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International Alert
**«Constructive Dialogues on Religion
and Democracy» project**
First Compilation of Researches



Bishkek – 2019

International Alert
«Constructive Dialogues on Religion
and Democracy» project
First Compilation of Researches

This compilation contains reports of four researches conducted as part of the "Constructive dialogues on religion and democracy" project funded by European Union and implemented by International Alert in the Kyrgyz Republic. The researches were conducted by young researchers went through a series of trainings in 2017 and 2018.

Edited by Rasul Momunaliev – Project Manager International Alert.

Editorial team:

Shakirat Toktosunova – International Alert representative in the Kyrgyz Republic/Project Director

Rasul Momunaliev – Project manager

Susan Calnan, Viktoria Khroundina (UK, English version),
Maxim Bloom (Kyrgyzstan, Russian version)

Translators:

Gulnara Abdykalykova (Russian – English)

Mirgul Ismailova (Russian – Kyrgyz)



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Introduction

Dear reader,

This is the first collection of reports prepared by teams of junior researchers from November 2017 to June 2018 for International Alert's "Constructive dialogues on religion and democracy" project. The aim of the project is to support open public dialogue and discussions on freedom of religion and belief, the role of religion in people's lives, the relationship between the state and religious institutions, and state policy on religion in a democratic and secular state. The project is being implemented with the European Union's financial support and local partner "Iyman", a foundation for the development of spiritual culture under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic.

The project's main objective is to examine religion and democracy from various perspectives and to stimulate broader discussion among state, religious and secular experts, civil society and youth in the Kyrgyz Republic. One aspect is support for research to better inform state structures, the expert community, and civil society, including young people, through strategic recommendations and thereby prevent the development of ideas that negatively influence society, those that promote distrust and conflict. Thus, we hope that the conclusions and recommendations from these studies will contribute to greater tolerance and understanding.

To enhance the capacity of junior researchers in the Kyrgyz Republic and support independent research that will enable them to obtain necessary data on conflict-sensitive topics, 29 young researchers from across the Kyrgyz Republic were selected to participate. This included training in applied research skills and conflict sensitivity topics under the guidance of mentors (research expert), and coaching on research methodology. Therefore, the junior researchers attended two training courses, received information and advice, consultation, and mentorship from experienced researchers, and learned from their peers in multi-disciplinary research groups.

The first training session consisted of 6 days (42 hours of training) (25-30 September 2017), aimed at strengthening the quantitative and qualitative research capacity of the junior researchers. 29 young researchers (Master's students, PhD candidates, and final-year undergraduates from higher education institutions in the Kyrgyz Republic) were trained in the relevant scientific disciplines. The second training course was 3 days in length (24 hours of training) (9-11 March 2018), aimed at developing the junior researchers' analytical and report-writing skills based on the data collected and analysed.

Four reports from the studies conducted are outlined below:

Real and imaginary Islamophobia in Bishkek. This study examines the phenomenon of Islamophobia – negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims – in Bishkek from two sides: the general population and practising Muslims. According to the study, the main reason behind Islamophobia is visual images or attributes associated with religion, such as the hijab, beards, and Sunnat (Muslim clothing), among others. Islamophobia in Bishkek is also seen as a factor in the formation of identity and how that is understood. Many residents of the city oppose this new religious identity and lean towards the 'traditional' national identity. This concerns appearance, clothing, and national traditions and rituals.

Kyrgyz national values and the creation of a civic identity. The study was conducted in two major cities – Bishkek and Osh. The preservation of Kyrgyz national values is a hot topic as a result of different global processes that can influence culture, i.e. the supplanting or even displacement of (traditional) values. From this 'values' point of view, modern Kyrgyz society is diverse. The formation of a common civic identity based on self-identification, belonging to a single society and the state, is of particular interest to the government. Preservation of the identity, cultural diversity, and languages of ethnic groups living in the Republic, as well as the creation of space for further development in the digital world, is necessary for the harmonious development of society.

The media's role in covering religious issues and building constructive dialogue on religion and democracy. This study was conducted in Bishkek and Osh and represents the first attempt to study the media's role in covering religious issues and building constructive dialogue on religion and democracy in the Kyrgyz Republic. The study revealed that the establishment of constructive dialogue on religion and democracy is possible, if it involves the active assistance of the state, civil society, and the media. It also requires the adaptation of modern journalistic models that take the historical development of domestic journalism and the national and traditional values of the peoples of the Kyrgyz Republic into account.

Interaction between religious organisations and local government bodies: reasons behind and content of the potential influence of religious organisations on decision-making processes at the local level in Chui and Talas oblasts of the Kyrgyz Republic. All respondents from government bodies stated that they interacted with religious organisations. In a number of villages, there are public committees (platforms) on religious affairs under the leadership of local government, which involves the participation of representatives of local authorities, local communities, and religious leaders. These platforms are used to discuss and develop mechanisms to counter radicalism and extremism, prevent interfaith conflicts, and organise events to promote tolerance. However, there was vulnerability to religious influence for budgeting land allocation. The results of the study revealed that a key factor influencing decision-making processes on these issues is the professional capacity of decision makers themselves.

On behalf of international Alert, I express my gratitude to the junior researchers and all those who provided direct or indirect support to their training and capacity building. Special thanks go to coaches Zharkyn Shadymanova, Aida Alymbaeva and Rita Ismailova; expert mentors Emil Nasretdinov (Associate Professor of Anthropology Department AUCA), Zailabidin Azhimamatov (Associate Professor of Osh State University), Mametbek Myrzabaev (Associate Professor, Kyrgyz State Pedagogical University named after Ishenaaly Arabaev), Indira Aslanova (UNESCO chair of Kyrgyz-Russian Slavonic University), Ikbalzhhan Mirsaitov (expert on security issues Internews, Ph. D.), and Sheradil Baktygulov (expert on public administration); to editors Susan Calnan, Viktoria Khroundina (UK) and Maxim Bloom (Kyrgyzstan), translators Gulnara Abdykalykova and Mirgul Ismailova, to members of the project's Expert Advisory Working Group on Religion and Democracy, who came up with the research topics and subsequently discussed the reports' findings.

Finally, this would not have been possible without the efforts of colleagues from International Alert. Heartfelt thanks go to London based colleagues Stuart Moir and David Ackers, and Bishkek based colleagues Rasul Momunaliev, Meder Musakozhoev, Zhazgul Zhanybekova, Elza Nasirova, Muslim Buriev, Iskender Usupbaev, Aichurok Kalieva, and Aziz Emilbek uulu.

Yours faithfully,

Shakirat Toktosunova

Representative of International Alert
in the Kyrgyz Republic



Real and perceived Islamophobia in Bishkek:
A quantitative and qualitative study

Research team: Urmat Kaleev, Izaura Maseitova

Mentor: Dr. Emil Nasritdinov, PhD, Associate Professor of Anthropology
Department of the American University in Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Summary

This report summarises the findings of research conducted to examine the phenomenon of Islamophobia – a negative attitude towards Islam and Muslims – in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Perceptions of Islamophobia were explored from two sides: 1) among the population as a whole; and 2) among those who actually practise Islam.

The research found that Islamophobia is strongly influenced by **visual images** associated with the Muslim religion, such as the hijab, beard, topu (men's headdress) and sunnot (men's clothing). The **older generation**, which grew up being subjected to Soviet anti-religious propaganda, was found to have a more negative attitude to Islam and Muslims. Islamophobia does exist among young people, however, it is not as prevalent. Islamophobia in Bishkek was also found to have a strong relationship with **gender**. The research shows that women tend to be more Islamophobic than men and at the same time experience more Islamophobia than men. **Atheists** were also found to have strong Islamophobic sentiments. It was also found that Islamophobia is related to **identity**, in that many residents oppose the new religious identity in preference of the traditional national identity. This is again related to appearance and clothing, as well as national traditions and rituals: national Kyrgyz clothing and traditions are favoured above Islamic clothing and traditions, which are viewed as foreign and contrast with accepted images of social life. The results also show that there is a link between **place of residence** and Islamophobia: residents of the city centre were found to be less religious and more Islamophobic than those living on the periphery. The more secular nature of the centre's inhabitants is possibly related to their age, nationality and other factors.

This report concludes with recommendations, based on the findings of the research, for state bodies, the religious community, the media and representatives of civil society.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In recent years, there has been an increase in religiosity and Islamic religious practices among the population in Kyrgyzstan. This has resulted in a mixed reaction from the secular part of the population, with some responding positively or neutrally, and some condemning, criticising or expressing discontent towards this. The below quote from former president Askar Akayev illustrates this:

*"I am very concerned about the fact that total Islamisation of all spheres of life is underway in the republic. It will not bring good outcomes. We see what is happening in Syria, where, by the way, about a thousand Kyrgyz people are fighting on the side of the 'Islamic state', which is simply a tremendous destructive force for the region. These people can return to their homeland and arrange terror."*¹

A study conducted in the framework of the School of Peacemaking and Media Technology in Central Asia in 2016 found that almost a third of socially aggressive acts in the country are related to Islamophobia:

*"This trend of negative attitudes towards Muslims gives rise to the process of alienation and condemnation of their actions, further leading to a general negative reaction towards Islam as a religion."*²

The same study indicates an increase in the number of rights violations committed due to Islamophobia. The women's organisation Mutakalim receives hundreds of applications each year from girls and their parents from all over Kyrgyzstan with complaints relating to violations of their constitutional rights and discrimination based on religious affiliation. Examples include girls not being allowed to cover their heads at educational institutions and, if they do, they are openly humiliated and their grades are deliberately lowered. There have even been cases of girls having their headscarves forcibly pulled from their heads, resulting in hair being pulled out. Women also complain of not being able to find jobs because they wear headscarves.

In 2009, Mutakalim and the Ministry of Education and Science were successful in abolishing the order banning headscarves at educational institutions. This has resulted in fewer complaints, however, they have not completely stopped. There are still instances of discrimination as some school principals are not accepting the abolishment order or simply ignoring it. This has led to many girls stopping to attend schools and universities, with this problem continuing to gain momentum.

The division of society due to practising Islam starts from the family level – between parents and children, and between spouses – and extends to the religious part of the population and the state as a whole. This can lead to disastrous consequences: loss of family values, disintegration of families, political instability, civil conflicts, feuds around religion and human suffering due to experiences of Islamophobia, which can result in people's personalities becoming radical. Those practising Islam may feel vulnerable, unfairly marginalised and isolated from the rest of the population.

This research focuses on a phenomenon that is new to Kyrgyzstan and that, accordingly, has not received much attention. Theology expert Kanatbek Murzakhaliyev notes that, "currently, there are no comprehensive system studies on this issue, there are no scientific approaches to address the issue of Islamophobia".³ As Islamophobia has been examined only in the media until now, this

1 Akayev: Total Islamisation of Kyrgyzstan will not lead to good, Sputnik Kyrgyzstan, 19 September 2017, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/Radio/20170919/1035291686/akaev-totalnaya-islamizaciya-kyrgyzstana-k-dobru-ne-privedet.html> (in Russian)

2 A. Ismanov, What causes Islamophobia in Kyrgyzstan?, New Faces, 20 April 2016, <http://nlkg.kg/ru/society/religion/v-chem-prichina-islamofobii-v-kyrgyzstane> (in Russian)

3 K. Murzakhaliyev, Main causes, characteristics and forms of Islamophobia in Kyrgyzstan, Akipress, 6 September 2017, http://mnenie.akipress.org/unews/un_post:9130 (in Russian)

research endeavours to assess the scope and nature of this phenomenon among the Kyrgyzstan population.

Bishkek was focused on as it is the capital and has the most diverse population in terms of ethnicity and religious affiliation. The research aimed to look at the differences in the level of Islamophobia in the city centre and micro-districts compared to the new outskirts settlements where many internal migrants live. How factors such as age, gender, ethnicity and religious affiliation influence levels of Islamophobia was also explored.

The research is unique in that various perspectives on Islamophobia were examined: 1) among members of the general population, some of whom have a phobia towards Islam and Muslims; and 2) among practising Muslims who have experienced Islamophobia.

1.2 Research goal and objectives

The main goal of the research was to examine Islamophobia among the population of Bishkek, residing in various parts of the city, to identify factors affecting the level of negative perceptions towards Islam.

The research objectives were to:

- determine the degree of Islamophobia in Bishkek;
- identify the causes and forms of Islamophobia; and
- identify the main factors influencing Islamophobia.

1.3 Research questions

Based on the goals and objectives of the research, the below research questions were formulated:

1. How high is the level of Islamophobia in Bishkek?
2. What causes Islamophobia and what forms does it take?
3. Which categories of Bishkek residents are more likely to manifest Islamophobic attitudes?

1.4 Research hypothesis

Authors of this research hypothesise that:

1. A latent form of Islamophobia exists in Kyrgyzstan, as it is more prevalent in the media than in real life.
2. The level of Islamophobia is influenced by factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation and place of residence.

2. Research methodology and report structure

This research used a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach. For the former, a survey was conducted to identify the main trends in religious practices, experiences of Islamophobia and expressions of Islamophobic attitudes. For the latter focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIs) were conducted to help explain the identified trends, provide specific examples and draw out the existing discourses on Islamophobia in Kyrgyzstan.

2.1 Methodology and sampling

The following methods and sample sizes were used:

Face-to-face survey of Bishkek's general population: with a representative and random sample of 396⁴ people of different ages, genders and places of residence;

Face-to-face survey of practicing Muslims: convenient sampling of 102 people (43 men and 59 women);

Face-to-face KIs with secular members of the population and practicing Muslims: 20 people, 10 of each;

3 Face-to-face FGDs with 1) the general population, 2) female practicing Muslims and 3) male practicing Muslims, with 5-6 participants in each; and

Face-to-face KIs with experts in the field of religion, sociologists and historians: 8 people.

2.2 Report structure

The research methodology informed the structure of the report. The first section examines how Islam and Muslims are perceived by the general population of Bishkek, and the second examines the experiences of practicing Muslims in relation to Islamophobia. Both sections include analyses of the surveys and the KIs/FGDs. This is followed by an analysis of expert opinions, and the final section summarises the conclusions and recommendations.

⁴ For Bishkek's population of approximately 1,000,000 people with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, the representative sample size was determined to be 384. Thus, including 396 survey participants ensures the sample is representative.

3. Perceptions of Islam among the general population in Bishkek

This section explores how residents of Bishkek perceive Islam. It consists of two parts: 1) analysis of the questionnaire survey, in order to identify the main trends and factors affecting levels of Islamophobia; and 2) analysis of KII and FGD conducted with the secular members of the population in order to identify the main topics and discourses related to Islamophobia.

3.1 Survey of the general population

Demographic characteristics

Three hundred and ninety-six people participated in the survey: 51% women and 49% men. The main ethnic groups of the participants are Kyrgyz (89%) and Russians (5.8%), with ethnic Ukrainians, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tatars, Caucasian peoples, Turks, Koreans and Uyghurs comprising the remaining 5.2%. Adults comprised the largest age group (60%), followed by youth (30%) and the older generation (10%) (see Figure 1).

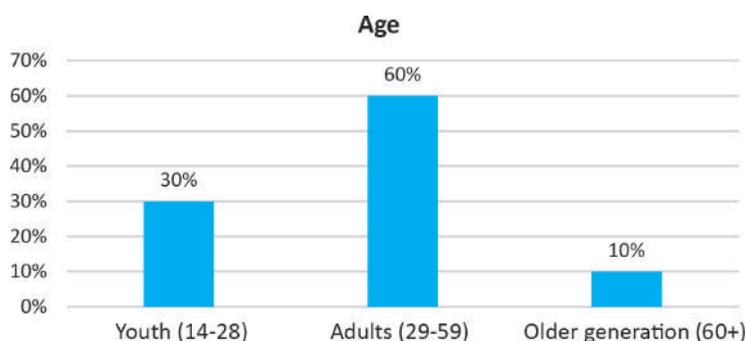


Figure 1: Age group of participants of the general population survey

Most of the survey participants are Muslims (87.3%), with 7.2% Christians, 3.4% atheists and 2.1% identifying with another religion.

The level of education among participants was found to be high: the majority of respondents (56%) have higher education, 26% have secondary education, 14% have secondary technical education and 4% have primary education.

An even sample was achieved, with around 50% of participants living in the centre and micro-districts, and around 50% in new settlements (see Figure 2). It was also important to determine the participants' place of origin (Figure 3), as religious, cultural and social practices of people living in these three distinct areas are different and thus have different effects on levels of Islamophobia.

