with Kyrgyzstan’s figure slightly higher, suggests that internet access and usage has become indeed very widespread among the Kyrgyzstanis. Tajikistan is an outlier in this regard, with only about 16% of respondents choosing this option. Internet penetration is roughly equal for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, at 33% and 35% respectively in 2018 (Kazakhstan at 77%),⁸⁸ so the fact that, for Tajikistan, ‘Social media’ is on a par with ‘Other people’ and ‘Messenger groups’ are relatively low, at 2.2% suggests that perhaps in Tajikistan there is still a stronger culture of conversation and physical interaction. 13% indicating newspapers as their preferred source of information is another interesting finding that puts Tajikistan apart from the two other countries. In all these respects – on online social media, other people, and newspapers as sources of information – the survey results clearly reflect the patterns observed in the qualitative interviews. Lastly, it is notable that information websites are not particularly popular in any of the three countries, despite the fact that more and more journalism has been based on internet websites recently.

Asked what kind of information they were most interested in, respondents in all three countries broke down in a similar pattern, only diverging in actual percentages of preferences (**Figure 1**): News (national and international) as the most interesting sort of information, Cultural information (including music, sports, movies, etc.) the second most interesting, and Educational information ranks third. In each country, the order of preference among the three types of information holds across all age groups, except one point: the youngest group (17-21) in Kyrgyzstan showed greater preference for Cultural information (67.9%) over News (57.6%).

⁸⁷ According to Internet World Stats (www.internetworldstats.com) and Freedom on the Net (at www.freedomhouse.net) data for 2017

⁸⁸ <https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocial/digital-in-2018-in-central-asia-86866176>

Figure 1. Type of information most interested in



In terms of the presentation format of information (**Table 2**), preferences of respondents broke down into partly similar and partly diverging patterns. Many more respondents in Kyrgyzstan preferred information in video format (relating this to their preference for internet-based sources of information as well) compared to respondents in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan who both preferred informational (news) programming the most. For all three countries, the second most preferred format of information was TV talk shows, with approximately a quarter of respondents in each. Interestingly, while more respondents in Tajikistan preferred newspapers as sources of information than both respondents in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, fewer of them than both of the latter liked the text-based format of information. Also notably, radio programming was not very popular in all three – well below 10% in all of them.

Table 2. Format of information preferred

	RK	KR	RT
TV talk shows	25.2%	22.8%	24.1%
Radio programs	6.1%	8.4%	8.4%
Information (news) programs	33.5%	17.0%	33.3%
Video information	17.2%	28.3%	22.3%
Textual information	9.5%	11.0%	4.8%
Visual information forms (pictures, infographics, etc.)	8.1%	12.3%	7.0%
Other	0.5%	0.2%	0.1%

When preferences by format of information are considered by different demographic groups, some stable trends are observable, albeit not by such surprisingly great margins. Thus, the same patterns of top three preferences (as in **Table 2**), only in slightly different percentage breakdowns, are observed in each country by gender and by type of residential area. When considered by age groups, in all countries, the younger groups gave greater preference for new and internet based formats of information (Video and Visual formats of information) whereas the older groups preferred the more traditional formats (Information/news programs in all three countries; TV talk shows in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; Radio programs in Tajikistan).

Time-related habits in information consumption – how much time respondents spend on receiving or consuming of information from different sources, and what time of the day they usually accessed different sources of information – were also examined.

Table 3 presents the data on amount of time spent with different information sources in all three countries, listed in three blocks. Thus, in Kyrgyzstan, the least time would be spent on information websites, newspapers reading and listening to radio. The most amount of time (3 or more hours a day) is spent on social media sites and messenger group communication. This was considerably higher than respondents in Kazakhstan or Tajikistan, suggesting a more advanced and embedded culture of social media (network and messenger) usage.

With respondents in Kazakhstan, the most notable general observation is how many less of them reported spending more than 3 hours on any source of information; the ‘information time’ for most respondents was between “less than 30 minutes” and “1-2 hours a day.” That said, the relatively more time-consuming information sources among respondents in Kazakhstan were social media, TV programs, and messengers (with each of them, more than 50% of respondents spent either “1-2 hours” or “above 3 hours” when these percentages are combined).

A similar pattern to Kazakhstan is observed with respondents in Tajikistan – generally even fewer numbers of people reported spending more than 3 hours on any source of information while even larger percentages of Tajikistanis reported spending 30 minutes or less with most sources of information. That said, like in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the social media, TV programs and messengers appear to take up ‘information time’ of more Tajikistani respondents compared to other information sources.

Table 3. Time spent on receiving information, by sources of information
Answers of respondents who use the relevant source in the list

Kyrgyzstan	Less than 30 min/day	About 1-2 hours/day	More than 3 hours/day	Not sure
TV news programs	37.5%	41.3%	17.9%	3.3%
Radio programs	45.0%	19.2%	18.8%	17.1%
Social networks	14.7%	37.2%	44.2%	3.9%
Information/news websites	51.8%	28.5%	8.8%	10.9%
Newspapers (local and national)	54.6%	21.0%	8.1%	16.2%
Messaging applications	22.6%	34.3%	39.8%	3.3%
Kazakhstan	Less than 30 min/day	About 1-2 hours/day	More than 3 hours/day	Not sure
TV news programs	39.0%	41.2%	10.0%	9.8%
Radio programs	52.8%	23.1%	4.9%	19.2%
Social networks	26.9%	43.8%	19.2%	10.1%
Information/news websites	47.6%	28.9%	9.5%	14.0%
Newspapers (local and national)	46.9%	23.6%	6.2%	23.3%
Messaging applications	38.7%	33.4%	17.8%	10.0%

Tajikistan	Less than 30 min/day	About 1-2 hours/day	More than 3 hours/day	Not sure
TV news programs	41.6%	39.5%	17.3%	1.6%
Radio programs	61.6%	24.0%	8.3%	6.1%
Social networks	38.4%	38.1%	20.5%	3.0%
Information/news websites	53.7%	27.5%	13.3%	5.6%
Newspapers (local and national)	58.0%	27.0%	8.7%	6.3%
Messaging applications	33.6%	33.9%	29.0%	3.5%

Further observations can be made by looking closer into the above data by demographic category. In all three countries, be it in rural or urban settings or among men or women, newspapers and radio got consistently the highest percentages of “Do not use” answers. Close to or more than 50% of women and rural residents, in all countries, claim that they are generally “not using” either of these media, with only slightly lower percentages reported for men and urban residents, respectively.

The other question regarding information consumption habits – the time of day when respondents preferred to access different sources of information – revealed some more interesting patterns and nuances. Respondents in Kyrgyzstan (**Table 4.1**) produced one noticeable trend – almost all sources of information (except TV) they accessed any time of the day, whenever they had convenient time. Technically, this suggests that they mostly access information via mobile phone-based internet (and hence, TV is the only source they cannot watch any time of the day). Also plausibly, however, in answering the question, respondents in Kyrgyzstan (as well as in Tajikistan) were led by the words “whenever convenient,” whereas the Kazakhstani respondents were guided more by the words “throughout the day.”

Table 4.1. Time of day information is accessed. Kyrgyzstan

	Before 12:00	12-14:00	14-18:00	18-22:00	After 22:00	Throughout day / when convenient	Not sure
TV	7.1%	4.6%	5.4%	37.7%	10.0%	33.7%	1.5%
Radio	13.4%	10.8%	4.5%	4.5%	2.6%	53.0%	11.2%
Social networks	5.1%	2.5%	6.3%	19.0%	13.5%	51.0%	2.5%
Information/news websites	8.9%	8.9%	6.1%	14.5%	8.1%	46.9%	6.4%
Newspapers	6.7%	10.7%	6.7%	8.7%	6.0%	48.3%	13.0%
Messengers	5.5%	4.3%	4.0%	11.5%	12.6%	59.8%	2.3%

When some of the most popular information sources – social media and messenger services - are considered by urban/rural divide, the urban residents were particularly likely to access them “throughout the day, whenever convenient” – Social networks 54.7% (versus 44.6% for rural) and Messenger services 64.9% (versus 52.4% for rural). When the same is considered by gender breakdown, it emerges that women get online “whenever convenient” more often than men. Lastly, considered by age groups, “whenever convenient” is still the most popular for all age groups, but the youngest (17-21) group leads the others by about 10 percentage points – 68.7% and 59.3% of them access Messenger services and Social networks, respectively throughout the day when convenient.

The respondents in Kazakhstan reported (in **Table 4.2**) a pattern almost opposite to those in Kyrgyzstan respondents. Generally, the smallest percentages of respondents in Kazakhstan accessed source of

information “whenever convenient any time of day”. The general pattern with Kazakhstanis is to access information in the evening and night – curiously, a large percentage (33.4%) watches TV in the early afternoon and, of those who listen to radio or read newspapers (see above) large percentages do so after 22:00. Access to the internet (social media and information websites) is somewhat more distributed throughout the times of day, possibly because it is accessed via mobile phones, though still more heavily accessed late in the day.

