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Policy Brief

Based on the results of the research work conducted within the framework of International Alert's project "Constructive Dialogues on Religion and Democracy" funded by the European Union

Real and perceived Islamophobia in Bishkek

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Resume

This research explores the phenomenon of Islamophobia - negative attitude towards Islam and Muslims in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. The research work was conducted among the ordinary population of Bishkek and among the representatives of secular and Muslim communities. The research shows that Islamophobia in Bishkek has a latent character; there are strong Islamophobic sentiments, but they rarely manifest themselves in real actions. Research identified five main factors, which increase Islamophobia: (1) Islamic visual images, (2) demographic factors (age, ethnicity and gender), (3) place of residence, (4) alleged Islamic challenge of ethnic identity and (5) alleged Islamic challenge of private-public boundaries.

Introduction

The origins of Islamophobia in Kyrgyzstan can be traced back to the strong anti-religious propaganda of Soviet times, when the state cultivated very negative attitude towards religion as a whole and to Islam in particular. This is one of the main reasons why a large part of secular population today has negative attitude towards rapidly grow-

ing religiosity and Islamic practices in the sovereign Kyrgyzstan. Previous research¹ indicates that one third of instances of social aggression in the country is based on Islamophobia and that Islamophobia leads to social division, religious conflicts, family break-ups, marginalization of a practicing Muslim community and favorable ground for the growth of radical ideology. So far, the post-Soviet Islamophobia in Kyrgyzstan was studied only in the media space. This research aimed to assess the character and the scale of Islamophobia on the streets of Bishkek, the capital city, which has a more ethnically and religiously diverse population than the rest of the country.

Methodology

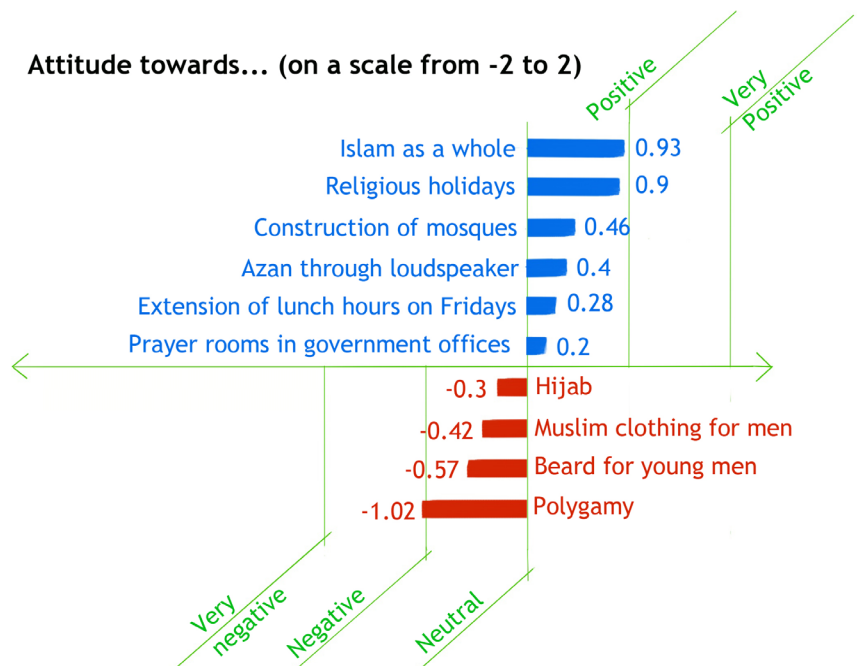
The research combined quantitative and qualitative methods. The questionnaire survey of urban residents included 400 respondents of different ethnic groups living in the city center, micro-districts and urban periphery. The survey of practicing Muslims included 100 male and female respondents. Series of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with representatives of both secular and religious communities and with experts in the field of religion complemented the survey data.

1. A study conducted in the framework of the School of Peacemaking and Media Technology in Central Asia in 2016 <http://www.ca-mediators.net/ru/issledovaniya/>

Attitude to Islam and level of Islamophobia

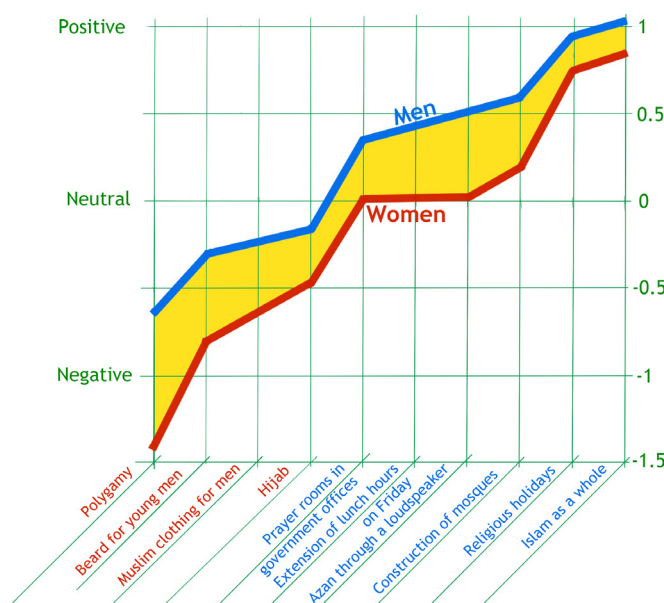
In general, the city residents view Islam positively. They also have appreciation of Islamic holidays and welcome the construction of mosques, azan and even the idea of extending lunch hours on Fridays. The main negative image they associate with Islam is that of polygamy. In addition, city residents have negative view on three visual Islamic images: beard for young men, Muslim clothing for men and hijab for women.

