

# Radicalisation and extremism in Kyrgyzstan: Perceptions, dynamics and prevention

## Introduction

Often dubbed the most liberal of the Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan has undergone a challenging transition since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. In 2005 the 'Tulip Revolution' overthrew the country's first president and public discontent got rid of his successor in 2010, an episode which was followed by serious inter-ethnic clashes in the southern part of the country. Following this crisis, a parliamentary democracy was established and since then the country has not experienced another major outbreak of violence. However, the context remains fragile with divisions between the Uzbek minority and Kyrgyz majority populations apparent and regular incidents of violence and discrimination.

While the country's recent democratic developments have created optimism within the international community, remaining vulnerabilities are also raising concerns over the resilience of both state and society to internal and external stresses. The related threats of radicalisation and violent extremism<sup>1</sup> are often presented as the most pressing security risks that Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian states are currently facing. This is due to various internal and external factors including the country's proximity to Afghanistan; the political and socio-economic marginalisation of its Uzbek minority; weak governance; the protracted war in Syria; and the rise of global jihadi narratives and movements.

However, despite this perception there have been few incidents of actual violence linked to extremist religious narratives or ideologies documented in Kyrgyzstan. Similarly, there is little evidence of radical ideologies taking hold over large sections of society.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, Saferworld is using a working definition of radicalisation as "a process by which an individual or group comes to adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious ideals and aspirations that reject or undermine the status quo or reject and/or undermine contemporary ideas and expressions of freedom of choice" and violent extremism as "beliefs or actions that support the use of violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals".

<sup>2</sup> Heathershaw J, Montgomery D (2014), "The 'Muslim radicalisation of Central Asia' is a dangerous myth", [https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-](https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/john-heathershaw-david-w-montgomery/%E2%80%98muslim-radicalisation-of-central-asia%E2%80%99-is-dangerous-1)

In the framework of the *Capacities for Peace* project, (funded by the EU under the Instrument for Stability), Saferworld accompanied a group of civil society organisations from Kyrgyzstan to analyse trends, perceptions and measures to prevent the threat of radicalisation in the country. This briefing provides an overview of the findings of this process which involved interviews with experts and practitioners from state, academic and civil society backgrounds, as well as focus group discussions with communities and citizens about their perceptions of radicalisation and current responses in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>3</sup>

The findings indicate that there is a widespread equation of 'radicals/extremists' with different forms of religiosity, or religious practice, especially linked to Islam. There are also differing views about the significance of the threat that radicalisation poses to the Kyrgyz state and to society more broadly. Current responses by state authorities focus narrowly on (ill-defined) 'prevention activities', which are not designed to address the dynamics underpinning radicalisation and may in fact be contributing to a culture of fear and perceptions of discrimination, as well as increasing alienation between state institutions and sections of the public. While there has been no comprehensive study of the dynamics and extent of radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan, the field research suggests potential contextual factors explaining why some sections of the population may be attracted to increasingly extreme political, social, or religious ideas which reject the status quo and/or support the use of violence to achieve goals. The briefing concludes with recommendations to Kyrgyzstani and international actors to develop a comprehensive multi-sector evidence-based response strategy in order to address these wide-ranging factors and reduce the potential for radicalisation and violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan.

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<sup>3</sup> As part of this analysis process, 39 people were interviewed and more than 100 people participated in focus group discussions. Respondents were selected on the basis of the following criteria: gender, region, profession, ethnicity and age.

## 1. Perceptions around radicalisation and violent extremism

The Kyrgyz law on ‘countering extremist activities’, defines ‘extremism’ as different types of “*activities, associations, enterprises, organisations or institutions*” which can be based on “*ideological, political, racial, or religious hatred or enmity*” and characterised by their aim to achieve “*forceful change of the constitutional order, breach the integrity of the Kyrgyz Republic, undermining the security of the Kyrgyz Republic, seizure or appropriation of powers of authority, creating illegal armed groups, carrying out terrorist activity, incitement to racial, national or religious hatred, as well as social hatred, linked to violence, or calls for violence, denigration of national dignity, mass disorder, acts of hooliganism and vandalism*”.<sup>4</sup> Despite this broad definition, current perceptions of extremism and radicalisation tend to associate these terms with practices of Islam that are portrayed as unacceptable in Kyrgyz society and often referred to as “non-traditional”.<sup>5</sup> Representatives of national level state security services interviewed made references to this broad definition of extremism, but repeatedly emphasised problems linked to religion. Similarly, police and other state representatives rarely acknowledged that ‘extremists’ could be anything other than representatives of illegal religious groups. For example, they made no reference to manifestations of other types of radicalisation or extremism, for example, along ethno-nationalist or political lines or towards sexual and gender minorities – all of which are active and serious issues and which, unlike religious extremism, have been sources of serious violence and insecurity in Kyrgyzstan in recent years. These perspectives are also commonly portrayed in the media, in particular on news websites, which tend to repeat statements by the police, religious leaders, and government officials uncritically and contribute to the spread of poorly understood terminology.