Table 4.2. Time of day information is accessed. Kazakhstan

	Before 12:00	12-14:00	14-18:00	18-22:00	After 22:00	Throughout day / when convenient	Not sure
TV	6.7%	33.4%	11.8%	19.3%	17.3%	5.5%	6.0%
Radio	4.4%	6.4%	8.4%	21.8%	47.9%	3.1%	8.0%
Social Media	4.5%	10.8%	15.2%	44.7%	16.8%	1.6%	6.5%
Information / news websites	3.9%	10.4%	10.8%	35.5%	29.5%	3.0%	6.9%
Newspapers	2.6%	6.3%	8.3%	24.1%	48.1%	1.9%	8.6%
Messengers	2.5%	7.4%	10.5%	53.4%	19.0%	0.9%	6.4%

The evening hours are the most popular for accessing most of the information sources in Kazakhstan – Messenger services, Social Media Networks and Information portals are all accessed by the largest percentages of age groups, rural and urban dwellers and along gender lines, in the period of the evening between 18:00 and 22:00. Watching television, interestingly, is popular during lunch time for a large part of urban residents (35.8%), whereas rural residents watch TV across most of the second half of day. On Radio timing, the curiously late time for the national sample holds in the demographic groups, too, with radio listening being most popular after 22:00. In all these observations, what is notable is the evenness of patterns across all demographic groups of respondents in Kazakhstan – with only slightly different percentage distributions all groups follow the same general pattern in most cases.

Lastly, the respondents in Tajikistan follow a very similar pattern to those in Kyrgyzstan in accessing messengers, social media and information websites as information sources at any convenient time during the day – again indicating that mobile phone access is probably the predominant means. Understandably, TV is watched by the greatest number (44.4%) between 18:00 and 22:00 in the evening and many listen to the radio in the morning hours until 12:00 (22.5%).

Table 4.3. Time of day information is accessed. Tajikistan

	Before 12:00	12-14:00	14-18:00	18-22:00	After 22:00	Throughout day / when convenient	Not sure
TV	12.2%	4.4%	4.1%	44.4%	12.7%	21.7%	0.6%
Radio	22.5%	6.5%	8.2%	11.7%	9.1%	38.5%	3.5%
Social Media	3.0%	4.2%	4.8%	11.2%	19.0%	56.2%	1.5%
Information / News websites	4.3%	1.3%	6.6%	12.2%	18.4%	53.3%	3.9%
Newspapers	8.5%	8.2%	9.7%	14.1%	7.3%	48.1%	4.1%
Messengers	3.2%	3.2%	4.8%	8.8%	18.4%	60.5%	1.1%

Across all the demographic groups, respondents in Tajikistan, too, follow the national sample patterns – the option “throughout the day, whenever convenient” is popular for all demographic groups in accessing all mobile sources of information – Information portals, Messenger services and Social Media. Women show a slightly different pattern in TV viewing time – 16.1% of them preferring “12:00 or earlier” (versus 9.3% for men), and 8.5% of them watching TV after 22:00 (versus 16.2% for men). But even here, the overall distribution of viewership time is the same for women and men – more of both watch TV mostly in the evening hours. To summarize the above observations regarding respondents’ information source preferences and access habits, there are some degrees of difference among the three countries but similar patterns in many respects. Thus, TV programs are solidly popular among all respondents, radio is less popular among all, social media and messengers are used broadly in all three countries, although those in Kyrgyzstan seem to prefer them the most as sources of information. The greatest numbers in all three countries preferred (by varying degrees) to receive information in the formats of information (news) programs, video information, and TV talk shows.

The demographic group distributions in information source and format usage are generally very stable and insignificant: especially, there does not emerge any striking pattern of difference in any of the above questions along the rural and urban divide or along the men and women divide. The more interesting and wider differences are found among age groups in some questions – the younger respondents generally (and unsurprisingly) giving greater preferences to any option/question involving newer, online and mobile phone-based information access, whereas the more traditional media, such as TV, radio, and newspapers are preferred more by the older groups of respondents. That said, TV proves popular with all demographic groups, including youth.

Trust toward Sources of Information

The next section of data collected in the surveys have to do with trust toward sources of information – a key concern at a time when so much public discourse is about fake news, disinformation, and propaganda. The results in this section are most directly addressed to the question about trusted sources of information posed in this study.

The very first question here is what sources of information are the most trusted. To this question, the answers of respondents in Kyrgyzstan reflected some of the preferences observed in the above questions – such as the positive attitude toward TV (a total of over 60% trust it in general), followed by informational/news websites (about 44% overall trust them in general). Yet, there was also some level of critical views toward sources that are nonetheless popular (social media) and considerable trust toward sources that did not appear to be very popular – newspapers (total of almost 40% trust them in general) and radio (more than 30% generally trust it). This observation indicates that people choose what to read or watch not necessarily on the basis of perceived trustworthiness. It is also noteworthy that close to 30% of respondents answered “not sure” about trusting radio, newspapers, and information/news websites.

While the general patterns are repeated in demographic groups here, again, some percentage differences are present and they are interesting. Rural residents and women in general show somewhat greater levels of distrust toward information – especially toward online-based (information websites, social media and messengers) as well as radio – compared to urban residents and men. The rural/urban divide here is particularly interesting. By conventional wisdom and logics of modernization theory, it should be the urban resident who distrusts more, but the data show the opposite. That said, however, the general patterns hold across the demographic groups; that is, there is no point where one demographic group’s most trusted

and least trusted information sources were opposing, or presented a significant difference from, trends in other groups.

On the same question, a large portion of Kazakhstani respondents showed more hesitant or guardedly trusting positions: regarding radio, social media, information/news websites and messenger services, nearly a third (34,1%) of respondents answered they “sometimes trusted” them, and about a quarter of respondents indicated they “generally trust” these sources. At the same time, only modest shares of respondents expressed distrust – in general or fully – toward any source of information. The largest total percentage of Kazakhstanis, similar to Kyrgyzstanis, trust television (55.7%), and significant numbers, similarly again, expressed uncertainty (“not sure”).

The pattern among all respondents in Kazakhstan is also reflected in the rural and urban breakdown – the broad pattern in either group toward all sources of information is to trust sometimes or generally, with a significant residual answering “not sure.” In the more specific percentage breakdowns along the trust scale, there are differences between the two rural and urban groups that do not produce any discernible pattern, moving one point up or down in most popular answers, and boiling down to a similar general distribution of trust overall. The same observation applies to men’s versus women’s answers to this question. However, when considered by age groups, somewhat more noticeably different patterns emerge. The younger groups (28 and younger) give more trust to Social media than the older groups, with 30% of 38+ respondents feeling not sure about Social media. Conversely, 26.3% of the youngest group (17-21) are most “not sure” about trusting Television. The distribution of trust toward messengers is slightly more even across the age groups, and still more so toward Television.

Results for the same question among the respondents in Tajikistan differ from both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. With the exception of television, there appears to be a noticeable bias toward distrusting most of the sources of information and relatively smaller numbers of people responding with “not sure.” Television is once more the leading most trusted source of information, whereas the internet-based sources – social media, information/news sites and messengers – appear to get the most “distrust” scores. Thus, in turn, preferences of respondents in Tajikistan are in news sources, where the internet was notably ranked lower than other options. This observation also generally supports the hegemonic role of the state in information and discourse, as discussed in the previous chapter with qualitative data – the sources of information least controlled by authorities are the least trusted, and those controlled by the state are trusted more.

When asked what type of information they trust the most (**Table 6**), the answers in the three countries were comparable in that in all of them, the two most trusted types of information were information from “popular media” – media which respondents considered popular in the country – and official governmental information. Besides this shared overall perspective, several differences are also notable. A far greater percentage of respondents in Kazakhstan – almost one half (48.8%) – answered they trusted official state information, whereas for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, this information ranks second after popular media (21,4% and 24,2% respectively). Another point is that information from acquaintances is a solid third for all countries (Kyrgyzstan – 19,1%, Kazakhstan – 15,8% and Tajikistan – 13,1%), suggesting that interpersonal relations and a level of social capital were still in place and valued in the region. Lastly, noteworthy is the more balanced distribution of trust in Kyrgyzstan, where no single type of information is significantly more trusted and many options gain significant trust, whereas Kazakhstan produces a rather imbalanced distribution, with the top three options (“From acquaintances,” “Popular media,” and “Information from state agencies”) taking up over 86% and the bottom four options less than 14% - among them, “certain websites” and “institutions.”

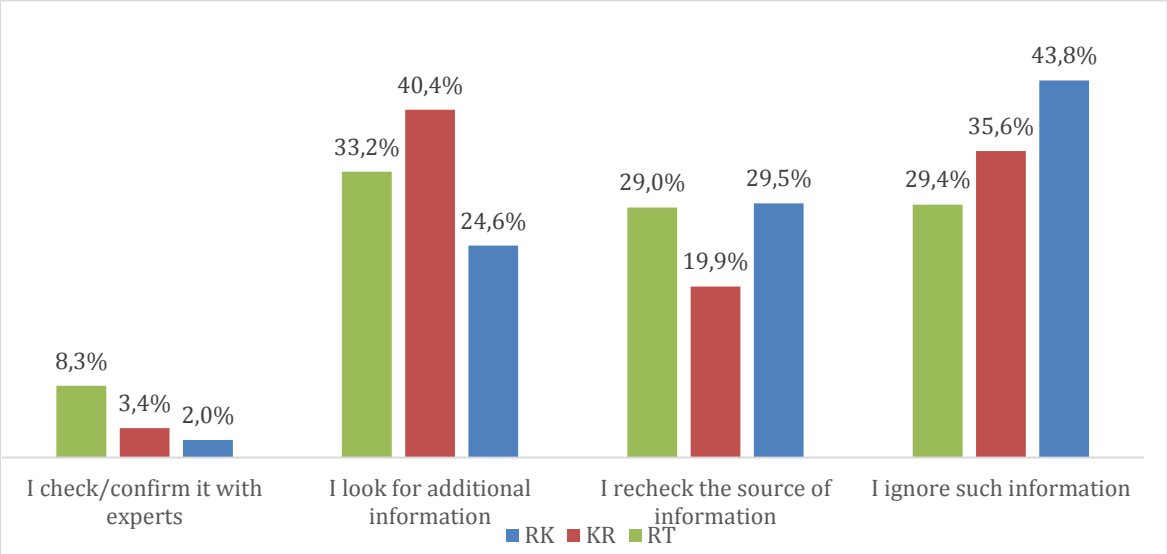
Some of the breakdowns by demographic groups are interesting in this regard. Among the well-distributed trust percentages of respondents in Kyrgyzstan, there are clear differences between urban and rural respondents. The urban most trusted popular mass media (28.3% vs rural 20.8%) and official information from state agencies (26.5% vs rural 14.7%), whereas rural respondents most trusted information from acquaintances (22.9% vs. urban 16.2%) and from respectable/prominent people (22% vs urban 12.1%). In other words, for rural residents, trust is given to sources of information that are personally known or respected, whereas for urban residents, trustworthy information comes from impersonal institutional sources.