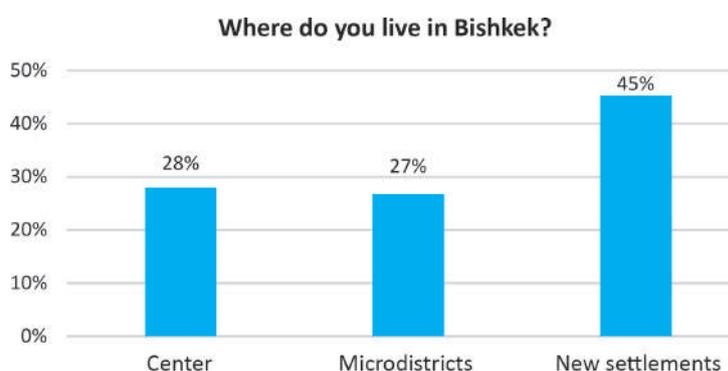


Figure 2: Place of residence of participants of the general population survey

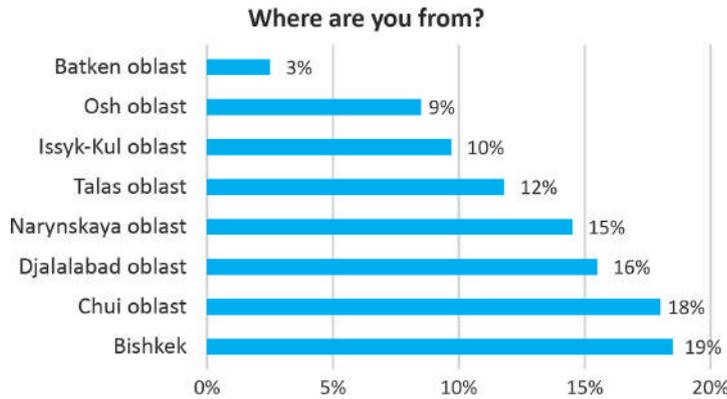


Figure 3: Place of origin of participants of the general population survey

Religious practices

Given that only 3.4% identified as atheists and everyone else identified with a particular religion, it was important to find out how strong the participants' religious practices are. The survey uncovered that only 28% pray and only 18% pray daily, while only 30% comply with fasting and 11% partially do.

No significant difference was observed between age and praying: 28% of youth were found to pray, 28% of adults and 30% of the older generation. A slight difference was observed between age and mosque/church attendance: slightly larger numbers of youth (39%) and the older generation (38%) attend the mosque/church compared to adults (31%), which could be explained by adults having less time due to work. A difference was also observed in terms of fasting: young people were found to be more active in this regard (see Figure 4).

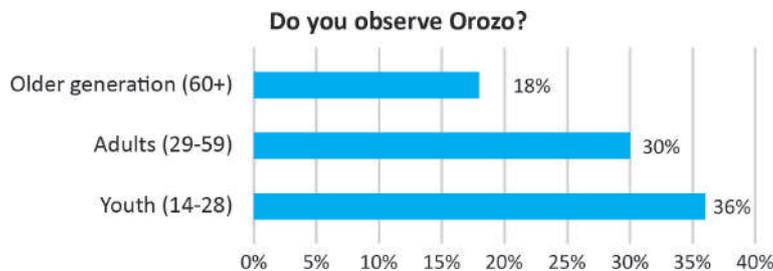


Figure 4: Participants of the general population survey who fast, by age group

Interestingly, Christians were found to be more active in terms of praying than Muslims (41% versus 28%). A larger percentage of Christians attend church (70%) than Muslims attend a mosque (33%). Differences were also observed between religious practices and place of residence. Larger numbers of residents of micro-districts and new settlements pray compared to those living in the centre (see Figure 5). In addition, a larger proportion of residents of new settlements fast (see Figure 6).

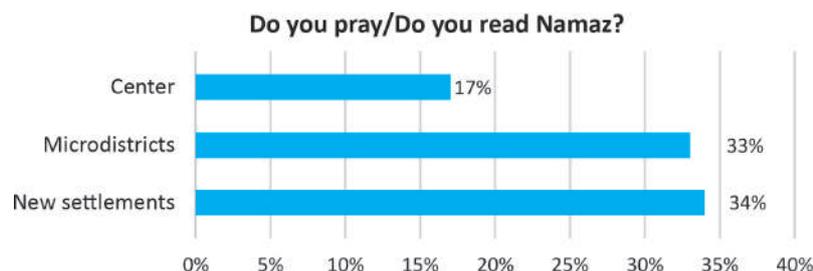


Figure 5: Participants of the general population survey who read namaz/pray, by place of residence

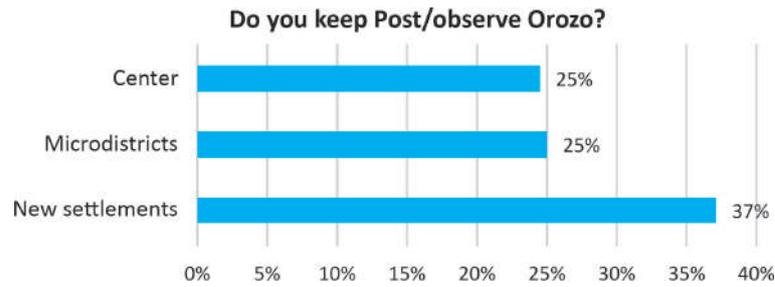


Figure 6: Participants of the general population survey who fast, by place of residence

Overall, the youth, residents of new settlements and Christians were found to be the most religiously active groups in Bishkek.

Attitudes towards Islam and levels of Islamophobia

To determine how people in Bishkek view Islam and Muslims, respondents were asked to what extent they have a negative or positive reaction to various aspects of Islam on a scale from -2: very negative to 2: very positive. A score of 0 denotes neutrality. The results are presented in Figure 7.

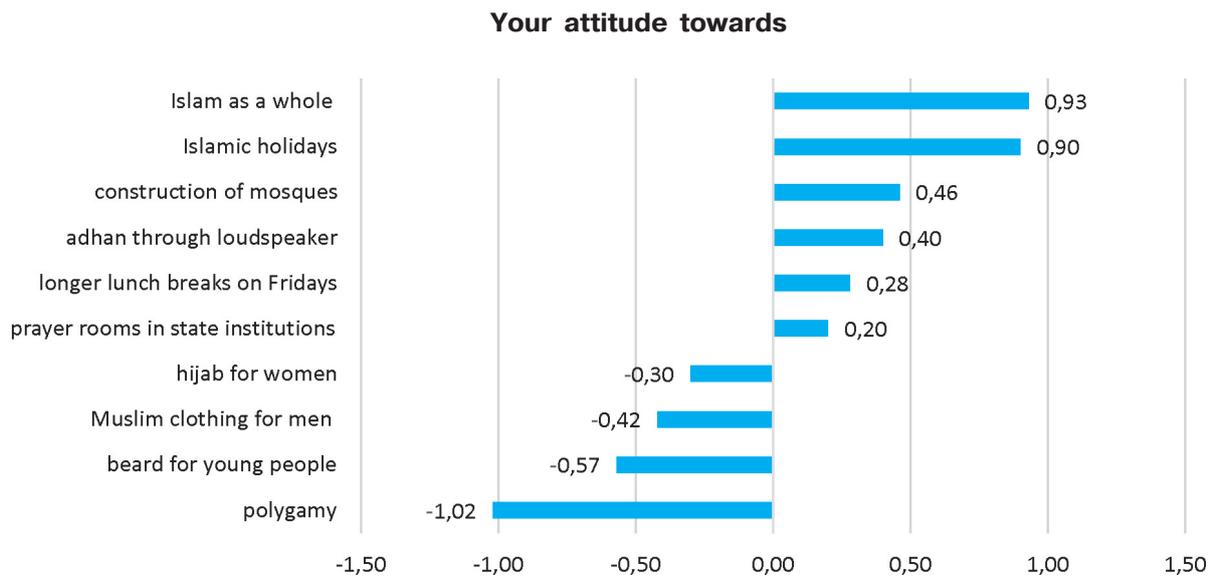


Figure 7: How participants of the general population survey perceive various aspects of Islam (on a scale from -2 to 2)

The most negative attitude was found to be towards polygamy, followed by visual images related to Islam: a beard for young people, Muslim clothing for men and a hijab for women. This reveals that Islamophobia in Bishkek is mostly formed on the basis of appearance – that which catches the eye and contrasts with the 'regular' more secular urban images.

The general population was found to have a positive attitude towards Islam as a whole and towards Islamic holidays. Participants also react positively, but slightly less so, to the construction of mosques, *adhan* through a loudspeaker, longer lunch breaks on Friday and presence of prayer rooms in state institutions.

Participants were also asked to what extent they agree or disagree with the main negative stereotypes associated with Islam. The results, as summarised in Figure 8, show that although the participants do not totally agree with any of the stereotypes, the degree of disagreement does vary.

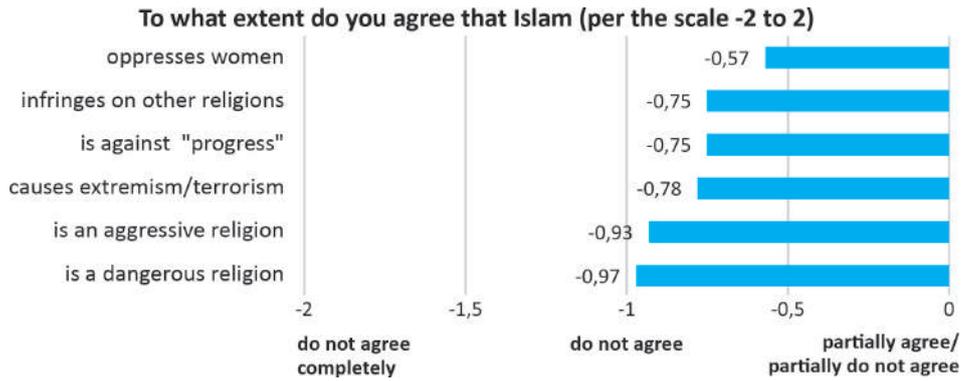


Figure 8: To what extent do participants of the general population survey agree or disagree with the main negative stereotypes associated with Islam (on a scale from -2 to 2)

The stereotype that participants are closest to somewhat agreeing with is that Islam is a religion that oppresses women (-0.57). This again shows that for participants Islamophobia is primarily related to gender relations. This can potentially be explained by the legacy of the long-term Soviet policy that emancipated women, which began in the 1920s and 1930s with the practice of *hujum* – policies and actions undertaken to try to have women remove their veils followed by women’s liberation, education and employment.

Interestingly, Islam is not considered a dangerous (-0.97) or aggressive (-0.93) religion. This is most likely explained by the fact that there have been no serious terrorist acts in Kyrgyzstan and the state policy (and state rhetoric) regarding Islam is relatively liberal. Perhaps the same research in neighbouring countries of Central Asia – where the state policy is more repressive and the discourse of Islam as a threat is more popular – would have shown different results.

Several main factors affecting the attitude of participants towards Islam were identified using the method of cross tabulation. The most important factor was found to be **gender**. In all 10 indicators, **women were found to be more Islamophobic than men**. Indicators were more or less similar for men and women only in relation to attitudes towards Islam as a whole and towards religious holidays (see Figure 9). This can be explained by the common stereotype of Islam (confirmed by this study) as a religion that oppresses women.

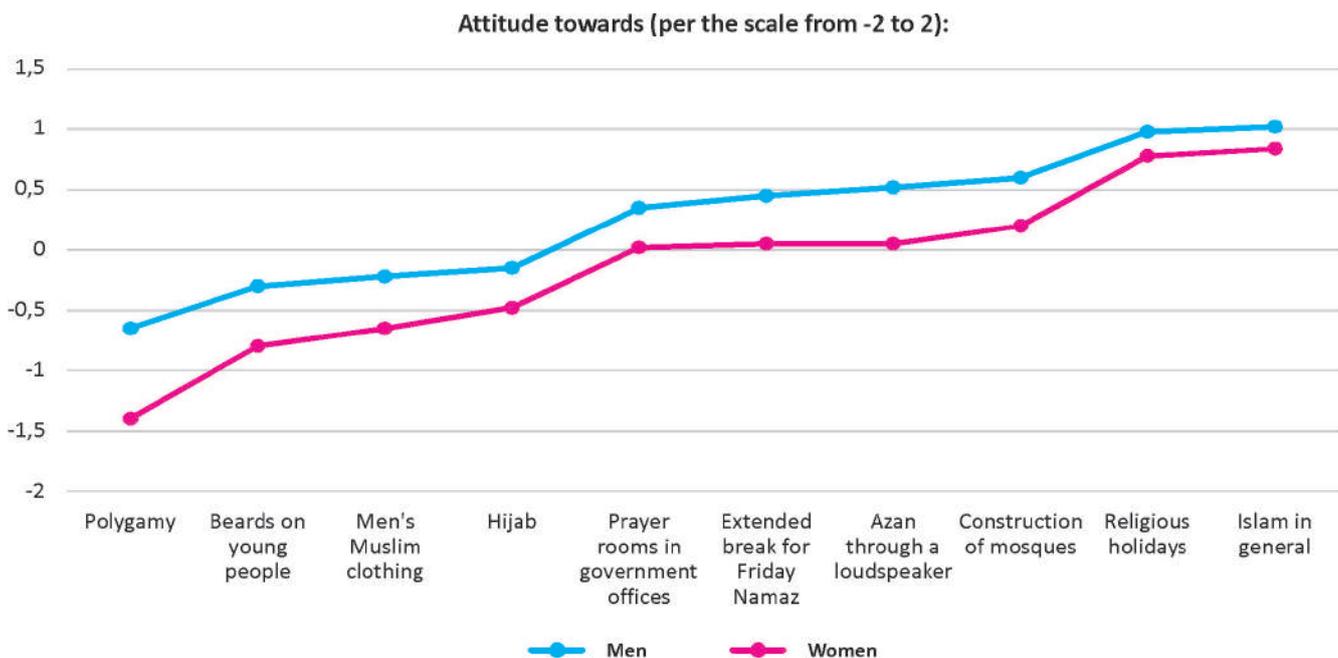


Figure 9: Participants' attitudes towards various aspects of Islam, by gender (on a scale from -2 to 2)

Age was also found to be an important factor: **the older generation is more Islamophobic than adults and youth**. The elderly were found to only have a positive attitude towards Islam as a whole and towards religious holidays. In almost all other indicators, they have negative attitudes, mostly discontent with young people's beards. This, in principle, is understandable, as many elderly participants do not have beards and are thus irritated by beards on youth. Beards are a symbol of authority and respect in Central Asia, thus young people's beards challenge the authority of older people. The youth were found to have the most positive attitudes towards Islam with adults somewhere in the middle (see Figure 10). This trend is best explained by differences among the generations: the older participants grew up in times of very strong Soviet anti-religious propaganda and their attitudes towards religion have thus not changed much, while the youth are more open.