The issue of religious practice in particular highlights the increasing divisions between religious and secular parts of society and the inability of authorities to find appropriate policies and practices to bridge the gap.<sup>6</sup> This also reflects the complexity of recent history between the Kyrgyz state and society. The secular legacy of the Soviet Union, where religious practice was not common or visible, is arguably a factor explaining defensive reactions to religion and the lack of experience of state institutions, such as schools, local authorities and security providers, to deal with

religious developments in recent years. More secular sections of society that equate extremism with forms of Islam that are different or more overtly expressed than their own (for example through the wearing of a headscarf or growing of a beard), feel that their secular way of life is being threatened. In contrast, others expressed concern that their religion is under attack and that there is a need to defend and protect it. A representative of the State Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan even went as far as saying that “extremism is an artificial geopolitical tool used to exert pressure on Islam”. Divisions are exacerbated by the perception that ethnic minorities (particularly ethnic Uzbeks) are “more religious”, often in reference to their clothing and appearance; this has given rise to discriminatory practices against Uzbeks and wide spread perceptions that Uzbeks are more prone to radicalisation.<sup>7</sup>

At the community level, perceptions vary. For example, a community member in Tash-Bulak village in Jalalabad explained, “Usually when people talk about *extremism*, we understand religion, mainly Islam”.<sup>8</sup> Other community representatives talked about the appearance and influence of “bearded *uncles* with guns on TV”<sup>9</sup> on young people looking for powerful role models, defining extremism as “notions outside of traditional Islam”.<sup>10</sup> An Imam from Uzgen, Osh, made links between extremism and Islam, explaining that “extremism is resistance to state law and the creation of a separate government under rules and ideology of sharia.”<sup>11</sup> However, several interviewees were angry about the systematic association of Islam with extremist groups, blaming either certain Kyrgyz authorities or the West for propagating this view. “Why, when speaking about extremists, don’t they show Christians? It is just the propaganda of Western countries.”<sup>12</sup> Others raised the issue of political violence being more significant than any potential danger of religious extremists: “Why do you think that religious extremists are dangerous? Oppositionists, who organise demonstrations or revolutions, are much more dangerous, because they destabilise the situation.”<sup>13</sup>

Perceptions of the significance of the threat of radicalisation and violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan differ too. For example, while some assert that the threat is serious, primarily because of the “spread of extremist ideology through the Internet from different

<sup>4</sup> Law On countering extremist activity, Article 1, Kyrgyz Republic, 17 August 2005.

<http://www.legislationline.org/ru/documents/action/popup/id/14753>

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘traditional Islam’ is controversial and does not correspond to any objective definition. It was used on a regular basis by workshop participants and interviewees, and relates to a perception that an ‘acceptable’ religious practice is home-grown and embedded in a set of local, cultural and sociological values, as opposed to more radical narratives and forms of practices which are perceived to be brought from outside, or other cultures and contexts.

<sup>6</sup> Zenn and Kuehnast, “Preventing Violent Extremism”, Special Report #355, USIP, October 2014:14

<sup>7</sup> The perception that ethnic Uzbeks are more prone to radicalisation and extremism is widespread. Politicians and the Ministry of Internal Affairs have made public statements about ethnic Uzbeks going to fight in Syria (apparently comprising 99 per cent of Kyrgyzstani combatants in Syria and Iraq).

For example, see “После задержания экс-имам Р.Камалова в Кара-Суйском районе снизилось количество отправляющихся воевать в Сирию, - РОВД” (21.07.2015) <http://www.turmush.kg/ru/news:143265> 19.08.2015

<sup>8</sup> Female, FGD participant, Tash Bulak, Jalalabad, October 7, 2014

<sup>9</sup> Male, Tash Bulak, Jalalabad, October 7, 2014

<sup>10</sup> Male FGD participant, Yrys, Jalal-Abad, September 30, 2014

<sup>11</sup> KII with religious leader, Uzgen Osh, December 9, 2014

<sup>12</sup> Male FGD participant, Yrys, Jalal-Abad, September 30, 2014

<sup>13</sup> Male FGD participant, Sadovoe, Chui, October 24, 2014

countries, like Afghanistan and the Middle East”,<sup>14</sup> others stated that the situation in the country is “under control” thanks to measures taken by the authorities.<sup>15</sup> Some interviewees highlighted that the sometimes excessive and sensationalised media coverage of these issues contributes to a fear that Kyrgyzstan is on the brink of being overrun by radical extremists. Others considered that perceptions of the threat are exaggerated. Clearly, radicalisation and violent extremism have become public issues that have generated expectations and demands for action by the authorities: some consider that the authorities are not doing enough to address the forms of religious practice that they see as excessive or not ‘traditional’ and other parts of society see the authorities’ response as oppressive and disproportionate.