In Kazakhstan, by contrast, rural residents have considerably less trust of information from acquaintances than urban residents (9.4% vs urban 20.4%), and somewhat greater trust to official information from state agencies than urban dwellers (56.7% vs urban 43.1%); both urban and rural respondents in Kazakhstan trust information received from popular mass media second-most at 23% and 22.9%, respectively.

In Tajikistan, on this question, the somewhat interesting divergence is in age groups. The youngest group (below 22 years of age) trusts acquaintances’ information the most (19.1%) whereas the least trusting group toward the same source is the more adult group (30-42 years of age), at 7.4%; and these two groups reverse positions on trust toward popular media – 32.4% of the youngest versus 51% of the 30-42 group. For all age groups in Tajikistan, the second most trusted source of information (popular mass media being the first) is official information from state agencies, at 20% and above.

Asked what they did when a piece of information sounded doubtful (Figure 2), and given four answer options – “I ignore,” “I check the source,” “I seek additional information,” and “I ask experts.” Respondents in all countries, to varying degrees, answered that they “ignored” or “sought additional information” or “checked the source” significantly more than “asked experts.” Within this pattern, the Tajikistani respondents gave the most balanced distribution among given options, whereas clearly more Kazakhstanis’ action was to ignore. More respondents in Kazakhstan were likely to ignore doubtful information and more respondents in Kyrgyzstan preferred to seek additional information when in doubt.

Figure 2. Action when you doubt a piece of information.



The next question was about trust toward different TV channels. The list of channels for each country was, of course, different. Tables 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3 show the results, rather straightforwardly. One may note that

in all three countries, the most trusted channels were the main state channels, and that in all of them, the fourth most trusted channels were Russian. The most trusted channel in Kazakhstan - indicated as such by more than half of respondents – was ‘Kazakhstan,’ a giant state-owned TV conglomerate with many subsidiaries that broadcasts, notably, in the Kazakh language. The second most trusted channel, KTK, is one of the oldest private TV companies in Kazakhstan. Notably, the rural respondents in Kazakhstan trust TV channels less than urban respondents. While the list and order of most trusted channels is the same for both groups, the percentages given to all these channels are lower among rural respondents. Given that rural respondents in Kazakhstan tend to trust official government sources somewhat more than their urban counterparts (see page 73), this is somewhat counterintuitive, and no obvious possible explanation is available. However, this could be explained by a lack of understanding of the nature of TV station ownership. In age groups and gender breakdown, the patterns again remain unchanged.

Table 7.1 Trust toward TV channels. Kazakhstan. Up to three choices possible

	Column N %	Count
Kazakhstan	51.4%	279
KTK	43.3%	235
Khabar	31.3%	170
First channel “Eurasia” – based on the Russian “First Channel”	20.1%	108
Khabar 24	17.7%	96
NTK	12.0%	65
31 Channel	11.0%	60
Kazakh TV	3.9%	21
Astana TV	2.2%	12
CTB	1.1%	6

Respondents in Kyrgyzstan indicated the de facto governmental (albeit formally publicly-owned and governed by an independent board of directors) channel KTRK as the most trusted. Despite routine controversies with it for unabashedly serving as the political tool of incumbent leaders of the country, KTRK leads as the most trusted by an overwhelming measure, garnering twice more approvals than the second most trusted channel, the privately-owned NTS. The list and order of most trusted TV channels in Kyrgyzstan, like in Kazakhstan, is virtually the same among age groups, urban and rural respondents, and men and women. The fact that a greater percentage of women trust KTRK than that of men, and a lower percentage of them trust the independent NTS than that of men, is somewhat interesting but these differences do not change the overall pattern: KTRK, NTS and Ala-Too 24, in that order, are the most trusted in all demographic segments.

Table 7.2. Trust toward TV Channels. Kyrgyzstan. Up to three choices possible

	Column N %	Count
KTRK	62.0%	361
NTS	31.6%	184
Ala-Too 24	28.4%	165
e	23.0%	134
5 Channel	15.8%	92
RTR 24 (Russian)	8.4%	49
Ekho Manasa	4.3%	25
April TV	4.0%	23
EITR	2.7%	16
Yntymak TV	2.6%	15
Osh TV	1.5%	9

In Tajikistan’s case, reflecting the almost entirely state-controlled media space, the list of most popular TV channels consists of all government-run state TV channels, although there, too, the fourth spot is given to what was identified as ‘Russian TV channels,’ including ORT, Rossiya-24, etc. Like in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the distribution and order of trust toward TV channels among different demographic groups, while eliciting different percentages, remain the same as the national aggregate.

Table 7.3. Trust toward TV channels. Tajikistan. Up to three choices possible

	Column N %	Count
Tojikiston TV	62.0%	358
Safina TV	45.8%	264
e	12.5%	72
e	10.2%	59
TV Jahonnamo	10.1%	58
TV Mezg	5.7%	33
Shahnavoz TV (муз канал)	2.8%	16
TV Varzish	2.8%	16
Foreign channels: BBC, Euronews	2.8%	16
TV Sughd	1.0%	6
Other channels ⁸⁹	2.1%	7

In a number of questions, such as preferred sources of information, formats of information, and others, one answer that was recurring often as moderately popular was ‘information/news portals’ – that is, the internet sites of information agencies. The following tables (8.1, 8.2, and 8.3) show answers to the question specifically about the most trusted ones among this category of information sources.

In Kazakhstan, the answers reveal a clear trio of leaders, topped by Tengrinews.kz, which lead the rest by a large margin. Notably, the top six most trusted information websites are local, Kazakhstani media agencies. Considered in urban/rural parameter, it is evident – not surprisingly so – that information websites are generally more trusted by urban residents, although the ranking of most trusted websites remains the same for both groups.

⁸⁹ SM 1, TV Sport, TV Football, Gem Series+ho, TV 24, TV Asia

Table 8.1. Trust toward websites. Kazakhstan. Up to three choices possible.

	Column N %	Count
Tengrinews.kz	60.4%	310
Informburo.kz	45.0%	231
Zakon.kz	42.7%	219
Karavan.kz	10.5%	54
Nur.kz	2.3%	12
Other websites ⁹⁰	5.3%	27

In Kyrgyzstan, as seen in **Table 8.2**, a clear leader by a large margin is the Kyrgyz branch of the American RFE/RL, Azattyk.kg, and this squarely repeats the relevant observation in the qualitative interviews chapter. This service has long been a highly popular and highly regarded media agency in Kyrgyzstan, often carrying the burden of providing critical and independent coverage of events when locally-owned critical media agencies were pressured or closed down. Azattyk’s fullest presence is web-based, although it broadcasts on both radio and TV as well. It is followed by several independent news agency websites, and only the sixth spot is gained by the governmental news agency website, Kabar.kg. The Kyrgyzstani version of the questionnaire included the option of “I don’t use them,” which ranked fourth in this list with over 18%. This apparently reflects the data in some other answers discussed above and further below, where respondents in Kyrgyzstan preferred social media and messenger services in their internet use.

Table 8.2. Trust toward websites. Kyrgyzstan. Up to three choices possible.

	Column N %	Count
Azattyk.org	50.1%	286
AKIpress	33.3%	190
24.kg	23.5%	134
“I don’t use them”	18.4%	105
Knews.kg	13.7%	78
Kabar.kg	8.2%	47
Kloop.kg	7.0%	40
Other websites ⁹¹	0.7%	4

In Tajikistan, there is a distinct trio of leaders, similar to Kazakhstan, and the Tajik branch of RFE/RL, Ozodi.org, is the most trusted of all. As in Kyrgyzstan, the second most trusted is the website of a popular independent news agency, Asia-plus – news.tj – and the third most trusted website, interestingly, is an

⁹⁰ Websites of “Echo of Moscow,” Russian websites, website of newspaper “Diapason,” Youtube

⁹¹ BBC, Google, YouTube, Sper.kg, Turmush.kg

advertising site, somon.tj. The popularity of Ozodi and Asia-Plus, as evident in the chapter above, was also very clear among the respondents in qualitative interview research.

Table 8.3. Trust toward websites. Tajikistan. Up to three choices possible.

	Column N %	Count
Ozodi.org	54.16%	241
News.tj	48.31%	215
Somon.tj	37.30%	166
Toptj.com	9.44%	42
Other websites ⁹²	3.15%	14

Further, the respondents' trust toward various radio stations in each of the countries produced results reflected in the following numbers. In Kazakhstan, the most popular radio station is the governmental Kazakh Radio (55,9%), followed by the local chapter of the Russian entertainment radio network Evropa Plus (39,4%). The third and fourth most popular stations are local private radio stations, 24.1% and 18.5% respectively.

In the Kyrgyzstani radio-scape, the leading spot is held by the radio chapter of Azattyk (58.9%), the local branch of RFE/RL. The second spot is occupied by the Kyrgyzstani branch of the Russian entertainment radio Evropa Plus (33.6%), followed by a local private entertainment radio station (21.8%), and that followed by another Russian entertainment station (16.3%).