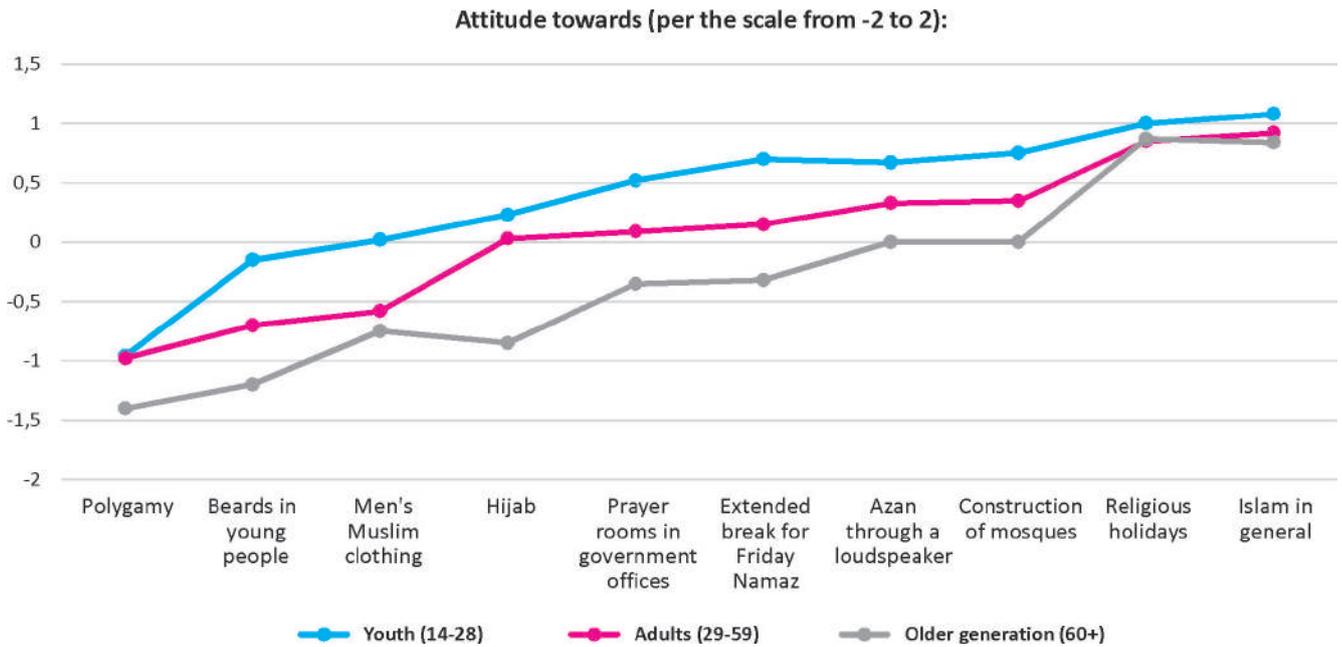


Figure 10: Participants' attitudes towards various aspects of Islam, by age

Religion was also found to influence attitudes towards Islam. Muslims were found to have the most positive attitude towards Islam, which is logical. The results pertaining to Christians and atheists are interesting: atheists were found to be much more Islamophobic. The only positive attitude (but weakly so) they have is towards religious holidays, whereas all their other views of Islam are negative (see Figure 11).

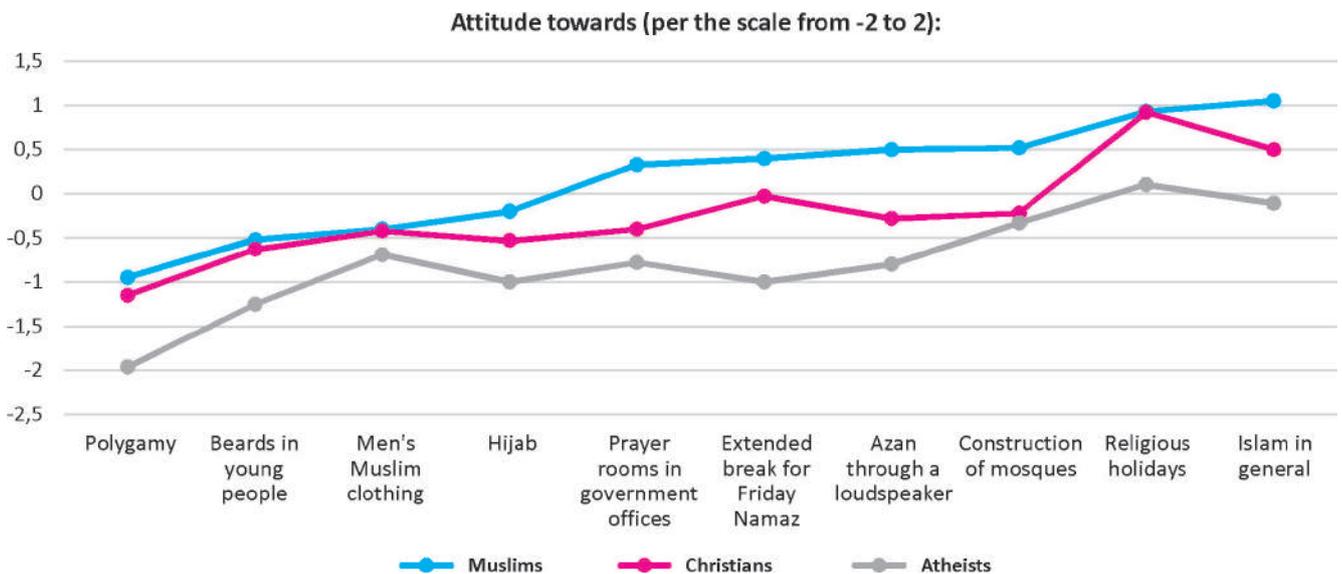


Figure 11: Participants' attitudes towards various aspects of Islam, by religious affiliation

In addition, a link was established between place of residence and Islamophobia. As per Figure 12, residents of new settlements receive Islam most positively. This is followed by residents of micro-districts and lastly residents of the centre.

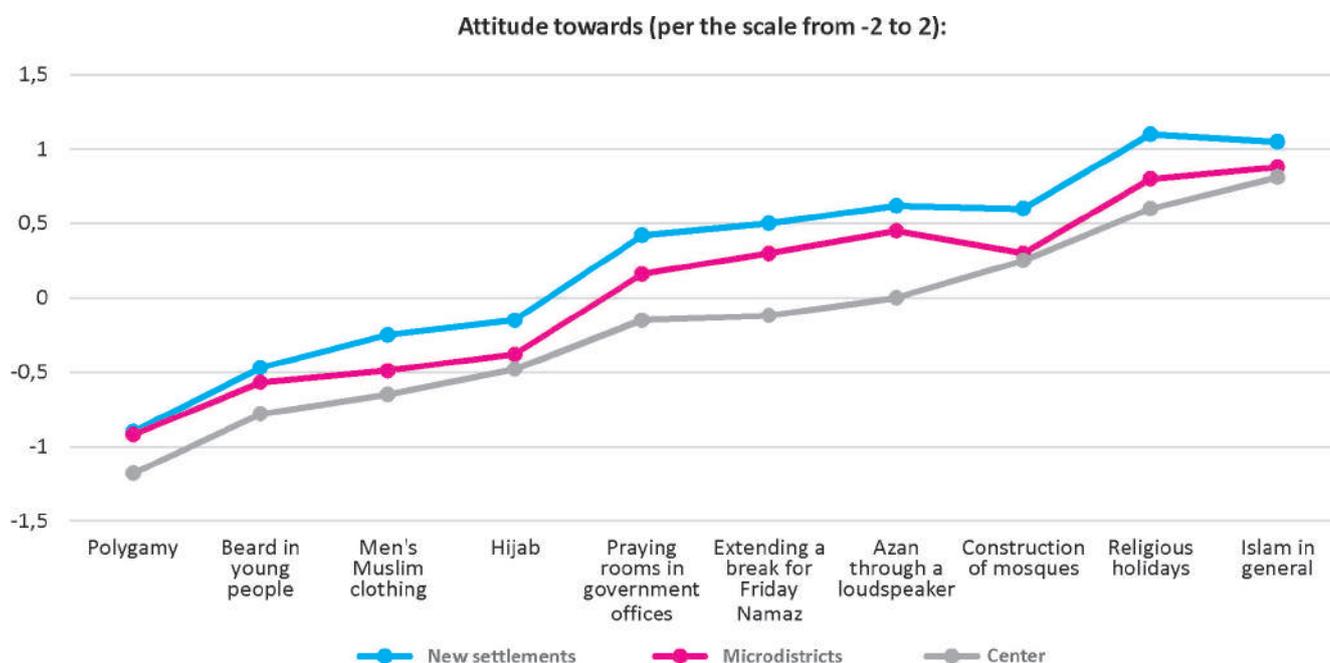


Figure 12: Participants' attitudes towards various aspects of Islam, by place of residence

From the analysis, basic conclusions about the general population's perceptions of Islam can be made and a typical portrait of the most Islamophobic resident of Bishkek can be drawn. According to the results, this is an **elderly atheist woman living in the city centre**. The least Islamophobic is a **Muslim young man living in a new settlement**.

3.2 Results of the KIIs and FGD conducted with the general population

Ten KIIs and one FGD were conducted with members of the population who are not religious and have a critical view of certain religious practices. The below discussion is divided into three sections around the main categories of responses: 1) religious leaders and ideology; 2) national and Islamic identity; and 3) appearance.

Religious leaders and ideology

Some respondents (Nargiza, aged 37; Gulnaz, aged 35) feel sympathy for the former supreme mufti Chubak aiy Jalilov. Others, like Erzhan (aged 32), also like Chubak aiy but oppose polygamy, which this religious scholar supports. The rest of the respondents did not speak about the activities of Kyrgyz religious personas, leaders or scholars. Sanira (aged 43) has a negative attitude towards all those engaged in religious activities, except for scholars such as Kadir Malikov. She also has a positive attitude towards the Islamic university.

The below comment from Nazgul (aged 39) highlights the attitude towards religious leaders:

"The attitude towards religious leaders is careful as religious leaders provide information without an educational bias for the most part, in their sermons. That is, to implement grants received from the Arabs. Gradually, it transcends to a 'cult of personality' when it comes to kissing hands."

Many participants believe that due to poor education, religious leaders often misinterpret Islam. Practicing Muslims likewise misinterpret Islam. This is illustrated by the following quote from Nazgul (aged 39). Respondents also mentioned "exaggerations" and "imposition of ideology".

"The incorrect interpretation of the canons of Islam does not lead to anything good. For example, an elite family with a higher education at once became a Muslim family and, in their opinion, according to the canons of Islam, it turns out that they should not communicate with the elite, the elite of society. Children were forbidden to communicate with friends."

Sanira (aged 43) is also frightened by the numbers of educational institutions in Kyrgyzstan: 1 Islamic university, 9 Islamic institutions and 102 madrasas, out of which 88 are active.

Many respondents were also found to have a negative attitude towards preaching. For example, many people dislike the Davatchi, who encourage people to go to the mosque. This is encapsulated in the below statement made by Bakyt (aged 56).

"Recently, there have been a lot of Davatchi people who go among the population, urging to practise Islam, give advice and consultations, sometimes criticise, they say, once you are a Kyrgyz, you have to be a Muslim, have to do namaz five times, keep orozo [fast], go regularly to the mosque."

Samar (aged 39) does not like the fact that religious leaders spread false information among the population, "beat[ing] our Muslim brothers" in other countries and inciting hatred towards other nations.

National and Islamic identity

A very large part of the discourse propagated by those who criticise Islam is the opposition of national and religious identities, with Islam presented as being alien to Kyrgyz pre-Islamic traditions and undermining the country's values. The below quote from Samar (aged 39) illustrates this:

"Imagine such a picture: women in elechek [traditional female headdress] against the backdrop of our mountains – they look beautiful. And in the same location, place a woman in black clothes, it brings a completely different picture. That is, such clothes do not fit at all. What I don't like is the fact that a different alien culture has come along with religions and is spreading with great speed. And our young people go into this religion, not fully comprehending their actions."

Perizat (aged 24) notes that, apart from accepting a foreign culture, "they change their names to Arabic ones, believing that this will give them benefits in the next world, they will forgive all their sins".

Nargiza (aged 37) is dissatisfied with the "blind copying" of Muslim clothing style from other countries by Kyrgyz Muslim girls. Again, the question of identity is found to be associated with appearance.

Appearance

The discussions and interviews support the survey results revealing that visual Islamic symbols play a very important role in the formation of Islamophobic attitudes.

Samar (aged 39) said the current manifestation of Islam is best described by appearances:

"I would call the Islam, that we have now, a demonstrative Islam: although they dress in a Muslim way, they live as usual. For example, you owe them money and they don't return them, as usual."

Aizada (aged 27) adds that, "according to one study it turned out that girls wear the hijab as it is advantageous to marry Arabs and other members of the Muslim world".

Another participant, Asel (aged 38), is unhappy that parents force young girls to wear the hijab. "Many people do not understand the meaning of clothes; blind copying is underway. For example, girls aged 3-4 are forced to dress in Muslim clothes and yet they are still children."

Meanwhile, Kubat (aged 38) does not like the fact that praying girls "cover themselves completely". In addition, Perizat (aged 24) noted that "religious girls are not allowed much, they have no freedom of action, opinion".

According to participants of the FGD, Erkinai (aged 30) and Nargiza (aged 37), the phenomenon of an external attribute such as a beard is viewed with "humility". "People's attitudes to young people's beards is neither negative nor positive. Five to six years ago, it became fashionable for young men to wear a beard, Pakistani clothes and other attributes of Islam. Now people seem to accept this."

Summing up, the strongest discontent was found to be towards those elements of Islam that have become part of social and public life, such as statements made by popular religious leaders and the appearance of practicing Muslims, as well as issues of national identity.

4. Experiences of practicing Muslims related to Islamophobia

This section summarises the results of the survey conducted with people practising Islam in order to divulge their experiences of life in Bishkek and how they communicate with/relate to the less religious part of the population. This section consists of two parts: 1) analysis of the results of the questionnaire survey; and 2) analysis of KIs and FGD with practicing Muslims.

4.1 Survey of practicing Muslims

Demographic characteristics

One hundred and two people participated in the survey: 58% women and 42% men. Almost all participants (95) are ethnic Kyrgyz, with one participant from each of the following ethnicities: Kazakh, Turkish, Uzbek and Uyghur. Figures 13 and 14 show the distribution of respondents by age group and place of residence, respectively.

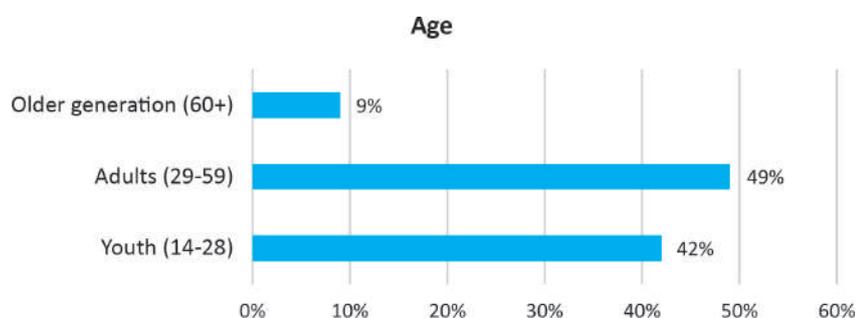


Figure 13: Age group of participants of the practicing Muslims survey

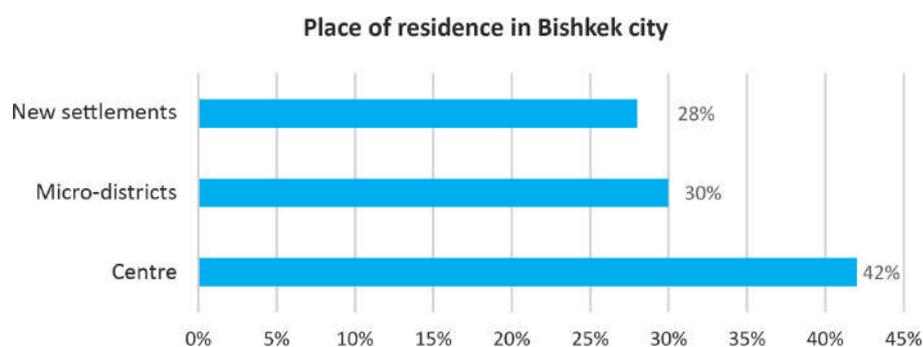


Figure 14: Place of residence of participants of the practicing Muslims survey

The level of education was found to be high: 52% of the respondents have higher education, 13% have secondary technical education and 35% have secondary education.

Religious practices

All participants regularly read *namaz* at an average of 4.94 times a day. All the men surveyed and 42% of the women surveyed attend a mosque. Men who go to the mosque daily do so on average 3.7 times a day; others attend the mosque less frequently (5.1 times a week). The average number of visits for women who go to the mosque weekly is 2.4 times, while others visit less frequently (4.6 times a year). Almost all (91%) respondents observe fasting fully, 6% fast partially and only 3% do not fast.

More than half of the participants were found to sympathise with the Davatchi (Tabligzhamat). Only 4% are sympathetic to two Turkish groups, Hizmet and Nurzhular. No one was found to sympathise with the Suleymancilar or Salafis.

As it was revealed that visual imagery strongly influences the level of Islamophobia, it was important to determine which common items of Muslim dress respondents wear and how frequently. Figure 15 shows that the most popular men’s item is the topu (headdress/skullcap), followed by the sunnot (clothing), while the chalma (turban) is rarely worn. The most common women’s headdress is the hijab, while only a very small percentage of respondents sometimes wear the niqab or burqa.