Attitude towards... (on a scale from -2 to 2)

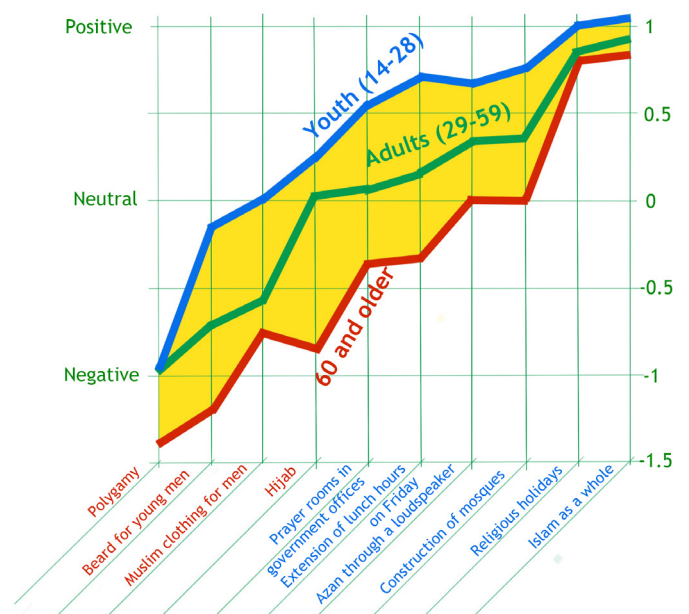


Women, people of older age, atheists, representatives of European ethnic groups (Russian, Ukrainians etc.) and residents of the city center are more Islamophobic.

Attitude towards ... (on a scale from -2 to 2)



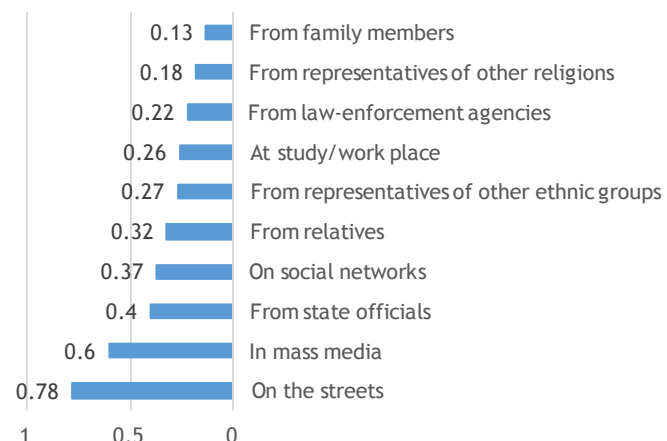
Attitude towards ... (on a scale from -2 to 2)



Experience of practicing Muslims

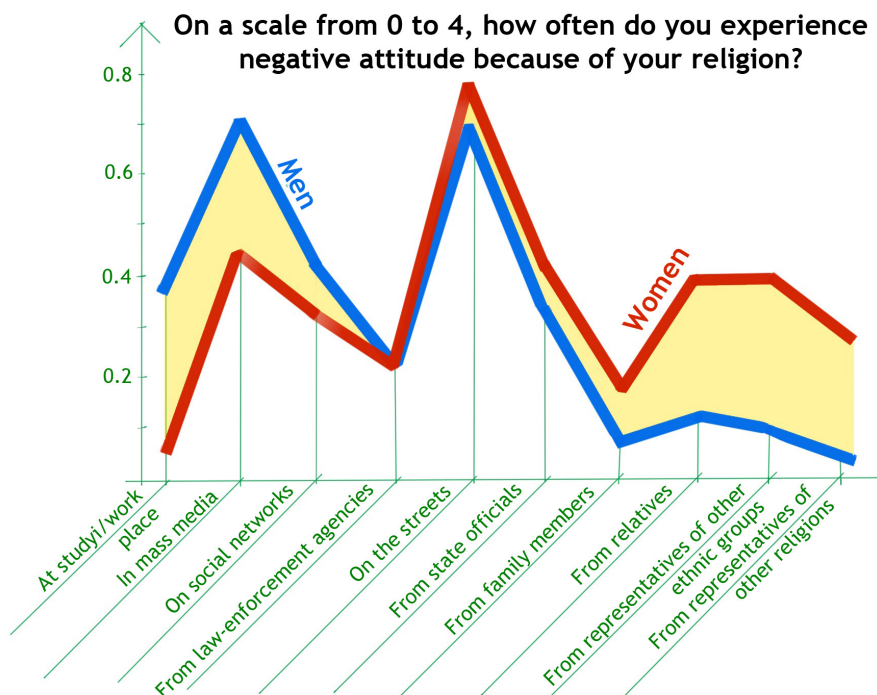
Practicing Muslims experience open Islamophobia quite rarely. Many respondents (men in particular) think that the level of Islamophobia is gradually decreasing as more people get to know about Islam and as Islamic images and practices become more and more normal for city residents. Those practicing Muslims, who nonetheless face negative attitude, are more likely to experience it on the streets, in media and while discussing religious issues. They expe-

On a scale from 0 to 4, how often do you experience negative attitude because of your religion?



rience more Islamophobia from the representatives of older generation. The respondents consider low level of religious competency among both general population and practicing Muslims to be the main reasons of Islamophobia.

Women experience Islamophobia, humiliation on religious grounds and even physical violence more often than men, particularly in family settings (from less religious family members), on the streets and while applying for jobs. This is often related to wearing hijab.



Men are more likely to experience Islamophobia at work, school, in media, social media and from law enforcement agencies. Men in Muslim clothing and headdress often experience Islamophobia on the streets.

“There were days when I suffered and cried because of rude attitude of people towards me. Once I was on a bus on my way to the university when an elderly man scolded and insulted me all the way through the journey. There was not a single person who stopped him and said: ‘Do not say that, do not do it’. I said: ‘I am fasting, sir, please stop,’ but he continued to scold me. I wanted to get off the bus, but I stayed because I was getting late for my classes. Then I started crying. I remember that he was tall, wearing glasses, under 60 years old. Until now, this terrible picture is in front of my eyes.”