## 2. The challenges to effective prevention

The lack of a common understanding of what is meant by radicalisation and extremism and their implicit or explicit equation with religiosity and Islam is not only causing conflict between different sections of society and between state and society, but is also affecting the way that responses are developed and implemented.

Current efforts by state security services and religious authorities (The Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan – SAMK, and the State Commission on Religious Affairs - SCRA)<sup>16</sup> to address radicalisation and violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan centre on the idea of carrying out ‘prevention activities’. These mainly aim to control the proliferation of radical/extremist ideologies and warn the public of the dangers of so-called ‘non-traditional’ political or religious groups. Examples of the types of activities that have been implemented by various state authorities include:

- ‘prevention meetings’ implemented by the Ministry for Internal Affairs’ 10th department<sup>17</sup> together with local authorities in communities deemed to be at risk of radicalisation and violent extremism. The meetings are held for between 25 and 50 participants from local crime prevention centres (LCPCs), village leaders, local religious leaders,

local self-governance representatives, teachers and other community members. The facilitators of the meetings may show a film about the consequences of joining violent extremist groups in Syria and provide statistics and background information about Kyrgyzstani fighters, including interviews with regretful returned fighters, and respond to the questions of participants.<sup>18</sup>

- legislation enacted/enforced by authorities in Kashgar Kyshtak and Uzgen that bans the involvement of children in religious organisations and requires all religious teaching to be conducted by certified teachers.<sup>19</sup> In practice, this prevents young people and school children from attending Friday prayers together at the mosque and forbids women teaching Islamic studies in their homes.
- public meetings organised by the mayor’s office and law enforcement agencies in Uzgen to warn against “the harm of the internet and computer games” linking them to the risks of radicalisation and extremism.
- guidance, information and materials (theological or more specifically relating to radicalisation) provided to Imams by the SAMK, and mosque visits to monitor Friday sermons.<sup>20</sup>

According to interviewees, the design, implementation and effectiveness of these types of activities are flawed. The various state and non-state actors engaged on these issues do not coordinate and collaborate effectively. State authorities do not often recognise the added value of civil society and are reluctant to work with them. Similarly, interviewees reported a certain level of distrust between local police and Imams in some localities, and a consequent reluctance to work together, due to different approaches to the issue of radicalisation (repressive versus theological). The SAMK and SCRA also differ on how to define and respond to the issue.

*“Civil society institutes, particularly NGOs, only prevent us from working. Sometimes they politicise the issue...which is completely incorrect.”*

Representative of National Security Service, Bishkek, January, 2015

Another weakness of current efforts to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism relates to the narrow focus. They are designed to address symptoms, but fail to take into account or address the dynamics and underlying factors that may lead to radicalisation. For example, state-led prevention strategies often focus on what can be done to stop

<sup>14</sup> KII with National Security Service (NSS) representative, Bishkek, January, 2015

<sup>15</sup> KII, representative of 10<sup>th</sup> Department, Mol, South Region, 24.12.2014

<sup>16</sup> These two bodies are different in nature and competence. The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan is a religious authority and is the biggest Islamic organisation that manages Islamic communities in Kyrgyzstan. The State Commission on Religious Affairs is a central state body that works state-faith relations and implements state policy in the religious sphere. For more information see: Mirsaitov and Sakeeva (2013) *Baseline assessment report in the framework of the ‘Strengthening capacity to prevent extremism in the Kyrgyz Republic’ project*, Search for Common Ground.

<sup>17</sup> The 10th Special Unit, an independent structural subdivision of the Ministry for Internal Affairs, is in charge of developing and implementing actions against extremism, illegal migration, cyber threats, preventing terrorism, monitoring public and political situation in the country. For more information, see Mirsaitov and Sakeeva (2013), *ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with LCPC members in Kara Suu, Osh, August 18, 2015

<sup>19</sup> The Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Institutions of the Kyrgyz Republic, December 31, 2008, #282, Article 6 “Education and Religion”, paragraph 6 and paragraph 5 bans both these practices.