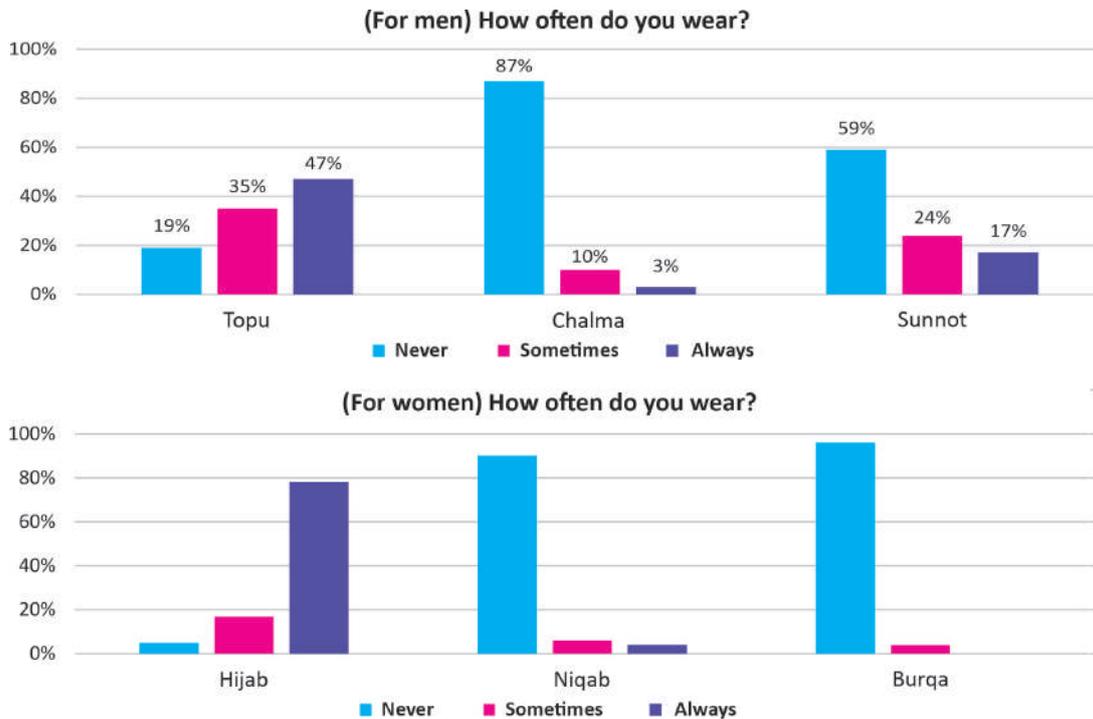


Figure 15: How frequently do men and women wear different Muslim dress

Experiences of Islamophobia

The survey sought to determine how often practicing Muslims face negative attitudes. Figure 16 shows that, overall, discrimination is low. On a 5-point scale (0: never, 1: rarely, 2: sometimes, 3: often, 4: very often), the average values do not exceed 'rarely' and most are closer to 'never'. The most negativity comes from strangers on the streets and the media.

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

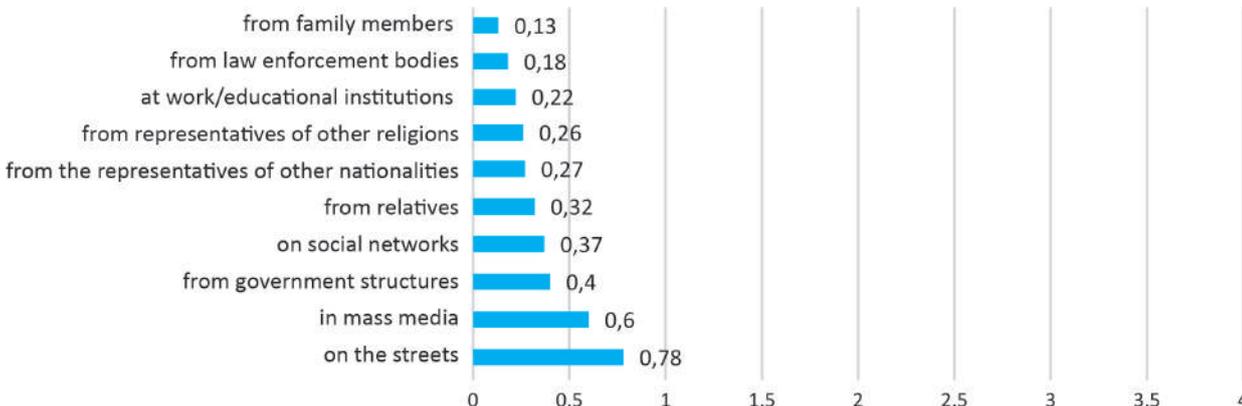


Figure 16: How often do practicing Muslims face negativity from various groups, on various channels, in various locations

In terms of other forms of Islamophobia, respondents said that it most often manifests in arguments about religious issues, although this was found to 'rarely' occur. Insults, refusals to hire for a job or admit to study, and physical abuse were found to almost never occur (see Figure 17).

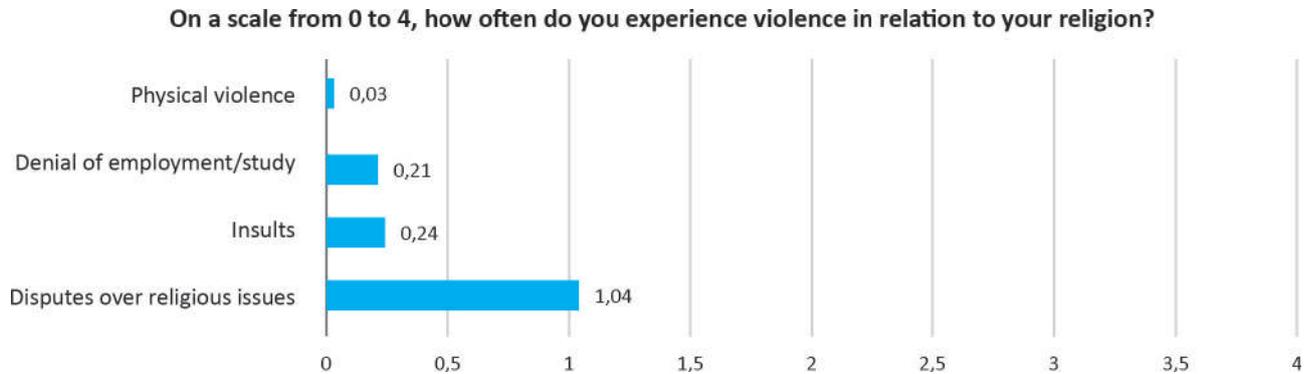


Figure 17: How often do practicing Muslims experience various forms of Islamophobia

Analysing the results of this survey and comparing them with the results of the general population survey (where in some aspects the attitude towards Islam was found to be negative), it appears that Islamophobia in Bishkek is latent, that is, existing in people's opinions but not manifesting in concrete actions or statements, as practicing Muslims encounter this phenomenon rarely or never in real life.

Nevertheless, Muslims still experience some Islamophobia, with the research showing that women experience Islamophobia more often than men (see Figures 18 and 19).

Interestingly, Muslim women are more likely to be negatively treated by people of other religions and nationalities; in the domestic sphere (by relatives and family members, which can perhaps be explained by the simple fact that they spend more time at home than men); by state bodies and on the streets. Men face negative attitudes at school and work, in the media, on social networks and from law enforcement (see Figure 18).

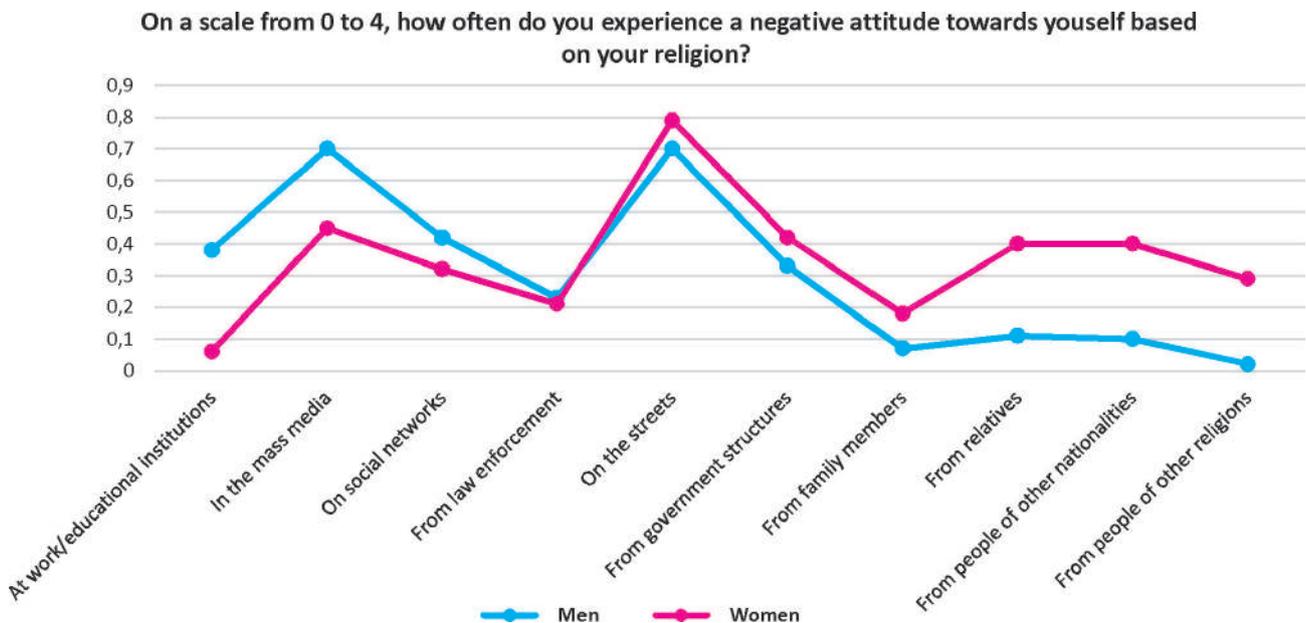


Figure 18: How often do practicing Muslims face negativity from various groups, on various channels, in various locations, by gender

Figure 19 shows that women are much more likely than men to be insulted and denied employment, with both of these likely to be associated with wearing the hijab (due to, for example, specific workplace dress codes and negative attitudes towards it on the streets). In addition, women experience physical abuse slightly more often and argue about religion more often than men.

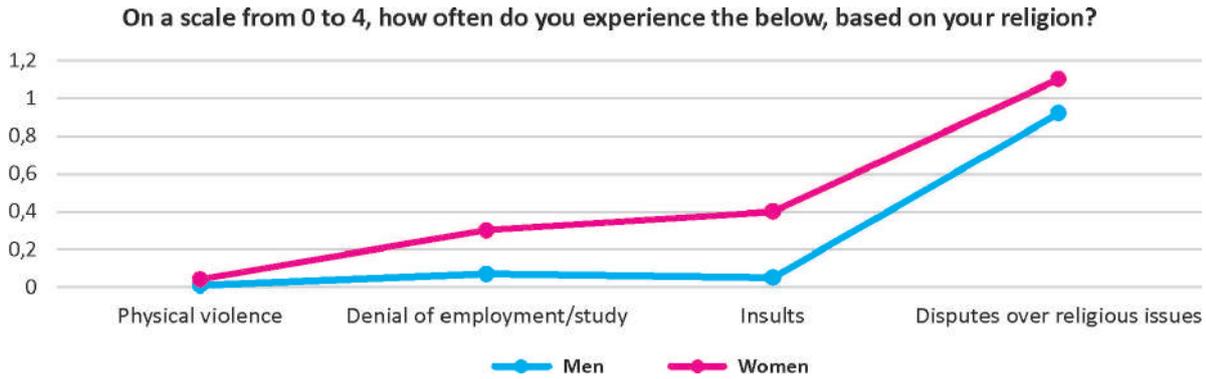


Figure 19: How often do practicing Muslims experience various forms of Islamophobia, by gender

It was also examined to what extent wearing Muslim dress affects the levels of Islamophobia, with results indicating that Muslim dress is perceived differently among different categories/groups/channels. For example, men wearing a Muslim headdress (topu) and Muslim clothing (sunnot) can be negatively perceived on the streets and at school or work, however, on social networks, men wearing Muslim headdress and clothing experience less discrimination than those who do not wear them (see Figure 20). This once again confirms the hypothesis about visual images perpetuating the growth of Islamophobia – as clothing is less obvious in social networks.

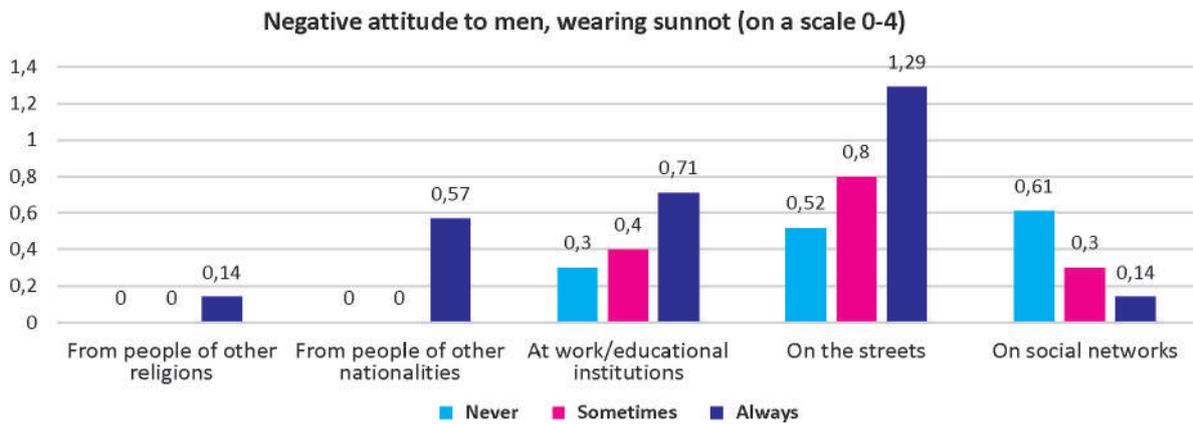


Figure 20: How often do practicing Muslim men who wear the sunnot experience negativity from various groups, on various channels, in various locations (on a scale from 0 to 4)

Women wearing the hijab often experience negative attitudes on the streets, as well as from people of other nationalities and state bodies. Interestingly, in contrast to men, women wearing the hijab also experience negativity on social networks (see Figure 21).

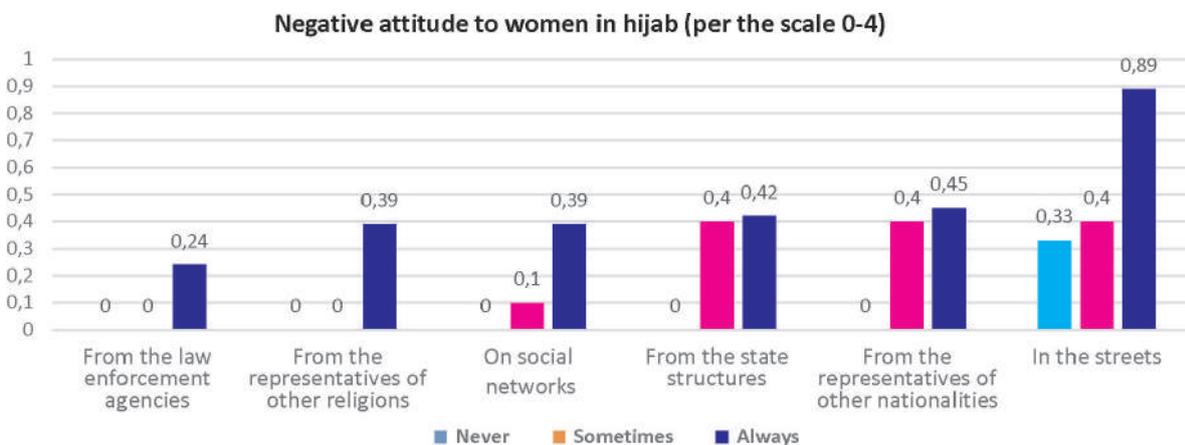


Figure 21: How often do practicing Muslim women who wear the hijab experience negativity from various groups, on various channels, in various locations (on a scale from 0 to 4)

Muslim women wearing the hijab often have to engage in disputes about religion and are more likely to be insulted and denied employment, as shown in Figure 22.