“I’m now in my second marriage. In the first marriage, my ex-husband reproached me all the time for wearing headscarf, saying that I was a terrorist. He himself was far from religion. All the time he mocked me: ‘Allahu Akbar! We need to be afraid of you, you are a real terrorist.’ Moreover, his parents told me: ‘What are you wrapped up in? Take all of this off.’ Now, thanks Allah, everything is fine with my second husband. I even attend courses and lectures on religion.”

Expert views

Experts consider the level of Islamophobia to be high in Kyrgyzstan, but lower than in other post-Soviet countries. They see many Islamophobic sentiments in the speeches of various state officials and public figures and on media and social networks. They believe Islamophobia can be used as a political instrument and lead to physical violence.

They see personal experience, education, lack of reliable information about Islam, low religious competency (both among secular and religious communities), large number of mosques and travel of Kyrgyzstani citizens to Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan to participate in military activities, as the main reasons of Islamophobia.

Sources of Islamophobia, according to experts, include representatives of older generation, social networks, ‘war on terror’ waged by the West in Afghanistan and Middle East, which is accompanied by the ‘war on Islam’ in the media.

Conclusions

The research report identified five main factors that reinforce Islamophobia.

1. Appearance - Islamophobia is formed on the basis of visual images associated with Islam. Hijab, Muslim clothing, beard for young men and other Islamic images stand out strongly against the background of secular population of the city and may cause hostility and irritation among people on the streets and in various institutions.
2. Demographic factors (age, ethnicity and gender): older generation (brought up in the context of Soviet anti-religious propaganda), representatives of European ethnic groups (most of whom are not Muslims) and women have more negative attitude to Islam and Muslims. Women also suffer from Islamophobia more often than men.
3. Place of residence: people who live in the city center are more Islamophobic than people who live in the outskirts. This may be due to the difference in age and ethnic composition of residents in these areas.
4. Ethnic identity - many residents believe that modern Islamic influences are foreign for Kyrgyzstan and contradict traditional Kyrgyz culture.
5. The boundary between private and public: many residents believe that religion should not go from personal private space into public domain. They have negative attitude to public Islamic preaching, especially on such sensitive private topics as family relations and polygamy.

Recommendations to reduce the level of Islamophobia

1. Raise awareness about religion as a whole and Islam in particular in educational institutions through TV public channels, radio and online media in cooperation with the Muslim clergy of the Kyrgyz Republic, scholars on religion, religious educational organizations, etc. Awareness-raising and religious education are important for both secular and religious communities.
2. Prevent and resolve conflicts on religious grounds; prevent violence, insults, and foster a constructive dialogue between secular and religious communities.
3. Muslim community representatives should work to improve their own image (both external and social) and broaden their worldviews. They should be more actively involved in public life and rely on the principles of tolerance, respect, humanness and politeness.
4. Religious leaders should work on promoting respect towards state policy, principle of secularism and representatives of secular communities. They should also promote integration into public life rather than separation from it.

This policy brief is based on the research results conducted within the framework of International Alert project "Constructive Dialogues on Religion and Democracy". Young researchers, trained by the project in 2017 and 2018, conducted the mentioned research work.

Editorial team: Shakirat Toktosunova, Project Director, Country Representative of International Alert in the Kyrgyz Republic and Rasul Momunaliev, Project Manager.

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Ethnic values as a factor of creating the civic identity in Kyrgyzstan

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Mentor: Zailabidin Ajumamatov

Introduction

Today, one can notice a significant increase in the role of ethnic factors in public life, particularly in the ideology of various movements aiming to uphold cultural, language, ethnic and religious identities. According to ethno-psychological dictionary, ethnic values are "a set of spiritual ideals of representatives of certain ethnic communities, which reflect their historical originality". The research aims to study what this set is formed of and considers how citizens of the republic treat such components of ethnic identity as values, customs, traditions, language, holidays and ethnic clothing.

Methodology

The research was conducted in two main cities of Kyrgyzstan: Bishkek and Osh. The research focused on these cities because this is where the most active changes take place in the understanding and practices of identity. It is important to bear in mind that urban population is more progressive and that were such research to include villages, the results could have differed significantly. It was also important to compare the cities from two historically and culturally different regions: the north and the south. 200 respondents participated in the survey (100 per each city) and 24 in-depth interviews were carried out. The discussion of research results is structured around five spheres related to ethnic values.

Resume

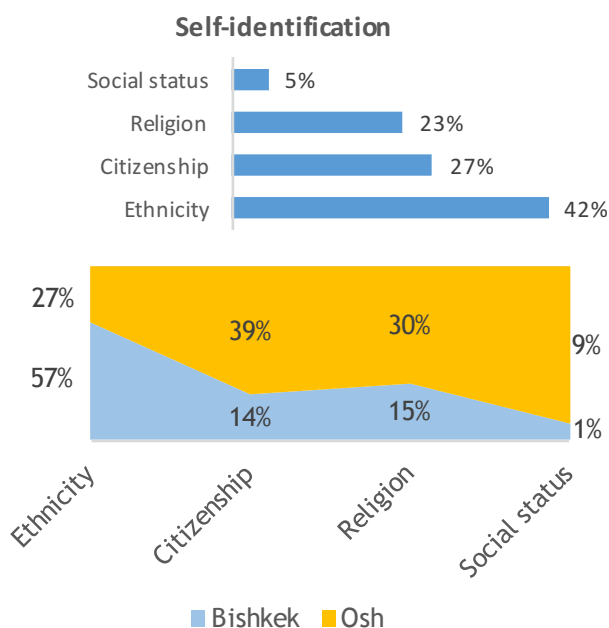
The study analyzed the formation of civic identity in two cities of Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek and Osh) through the prism of five spheres related to ethnic values in Kyrgyzstan: self-identification, language, traditions, holidays, and ethnic clothing. The results revealed that ethnic values are more important than other values in all five spheres: ethnicity is more important than citizenship and religion in self-identification; people speak Kyrgyz language better than Russian; ethnic traditions are important for 73% of respondents; and 90% observe (or partially observe) them; ethnic and religious holidays are more important than the state and secular ones; and 68% wear ethnic clothing (regularly or sometimes). The research also revealed significant differences between two cities - ethnic values are more important for the residents of Osh city than for Bishkek residents; the southern capital continues to be more traditional. The research concludes that the preservation of ethnic values and development of Kyrgyz language may serve as a uniting factor for the country's population. However, it is very important to ensure that it does not lead to the growth of conservatism and nationalism.