Tajikistani respondents gave their greatest trust, similar to Kyrgyzstanis, to the Tajik branch of RFE/RL, Radio Ozodi (25%), followed by local stations such as Radio Sadoi Dushanbe and Radio Asia Plus (20.6% and 20%).

Taking a general look at trust in information sources in all three countries, some of the overall notable findings are worth recalling. Firstly, the respondents in Kyrgyzstan overall seemed to view information critically although holding different levels of trust toward different sources of information. The Kazakhstanis tended to be moderately trusting toward most sources of information, while the Tajikistanis came out as the most distrusting of the three. That observed, in all countries, somewhat greater trust was awarded to TV programs compared to other sources, and to official information from the government compared to other types of information.

To questions about trust toward different outlets in each category of information source, it was observable that TV channels got the greater numbers of respondents answering the question, followed by information websites, and radio stations getting the lowest numbers of respondents giving answers. In the latter set of questions, it was also notable that state-run TV channels were the most trusted in all countries, while among media websites there were independent agencies ranked as trustworthy, with RFE/RL branches in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan being the most trusted. Among radio stations, some of the more popular trusted stations tended to be entertainment stations, with Russian radio networks among the top, while the Kyrgyz and Tajik versions of RFE/RL were again the most trusted among radio stations, respectively.

⁹² Islam.ru, Khovar.tj, Lenta.ru, Inosmi.ru, Sports.ru, Akhbor.com, Vesti.ru, 1tv.ru

In addition to institutionalized sources of information, it is also worth noting that a considerably trusted source is acquaintances – that is, in all three countries, people award considerable trust to what they hear from people they know.

For the most part, measures of trust in information sources at the national aggregate were reflected quite consistently across different demographic groups: while percentage distributions varied and different demographics occasionally differed in most trusted or least trusted sources, for the most part all group percentage breakdown patterns concurred with those in the national aggregates.

These findings about trust toward information are similar to observations from the in-depth interviews in Chapter 2. What has been found in the surveys as the most trusted or the least trusted sources of information, the general patterns of trust toward information in the three countries, and views of official information, on the one hand, and independent and internet-based information, on the other, are clearly in line with observations in the qualitative research above.

Social Media and messenger services usage patterns

The next section of the surveys inquired into internet-based social media sites and messenger service usage patterns in the three countries. These two, often going together in similar trends in terms of usage frequency and popularity, were already seen as prominent information channels in the above sections, especially with the Kyrgyzstani and Kazakhstani respondents. Social media and messengers have also figured prominently in analyses of information flows in radicalization studies,⁹³ making them all the more salient for the present study. The following several charts and tables reflect the results of more particular look into this segment.

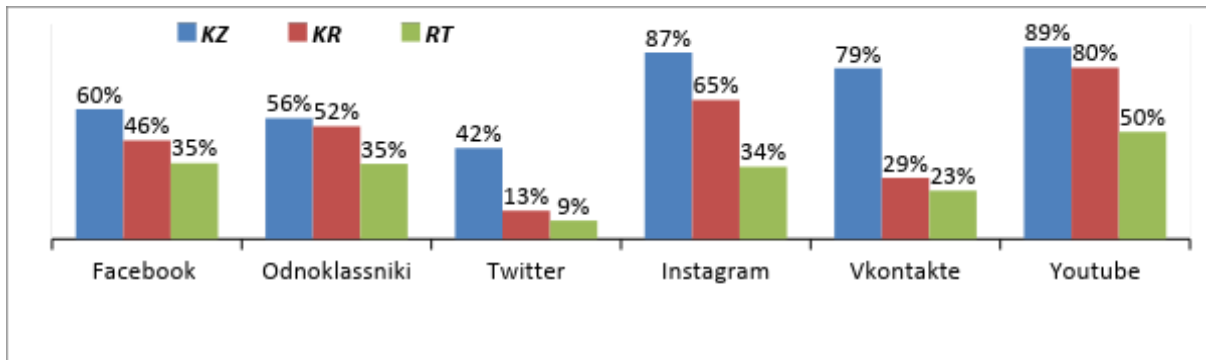
Figure 3 below provides the usage percentages of respondents in each country of several most popular social media platforms. As the overall pattern indicates, in all three countries, Youtube and Instagram were found to be the most popular, VKontakte, Facebook, and Odnoklassniki of medium popularity, and Twitter was the least popular. That said, there were differences among the countries. The Kazakhstanis were clearly the most active online social networkers whereas the Tajikistanis were the least active.⁹⁴ One more notable observation: Kazakhstanis used VKontakte as a strong third most popular choice, whereas the same platform was far less popular with both Kyrgyzstanis and Tajikistanis.

The various demographic groups, again, reflected the patterns at national aggregate levels, even though percentages of usage fluctuated somewhat: in Kyrgyzstan, the rural respondents show a lower percentage of Youtube usage, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan women show a higher percentage of Instagram usage; and in all countries, the younger age groups report greater usage of all social media; the percentages of respondents answering “I don’t use” are the highest for all social media in all countries in the oldest age groups.

⁹³ Recall Seraphin Alawa et al, “Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research”, UNESCO 2017

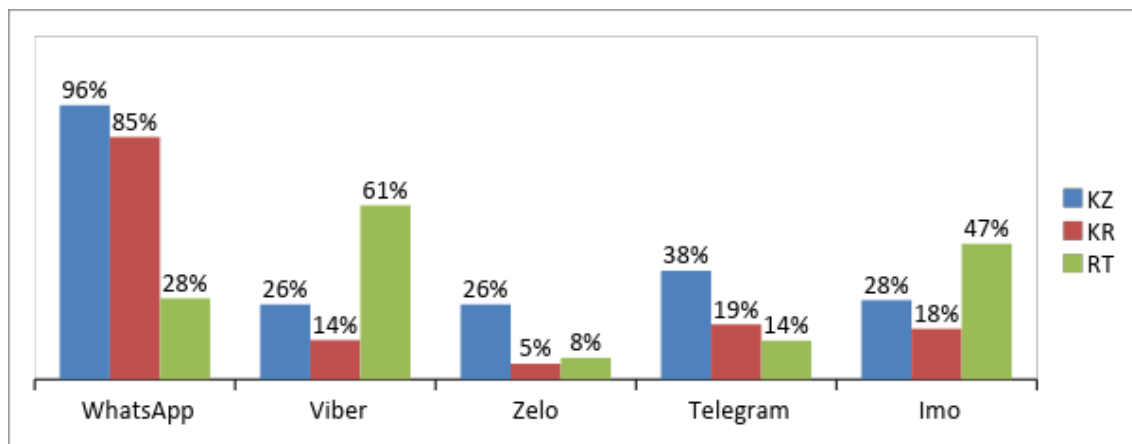
⁹⁴ Internet access in general, but especially access to social media platforms, can be subject to government restrictions – such as occasionally blocking Facebook – in Tajikistan and to a lesser extent in Kazakhstan. Factoring such circumstances with any precision was not possible, but some of the data are likely to reflect such restrictions.

Figure 3. Breakdown by social networking sites usage in all three countries. Percentages rounded.



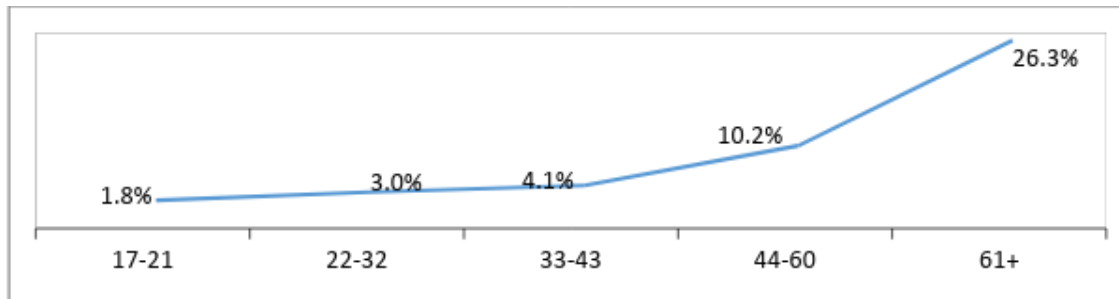
The messenger services is another category of internet based communication and information channel that has grown increasingly popular. As seen in **Figure 4**, there is no region-wide pattern as there was with social media; instead, the Kazakhstanis and Kyrgyzstanis share a mild pattern (with significant margins of difference in percentages) whereas the Tajikistanis have distinct preferences. WhatsApp is by far the dominant messenger for the Kazakhstanis and Kyrgyzstanis, whereas the generally – again – less enthusiastic users in Tajikistan mostly prefer Viber; a runner-up for them is Imo.