<sup>20</sup> KII with religious leader, Kashgar Kyshtak, Osh, December 12, 2015

'undesirable' religious groups from operating in Kyrgyzstan but do not seek to understand or mitigate the reasons why people may be joining such groups in the first place.

### 3. Towards effective responses to radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan

At the time of research no comprehensive study into the extent of radicalisation or violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan or its causes was publically available. This research included an initial analysis to explore the attractiveness of extremist ideologies (including ethno-nationalist, religious, political) and the reasons people may reject the political, social or religious status quo, as well as examining notions of diversity, freedom of choice and expression. This section does not provide a comprehensive analysis of potential causes, but suggests that a wide array of socio-economic, political, cultural and geopolitical factors should be taken into consideration in order to inform effective prevention strategies.

Many interviewees mentioned a lack of 'traditional' or 'home-grown' religious (counter-) narratives as well as the weak legitimacy of religious institutions as a factor in the establishment of religious extremist movements in Kyrgyzstan. Interviewees and workshop participants stressed how religious knowledge and education is usually considered to be low among followers of Islam. As a result, it was felt that 'born again' Muslims are easily influenced by fundamentalist narratives brought forward by radical groups who tend to discredit moderate approaches. This perceived lack of theological clarity is further reinforced by a lack of trust in religious authorities who are considered ineffective in guiding and supporting to local clerics.<sup>21</sup>

*"They are poorly informed, poorly educated in such matters and even their secular education is losing its strength."*

Interview with expert in religious affairs, 16 November 2014

Several respondents identified the lack of high quality educational and employment opportunities for young people as a potential reason for being easily influenced and manipulated by violent groups of an ethno-nationalist, political or religious nature. The Kyrgyzstani education system is reported to be corrupt<sup>22</sup> and dysfunctional,<sup>23</sup> and even if young

people complete their education they have very few employment opportunities besides seasonal or permanent labour migration. As a result, young people are looking for alternative affiliations, sources of income, and more broadly a sense of belonging and self-realisation. Boxing, martial arts and other sports clubs have long been associated with violent political and criminal groups in Kyrgyzstan, which mobilise young men trained in sports clubs they finance when 'muscle' is needed to further their cause. These groups sometimes espouse ethno-nationalist sentiments and were also reported to have been active during the 2010 inter-ethnic violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>24</sup>

*"One of the most vulnerable parts of the population is youth. They can be manipulated; they can be recruited to different movements through money. Nowadays in Kyrgyzstan it is fashionable to organize different sports clubs and invite young people there and further to train them to become 'killers' for a certain cause."*

Female participant, FGD, Tash Bulak, Jalalabad, October 2014.

Interviewees also considered perceptions of social injustice to be a key factor in the rejection of the political and societal status quo, and the consequent pull of radical or extremist groups who present different alternatives.

*"Disappointment with the state, instability and social needs mean that people are searching for justice... then they find themselves in banned organisations and start involving others."*

Male FGD participant, Sadovoe, Chui, 24 October 2014

A lack of trust in state structures, frustration over high levels of corruption, and the stark disparity between rich and poor are well-documented perceptions in Kyrgyzstan. Respondents linked these issues to why people seek out radical ideologies that appear to promote social justice and offer solutions to these governance and societal problems.<sup>25</sup> There were suggestions that some people were motivated to join political, nationalist or religious radical and extremist groups in order to seek justice or even revenge for the 2010 events. This has been one of the factors cited to explain the emergence of ethno-nationalist

<sup>21</sup> Zenn and Kuehnast (2014) 'Preventing violent extremism', Special Report #355, USIP, October 2014:5

<sup>22</sup> Transparency International (2014) 'The risk of corruption in the education system', Transparency International, Kyrgyzstan, May 12, 2014, <http://en.transparency.kg/news/2/6.html>

<sup>23</sup> Yuldashev, Sahin (2015) "Evaluating Youth Policy Reform in Kyrgyzstan Using Social Network Analysis", TRAMES, pp. 274 [http://www.kirj.ee/public/trames\\_pdf/2015/issue\\_3/trames-2015-3-273-287.pdf](http://www.kirj.ee/public/trames_pdf/2015/issue_3/trames-2015-3-273-287.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group (2010) 'Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan', Crisis Group Asia Report No 193, August 23, 2010: 6 -12

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/193%20The%20Pogroms%20in%20Kyrgyzstan.pdf>  
Matveeva et al, "Kyrgyzstan: Tragedy in the South", Ethnopolitics Papers, No.17, April 2012:12 - 19 <http://www.ethnopolitics.org/ethnopolitics-papers/EPP017.pdf> ;