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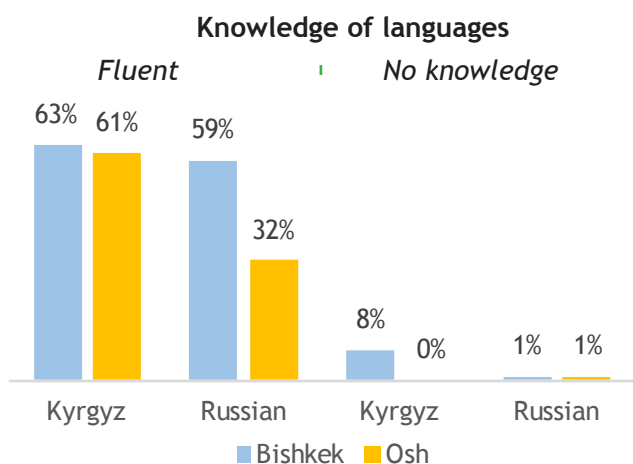
Self-Identification

The majority of respondents (42%) while answering the question “Who are you?” identified themselves first as Kyrgyz, Uzbek, etc. Citizenship (of the Kyrgyz Republic) was the second important marker of identity (27%) and religion was the third (23%). Interestingly, more people in Bishkek identified themselves by ethnicity than in Osh. This might be because of the tragedy of 2010 ethnic conflict and sensitivity of the question in Osh. Citizenship, religion and social status were more important factors of identity in Osh.



Language

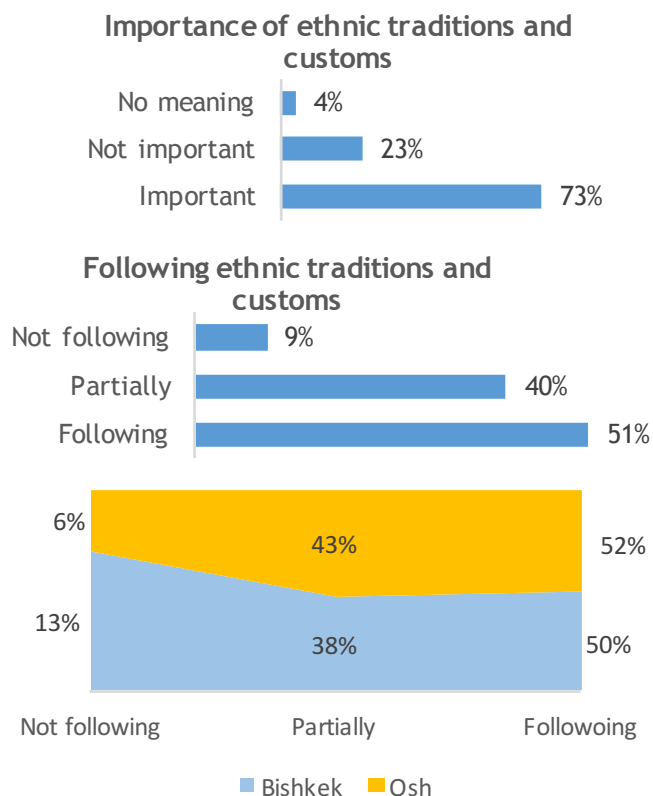
In the past, the majority of residents in both cities were Russian-speaking. Today the situation has changed completely. 62% of respondents speak Kyrgyz fluently and only 46% are fluent in Russian. Moreover, there is a big difference between Bishkek and Osh: Russian is spoken better in Bishkek while Kyrgyz is spoken better in Osh.



«Perhaps, that is the feeling of patriotism, or I do not know, I think if I do not know the Kyrgyz language, then I do not know myself” (Aigerim, 24, Bishkek).

Ethnic traditions and customs

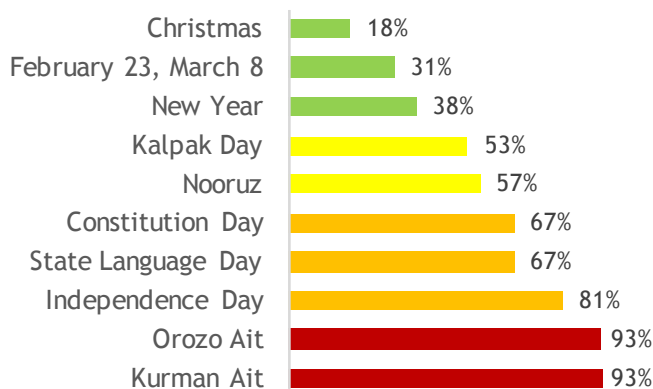
Nearly three quarters of respondents consider ethnic traditions and customs important, and 9 out of 10 respondents observe them fully or partially. People in Osh are stronger observers of traditions and customs, while residents of Bishkek are somewhat more “modern”.



Holidays

According to findings, Kurban Ait and Orozo Ait are the most important holidays. These are traditional Islamic holidays and many celebrate them as such. At the same time, they can also be considered ethnic holidays, because they are celebrated by non-religious families too. Other public holidays, associated with civic identity include the Independence Day, the State Language Day and the Day of Constitution. These are followed by less formal ethnic holidays of Nooruz and Kalpak (Kyrgyz ethnic hat) Day. Soviet holidays such as the Day of Fatherland Defenders and the International Women’s Day gradually lose their significance. According to our findings, ethnic and religious holidays are more popular in Osh, while all other holidays are more popular in Bishkek. More respondents from Osh had positive answers to the question “Do you celebrate ethnic holidays?”, which supports our argument that Kurban Ait and Orozo Ait are seen as ethnic holidays.