Figure 4. Breakdown by messenger services usage. Percentages rounded



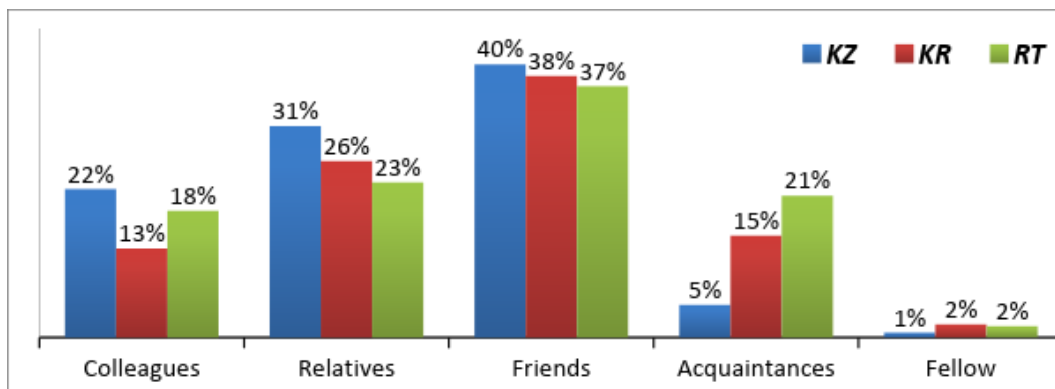
Given the extremely wide usage of WhatsApp by the Kazakhstanis – 96% of all respondents – it was interesting to see how that near-universal usage breaks down by age groups of the respondents. As **Figure 5** shows, very few of the youngest respondents do not use WhatsApp, and the regression line of non-users sharply rises only among the eldest category of respondents – over 60 years old.

Figure 5. Non-users of WhatsApp by age groups. Example of Kazakhstan



Since messengers are primarily used for communication with others rather than for receiving information, it was of interest to learn who the users generally communicate with via their preferred messenger services. **Figure 6** provides the answers. The two most frequent addressees with respondents in all three countries were similar - 'Friends' followed by 'Relatives'. Respondents in Tajikistan communicated with 'Acquaintances' considerably more than those in Kyrgyzstan and especially Kazakhstan, and respondents in both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan communicated with 'Colleagues' more often than those in Kyrgyzstan.

Figure 6. Who do you mostly communicate with via messenger services? One choice possible



There are interesting differences in who the respondents communicate with when broken down by demographic groups. In all countries (with milder differences in Kazakhstan), the rural residents and women had "Relatives" as the most popular answer, whereas urban residents and men had "Friends" as the most popular answer. Among age groups, the younger groups (especially the youngest groups, 17-21 years old) communicated more with friends and acquaintances, whereas the older groups had more even distribution between relatives, friends, and colleagues.

Whereas the messenger services are used primarily for communication with others, social media platforms are primarily used for getting information, as noted above. So regarding the latter, of some interest was to inquire what sort of information the respondents sought in their use of online social media platforms. Respondents were asked to select up to three most preferred topics of information of interest. The top four general topics of interest - entertainment, politics, health, and sports - were the same for all three countries in varying orders of priority and well above the fifth option (work). The category of "Other" was presented with slight variations in the three versions of the questionnaire, but religion was included in it in all three. This category was the last on the list for each country and was not widely chosen.

Of these preferences among respondents in all three countries, relatively speaking, men and older age groups are more interested in politics, whereas younger respondents and women are more interested in entertainment. Women and older age groups are more interested in health, but men of all ages are more interested in sports. All of these are, of course, unsurprising social patterns, however, notably, health was of particular interest to respondents in Kyrgyzstan. But to stress again, these differences are only relative and the overall list of most preferred topics – entertainment, sports, politics, and health – remains the same in slightly varying orders.

Considering online social media and messengers usage patterns, several points can be highlighted. First of all, both types of information channels were quite widespread among all three countries' representatives. Respondents in Tajikistan were the least active users in both types of services, however at least half of them used at least one social media platform (Youtube, see **Figure 3**) and over 60% of them used at least one messenger service (Viber, see **Figure 4**). Considering that most of the respondents in each of the three national samples were rather young (see Demographics), and also recalling the WhatsApp non-usage graph in **Figure 5** as a suggestive illustration, it is possible to suggest that large majorities of youth in all three countries use both social media and messenger services. This was, of course, clearly suggested in the results on information sources used in section 1 of this chapter.

Social media platforms and internet messenger services, thus, are highly popular and potent communication channels among the youth of all three surveyed countries. For respondents in Kazakhstan, the leading social media platforms are Youtube, Instagram, VKontakte and Facebook, and WhatsApp is the almost universally used messenger tool, followed by Telegram. In Kyrgyzstan, the most popular social media platforms are Youtube and Instagram, followed by Odnoklassniki and Facebook; the most popular messenger tool by far is WhatsApp, followed by Telegram and Imo. Among users in Tajikistan – generally less prolific in use of these tools – Youtube, Instagram, Facebook and Odnoklassniki are most popular among social media tools and, in a bit more of a departure from others, Viber and Imo are most preferred as messenger tools, followed by WhatsApp.

Interest in religious information

The last block of questions in the surveys examined the interest and consumption habits of religious information among respondents. These questions were considered important and included because most analyses of radicalization and extremist sympathies regularly revolve around channels and content containing religious information. The results gained on these questions provide some valuable and specific answers to the questions about pertinent information flows and trusted sources of information. This section was left for last due to its predicted greater sensitivity for respondents, especially in view of certain recent developments in the public space that have made the topic of religion still more sensitive and some findings may still need to be read with this in mind.

To the basic introduction question of whether the respondent was interested in religious information, the answers in the three countries revealed some telling differences, as shown in **Figure 7**. The highest percentage of respondents interested in such information was in Kyrgyzstan, at 58.6%, followed by the slightly lower percentage in Tajikistan, at almost 50%. However, the much smaller percentage – just over 19% – stating an interest in religious information in Kazakhstan is the most interesting. This interest is compounded by the fact that, conversely, almost 75% of respondents in Kazakhstan claimed that they were not interested in religious information. This might be partly explained by the long-held understanding that Kazakhstan was always the least religious of the post-Soviet Central Asian societies, despite the observed

fast-growing numbers of people there turning to religion.⁹⁵ The fact that respondents in Kyrgyzstan emerge as the most interested (and the least disinterested) in religious information might be explained at least partially by a considerably more open and tolerant public space for religious observance. The perceived lack of such conditions in Tajikistan might explain why in that society, traditionally viewed as closer to religious traditions, respondents were split evenly between those interested and those not interested in such information.

The respondents who reported being interested in religious information were asked where they mostly got such information, with answer options being: internet, religious figures, literature from places of worship, practicing worshippers, books, mass media, literature distributed in residential areas, as well as “I don’t get such information” and “not sure.” The answers showed internet was the most popular source in Kazakhstan (30.7%) and Kyrgyzstan (48.6%), but whereas in Kazakhstan, among the smaller number of respondents answering this question, the answers were fairly evenly distributed among the given options. In Kyrgyzstan, the internet is the most popular for almost half of the respondents. This prevalence of reliance on the internet continues the pattern observed among the Kyrgyzstanis regarding sources of information in general.

By contrast, in Tajikistan, the internet is only the fifth most popular source of religious information (19.9%). This might be explained in part by the more limited internet access there but even more importantly by the greater sense of caution that Tajikistanis may have come to exercise in browsing the internet for religious content. In Kazakhstan, where internet surveillance has also been prevalent recently, the popularity of this source of information may be offset by the small number of people who even reported as being interested in religious information. Besides the internet, of interest is the fact that in all three countries, religious leaders/preachers and people practicing religion are two other top choices as preferred sources of religious information.

For respondents in Tajikistan, the fact that books are the clear leader for preferred source of information (45.3%) is both remarkable and somewhat curious, considering the perception in the region of declining book readership and the fact that publication of trustworthy books on religious matters in local languages is still not highly developed. This result is supported by findings of the in-depth interview analysis, as observed above, indicating that many respondents in Tajikistan would turn to books for religious information, more than respondents in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Regarding sources of religious information, some demographic group observations are worth noting. The options of getting such information from literature distributed in places of worship and by talking to religious leaders are considerably more popular for men than for women for obvious reasons – in Central Asia, women do not generally attend mosques, and the religious leaders and preachers are mostly men who are also generally less accessible for female audiences. In Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, the option of using literature from places of worship that a respondent attends is more popular among rural residents, whereas in Kyrgyzstan the same option is more popular among urban residents. The latter is interesting but not too surprising in the context of ongoing discussions of there being “more mosques than schools” in the country, and mosque attendance being unhindered by any policy (unlike in Tajikistan). Thus, in Kyrgyzstan, urban residents have full access to mosques whereas in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, it appears, such practice remains more of a rural tradition. Tellingly, of freedom to attend mosques, the youngest age group in Kyrgyzstan (17-21 years old) produce the highest percentage (compared to other age groups)

⁹⁵ E.g., see Junisbay and Junisbay chapter in Laruelle, ed, 2018

stating their source of religious information as “literature from place of worship I attend.” In Tajikistan, conversely, the youngest group is the one least reliant on this religious information source.

Religious leaders – preachers, clerics, imams and so on – are one of the most preferred sources on religion in all three countries, as clearly observed in the qualitative study in Chapter 2, so it merited to inquire more closely into this aspect. When asked whether listening to sermons/lectures of preachers was a regular thing for them, respondents in the three countries answered mostly in line with the answers to the preceding questions. Namely, the respondents in Kazakhstan, by a large majority, answered that it was not a regular activity for them (almost 66%), whereas the lowest number of respondents in Kyrgyzstan said it was not a regular activity for them (34.1%). A very small percentage of Tajikistanis (12.6%) responded that they listened to such sermons/lectures online (in line with the internet’s low popularity as a source there, as noted above), as contrasted to a much higher percentage of respondents in Kyrgyzstan answering the same way (close to 32%).

Table 14. Do you regularly listen to preachers?

	RK	KR	RT
Yes, online	9.5%	31.7%	12.6%
Yes, in places of worship	20.0%	22.8%	28.5%
No	65.9%	34.1%	56.2%
Cannot answer	4.6%	12.5%	1.6%
Other	0.3%	1.6%	0.7%
Yes, on DVD	0.0%	0.0%	2.1%

Predictably, more women in each country (but in Kazakhstan, only slightly) would report “Yes, in places of worship” than men, but in other respects, there were not notable differences between groups – especially, between the urban and rural respondents.