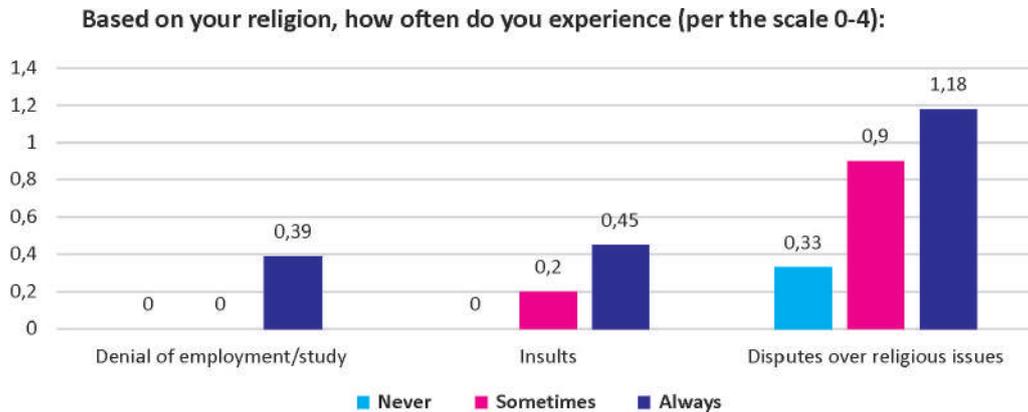


Figure 22: How often do practicing Muslim women experience various forms of Islamophobia (on a scale from 0 to 4)

Summing up, the research revealed that real levels of Islamophobia are lower than perceptions of Islamophobia. This speaks of its latent character: people may have a negative opinion about Islam, but they do not express it openly. As also found in the general population survey, Islamophobia is more openly expressed against Islam's visual cues: topu and sunnot for men and hijab for women.

4.2 Results of the KIIs and FGD conducted with practicing Muslims

Ten KIIs (five with men and five with women), as well as a FGDs with practicing muslim women and men were conducted. The below discussion is divided into six sections around the main categories of responses: 1) religious and social practices; 2) experiences of Islamophobia; 3) sources of Islamophobia; 4) causes of Islamophobia; 5) reactions to Islamophobia; and 6) tackling Islamophobia.

Religious and social practices

Almost all interviewed Muslim women have practised Islam since childhood: some were brought up in religious families, others had religious relatives from whom they learned about Islam. Others began to practice Islam when they entered religious schools. In contrast, the majority of male respondents started practising Islam from a more mature age.

All interviewees are practicing Muslims and try to observe the canons of Islam, attend a mosque, listen to lectures and try to gain knowledge about their religion.

The majority of respondents (both women and men) are socially active: they work, study, often go to public places and travel abroad.

Experiences of Islamophobia

Almost all male interviewees know and correctly understand the term 'Islamophobia'. Most women interviewees, however, have not heard this term and do not quite understand it, while some have heard it, but misunderstand it.

All interviewees have encountered Islamophobia in one way or another. Islamophobia was found to be especially prevalent among women – they encounter condemnation and hostility, and experience discrimination due to their appearance. As practicing Muslim women are more likely to be distinguished by their appearance (as wearing a veil and long dress are considered to be more

important Islamic attributes for women as compared to forms of Islamic clothing for men), women face Islamophobia more often. This is illustrated by the following comment by Saltanat (aged 32), who works as a waitress:

"If you go to the hospital, there's one attitude towards the person who stands with her head uncovered, and if I go after her, with my head covered, then I'll have a completely different attitude. I do not understand, we are perceived worse and lower than others, or what? But it is clear that they simply dislike us."

Rina (aged 45) also shared a negative experience:

"We lived in a village, my daughter studied in a village school, then we had to move to the city, and after a while, back to the village. When I tried to enrol my daughter into her former school, the teacher refused to accept her into the class. I asked for the reason, she answered that her class was full and asked to give her to another school. I said that she was used to her classmates, yet she insisted on what she said. Later it turned out that she refused us because my head was covered. She had also told other girls that their mothers should not cover their daughters' heads, as the director of the school would not allow parents to force their daughters to cover their heads."

Men also have memories of negative experiences, as this quote by Mukhtar (aged 51) demonstrates:

"When I was young and just began to practise, there was a negative perception. They said: 'What is the use of this? Why do you need it?'"

Respondents note that in most cases, Islamophobia is only verbal, but there have been cases of physical violence. Arzygul (aged 34) tells about an incident in her village:

"Last year there was a case when girls in a rural school started to wear headscarves one after another. A female teacher approached one of the girls during the lesson and abruptly tore a headscarf from her head. Then the needle, which was fastened in the scarf, pricked the girl's throat. There was a big scandal between the parents of the students and the school employees. They even wanted to sue this teacher. But fellow villagers stopped the mother of that student from doing it. I was also very angry with this. What right did [the teacher] have to remove her headscarf? Instead of wearing it herself, she tears off the headscarves of girls."

Ryan (aged 22), a graduate of the Islamic University, shares another example:

"There was one case in the hospital. When we studied, it was necessary to have a medical certificate to stay in a dormitory. When we arrived at the hospital, there were a lot of students, with 200 in the queue. We were 22nd or 23rd. There were three of us. Two were in a scarf and one was not. While we stood and waited for our turn, the woman chief doctor came out, came up to us and pushed us back, saying: 'You come and stand all wrapped up.' Well, if she was a simple cleaner, but she is the chief doctor who should examine us and issue a certificate. Then I could not stand it and told her: 'Why are you pushing us? We arrived early in the morning and stood in the queue', and I returned to my initial place. Then she pushed me back a couple of times, but I kept returning to my place. She pushed my girlfriend to the end of the line, despite the fact that she told her: 'Sister (or Madam) I was standing here.' But the doctor told her: 'If you resist, I can't accept you at all.' After receiving the medical certificates, on the way home, one of the friends told me: 'Allah tested me even here, when I wanted to get a certificate in my last year of study. I pray to God that he never brings me here again.'"

Both men and women said that Islamophobia is much less common nowadays than it was a few years ago. None of the men interviewed are facing negativity, although men did experience this more often in the past. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Islam is becoming an increasingly familiar part of public life and the population treats it more and more tolerantly.

Sources of Islamophobia

Three categories of sources of Islamophobia were identified. The first category is older people who – by virtue of their upbringing under the communist regime – treat practicing Muslims, especially women, very negatively. They say offensive, abusive words about them and openly discriminate against them (refusing to hire for jobs, denying them social services, etc.). Nadira (aged 29), a journalist, gave the below example of an incident that happened to her:

"It was 5-6 years ago. I got on the bus, young boys and girls were sitting next to me. Later an elderly man approached us and used offensive words to force me to stand and walk away. I told him: 'Uncle, here are young boys sitting next to you, ask them to give their place.' Then he started shouting at the whole bus: 'Does your religion teach you this?'"

Another participant shared a similar case:

"There were days when I suffered, crying from the rude attitude of the public towards me. Once I was on a bus on my way to the university when an elderly man scolded me, insulted me. There was not a single person who stopped him and said: 'Do not say that, do not do it'. I said: 'I keep fasting, sir, please shut up,' but he continued to scold me. I wanted to get off the bus, but I stayed because I was late for my studies. Then I started to cry. I remember that he was wearing glasses, tall, under 60 years old. Until now, this terrible picture is in front of my eyes."

The second category is those people who express sympathy or false sympathy, and provide unsolicited advice such as: "While young, why wear a headscarf?" "Are you not hot?" or "You can't get married, find a job". Jyldyz (aged 26), a madrasa teacher, recounts how her relatives persuaded her to take off her hijab:

"My relatives told me: 'Well, what are you dressed like that for? Because of this, you can't get a job, you are lagging behind everything and you won't get married.' And they say on the streets: 'Well, how can you walk in the hijab in the heat? Couldn't you dress normally?'"

Zhypara (aged 32), a housewife, shares her experience:

"When we got married, my husband asked me to cover my head. At that time, he worked as a teacher at an Islamic university. The mother-in-law then told her son: 'Why should she cover herself? She is still quite young, and if she likes, she will also wear shorts.' Then my husband said nothing. Later, I did listen to his request and covered my head."

The third category is those who associate Muslims and Islam with extremism and terrorism. They may treat Muslims with scepticism or suspicion, not trust them and avoid them. It is interesting that this happens not only on the streets, but also in the family sphere, among relatives. The following two stories – the first from Meerim (aged 28) and the second from Rina (aged 45) – illustrate this.

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

"Everyone began to fear Islam, because it has been demonised and identified with terrorism. For example, those who do not know the essence of religion, people of other religions and other nationalities are afraid of Islam because someone commits jihad without understanding its essence. Here's an example: When we go to the courses on the basics of Islam in kyz Quran, our husbands are afraid that we are supposedly being trained for Syria and we can even not suspect it, now they say this happens often."

Ryan (aged 22) recounted a similar experience:

"My sister and I rode in a minibus. She was then a newcomer, that is, it was only recently that she put on a headscarf and began to be interested in religion. She had a melody on her phone, beginning with the words 'Allahu Akbar!', and suddenly her phone rang. All passengers were frightened, looked at us with fear in their eyes. Then they all got off at the following stop. Moreover, my sister was in a black scarf. Therefore, I urge all Muslims of Kyrgyzstan not to wear black headscarves, but to wear clothes in the national style. Even Chubak ajy says the same."

In contrast to the results of the survey, which showed that older people and women are more prone to be Islamophobic, several male respondents noted that Islamophobia sometimes comes from their male peers. For example, Eldiyar (aged 29) recounted that one time on public transport several young people looked at him unkindly and even spoke swear words to him.

Interestingly, interviewed men said they face Islamophobia on social networks, but not as often as women, which confirms the results of the survey.

Causes of Islamophobia

Some interviewees are convinced that Islamophobia is being spread purposefully by external forces and is part of geopolitics. According to them, Islamophobia is intentionally promoted as propaganda in films, music and in the media, which portray Muslims negatively. Moreover, these same interviewees believe that Muslims themselves are also to blame for this, as they do not convey information about Islam in the correct way. According to respondents, Muslim organisations that have access to the media should promote Islam in the correct way in order to show the religion as it really is. For example, Beksultan (aged 28) said:

"Muslims cannot correctly show their religion. The main thing is that they profess as they see fit, without thinking about how others relate to this."

Many interviewees also pointed out that religious illiteracy and a lack of basic knowledge about Islam and its true values are among the most important causes of Islamophobia.

Reactions to Islamophobia

Many respondents, both men and women, said that they feel pain and resentment when faced with a negative attitude on religious grounds, but try to forget and accept what is happening as a test of Allah. Respondents said they try to be tolerant of anyone who perceives them negatively, refrain from responding and, conversely, try to treat such people with pity and understanding. The following quote from Azim (aged 26) encapsulates this:

"It seems to me that such a person has succumbed to some kind of manipulation and cannot say what he wants. I would treat such people gently, delicately and would not argue, would not prove anything, but tried to explain why I was doing it."

Beksultan (aged 28) also shared his thoughts:

"I will show Islam as I can, not completely, of course, but what I know myself. Everyone can be wrong, it does not happen completely without mistakes. As for me, I will try to correctly explain to such a person what Islam is and what conclusion he makes does not depend on me any more."

Tackling Islamophobia

Many respondents recommend comprehensive measures to tackle Islamophobia: acting in a unified manner and in all possible ways, communicating their thoughts about Islam through social networks

and the media. Interviewees consider it necessary to show that Islam is a religion of peace and demonstrate this by example. They also recommend dressing neatly, in a modern way, and not wearing 'flashy', exotic clothes.

The informants also believe that it is important to show universal human qualities such as kindness, honesty and decency. They are sure that if all Muslims do this – promoting high morality not only with words but also with actions – then there will be less Islamophobia.

Interviewees are also in favour of spiritual development, as well as the development of science and technology. Muslims, they believe, first need to develop themselves and work with youth, as "young people are the main force". When conflicts arise on religious grounds, the state should take informed decisions, avoid provocations and control the activities of religious leaders. The state is also encouraged to be more active in disseminating information about Islam. As Beksultan (aged 28) notes:

"The theme of Islamophobia has been raised before. It is being raised and will be raised. We see and understand that Islam is a rapidly spreading religion, which is why there are so many attacks on it. But Islam does not carry anything negative, people always seek justice in it."

Overall, the analysis showed that the level of Islamophobia and negative attitudes towards Islam from secular groups of the Kyrgyzstan population is not very high and is consistently decreasing. However, looking at this issue in a targeted way, it becomes apparent that an individual's experience might be very different – that is, negative or even tragic. When Islamophobia is layered with other forms of inequality and discrimination, such as gender inequality, it becomes very visible. Islamophobia in traditionally patriarchal societies, even if they are secular, such as Kyrgyzstan means that Muslim women are twice as vulnerable.

5. Experts' opinions on Islamophobia

Eight KIs were conducted with experts, who are all specialists in religion and have many years of research experience. This section is divided into the main themes of the discussions: 1) definitions and origins of Islamophobia; 2) level of Islamophobia in Kyrgyzstan; 3) causes and forms of Islamophobia; 4) sources of Islamophobia; 5) positives and negatives of Islamophobia; and 6) preventing Islamophobia.

5.1 Definitions and origins of Islamophobia

Three categories of definitions came out of discussions about what Islamophobia is. It was defined as: 1) a natural process; 2) a political instrument; and 3) feelings and emotions.

Some experts believe that Islamophobia is a part of society's development process, which affects different spheres of people's life, including religion: as society becomes more religious, negative reactions to this can also grow. Nurgul Esenamanova, associate professor at the Philosophy and Social and Natural Sciences Department of the Kyrgyz State Law Academy, calls this process "natural". Mametbek Myrzabayev, director of the Scientific Research Institute of Religious Studies, defines it as "a process...not ideology". Nurlan Ismanova, former deputy of state district administration, says it is a process of confrontation between the growing religious community on the one hand and the secular community on the other.

Others – for instance, Indira Aslanova, senior lecturer at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Department of World Culture and Religion at the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University – believe that this confrontation is not natural or harmless. On the contrary, they see Islamophobia as an instrument used by certain groups to further their political interests.

Ikbalzhan Mirsaitov, an analyst at the non-governmental organisation Internews, notes that,

"Islamophobia is now increasingly moving from social content into the political sphere and taking the form of political struggle", further adding that "unfortunately, countering radicalisation and violent extremism often turns into a fight against Islam".

Rasul Momunaliev, manager of the Constructive Dialogues on Religion and Democracy project, and Nazira Kurbanova, director of the Institute of History, Social and Legal Education of the Kyrgyz State National University, believe that there are "secular radicals" behind Islamophobia who demonise Islam in order to deter people from it.

Finally, several experts mentioned that Islamophobia is a result of certain negative feelings and emotions, such as fear, phobia and hostility. Some related it to the fear of Islam as a religion, the fear of terrorism and the fear of the radicalisation of society. Esenamanova believes that Islamophobia is the fear of Muslims, associated with the existence of such organisations as the Islamic State (IS); and fear that Kyrgyzstan will become like Afghanistan, where illiterate believers and imams, hiding behind religion, will turn the country into a society of fanatics. Aslanova adds that such fear can spread to all areas of society.

In terms of its origins, most experts believe that Islamophobia appeared with the birth of the religion itself, in the days of Prophet Muhammad. According to Mirsaitov, "the first Islamophobes were the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula themselves, who did not understand and did not perceive Islam as the religion of the future". Some experts see the 'war on terror' that the West has waged in Muslim countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria and the 'war on Islam' in the media as modern forms of Islamophobia.

5.2 Level of Islamophobia in Kyrgyzstan

Experts differed in their assessments of the level of Islamophobia in Kyrgyzstan, but most consider it to be high. Myrzabayev believes the level of Islamophobia is very high and thinks that the trend is growing. Ismanova likewise believes it is quite high and Eliana Satarova, chief editor of a religious magazine, referring to data from media expert Inga Sikorskaya, claims that Islamophobia in the media is quite high.

Aslanova also believes that Islamophobia is growing and explains this by the secular population's reaction to the growing religiosity in society. Esenamanova, however, does not agree with this and believes that the level of Islamophobia is not very high and does not go beyond the framework of everyday hostility.