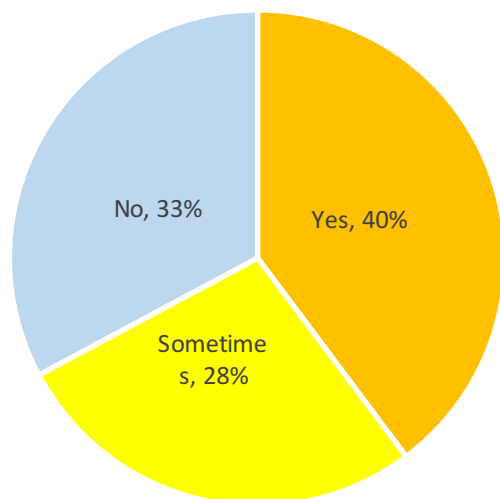
Importance of holidays



Ethnic clothing

If wearing ethnic clothes in the past was viewed as a sign of backwardness, today trends are very different. There are many new popular brands, which produce ethnic clothing and more and more often we can see people wearing kalpaks, chapans (ethnic coats) or tubeteikas (traditional hats): 40% of respondents wear ethnic clothes regularly and 28% wear them occasionally. Again, findings indicate that ethnic clothing is more popular in the south than in the north.

Wearing ethnic clothing



Conclusions

This research shows that ethnic values are becoming more and more important components of contemporary civic identity of urban citizens of the country. The analysis in all five spheres shows that ethnic values, which often overlap with religious ones, play a more important role than civic and secular ones. This is particularly noticeable in the southern city of Osh. This suggests that globalization processes do not necessarily erase the uniqueness of local culture in Kyrgyzstan, but on the contrary, highlight and strengthen it. We see this as a positive development.

Recommendations

We believe that the state should work towards strengthening and reinforcing positive trends in the popularity of ethnic values. In the era of globalization, these values become the warrants of preserving the uniqueness of ethnic culture, traditions, customs and language. The state should encourage youth's interest in ethnic languages, holidays, clothing, etc. However, it is very important to ensure that such a tendency would not lead to the growth of conservatism and nationalism. Much effort must be made on positioning ethnic values in the context of global cultural diversity and changes related to new developments in science, modern technologies and innovations. It is important that ethnic values become the basis for positive and progressive growth of society, not a backward force that pulls it to the past.

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The media's role in covering religious topics and building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan

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Aiperi Abdyvaeva

Mentor: Mametbek Myrzabaev



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Resume

This research is the first attempt to examine the contemporary role of mass media in covering religious topics and building constructive dialogues on religion and democracy in the Kyrgyz Republic. In order to investigate this subject, a comprehensive analysis was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. These included content analysis of publications of three domestic on-line media agencies, interviews with experts and in-depth interviews/mass questionnaire survey of population in Bishkek and Osh cities. Research portrayed main characteristics of published materials and analyzed the role of media in covering religious themes in the country. We concluded that building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy is possible with government's and civil society's active support of media activities, and with the use of modern journalistic models that take into consideration local historic journalistic traditions and national and traditional values of the Kyrgyz people.

Introduction

Since Kyrgyzstan gained independence, one can observe a significant

growth in public
interest in religion.

The strong indicator of this interest is a dramatic increase in the number of religious organizations. Liberal state policy on religion and active work of foreign missionaries combined with the financial support of foreign religious organizations were among the reasons for the growing popularity of religion and increase in the number of religious entities. Accordingly, the role of media in affecting public opinion on religious topics became particularly important. Media can serve as a factor of public stability but it can also play a potentially negative role.

The goal of the research was to explore the role of media in covering religious topics and in building constructive dialogues on religion and democracy.

Methodology

This research included was based on desk review and field research. Desk review included content analysis of three online media sources: TV-Radio Company (KTRC, government); Azattyk (Liberty, international non-commercial); 24.kg (local). Field research included interviews with experts and mass survey of 400 respondents (200 in Bishkek and 200 in Osh). This survey involved active users of Internet resources, mainly students and the representatives of academia.

Azattyk



Azattyk has a special news section titled “religion”, which publishes materials up to three times a week. The agency fully supports the principles of secularism and democracy. Most of examined publications (77.5%) are analytical, which points to competency and professionalism. Azattyk involves more experts on religion than other news agencies. While preparing materials for publication, Azattyk journalists follow all principles of the Code of Ethics of Journalists of the Kyrgyz Republic. Azattyk does not only inform its readers about religious issues, but contributes to their detailed examination. The shortcomings mainly relate to non-compliance with the articles 10 and 17 of the Code of Ethics. There are more readers of this website in Osh (19.5%) compared to Bishkek (3%).

KTRC



KTRC publications are dominated by news (65.5%). Analytical materials make only 29.7%, which points to the low level of competency on religious topics among KTRC journalists. The research findings confirmed the presence of significant violations of the main principles of journalism code, including: (1) lack of balance in some publications; (2) not incorporating opinions from all sides; (3) lack of competency and professionalism of journalists covering religious issues; (4) lack of holistic (multi-angle) approach and (5) non-justified comparative analysis. Because of its official state media status, KTRC’s largest share of analyzed publications (26.2%) are about the state policy on religion.

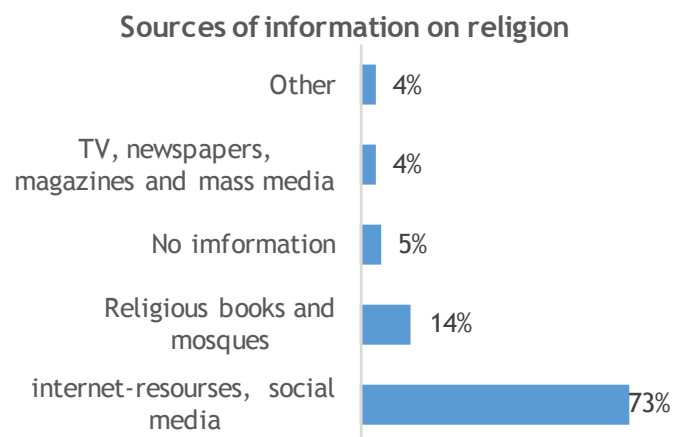
24.kg



24.kg does not have a separate section on religion. Religion is covered in analytical articles in other sections, in the News Brief publications and in research-based materials. The majority of publications are neutral and journalists follow the principles of balanced opinions. The main bulk of publications is news, but there are some analytical articles too. Analytical pieces do consider the opinion of experts. Weak points of journalist work are linked to the ethics of referencing/quoting the original documents and researchers. Four per cent of survey respondents receive information on religion at the 24.kg web site.