Given that Kyrgyzstanis predominantly tuned in to lectures and sermons of preachers via the internet, it was interesting to see how that indicator broke down by age groups. As seen in **Table 15**, the youth – those below the age of 30 – were considerably more likely to turn to the internet to access such material, around 40% across the three youngest age groups of respondents. The oldest group of respondents, by contrast, were the least interested in online access to such material and generally the most likely not to regularly listen to preachers compared to other age groups.

Table 15. Do you regularly listen to preachers? Breakdown by age groups of Kyrgyzstan respondents

	17-19	20 - 23	24 - 31	32 - 42	43+
Yes, online	41.0%	36.9%	40.7%	23.9%	15.7%
Yes, in places in worship	23.0%	20.7%	21.2%	22.9%	23.5%
No	32.0%	35.1%	26.5%	33.9%	44.1%
Cannot answer	4.1%	10.8%	14.2%	18.3%	16.7%
Other	2.5%	0%	0%	1.8%	2.9%

Preachers have been popular and much-discussed agents in religious communication as well as in state strategies regarding regulation of the religious sphere. If involved in the right way, they may turn out to be

some of the most effective communicators of moderate and constructive religious views and education as one aspect of countering extremism. This is a systematically stressed point in the in-depth interviews, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan where the names of several prominent preacher clerics get repeated among both non-expert ordinary respondents and expert interviewees. To that point, it is of interest to inquire whether some characteristics of preachers – whether objective or perceived – are most appreciated by most respondents. To this question, the same very strong “winner” was evident in all three countries – the ‘instructive’ type of clerics was liked by far the most (more than 70% in all three countries). While the ‘artistic’ type was a distant second (Tajikistan-24.6%, Kyrgyzstan – 9.2% and Kazakhstan 19,4%), the more notable result was that the ‘preaching’ type was a third (by a large margin in Kazakhstan - 3.0% and Tajikistan 3.8%) most popular – quite suggestive of what sort of style and characteristics of religious information and edification respondents sought the most.

The last point above is reinforced by answers to the next question about preferred topics of sermons that respondents liked listening to. **Table 17** shows an instructive arrangement of most popular themes in a declining list by countries – in all three, sermons about family matters and about good manners and behavior were the two most popular, almost equally. It is notable that sermons about religion and faith were only the third in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (although somewhat popular in Tajikistan as an absolute percentage: 36.4% of respondents interested in religious information marked this option there), and even the fourth in Kyrgyzstan. These answers suggest that for most people who are interested in religious information, such information is mostly sought as a source of answers for difficulties or puzzles in their lives and mundane situations, as opposed to seeking such sermons for learning religious dogma. This finding, again, goes along with the finding above (**Table 16**) about the relative disinterest of respondents in the ‘preaching’ sort of preachers. This same observation also corresponds to what was observed in the qualitative research, reported in Chapter 2, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where the spread of religious practice was welcomed by many for reasons of improving people’s behavior.

Table 17. Preferences by sermon topics. Up to three choices possible

	RK	KR	RT
Family	42.5%	48.0%	48.6%
Good manners	39.0%	52.5%	44.5%
Health	17.0%	22.8%	23.9%
Faith/religion	19.5%	15.8%	36.4%
Education	4.0%	8.7%	14.2%
Other	2.5%	0.2%	0.0%

Taking the findings regarding religious information together, a number of general conclusions are apparent. These conclusions are particularly relevant here because they clearly relate to, and corroborate, observations from the qualitative component. Thus, there is less interest in the religious sort of information among the respondents in Kazakhstan, and a significant level of such interest for those in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. That said, the respondents in Kyrgyzstan seek their religious information first of all via internet-based sources (video sources), while the Tajikistani respondents bypass internet sources in favour of at least four other alternative sources. Among those alternative sources, for interested respondents in all three countries, two of the most popular sources are religious leaders/clerics/preachers and people practicing religion – in other words, either the famous religious people or people whom the respondents know and who are knowledgeable in religious matters in their view. When looking into what further preferences the respondents had regarding preachers and the topics of their sermons, in both of

these regards the answers in all three countries suggested that people are mostly interested in religion as spiritual guidance and maybe support in life's challenges, but not so much as a matter of theology or religious doctrine.

These are all important results for the present study. One of the major drivers for extremist sympathies, as most respondents in the qualitative research in all three countries perceive, is the poor knowledge or understanding of religion, and correspondingly, they think better information about and teaching of religion would be necessary as part of preventing violent extremism. Moreover, as a resource toward strengthening religious knowledge and toward CVE/PVE, many respondents in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan wish to see a greater public role for moderate and respected imams and preachers. The results of the survey as seen here provide some more precise data on these ideas. Thus, the internet is an important source of religious information in each country, especially for younger age groups of the respondents. Prominent religious clerics are sought after in Kazakhstan and especially in Kyrgyzstan. The preference given to the internet as a source is likely to be still referring to recorded videos of these clerics' lectures. The popularity of clerics, established in the qualitative interviews, is further specified in the surveys where the most popular topics of sermons in all three countries were those about family and good behavior (far more popular than religious doctrine) and by far the most popular type of preachers was the 'instructive' type (and the 'preaching' type was a distant third). In Tajikistan, consistent with in-depth interview results, the most popular source of religions information is books, which becomes even stronger when seen together with literature taken from places of worship.

Just one point needs to be borne in mind regarding this last section: the need to read the results with caution. Religion and seeking information about it is a sensitive subject for respondents, especially so in Tajikistan. It is possible, therefore, that some answers may involve respondents' self-censorship on some level, especially when they speak of internet and online resources used for these purposes. Some level of credibility of all answers is suggested by the fact that only respondents expressing interest in religion went on to answer the rest of the questions. But this introduces another limitation – the fact that the sample sizes answering questions in this section become considerably smaller.

Survey Analysis Conclusions

The results of the surveys in three countries allow a number of interesting observations to be made. Such observations in particular provide further specific detail to observations drawn in the qualitative research part of this study. Nearly all aspects of the main findings from the interview research, as provided in Chapter 2, found corroborating results in the surveys. Generally, the comparative descriptions of the three countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – as representing the moderately hegemonic, the least hegemonic and the most hegemonic discourse regimes, respectively, are discernible in the results of the surveys, too.

- Respondents in Kyrgyzstan feel most open to using internet-based sources of information, attend mosques and listen to preachers, use and trust independent as well as state information outlets.
- Respondents in Tajikistan are mostly trusting of and use government-controlled information, and show relatively least preference to internet-based sources of information and communication, preferring printed material over online.
- Respondents in Kazakhstan generally fall in between the above but are somewhat closer to the patterns found in Kyrgyzstan.

The survey results, of course, went beyond merely reaffirming the observations of the qualitative research. As intended in running the surveys, more specific, precise and detailed evidence of relevant matters across the countries and demographic groups, has been gleaned. It is possible to highlight a general conclusion from the comparative analysis of the results. The clearest and most important variation on most issues is found among the three countries in their aggregate results. That is, differences of how respondents chose, trusted, or used various information resources were the clearest among countries, rather than among different demographic groups. Having said that, once country results are disaggregated into demographic subsets, the most evident and interesting variation comes out among age groups – how the younger respondents answer versus how the older ones do. When samples are broken down into rural and urban respondents, and into men and women, the variation in answers in these parameters – which certainly exists – is much less clear, mixed, and generally does not suggest substantial national differences. That is, despite rural and urban respondents trusting a source of information by different percentages, or men and women showing different levels of preference for different information tools, such differences largely end up being differences of degree rather than of substance. As noted in the Methodology section, cross-sectional analysis involving occupation, geographic breakdown and education levels was not carried out, given that by these variables the relatively modest samples of 600 or less (on questions about religious information, for example) would break down into too small groups, rendering such an analysis unreliable.

Some more specific results can be reiterated from the section summaries above.

Overall, in all three countries TV remains the most popular and most trusted source of information. Most television viewership is dedicated to news information programs in all three countries, with talk shows being the second most popular. Furthermore, when considering trust by TV channels, all three countries reveal the greatest trust of most respondents toward state-run national TV channels. These observations apply to all considered demographic groups – men/women, urban/rural, and across age groups. Some expert interviewees in all countries stressed the need to strengthen television’s role in CVE/PVE efforts, when asked for recommendations. The results of the surveys strongly confirm that suggestion: television is indeed potentially a highly effective channel for such work. Granted, it is also the most difficult, especially when the governments – which dominate the TV sphere, especially in Tajikistan – are not fully engaged in such efforts. But as much of the evidence from the interviews as well as desk research suggests, the governments in all countries, including Uzbekistan, have been interested in and even investing in CVE/PVE programming in television.

Television’s popularity, however, has been almost caught up by the internet (social media) among the respondents of Kazakhstan and has even been surpassed by a narrow margin in Kyrgyzstan. Social media and messenger usage, combined with usage of online information sites/portals as sources of information, indicate that online access to information has become a solid second and occasionally even the most widespread way of accessing information, particularly among younger respondents in all countries. If the perceptions of most respondents in interviews, as well as evidence from much previous research, are correct about the youth being particularly vulnerable, then youth presence online would be both a channel by which radical messaging could spread but also a channel for counter-narratives and CVE/PVE communication generally.

In terms of social media and messenger services usage, a remarkable leader among all three groups of respondents is Youtube. That might be explained by Youtube not requiring a subscription to simply view videos and also merely viewing videos often being a sufficient level of usage. As told in a number of in-depth interviews (but not specified in the surveys, unfortunately), Youtube would be a prominent site for seeking religious information as well. Overall, the respondents in Kazakhstan were the most active users

of both social media platforms and messenger services, whereas those in Tajikistan were the least active in both respects.