Comparing the level of Islamophobia with other countries, Kurbanova concludes that it is manifested in a softer form in Kyrgyzstan than, for example, in Russia. Myrzabayev mentions Turkey, where Islamophobia reflects certain social divisions: "secularists, Kemal residents, people with higher education oppose Muslims who have not studied in universities, that is, the elite are against the uneducated population".

Momunaliev believes that the situation is better in Kyrgyzstan, citing the tightening of laws that could infringe upon the rights of Muslims in neighbouring countries such as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and, in the recent past, Uzbekistan.

Satarova believes that Islamophobia is present in many countries, however, "it all depends on what system, what policy, what traditions the country has, what the past and the history is". She also believes that Islamophobia is "a global trend that is associated with the latest events in the world that form a common concept, a general discourse. Therefore, everything is interconnected."

5.3 Causes and forms of Islamophobia

Experts cited several causes of Islamophobia in Kyrgyzstan, most frequently pointing out the lack of reliable information and religious illiteracy of both the secular population and religious groups. They lamented that the population has little reliable information about Islam, and if it does, it is mostly negative. Meanwhile, religious leaders do not have sufficient knowledge, therefore preaching and spreading incorrect aspects of the religion.

Other reasons cited for growing Islamophobia were: the recent construction of many mosques, which tends to alarm the secular part of the population; and the departure of citizens abroad to participate in operations in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, Momunaliev believes that it is personal experience and upbringing that greatly influence people's attitude towards Islam.

In terms of forms of Islamophobia, it mainly comes from statements, made in public and private. Information and propaganda in the media and social networks are also important forms of Islamophobia. Mirsaitov believes that Islamophobia manifests itself "in attacks on Muslims and criticism of their activities". Momunaliev adds that Islamophobia can manifest "both in a physical form (assaults and insults) and in a political form...in legislative initiatives that restrict the right to freedom of religion".

5.4 Sources of Islamophobia

Momunaliev believes that there is a difference between those who reproduce Islamophobic discourse involuntarily or unintentionally and those who do it consciously and deliberately. He notes that "certain groups are created, who deliberately make a name for themselves, criticising the main mass of people and there are cases when people express their dissatisfaction with the attributes of Islam, they do not realise that they are showing Islamophobia".

The first group – those who reproduce the Islamophobic discourse involuntarily or unintentionally – includes, for example, the older generation. Myrzabaev commented that, "the secular population, the older generation with an atheistic past, intellectuals who were educated in the Soviet era, most of all show Islamophobia". Ismanova adds that, "secular society does not want to change the established order".

The second group – those who reproduce the Islamophobic discourse consciously or deliberately – includes what Mirsaitov calls "imported Islamophobia": "Islamophobia is imported from certain foreign ideological centres from Russia, China, Europe, the United States, and spreads among the country's population."

The media, to some extent, belongs to both groups. All experts agree that the media and social networks play a major role in the development of Islamophobia. Kurbanova, Ismanova and Myrzabayev consider the role of the media to be enormous, Momunaliyev thinks it is significant, while Esenamanova views it as the main factor perpetuating Islamophobia. Mirsaitov notes that, "the media and social networks are the main platform where Islamophobia is formed and spreads". Satarova is particularly convinced that the media and social networks formed Islamophobia in the first place: "I often notice that there are special groups in social networks, they are administered by certain interested groups, they develop this theme through insults and paint a bad picture of Islam through some stereotypes".

5.5. Positives and negatives of Islamophobia

Most experts responded sceptically to the question of whether there are positives to Islamophobia. According to Aslanova, any phobia is a negative phenomenon, and she does not see anything positive in Islamophobia. However, several experts pointed out the importance of constructive criticism for improving the conduct of religious leaders and practicing Muslims. Satarova also notes that Islamophobia is a reminder of the need for a proper information campaign educating people about Islam.

Speaking about the negative consequences of Islamophobia, almost all experts pointed to a split division of society and potential conflicts arising between the religious and secular parts of the population.

5.6 Preventing Islamophobia

Experts suggested several ways to prevent Islamophobia and minimise its negative effects. According to Kurbanova, "the muftiyat should work together with everyone – the civil sector, government bodies, the population, representatives of the clergy – and correctly interpret the activities of religious organisations to show themselves only from the positive side". Ismanova says to minimise Islamophobia, Islamic practices should be kept at a moderate level – what she calls the "golden middle" – and fanaticism prevented.

Myrzabayev believes that "the state should control religious processes, promote the establishment of a constructive dialogue, create platforms, take into account the critical views of ordinary people, and spiritual leaders should correctly interpret Islam to the entire population". Mirsaitov and Satarova mention the dissemination of information and education among the ways to minimise Islamophobia, as well as searching for news ways to have dialogues between religious and secular communities. Esenamanova believes that the issue is still very poorly studied and it is necessary to continue research in this area.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

This research shows that religion in Bishkek is important at the level of identity, but not at the level of practice. Most residents identify themselves with Islam or Christianity, but are not practicing Muslims or Christians. People who live in new settlements are more religious compared to the residents of the centre.

The research also shows that the actual level of Islamophobia in Bishkek is not very high. The majority of survey participants have a positive attitude towards Islam in general, Islamic holidays, mosques, adhan and Friday prayers. In addition, the majority of participants do not agree with the negative images of Islam that are presented. The exceptions are around issues of polygamy and external religious attributes.

Six main factors relating Islamophobia in Bishkek were identified: 1) appearance; 2) age and religious affiliation; 3) gender; 4) national versus religious identity; 5) the boundary between the public and private; and 6) place of residence.

Appearance

The research showed that Islamophobia is firstly formed on the basis of visual images associated with Islam, such as the hijab, beard, sunnot and topu. This is because the majority of the population dresses in secular fashion and thus the Muslim dress stands out, attracts attention and causes irritation.

Age and religious affiliation

The older generation was found to have the most negative attitude towards Islam and Muslims. This can be explained by their communist education, growing up under the conditions of Soviet anti-religious propaganda, and their unwillingness to change established habits and lifestyles. A stratum of young people was found to respond negatively to Islam as well. The findings also show that the level of Islamophobia is highest among those who consider themselves atheists.

Gender

Interestingly, Islamophobia in Bishkek was found to have a strong gender dimension. Women were found to be more Islamophobic than men and at the same time experience more Islamophobia than men. A separate study is recommended to understand and explain this trend.

National versus religious identity

Islamophobia in Bishkek also manifests itself in issues of identity formation and understanding. Many residents oppose the new religious identity in preference of the traditional national identity. This again concerns issues of appearance and clothing, as well as various national traditions and rituals.

Boundary between the public and private

Bishkek residents react negatively to Islam on the back of certain statements made by religious leaders and associated preaching. Many believe that such statements (for example, about polygamy) and preaching violate the boundaries between the public and private space.

Place of residence

The research showed that residents of the city centre are less religious and more Islamophobic than those living on the periphery. This can be explained by the more secular nature of life in the centre, and possibly by the age and ethnicity of these residents (people in new settlements are younger and more homogeneously Kyrgyz – two categories with lower levels of Islamophobia).

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the above conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed.

Awareness-raising/educational activities

All respondents agree that a solution to the issue of Islamophobia is the education of both the secular and religious parts of the population. The essence of Islam should be explained in television and radio channels, for example, in the Hour of Religion programme. As external religious attributes are the main contentious issues and are the sources of most of the negativity, it is necessary to pay special attention to explaining their meaning and values. Lectures on religion and religious attributes (hijab, topu, sunnot, beards, etc.) in schools, universities and workplaces should be organised.

It is important that educational activities are targeted to those groups of the population that were identified as the most susceptible to Islamophobia: women, older people, residents of the city centre and atheists. Information campaigns should answer questions that are of particular interest to these groups, addressing issues of gender, atheism and the Soviet past. The campaign should be conducted in Russian, as the residents of the city centre are mostly Russian speaking.

Many respondents noted the importance of the media's role in preventing and combating Islamophobia. It is important that the media in general and Muslim organisations using the media do not perpetuate Islamophobia. Journalists should familiarise themselves with how to filter Islamophobic messages in their publications and productions, while Muslim media specialists should learn how to filter negative portrayals of secular society.

Recommendations for Muslim communities

Many participants noted that Muslims themselves should convey the essence of Islam in the correct way. Everyone should display universal human qualities, such as kindness, honesty and decency; and always adhere to the 'golden middle' in their religious practices, as per the Prophet's will, without becoming fanatical. Muslims are also advised to be tolerant of people of other nationalities and beliefs, and to respect their state and rule of law, traditions and culture. It is advisable to wear light-coloured clothing, in the national style, and not to dress completely in black.

In addition, it is necessary to learn courtesy, take into account the current mentality and behave in accordance with it. Young people should strive for both secular and religious education in order to broaden their horizons and develop their intellect.

Religious leaders should honour and respect state policy, the principle of secularism, as well as national identity and traditions, and to conduct public speeches and sermons in accordance with them. They are advised not to preach the anti-state messages to the Muslim population and not contribute to discord and division among citizens. Religious leaders and preachers should also respect the boundaries between citizens' public and private spheres.

Recommendations for state bodies

The state needs to work with the older generation. Many current programmes are aimed at young people while the older generation is generally considered more stable and less problematic, thus not receiving enough attention. However, it is necessary to develop programmes that promote the ideas of tolerance among citizens of all ages.

It is also necessary to monitor the activities of religious leaders and organisations. When conflicts arise on the basis of religion, it is necessary to solve issues in a balanced way and not allow provocations. In general, comprehensive measures should be taken allowing various actors to work collaboratively.

State bodies should ensure that Muslims (as well as people of other religions) are not allowed to be verbally, mentally or physically abused in public places, at school and work, in government institutions, in the media and on social networks, as well as by the police. This is not an easy task – it requires a multi-step educational effort with schools, places of employment and law enforcement bodies all taking part.

Appendix 1: Glossary

Adhan: an Arabic word that translates to ‘announcement’, ‘invitation’; in Islam: a call for compulsory prayer. A person who recites the *adhan* is called a *muezzin*.

Allah: an Arabic word meaning the ‘one and only God, the creator of the world, and the Lord of the Day of Judgement’. In Islam, God sent his messenger (*rasul*) Muhammad to the people. In Pre-Islamic Arabia, Allah was one of the highest deities.

Burqa (synonym: burka, less often: *chador* – women’s dress): women’s outerwear in Muslim countries, in particular, in Central Asia and the Middle East. It is a robe with long false sleeves, a face covering and a hair net (*chachwan*).

Davatchi: a group of people who adhere to the Islamic movement Jamaat Tablighi.

Gender (English gender, from the Latin *genus*): a range of characteristics related to masculinity and femininity. Depending on the context, such characteristics may include social structures (in particular, gender and other social roles) or gender identity. The concept of ‘gender’ has become widespread due to the development of feminist theory and gender studies. It relies on the theory of social constructivism, the representatives of which (mostly feminist authors) question the natural origin of the differences between people and explain them by social processes. Thus, the concept of ‘gender’ is intended to criticise everyday ideas about ‘biology as fate’ and refers to the ideology of gender equality.

Gülenism (tur. *Fethullahçılık*; other names: Gülen Movement [tur. *Gülen hareketi*], Hizmet [tur. *Hizmet* – service], Gülen Community [tur. *Gülen cemaati*] or simply ‘Community’ [tur. *Cemaat*], Followers of Fethullah, Güleni [tur. *Fethullahçılar*]): Turkish social movement that arose around the ideas of the Turkish writer Fethullah Gülen. The movement is particularly active in the field of education (approximately 1,400 schools have been opened by supporters of the movement in over 140 countries) and in the development of interfaith dialogue. In addition, the group is close to the media, and there is a desire to develop the financial industry and to open commercial medical clinics. *The Economist* notes that Hizmet is described as “a peace movement based on pacifism and offering a new, modern view of Islam; the concept of movement opposes the extremist orientation of Salafism”.

Hijab: an Islamic women’s headscarf and clothing that hides the head, figure, wrists and neck of a woman.

Hujum: the movement for the liberation of women in Central Asia, which began in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) with the arrival of Soviet power in the 1920s.

Jamaat Tablighi: a religious movement banned in Russia and several other countries, which was established in 1926 in India by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas. The main goal is spiritual transformation in Islam, appealing to Muslims regardless of their social and economic status, to bring them closer to the religious practice of Islam, as indicated by the Prophet Muhammad.

Islamic State (IS) (Russian transcription *ad-Daulat al-Islamia*): formerly Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, an international Islamist Sunni extremist terrorist organisation operating predominantly in Syria (partially controlling its northeastern territories) and Iraq (partially controlling the territory of the ‘Sunni triangle’) since 2013 as an unrecognised quasi-state (proclaimed as the world caliphate on 29 June 2014) with a Sharia form of government and headquarters (capital) in the Iraqi city of Rawa (previously in the Syrian city of Raqqa). In addition to Syria and Iraq, the IS or its groups also control extremely small occupied territories in Afghanistan, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and conduct terrorist activities in Algeria, Indonesia, the North Caucasus, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the Philippines and in other countries.

Islamophobia: a kind of xenophobia; a collective definition for various forms of negative reactions to Islam, as well social phenomena related to it.

Moldo/mullah: a connoisseur and minister of the Muslim cult. In the Russian Empire, all Muslim clerics, sometimes madrasa teachers and literate people were often called *mullahs*.

Muftiyat/muftiat: a self-governing centralised religious organisation that unites Muslim religious and educational institutions on a volunteer basis, as well as residents living in a particular territory for the joint confession and spread of Islam. It is headed by the mufti. Each of the Commonwealth of Independent States countries has its own independent *muftiat* (association of mosques).

Niqab: Muslim women’s headdress that covers the face, with a narrow slit for the eyes.

Nurzhular (tur. *Nurcular, Nur Cemaati*): a Turkish religious community that spreads the ideology of Sunni Islam. It was formed after the First World War on the basis of Tafsirs of the Quran. The famous Turkish theologian Sheikh Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877–1960), who considered the Quran to be a “living document”, preached the ideas of brotherhood and

mercy and called for faith and love for Allah. He also opposed the establishment of a militant atheistic state system in Turkey. The Turkish authorities have recognised the benefits of the works of Said Nursi. The community is mainly based in Turkey, but is also widely represented in other countries, especially those that are Turkic speaking. According to some experts, this religious organisation promotes the idea of Turkic superiority and the need to unite the Islamic world under the auspices of Ankara with the ultimate goal of creating a “pure state” based on “enlightened Sharia” (unconfirmed).

Salafia: a direction in Sunni Islam that unites Muslim religious figures who, at different periods of Islamic history, called for an orientation towards the lifestyle and faith of the early Muslim community to righteous ancestors, qualifying as *bida* (innovations in religion), starting with the methods of the symbolic-allegorical interpretation of the Quran and ending with all sorts of innovations brought to the Muslim world through its contacts with the West.

Salafia means “understanding of religion in the form in which the Prophet and his Companions understood it” and “returning to the Quran and the Sunnah” in the interpretation of the Sharia provisions. Salafis include, in particular, Al-Shafi’i, Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the ideologists of the Muslim Brotherhood Association. A number of researchers argue that the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood has nothing to do with Salafi and disagrees in many ways with the *salaf*. In Western literature, the terms ‘traditionalism’, ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘revivalism’ are used to characterise the Salafi ideology. They are also called ‘Muslim Puritans’.

Suleimandzhilar (Süleymancılar): the name given to the people of Jamaat, whose were educated in schools founded by Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan and were his followers. In 1924, training in a madrasa was prohibited in Turkey. However, Tunahan, along with 520 religious teachers, who remained out of work after the closure of madrasas in every corner of Turkey, continued to give religious education to everyone, teaching at least 1–2 students each. Even in years when religious education was completely forbidden, the Jamaat followers tried to educate at least a few people. Now, Jamaat has at least one school with a course on the Quran in each region of Turkey. The total number of their schools, courses and student boarding houses exceeds 1,500.

Skullcap (head. *tybatay*, kaz; *tobetey*, *takia*, kyrg; *tebetey*, chech; *pias*, tat; *tybatay*, turkm; *tahya*, azeri *araxçın/arakhçyn*): Turkic men’s or women’s headdress; in Russian, the word ‘skullcap’ is derived from the Tatar/Bashkir word *tbuty*, meaning the Tatar and Bashkir round cap.