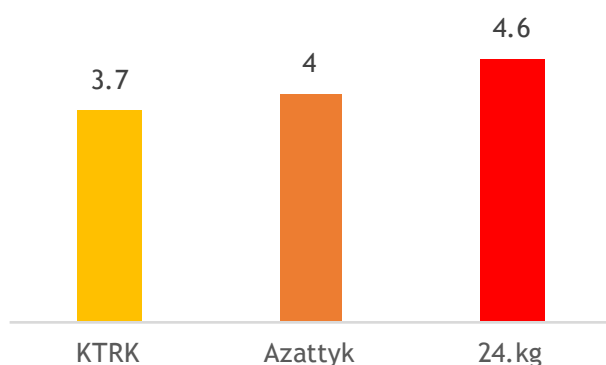
Questionnaire results

The majority of respondents (63%) receive information on religion from Internet sources.

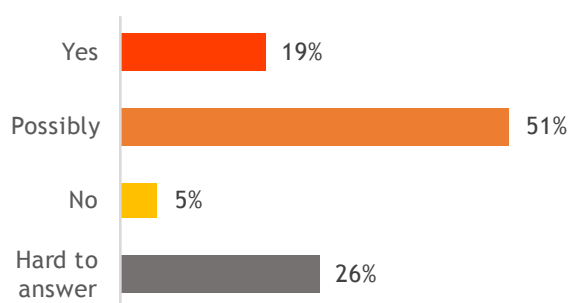


Survey respondents were requested to provide ratings (on a 0-5 scale) of openness, neutrality, competency and constructivism for these three media sources. 24.kg received the highest evaluation (4.6 points), followed by Azattyk (4 points); KTRC (3.7 points) received the lowest evaluation. Only 4% of respondents do not consider media to be the reason of conflicts between secular and religious communities; the majority sees its direct (24.7%) or possible (48.5%) contribution.

Evaluation of three news-sources



Do you consider mass media to be the reason of conflict between secular and religious communities



In-depth interviews with journalists

Media representatives noted that the procedures of preparing materials are based on general standards and principles of journalism. However, the agencies differ from each other by how seriously they approach their publications. For example, Azattyk has a theology expert in its editorial team and preparation of materials for one publication takes on average one month. At the same time, there are journalists in other agencies who write articles based simply on the press releases of different institutions, such as the State Committee on National Security (SCNS). Others chase quick and sensational cases aiming to make profits and increase ratings of their agencies by using photos, statements, specific themes and such terms as 'extremism', 'fanaticism', 'terrorism', which agitate society, without any empirical basis.

There are very few journalists (4-5% of the total number) who cover the issues of religion and who are specialists in this field. Some media companies organize trainings and seminars for their journalists to resolve this issue. Each media has its own position, for example,

Azattyk stresses preserving secularism, while the KTRC focuses on the state policy on religion. Journalists highlight the importance of preserving neutrality and not imposing their opinion on readers. As for dependency of media on state institutions, opinions differ. Some journalists think that journalism should be shaped by the state policy and influence of important political figures. Others think that media is already influenced the state policy today (especially those, which use press releases of government bodies), and that it should be independent.

Writing on religion is not easy. Journalists should be careful and concerned about publishing non-reliable information and about potential negative reaction (including physical violence) against them from religious communities in response to their criticism.

Conclusions

As the survey results revealed, internet is the main source of information about religion. That is why media coverage of religious topics plays a key role. Journalists understand it; however, there is a difference between the ways they see how religious themes must be covered and how they do it in reality. Majority of journalists understand the importance of general standards and principles of journalism, objectivity, sensitivity of approaches and reliability of information. However, not all journalists follow these principles fully. Azattyk is one of the examples of best practices in taking these approaches seriously. At the same time, many agencies chase sensational cases and approach the theme of religion without required attention to details. One of the main reasons of this is shortage of qualified journalists who are well informed about religion. In addition, not all media can present their views on religion independently from the state. It is not surprising that the majority of survey participants among the population view media publications as a possible reason of tension between secular and religious communities. Accordingly, the research concluded that media has a potential to have positive influence in building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy. However, lots of efforts are needed to realize this potential.

Recommendations

State authorities, international and religious organizations, civil and academic representatives:

- Actively support media in building constructive dialogues on religion and democracy, be accessible and open in the process of preparing and publishing materials on religious topics.
- Support media in the process of implementation of the Concept of State Policy on Religion.
- Ensure compliance with the Code of Ethics of Journalists of the Kyrgyz Republic. Organize trainings on the journalism of religion and support those journalists who already write on religious issues.
- Introduce courses on journalism of religion within the faculties of journalism and strengthen the preparation of journalism students to address religious themes.
- Establish the state weekly periodicals, which would cover religious themes in full depth.
- Amend the legislation to require the mass media agencies that publish on religion to have a special unit that covers religious issues (with theology expert/s on board) in the editorial teams.
- Introduce courses of public speaking and public relations in religious educational institutions to train future religious workers to communicate with the audience and mass media.