<sup>25</sup> Interview, director of Research Institute for Islamic Studies, M.Myrzabaev, 11.12.2014

groups and ethnic Uzbeks joining religious radical groups.<sup>26</sup>

Another hypothesis put forward by respondents relates to a rejection of Western narratives and way of life, while at the same time searching for a sense of purpose in life in their own country. This can partly be explained by the vilification of Western values in the Russian media, but also relates to perceptions of hypocrisy and double-standards in Western geopolitical aims in the Central Asian region.<sup>27</sup> Beyond Central Asia, the protracted war in Syria has also prompted young Kyrgyz to join the ranks of the Islamic State and seek combat experience or to embrace a devout and purposeful life.<sup>28</sup>

*“Young men are trying to find their place in the world, they are looking for a faith, something able to fill the spiritual void.”<sup>29</sup>*

KII with expert in religious affairs, December 2014

The identification of factors and dynamics underpinning radicalisation is a key step towards designing effective response strategies. The initial exercise undertaken in the framework of this project suggests that a range of internal and external factors is driving resentment and disillusion and the search for radical solutions. An effective strategy to tackle the root drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism should therefore seek to understand these dynamics in a broader context. It should seek to shift the debate from one which focuses on ‘counter-radicalisation and violent extremism’ to one which acknowledges other contributing factors and reaffirms sustainable peace for all as the objective of any national strategy (rather than ‘victory’ over a particular enemy or ‘national security’ defined in narrow terms). Such an approach would consider the contributions that a wide range of stakeholders can make to building lasting peace, rather than stigmatising those labelled ‘radicals’, ‘extremists’, and ‘terrorists’ – which risks further alienating certain groups.<sup>30</sup>

## 5. Conclusion and way forward

The process undertaken in the framework of this project offers a number of observations:

- The dynamics of radicalisation are not well known, researched, or debated and need to be more thoroughly understood in order to design more effective responses. Research processes using conflict analysis methodologies would provide a useful format to explore the potential social, economic, political and cultural drivers of radicalisation, as well as to explore the broader solutions that can contribute to a more just and peaceful society for all.
- While perceptions of the significance of the threat vary, the topic has become so important in the public domain and at the international level that there is increased pressure on authorities to take action. Public awareness-raising initiatives are necessary to counter sensationalist coverage and narratives, promote constructive approaches and encourage critical thinking. International partners (donors, regional organisations, INGOs) can also help raise the awareness of the government and national level authorities about good practices in the field of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, in order to support more sustainable responses to radicalisation.
- Measures taken so far are ill-defined and although labelled as ‘preventive’, fail to address underlying drivers of radicalisation and may risk further alienating groups that are already marginalised. There is a need to adopt a state strategy on preventing and countering radicalisation that is based on a broad understanding of the issue and an acknowledgement of the role played by different actors. Better coordination between state and non-state actors including international organisations is also needed. An evaluation of existing responses and awareness raising of good practices in the field would also be useful in order to explore more effective and innovative approaches.
- Engagement on these issues is relatively new and mostly led by state authorities (security or religious). Civil society organisations across Kyrgyzstan which are implementing programmes to address economic, social, governance and security challenges are well-placed to engage with at-risk groups and contribute to comprehensive efforts to address root drivers of radicalisation. Communities, civil society organisations, authorities at local and national level should build on the experiences in the peacebuilding sector, such as community security processes<sup>31</sup> or mechanisms like Local Crime Prevention Centres, which provide effective frameworks for multi-stakeholder cooperation that

<sup>26</sup> International Crisis Group (2015) ‘Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia’; Paraszczuk J. (17.03.2015), “Kyrgyz Official Blames Minority Uzbeks For Syria Presence”, RFEL/RL,

<sup>27</sup> Saferworld (2012), “Nobody has ever asked about young people’s opinion” p.27 <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/640-nobody-has-ever-asked-about-young-peoples-opinions>

<sup>28</sup> International Crisis Group (2015) ‘Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia’

<sup>29</sup> See also <https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2015-en-youth-in-kyrgyzstan.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Saferworld (2015), ‘Envisaging more constructive alternatives to the counter-terror paradigm’ p.8 <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/876-envisaging-more-constructive-alternatives-to-the-counter-terror-paradigm>

<sup>31</sup> Saferworld (2015), ‘Democratisation, conflict prevention and increased security of local people’ p5 <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/pubdocs/163---lessons-learned-from-csa-in-ferghana-valley---english.pdf>

can enhance trust between the public, authorities and security services.

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This briefing is part of a 'regional hub' that works to strengthen local capacities in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan to analyse conflict risks in the region and recommend action to build long-term peace.

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