A very important issue in understanding information consumption in general and in designing CVE/PVE material is the issue of trust in information. The more an information user is a critical reader and viewer of content, and is able to tell what is trustworthy and what is suspicious information, the lower the chances of radicalization of that person through extremist messaging.

In this regard, the respondents in the surveys revealed somewhat diverging patterns. Regarding trust in information, respondents in Tajikistan emerged as the least trusting of any source of information, and the rural respondents there (as compared to urban respondents) showed still lower trust percentages toward online sources of information. The respondents in Kazakhstan appeared moderately trusting toward most sources, and those in Kyrgyzstan showed more varied levels of trust toward different sources but were more often open to certainly trusting particular sources of information. These results were very similar to information trust patterns observed in the qualitative interviews, found in Chapter 2.

That said, when asked what type of information deserved the most trust, in all three countries there was strong trust given to popular media outlets (with the highest percentage in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and to official information provided by state agencies (the highest percentage in Kazakhstan). This relatively stronger trust toward official information is not very surprising – “official” is often viewed as synonymous with “true” in post-Soviet Central Asia, but the comparably strong trust in popular media outlets is a promising sign for potential productive CVE/PVE work in this sphere. These patterns are confirmed in the in-depth interviews as well, wherein respondents identified and praised several popular media sources in each country.

Answers to questions regarding religious information revealed that internet and religious leaders (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and books (Tajikistan) were some of the leading sources of such information, but keeping in mind that significant numbers of respondents in all countries (especially in Kazakhstan) answered they were not interested in such information at all. The latter point might be indicative of insecurity that many people feel in declaring interest in religion – this is not necessarily supported by in-depth interviews in Kazakhstan, but in Tajikistan, those qualitative interviews would also suggest the possibility self-censoring. This, however, remains an untested hypothesis.

From Chapter 2, it was clear that in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but not so much in Tajikistan, some prominent religious figures were popular – their lectures and sermons were mentioned often as sought. In the survey, when asked what topics of sermons/lectures by such religious figures they liked to hear, respondents in all three countries gave a similar and revealing pattern – they preferred to hear about matters pertaining to family questions and to good manners and behavior. Hearing about matters of religion and faith was the third preferred for respondents in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, and the fourth for those in Kyrgyzstan.

These latter observations clearly link to observations from the in-depth interviews in the previous chapter, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Among the non-expert interviewees, there was a prevailing positive attitude to the fact that more people have turned to religion in recent years and they based this on its good effects on people’s behavior. No respondent, stressed the learning of proper religious doctrine as particularly important. That is what the latter result of the surveys appears to amply confirm, besides also confirming the popularity of lectures and sermons by preachers.

In sum, the surveys in the three countries confirm the observations about the respondents’ information use and trust that were gained in the qualitative research component and make it possible to claim that

such observations are generalizable to populations. The survey questionnaires did not include questions about radicalization and violent extremism, nor about drivers of sympathy for these, both in the interest of focusing more specifically on information flow channels and on trusted sources of information, and because questions about RVE would be particularly difficult to cover reliably in a survey.

Report Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

What are the information ecosystems like in Central Asia, and how can they inform work on prevention of violent extremism in each country? Based on the results of the desk research, in-depth interviews and surveys, presented above, future CVE/PVE efforts may rely on a range of interesting and relevant conclusions.

Firstly, the role of government in this area in each country needs to be considered, as this defines much about the information ecosystems and explains most of the differences between the countries. In this regard, from Kyrgyzstan, to Kazakhstan and on to Tajikistan, the report has proposed to consider them as mildly or weakly hegemonic, medium-level hegemonic and strongly hegemonic discourse regimes, respectively, with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan closest to, or even surpassing, Tajikistan in level of hegemony in public discourse. How hegemonic the discourse regime is defines how free or reserved people are in discussing sensitive matters such as radicalization and extremism and government policy there.

The drivers of extremist sympathies in Central Asian societies are evidently multiple and varied among the countries. Some of the serious previous studies have already underscored that no single causal factor or driver can be identified as responsible for radicalization in a country or region or even in an individual case. Such drivers work in concert and interact with each other in complex ways to encourage radicalization and the adoption of violent extremist views. In this study, some of the most frequently cited drivers of extremism have been poor knowledge or understanding of religion,⁹⁶ economic factors such as unemployment and poverty, and – especially in Kyrgyzstan – political factors, such as discrimination and unjust treatment by law enforcement organs. In all countries, mostly as a result of poor religious understandings, respondents thought ideological motivations also drove people to radicalization.

A facilitating factor that was systematically observed in almost all cited cases of actual radicalization and joining of extremist groups, was that of personal linkages. Most often, family members and friends, and generally immediate acquaintances of the persons in question would be decisive in pulling people into pathways to radicalization. Labor migration and gender as conducive factors among drivers of RVE, while much discussed in various previous studies, did not emerge as notable in the present research. Neither in the interview answer patterns of labor migrants and women, nor in what respondents generally thought drove people to radicalization, did these people appear as distinctly vulnerable to becoming radicalized. Youth, on the other hand, were often mentioned as a vulnerable group, because respondents thought that young people were most susceptible to the effects of the above larger structural factors. Only occasionally, and highlighted systematically as only being a means, was the internet and associated sources of information (social media, messengers, “Google,” etc, and smart phones with access to the internet) as a major factor in radicalization, where radicalizing messages, in the form of videos and other material, are passed to and accessed by recruited persons via different channels of internet communication.

How the internet and related means of communication are viewed links to the question about pertinent information flows. Generally, in all countries – to a lesser extent in Kyrgyzstan – there appears to be a strong presence of the government in information flows, be it by government-approved information, government-controlled channels of information, or simply when information is such that would need to

⁹⁶ In this study, as admitted from the start, religion has been admitted as paramount in understanding radicalization and violent extremism: radicalization need not be religious, but that religion is systematically implicated in RVE is a truth all too evident, and it is a systematic part of how people – respondents in this study – understand RVE.

pass government scrutiny to be published. The latter point was cited in a number of interviews as a reason why many media outlets did not wish to engage in CVE/PVE publications more regularly. In the surveys on information use preferences, in all three countries there is some level of skepticism about information passed on online social media and even more through messenger services. Respondents in Tajikistan revealed generally more suspicion toward information on the internet, although the younger respondents there were more open to it than older respondents. In Kyrgyzstan, respondents were more prone to use the internet generally, and online social media particularly, for seeking information. Attitudes toward internet-based information may be reflective of the restrictions on such information emerging in the recent couple of years in Central Asia. For example, “liking” a wrong post can get you in trouble, as a respondent confided in Tajikistan. Despite the stated skepticism to online sources of information, however, in the three countries studied closely there were several online media agencies that were clearly very popular.

Besides the general information flows, there were channels of religious information content particular to each country. Besides the internet being used for such information in all countries, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, these sources included popular media – TV and internet – specialized in religious educational programming and hosting several prominent religious figures whose lectures and sermons were sought after, live or in recordings posted online. Additionally, information on religion received in places of worship was significant for (mostly male) respondents in all countries, especially in Kyrgyzstan. Religion was also learned from books and other printed material, especially among respondents in Tajikistan.

The information on religion accessed in all the above sources was trusted information, with variation in preferences for some sources over others. More generally, trusted sources of information included official information and information delivered via government-controlled media, such as TV and, in Tajikistan, newspapers, and information from some independent media outlets, such as Azattyk in Kyrgyzstan and Ozodi in Tajikistan.⁹⁷ While such preferences could be established, it was also evident from the combination of various prevailing answers in both in-depth interviews and survey results that critical information literacy and consumption habits were not strong in any country. In Kazakhstan and especially in Tajikistan, skepticism toward information, especially from independent sources, was evident among large numbers of respondents but such skepticism did not seem to lead to habits of cross-checking, verification or other ways of active critical analysis, evaluation, or consumption of information.

Given the above, and given the variation in the level of government-controlled hegemonic discourse between the countries, the question of respected moderate local voices leads to different answers in each country. It is apparent that discrete local voices outside of government itself do not emerge, but some respected figures, such as several religious leaders, are mentioned regularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. That said, in Kazakhstan, quite frequently, in speaking about moderate imams, respondents would identify them as “legitimate” or “approved” by the government – indicating how the government maintains control of who among popular clerics are allowed to freely access the public and who are disapproved of, or even denied publicity. In Kyrgyzstan, virtually no such qualification is raised as respondents often mentioned the several nationally or regionally popular clerics. From survey results, an additional strong finding regarding the imams and clerics that is relevant here was that in all three surveyed countries, by far the most popular type of clerics – preferred by more than 70% of respondents in each case – was the ‘instructive’ type, whereas the ‘preaching’ type of cleric was a distant third.

In all three countries, however, besides the respected moderate voices, what respondents thought would be important for preventing radicalization was to tell the stories of PIE persons and their families – actual stories of actual people were stressed as particularly potent. Indeed, several of the PIE respondents in

⁹⁷ The national branches of American-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Tajikistan and at least one in Kyrgyzstan told of their engagements in local communities to share their experiences with extremism (as part of CVE/PVE programs in the respective countries and communities). These were deemed by many expert respondents as the most effective counter-narratives and as eye-opening, disillusioning stories for those who were susceptible to being misled into extremist activities for religious ideological motives.