Skullcaps can either be of a cylinder-conical cut or have four edges. Traditionally, skullcaps were worn both in cities and in rural areas of Central Asia, in the Russian Volga, the Pre-Ural regions (Bashkortostan and Tatarstan) and also in the Crimea. In Kyrgyzstan, the word *tebetey* denotes a men’s winter hat trimmed with fur and light hats are called *topu* (Kyrgyz *topu*, uz; *do’ppi/dÿppi*, uig; *dopp*, taj; *tÿppÿ* [north dial.]; *thatkqÿ* [south dial.]).

Sunnat: Muslim men’s clothing (shirt, pants).



Kyrgyz national values as a factor
in creating civic identity:
A sociological study

Research team:

Aisalkyn Toibaeva, Dr. Ali Zhusubaliyev, Meerim Subanbekova
and Nurbolot Zaiyrbek uulu

Mentor:

Dr. Zailabidin Azhimamatov, PhD, Associate Professor of
Theology Faculty of the Osh State University, Osh, Kyrgyzstan

Summary

The preservation of national values is one of the acute problems facing the Kyrgyz republic today. This is due to a range of factors, including the globalisation process, which has led to one culture being absorbed by another, global modernisation processes along the democratic path, the country's political and economic dependence on other states, and the influence of various cultural vectors. As a result, some values are being supplanted by others or replaced entirely.

From a values perspective, modern Kyrgyz society is diverse. The issue of forming a common civic identity based on self-identity, belonging to a single society and state, is of particular interest to the government of Kyrgyz Republic. Preserving one's identity, cultural diversity, the languages of ethnic groups inhabiting the republic, as well as obtaining space for further development in the digital world are important considerations for the harmonious development of society.

This study conducted in the two largest cities of Kyrgyzstan - Bishkek and Osh - provides a real picture of inhabitants' attitudes to Kyrgyz national values and to the state language as a factor in creating a civic identity. It concludes that the preservation of Kyrgyz national values and the spread of the Kyrgyz language can serve to unite the country's population. The study provides brief recommendations on future actions by the government to create, maintain and strengthen the civic identity of the Kyrgyz population.

1. Introduction

Currently, there is a polarisation of opinions on various issues and lack of consensus among different age and ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan, and between religious and non-religious communities. This leads to fragmentation, a weakening of society and statehood, and greater susceptibility to falling under the influence of various radical ideologies, marginalisation and other destructive processes that erode the unity of the Kyrgyz population as a nation.

The issues related to building a nation based on civic identity to ensure the growth of patriotism and unity of the state, and the formation of a competitive nation, are all discussed and resolved at the state level – not only in this country, but also in neighbouring countries. For example, Russia and Kazakhstan developed state programmes, concepts and development strategies, and formed committees with the aim of creating a common civil identity.

The problem, however, is that there is no clear idea of what a common civic identity means either in scientific literature or in the mass consciousness. Most believe that this simply means identifying with those living in the country. In his time, I. A. Il'in considered a civic nation a national fraternity, a nation-wide cooperation of the country's people in culture, their participation in common civil and political life. Modern political scientists interpret the concept as loyalty to the state, the authorities and elites (Rostow, Zheleznyakov).

Well-known sociologists interpret common civic identity as solidarity with the people and the loyalty of state power (Tishkov), also associating it with the activity of taking responsibility for the country's affairs (Drobizheva).¹

The government's 'Trust and Unity' programme is currently underway in Kyrgyzstan. This programme focuses on strengthening the state language and developing multilingual education programmes. It also seeks to deliver a programme on patriotic education in pre-school and general education institutions, at all stages of the younger generation's development. This programme acknowledges that a society requires the formation of new sociocultural standards and patterns of behaviour, healthy lifestyles, creativity and self-realisation, as well as respect and strengthening of ethical foundations and moral principles focused on the future of the country. It asserts that the originality of the Kyrgyz culture should be preserved and increased.²

The concept of the state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the religious sphere for 2014 to 2020 states that a "positive solution of economic, political and social problems, a successful course of reforming the country, cannot be done without preserving and developing spiritual and national values". However, the issues of creating a civic identity, civic unity and the role that the state language can play in this objective are not touched upon whatsoever.

Therefore, the question remains whether the Kyrgyz language and national values (traditions, customs, national games, holidays, clothing) will be able to play a role in creating civic identity in Kyrgyzstan.

Based on this question, a group of young researchers conducted a study on the topic of 'Kyrgyz national values as a factor in creating civic identity'. This study was conducted within the framework of the 'Constructive dialogues on religion and democracy' project, implemented by International Alert and the Public Foundation 'Yiman', with financial support from the European Union in the Kyrgyz Republic. This research looked at the perceptions and attitudes of young people and the older generation in Osh and Bishkek regarding the aforementioned Kyrgyz national values.

1 Ogneva V.V. All-Russian civic identity: actual issues of forming in the conditions of the polyethnicity, Scientific digest, series on History, Political Science, 2017, №8 (257). Issue 42 177 <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/v/obscherossiyskaya-grazhdanskaya-identichnost-aktualnye-problemy-formirovaniya-v-usloviyah-polietnichnosti>

2 The Programme of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic "Trust and Unity" http://www.gov.kg/?page_id=3422&lang=ru

2. Research overview

The purpose of this research was to measure the perceptions and attitudes of citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic to its customs and traditions, state and official languages, holidays, national games and national clothes, as well as national values – all of which form a common civic identity. The research sought to identify any commonalities, differences and peculiarities in perceptions – using the example of the residents of Bishkek and Osh cities.

Subject of the research: Kyrgyz national values, traditions and customs

Target groups: Citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic aged 16 and over, public opinion makers

2.1 Research objectives

1. To determine the attitudes of the young and older generations to the country's traditions and customs.
2. To determine the attitudes of the young and older generations to the state and official languages.
3. To identify any differences in perceptions of Kyrgyz national values among Kyrgyz citizens (based on the example of Bishkek and Osh).
4. To identify any peculiarities in the perceptions of Bishkek and Osh residents regarding Kyrgyz national values, state and official languages.
5. To identify any commonalities in relation to Kyrgyz national values among residents of Bishkek and Osh.

2.2 Hypotheses

1. There is a difference between the older and younger generations.
2. There is a difference between the cities of Bishkek and Osh in relation to Kyrgyz national values, state and official languages.
3. Ethnic minorities have a positive attitude towards Kyrgyz national values and the state language.
4. Religious values coincide with Kyrgyz national values.

2.3 Methodology

One hundred face-to-face interviews were conducted in Bishkek and Osh as part of the research. The sample was determined based on data from the National Statistics Committee and included residents of cities, students and faculty members of universities. Alongside the quantitative survey, 24 interviews were conducted, 12 each in Bishkek and Osh. Structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with the representatives of:

- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs);
- Youth organisations and movements;
- Education and health spheres (directors and deputy directors of schools, doctors, etc.);
- Clergy.

The interviews were conducted anonymously, in Russian and Kyrgyz, at the place of residence. Interview questions consisted of three blocks:

1. Knowledge of common civil identity and Kyrgyz national values;
2. Attitudes towards Kyrgyz national values and civil identity;
3. Practice of the respondents.

One challenge faced was the difficulty of finding respondents (experts) who knew the area well enough for them to be interviewed. To solve this issue, a 'snowball' method of sampling was used, while guaranteeing the complete anonymity of respondents.

The survey toolkit included an interview form (questionnaire) for a population survey and questions. Research results were analysed using the SPSS statistical and econometric modelling software (version 23.0.0).

3. Survey results

3.1 Knowledge of state and official languages

Analysis of the survey results and interviews revealed differences between the residents of Bishkek and Osh cities in relation to knowledge of the state and official languages.

Table 1: Knowledge of the Kyrgyz language by respondents (%)

	Don't know	Understand, but cannot speak	Know, can express my opinion	Know, speak fluently
Bishkek	7.5	6.5	22.6	63.4
Osh	0.0	8.3	30.6	61.1

For instance, none of the Osh respondents replied that they did not know the Kyrgyz language (the state language), whereas some ethnic Kyrgyz in Bishkek indicated that they did not know the state language and even doubted the importance of this knowledge:

"Russian language, I think, is one of the richest world languages and I consider that knowledge of the Russian language ... it is more important."

29-years-old Kyrgyz woman, Bishkek

When asked how important they considered the state language, another ethnic Kyrgyz woman in Bishkek responded that:

"This is a symbol of statehood, it's probably important, but ... I don't know it and therefore I consider it not very important."

Begaim, 36-year-old Kyrgyz woman, Bishkek

Based on these data, it can be concluded that the objective of developing the state language, adopted in 1998, is being implemented but slowly. The percentage of Kyrgyz-speaking people is growing and, in this context, developing and applying the concept of trilingualism may be an important consideration – that is, knowing and using the state, official and English languages at the same level to create a competitive nation.

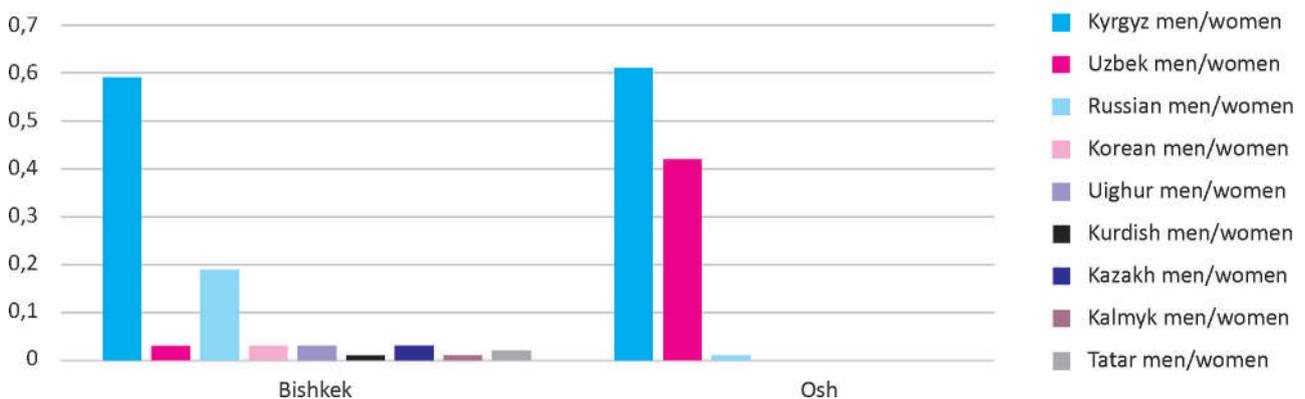


Figure 1: Nationality and place of residence of respondents (%)

Respondents in Osh mostly indicated that knowledge of the Kyrgyz language is a necessity for them, since this is the main language of communication.

For instance, a 35-year-old Uzbek woman in Osh made the following remarks:

"Recently there has been such a tendency that office paper work is conducted in the Kyrgyz language and gradually there is such a smooth transition from Russian to the state language, precisely in the state institutions. For example, we even try to keep correspondence with our local partners in the Kyrgyz language."

"All citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic should speak the state language. I believe that knowledge of the state language, that is, Kyrgyz, is critically important, since we are citizens of Kyrgyzstan and we simply must know the state language."

"... we have 13 pilot schools in the south. There are schools with either Uzbek or Russian language of instruction. When we conduct trainings, the guys from Russian schools, but mostly from Uzbek ones, are asking for handouts and manuals in the Kyrgyz language. Although we give them the opportunity to receive books, for example, in the Uzbek language, they say: 'It's easier for us in Kyrgyz because the trainings are conducted in Kyrgyz and the training materials are easier perceived in it.' Accordingly, children from Uzbek schools are asking for textbooks in Kyrgyz. Even when we go on working trips, business trips, children communicate with me in the state language. Although we are of the same nationality with them, nevertheless, such an interesting trend – they are trying to speak with me in Kyrgyz. I think this is positive, because children have such a natural interest, because they know that they are citizens of this country and that in the future they simply must possess it. The more languages you know, the better for you."

In Bishkek, there is a growing trend of patriotism in relation to the state language, as illustrated by the following interview excerpts:

"Probably, it is a feeling of patriotism, or I don't know, it seems to me, if I don't know Kyrgyz, I don't know myself."

Aigerim, 24-year-old woman, Bishkek

"I start speaking Kyrgyz in many places, when they ask in Russian 'What?', then I have to speak Russian. It is very important for the nation. It is for the preservation of the nation. Because this language is not just a language, everything is linked with the language... Its preservation is highly important, language is a mentality and behaviour, all of these relate to the language. If the language is lost, we may lose everything."

Aidai, 24-year-old Kyrgyz woman, Bishkek

At the same time, based on the interview results, it appears that the state language is used very poorly at the state level.

"I think the Kyrgyz language and its level as our state language has been very low, as before. It is not used. The foreigners start learning Kyrgyz language at first, then they stop it and switch to the Russian language, because it is difficult to do the work, knowing the Kyrgyz language. They realise this and learn the Russian language."

Aidai, 24-year-old Kyrgyz woman, Bishkek

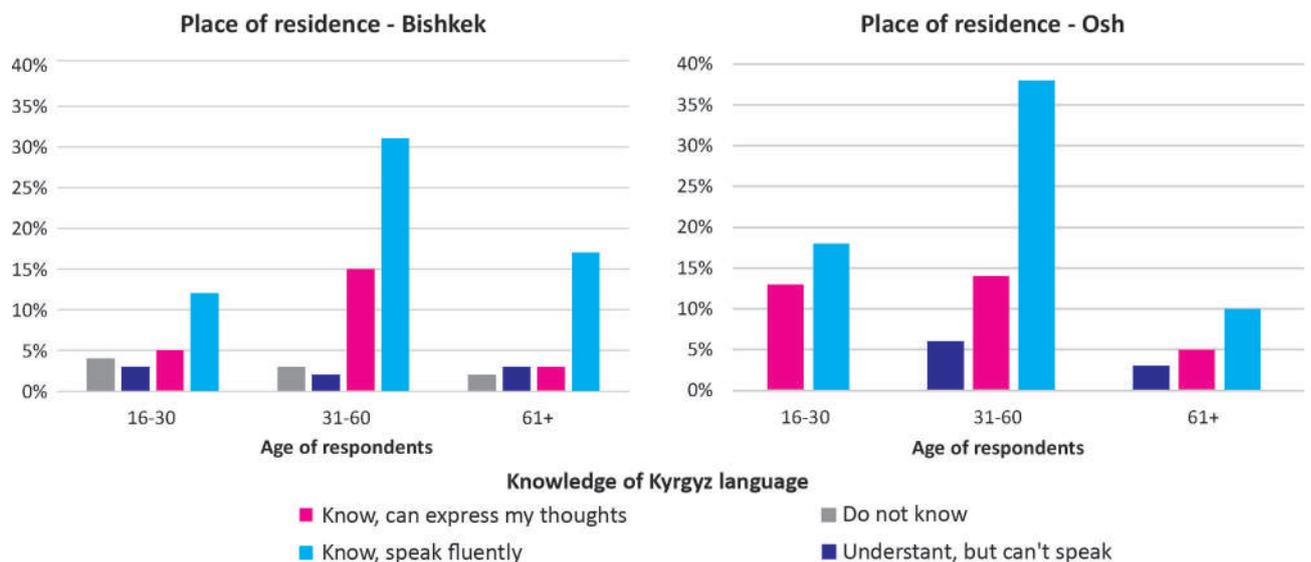


Figure 2a-b: Knowledge of Kyrgyz language by respondent characteristics (%)

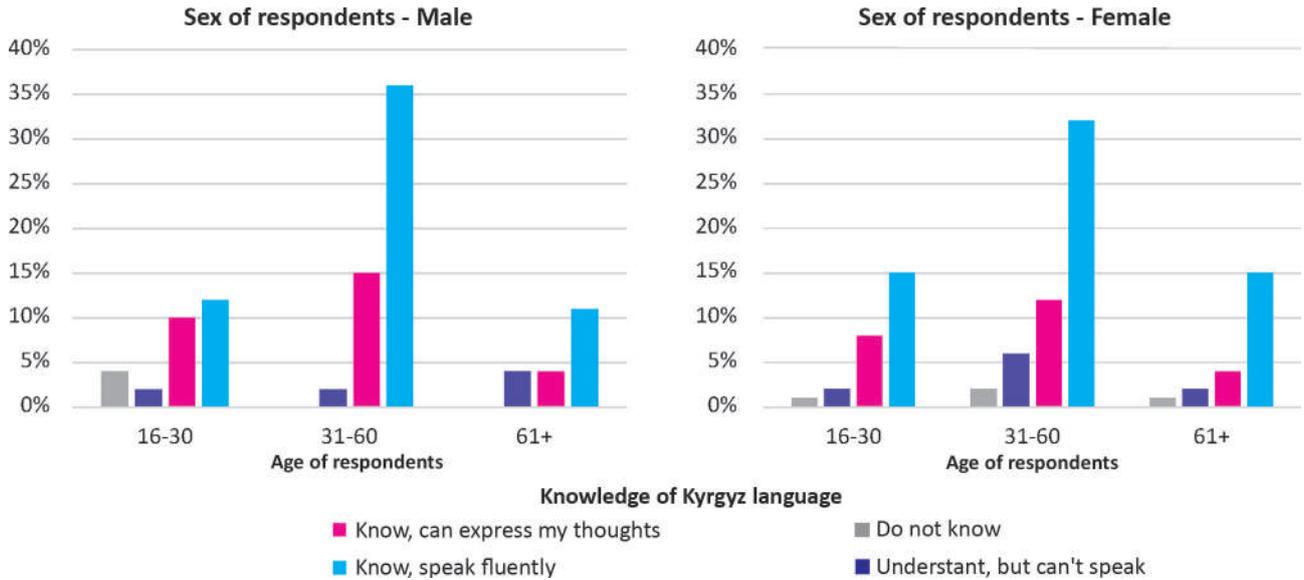


Figure 2c-d: Knowledge of Kyrgyz language by respondent characteristics (%)

Compared with the Bishkek population, the majority of the population of Osh between the ages of 31 and 60 speak the state language regardless of gender and nationality.