Mass media:

- Domestic media should adopt modern journalistic models that take into consideration local historic journalistic traditions and national and traditional values of the Kyrgyz people.
- While covering religious issues, domestic media should take into account main principles established in the Concept of State Policy on Religion.
- It is necessary to involve experts and state bodies and conduct full-scale objective analysis in preparing and publishing materials on religion.
- Media should cover religious aspects without bias, honestly and very delicately, especially in regards to conflict situations. Journalists should pay attention to the reliability of information; they should study and use international practices in covering religious topics.
- Media should cooperate not only with the state and civil society, but also with religious organizations

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Interrelations between religious organizations and local self-government: A study based on practices in Chui and Talas oblasts of the Kyrgyz Republic

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A. Tumyr kyzy;
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Resume

The following research explores how local self-government (LSG) bodies interact with religious organizations and how they influence each other. The research was conducted using desk review and field research methods. The results have revealed that interactions occur in the context of relative freedom of religion and various kinds of mutual partnership. LSGs that participated in our surveys stated that they interact with religious organizations under their jurisdictions. There are public committees (platforms) on religious affairs in a number of communities, led by the heads of LSGs with the participation of representatives of local authorities, local communities and religious leaders. These platforms are established for discussing and developing mechanisms of countering radicalization and extremism, preventing interfaith conflicts and organizing activities to promote tolerance. The research also found that budget distribution and land allocation are the most problematic issues when it comes to interactions between LSGs and religious organizations. The results of this study indicate that one of the key factors influencing the LSGs decision-making process is the professional qualities of the decision-makers. However, there

are significant differences if we compare findings in Chui and Talas oblasts: religious organizations play more important role and population expresses more religious views in the latter.

Introduction

Religious organizations have a significant influence on society in many contemporary societies. This is particularly important in Kyrgyzstan, where religion is likely to be mixed with politics. This research analyzes the decision-making processes at the local level and the role of religious organizations in these processes. Considering that Muslims make the majority population in Kyrgyzstan, understanding the interactions of state agencies with Islamic organizations and communities is particularly important. LSGs decision-makers should be competent in a wide range of issues, because in most cases, the first place where people often seek advice is LSGs. Today, the issue of developing a specific national model that will enable interaction between religious organisations and the state in such a way as to allow for cooperation, pluralism of opinions and freedom of religion, is very important. By building relationships with religious organisations properly, heads of local administrations can play an important role when it comes to dealing with issues that affect the society. The

aim of the research is to answer the following question: What is the potential influence of religious organisations on decision making at the local level?

Research methodology

Research was conducted in 29 communities of Chui and Talas oblasts in the Kyrgyz Republic. It involved both desk review and field research. Desk review analyses the legal normative acts regulating LSG's activities, reports of state agencies, research and media publications describing incidents of religious organisations or leaders influencing the decision-making process. The field research included interviews with 11 religious experts in the area of religion, 20 religious workers (imams) and 234 ordinary people. In addition, 145 people participated in the survey.

Religion and the state

The Kyrgyz Republic is a secular and democratic state that offers freedom of religion and equal rights to representatives of various faiths. Analysis of the regulatory documents shows that religious issues receive considerable attention from state institutions and that the law guarantees freedom of conscience. This is further supported by survey results: only 3% of respondents think that they cannot fulfil their right to freedom of religion, the majority (68%) can fulfil their rights fully and (30%) partially.

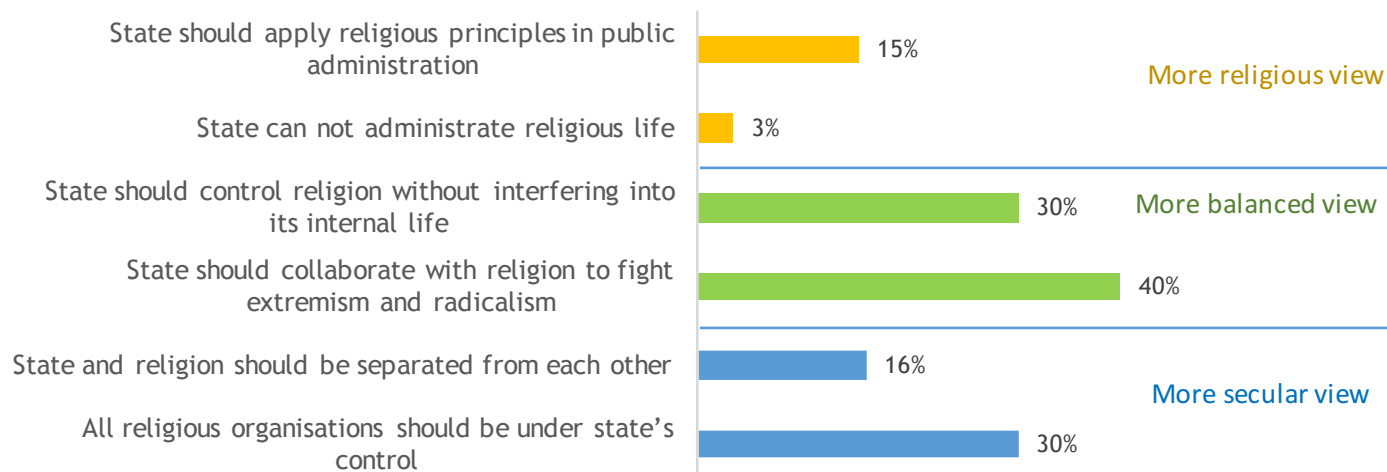
LSGs play a significant role when it comes to interaction between the state and religious organizations. The interaction covers various

spheres, including culture, education and social affairs. The state views religious organizations as partners who can help in the issues of morality, religious literacy and social justice. Religious workers are also involved in school activities that are intended to educate them on moral questions. At the same time, the state carries out preventive measures to counter radicalism and extremism.

The research found that religious organizations and individuals influence the activities of LSGs. For example, on the questions of land allocation for building mosques, banning sale of alcoholic drinks, burying proselytes, and even having celebrations, etc. At the same time, there is a clear understanding, that religious figures do not have the right to interfere with political affairs. LSGs don't seem to possess the required legal knowledge, which is the main factor increasing the risk of influence from religious individuals.