Thus, the present study reveals that people in Central Asia are aware of, and reject radicalism and violent extremism. They explain, based on their experiences, perceptions, and opinions, such issues as being due to a variety of problems found in their societies, and not as normal or acceptable. Their attitudes to the rising levels of religious practice in their societies are mostly positive, and in this phenomenon, they appreciate such positive outcomes as better morals and behavior in society. The survey indicated that religion as guidance in life's questions was of significantly greater interest than religious dogma and many saw the rising religion, especially those who practice religion, as a regaining of part of their society's identity. These positive attitudes are present but are more muted in Tajikistan, more open in Kazakhstan and still more in Kyrgyzstan.

The role of the governments and of official policies toward preventing and countering violent extremism of the countries is a major part of all the findings outlined above. Information ecosystems are restricted and streamlined where government's hegemony in public discourse is strong, and they are broader, more multi-vocal and free where government hegemony is weaker. CVE/PVE policies of Central Asian governments have grown more comprehensive, multidimensional and systematic in the years since ISIS recruitment from Central Asian countries became a priority concern during 2014-2015 however, a continuing feature of official policy in all countries has been the securitization of both religion in general and of CVE/PVE work in particular, rather than being issues of development, social justice, education, political debate, and so on. This, put together with the generally authoritarian political regimes in the region, makes the design of effective CVE/PVE work all the more challenging.

Taking all of these conclusions of this study together, the important thing is to draw ideas as to what and how to devise by way of enhancing the resilience of the region's societies against radicalization and violent extremism. So, a set of recommendations for action are offered next as springing out of the present research results overall.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emerge from wishes expressed by interview respondents in in-depth interviews, as critical observations and recommendations in expert interviews, as conclusions emerging from the survey results, and more generally, as areas that call for attention in combination of multiple findings of the research. For convenience of reading, the recommendations are grouped by topic or intended audience.

First, some areas for further research beyond this current study are evident.

- One area is **to study religious discourse-formation more closely**: what particular actors, which institutions, by what language, and through what channels of communication, shape public ideas, understandings, and attitudes regarding religion? Discourse-formation can happen, and should be studied, both at national level and in the regional and international information space. Particularly, it would be interesting to examine the roles of governments, religious institutions and clerics, and media in shaping and toning the discourse in religion.
- Another area that merits studying is **the question of secular politics and government**. A potential new line of contention in many societies – especially post-Soviet Central Asian societies – is the line between secularists and the religious. Seeking the common ground on which both sides can agree and coexist is a challenge that the relevant societies – and their governments – have not yet seriously considered, and the failure to do so risks producing another driver for radicalization and social tensions.
- **A third direction of further research is geographical**: Uzbekistan has always been a highly interesting, possibly the most important case, yet is little studied and understood. As applauded universally and tested by some, the country has recently opened up to international economic, cultural as well as research engagement, and conducting research on media and radicalization on the ground would strengthen knowledge about Uzbekistan.
- A fourth area to explore, in extension of the logic held in this study and in partial fulfillment of the preceding points, is **to go beyond causality studies in CVE/PVE and focus on communication**. Nearly all work in the field so far has focused on causes of radicalization and extremism, and the answers derived so far are possibly as good as they can get. Causal approaches are predicated on the logic that once a cause of the problem is identified, it is possible to neutralize that cause so that the problem does not occur. The communication approach to problems of radicalization and extremism would focus on the information ecosystem as defined herein, and explore what meanings, ideas, attitudes and so on are generated and communicated within a society and how they form values and perceptions.

Besides the recommendations for further possible research areas, more specific action recommendations have emerged during both field and desk research for the media and journalists.

- A set of recommendations relate to basic expectations of rigor and responsibility in reporting. Media outlets in all three countries **require stronger fact-checking and critical sourcing trainings**. Typically, sources cited for any news or report are suspect; very often, behind strong titles of articles are found casual remarks of an official or expert. There is also need for training in **conflict-sensitive coverage** of news and topics on religion and radicalization. Typically, and understandably, the media write what is newsworthy. However, very often they tend to use exaggerating language, style, especially

in titles of their articles, thus contributing to apprehensions towards normal religious practice. The media community **needs more understanding of and training in religious matters**, so as to avoid writing in clichés and ill-informed tone, let alone presenting inaccurate information about religion. Depending on the form of material being prepared, inviting experts of theology and of religious practice to inform an article or a report, could be a practical solution to inform the journalist on reporting on religious topics.

- Media and journalists can be essential in **promoting transparency and rule of law by effective coverage of legal cases** against persons charged with extremism. This is an area where serious problems continue, creating ground for grievances, and, admittedly, it is also an area where information is very restricted. Such reporting is most possible to do in Kyrgyzstan, but some independent outlets in Kazakhstan are also capable of undertaking such proper journalism. Such journalistic practice is much more difficult in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, unfortunately.
- **Media specialized on religious education should be considered as a potential resource.** Such media are found to be quite popular in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, usually directed by or featuring well-educated, respected scholars of Islam. They can be a resource for strengthening the quality of journalism regarding coverage of religious matters.
- Besides social media platforms, **CVE/PVE programming should be further featured in television media** – the most solidly popular media form in all countries. State-controlled TV channels are unavoidable in Tajikistan and should be engaged in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as well. These are the channels that respondents trust and watch, in addition to a few private channels in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.
- **Formats of media material need to be diversified** and feature live talks and debates (on TV, radio or online), especially stories from first-person perspectives (of PIE persons especially), documentary films, and even movies (as a number of respondents, including experts, pointed out in Kazakhstan). Engaging, readily relatable, and informative formats were the recommendations given in all countries.
- Resources – when possible, trainings – **enhancing the information consumers’ media literacy are needed.** Related to the research recommendation above, such ability would enable readers to better analyse and evaluate and thus be more selective in their information regarding religion, radicalism, and extremism. While most respondents in both in-depth and survey research, when asked directly, say that they are aware of biases in media, in their habits and preferences regarding information they reveal an inability to act upon such awareness.
- Media **coverage and discussion of pernicious social problems**, such as problems of discrimination, inequality, injustice and abuse by law enforcement representatives, in a language that gives voice to the weak and encourages the government to take positive action, is necessary. Such work is most easily possible – and called for – in Kyrgyzstan, but other countries also need to be considered. Uzbek President Mirziyoyev’s invitation to openly discuss problems has been partially taken up by some media and citizens.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ But see Human Rights Watch cautious report in reception of newly regained freedom in media, HRW, “Censorship and Media Freedom in Uzbekistan,” 2018

- In media coverage of topics like radicalism and extremism, **it will be more effective when done from a position of respect for the peaceful, socially accepted religious practice.** Media positionality is something that most ordinary viewers and readers are intuitively aware of, and a tone that betrays fear of, or resistance to, the spread of legitimate religious practice would be perceived a priori as biased against religion as such and not just against extremism.
- In pursuit of the above, a highly relevant project would be working with select media outlets, religious leaders active in the media, and possibly relevant stakeholders from government bodies, on **developing a constructive, conflict-sensitive, consensus-forging language on religion in society,** a language that is not predicated on extremism, radicalization, and the need to counteract them.
- **Reaching audiences via channels accessible on smartphones needs to be further explored** – it is difficult, given the volume and channels of information a person faces, but it is attractive, because it is a highly popular, and increasingly so, means of accessing information in all three countries, and it particularly applies to youth – the most vulnerable population category in terms of radicalization.

Action and projects for more effective information flows and communication need to be developed, and they would be very beneficial in strengthening the resilience of Central Asian communities to radicalization and extremist ideas and activities. On a larger scale, however, some further policy and perspective recommendations emerge from this research overall, addressed to all key stakeholders – governments, their agencies, donors, researchers, and media.

- There is **need for particular care in defining target populations** of CVE/PVE activities. The youth – from late teenage years to mid-twenties, and typically unmarried – have been one very broad and universally cited population category most vulnerable to radicalization. This expectation appears to be supported tangentially in the present research. A more specific category has been the labor migrant population. In this as well as some previous studies, as a category of population, labor migrants have not been identified as particularly prone to radicalization. While an individual migrant, in the particular circumstances of her or his movement, can be particularly vulnerable or likely to radicalize precisely because of their movement, the population of Central Asian labor migrants, counting several million people, are not any more vulnerable than another demographic. A similar reasoning applies to women.
- Similarly, **caution is advised when considering geographic targeting.** As this study and some other observations indicate, geographic focus may be valid in cases of concrete individuals or groups operating in a location, however in general, radicalization – to the extent that it has been a recurring phenomenon – has become very mobile. Focus on particular locations, even when such locations have had a record of being fertile ground for radical recruitment, has the potential of further stigmatizing its population, instilling fear and discomfort, and encouraging repressive approaches by law enforcement agencies.⁹⁹
- Governments need to **approach the question of restricting information flows and information access very carefully, to avoid sweeping restrictions** of citizens’ ability to get information and media’s ability to publish. It is essential to provide rationale and to carefully design such government

⁹⁹ For a sobering study, see Noah Tucker, “What Happens When Your Town Becomes an ISIS Recruiting Ground?”, CAP Paper 209, 2018, at: <http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Tucker-CAP-Paper-July-2018.pdf>

mechanisms. While extremist groups' messaging can be a legitimate target for control, such controls have often gone far beyond the necessary levels of restriction.

- Once more, in agreement with many previous studies, it is **important to stress education**. Education, in a broad sense, continues to be a problem in all Central Asian countries. However, better education, not least in media literacy, is essential for informed and responsible consumption of any information. Ultimately, it is also essential for the ability of the society to uphold pluralism and reject intolerance.
- Lastly, but most importantly, it is **paramount to consider the likely policy and political effects** of every project and research output. As such, it is worthwhile making a 'political impact evaluation' procedure a requirement for any project. Further repression of citizen freedoms and curtailment of their civil and human rights would be a cure probably worse than the disease, and yet arguably it has been happening.