According to the research results, interaction seems to be greater in Talas oblast, while in Chui oblast interaction is limited to control of religious organizations by LSGs and requests for imams to distribute information. There is more interaction with Muslim organisations than with Protestant groups because the latter are less open to public. The survey results indicate that more people have a balanced view towards state-religion interaction; it is followed by secular views and by religious views at last. Also, secular views are more dominant in Chui oblast than in Talas oblast.

Views on the state-religion interaction



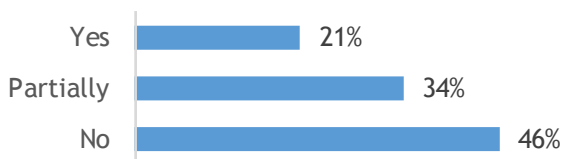
Religion and society

The majority of respondents (half in Chui and three quarters in Talas oblast) view religious organisations positively. There is a negative attitude mainly towards non-traditional religious movements/coalitions such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir or Jehovah witnesses. Many respondents perceive Baptist churches as sects.

Many respondents believe that religious organizations should be engaged in solving social issues in the society, particularly in the field of charity, in orphanages and homes of elderly, with socially vulnerable groups, in the popularization of secular education, in the use of mosques for social projects, working with schoolchildren to prevent racketeering and violence in schools, preventing early marriages, promoting tolerance and building houses for low-income families. In many communities, such work is already taking place.

Even more respondents think that religious organizations should be involved in addressing questions morality, such as drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution, and promoting family values, instilling moral qualities in children and youth, etc.

Should religious organization engage in solving social issues in the society?



Religion and personal identity

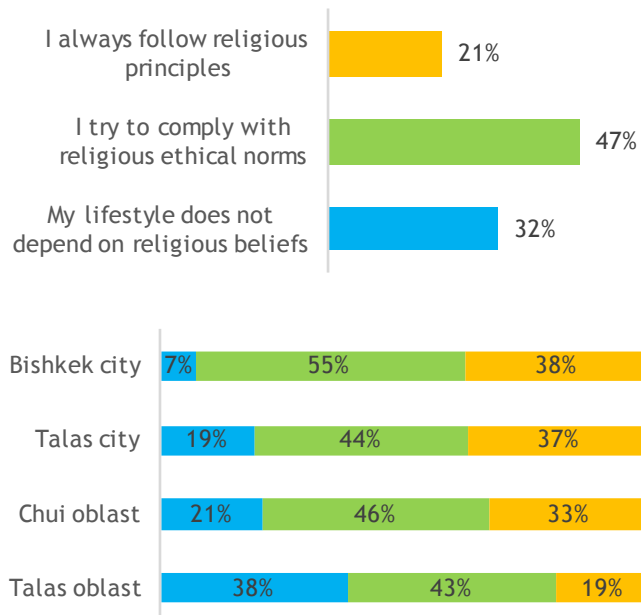
The research found that there is a significant difference in personal religious views: people in Talas oblast are more religious than people in Chui oblast and people living in rural areas are more religious than people living in urban areas. However, the majority of respondents

Should religious organizations engage in solving moral issues in the society?



in all communities try to stick to the 'golden middle' position and try to be in line with religious ethical norms. Chui oblast differs with its more tolerant attitude to representatives of different confessions.

Religion and self-identification



Conclusion

The degree of interaction between local self-government and religious organisations in targeted rayons and villages is not the same: it depends both on the external decision-making environment (e.g. the population living in the village territory) and internal factors, such as the level of qualification of decision-makers. Professional qualities (level of education, professional qualifications, work experience) are very important among the latter. Considering the difficulty of influencing the external environment, concentrating on internal factors, particularly on professional qualities of decision-makers seems rather more effective.

LSGs are not informed sufficiently enough about the mechanisms of interaction with religious organisations. In this regard, interaction between LSG and religious organisations in decision-making process may be regulated by subjective factors such as personal characteristics of decision-makers.

The issues of budget distribution and land

allocation are the most contentious in interaction between LSGs and religious organizations. Poor knowledge of laws by the representatives of LSGs is one of the main factors affecting that interaction.

Some communities have public committees (platforms) on religious affairs led by LSGs' representatives with the participation of representatives of local authorities, local communities and religious leaders. These platforms are established for discussing and developing mechanisms of countering radicalization and extremism, preventing interfaith conflicts and organizing activities to promote tolerance.

In Talas oblast, interethnic conflicts are common between the representatives of Kurdish and Kyrgyz ethnic groups (Kyzyl-Adyr village) in Talas oblast. The representatives of local self-government bodies in Chui oblast are not sufficiently aware of the activities of religious organisations of Protestant movements and interaction with these organisations is limited.

Large portion of respondents share the perception that the terms 'religious organisation', 'sect' and 'terrorist organisation' are synonymous.

The level of control over religious organizations is different. For instance, regular check-ups (monthly, quarterly) take place in some villages and LSGs, while in other villages control means annual monitoring of documents only.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended to strengthen the LSG capacity on interaction with religious organizations. The findings include the following recommendations to the State Agency on Local Self-Governance and inter-ethnic relations (SALSGIER) under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic:

- If possible, appraise the professional qualifications of key employees in local self-government bodies, focusing on the following issues: interaction with religious organisations and other civil society associations, formation and distribution of local budgets, and the allocation of land.
- Organize training for key employees of local self-government and local kenesh representatives on the formation and distribution of budgets.
- Increase awareness of local self-government bodies on interaction with religious organisations in partnership with the SALSGIER (through training seminars or information leaflets and booklets).
- Assist in solving problems of interethnic conflicts between representatives of Kurdish and Kyrgyz nationalities in the Talas oblast (Ministry of Internal Affairs, LSGs).

This policy brief is based on the research results conducted within the framework of International Alert project "Constructive Dialogues on Religion and Democracy". Young researchers, trained by the project in 2017 and 2018, conducted the mentioned research work.

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