In terms of knowledge of the official language, as the research results show, a larger percentage of respondents aged 31 to 60 years in Bishkek are fluent in the official language of Russian (Table 2). In Osh, more people understand, but cannot speak Russian. In both cities, only 1% of the population does not speak the official language.

Table 2: Knowledge of the official language by respondent place of residence (%)

	Don't know	Understand, but cannot speak	Know, can express my opinion	Know, speak fluently
Bishkek	1	10	23	59
Osh	1	24	51	32

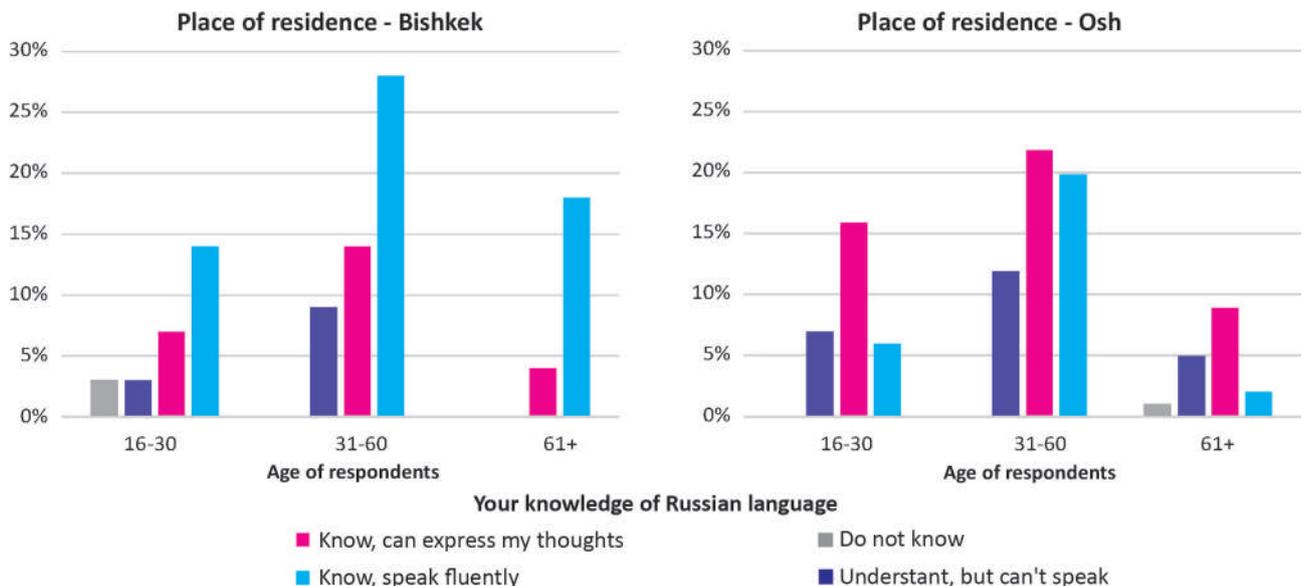


Figure 3a-b: Knowledge of Russian language by respondent characteristics (%)

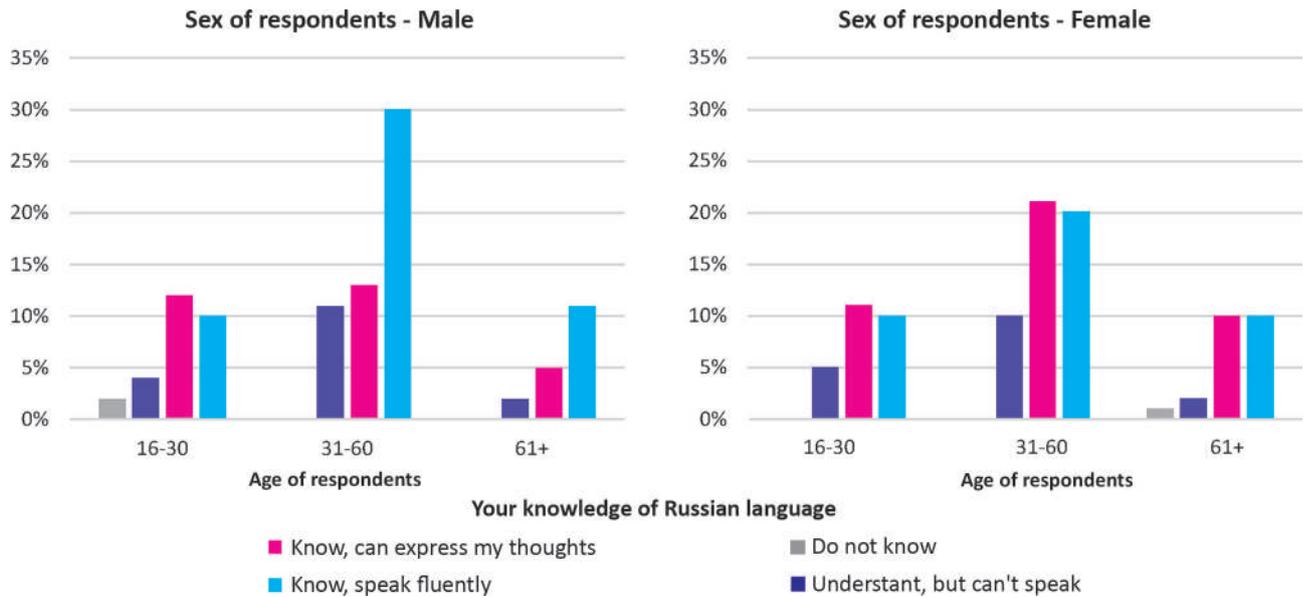


Figure 3c-d: Knowledge of Russian language by respondent characteristics (%)

3.2 Identity

The topic of respondents' self-identity was of particular interest to the research group and the questionnaire included the question: 'Who are you?' Bishkek residents mainly pointed to their national identity, while Osh respondents emphasised their civilian identity. At the same time, in the southern capital of Osh, a much larger proportion of respondents identified themselves by religious affiliation.

"I am firstly the citizen of Kyrgyzstan, secondly I am a Muslim."

Israev S., 39-year-old man, Osh

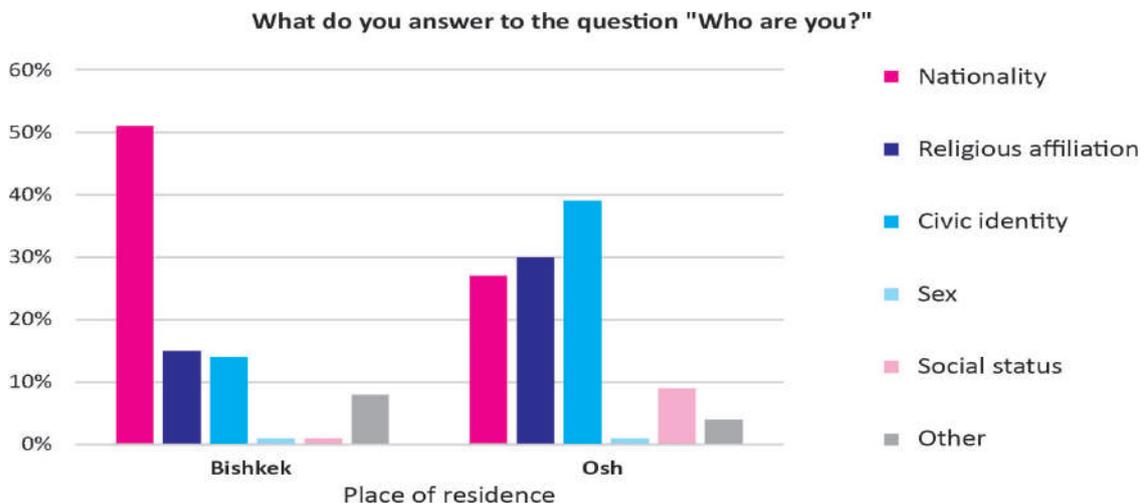


Figure 4a: Aspects of self-identity by respondent characteristics (%)

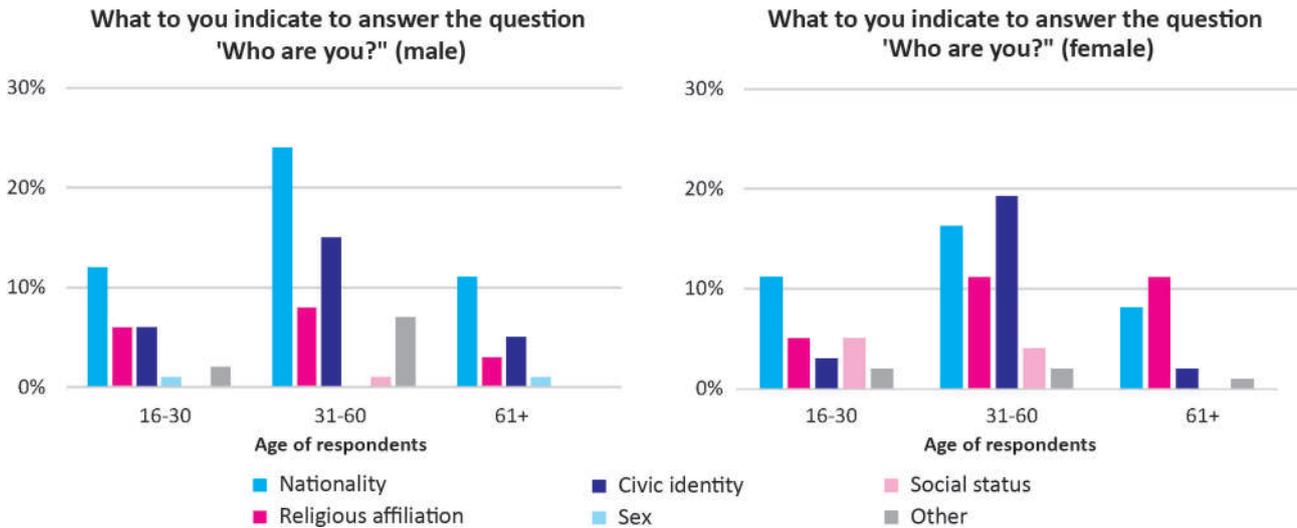


Figure 4b-c: Aspects of self-identity by respondent characteristics (%)

3.3 Values

In relation to values, when asked what comes to mind first when they hear the word 'Kyrgyzstan', a greater number of respondents in Osh answered 'Motherland' (47% of those polled in Osh are ethnic Uzbeks).

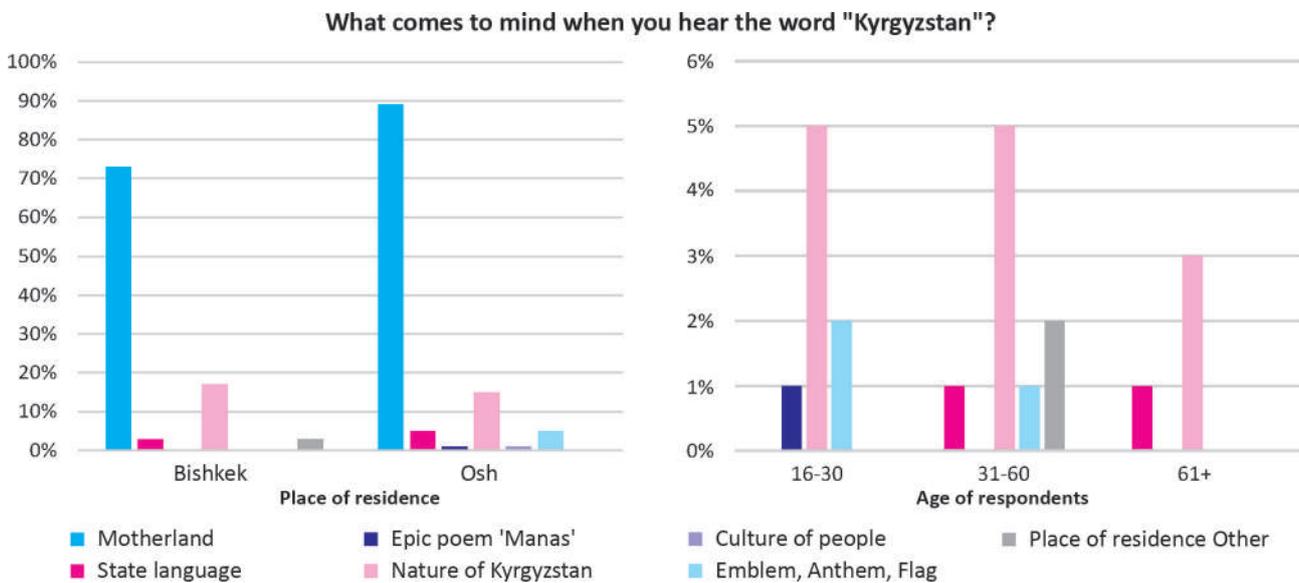


Figure 5a-b: Meaning of word 'Kyrgyzstan' by respondent characteristics (%)

3.4 Traditions, customs and holidays that form common civil unity

In terms of holidays, the most important holidays cited were Kurman Eid (93%), Orozo Eid (92.5%) and Independence Day (81.1%) (Table 3). These were followed by Constitution Day and the Day of the State Language (66.7% each) as well as Nooruz (56.7%). Lower proportions of respondents cited the New Year (37.8%), 23 February and 8 March 8 (31.3%). Christmas proved to be even less important for the residents of Bishkek and Osh (18.4%).

Table 3: *Level of importance given to holidays by respondents (%)*

	Not important	Neutral	Important
Independence Day	7.0	11.9	81.1
Day of State Language	11.4	21.9	66.7
Day of Kalpak (men's headwear)	21.4	25.4	53.2
Constitution Day	14.4	18.9	66.7
New Year	47.8	14.4	37.8
Kurban Eid	3.0	4.0	93.0
Nooruz	26.4	16.9	56.7
Orozo Eid	3.5	4.0	92.5
Christmas	64.7	16.9	18.4
23 February, 8 March	45.8	22.9	31.3

The level of importance attached to holidays was also broken down according to the two target cities of Bishkek and Osh (Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4: *Level of importance given to holidays by respondents in Bishkek (%)*

	Independence Day	Day of State Language	Day of Kalpak	Constitution Day	New Year	Kurman Eid	Orozo Eid	Nooruz	Christmas	23 February, 8 March
Not important	3.2	7.5	8.6	8.6	40.9	5.4	3.2	23.7	60.2	40.9
Neutral	7.5	20.4	17.2	17.2	12.9	5.4	4.3	9.7	16.1	26.9
Important	89.2	72.0	74.2	74.2	46.2	89.2	92.5	66.7	23.7	32.3

Table 5: *Level of importance given to holidays by respondents in Osh (%)*

	Independence Day	Day of State Language	Day of Kalpak	Constitution Day	New Year	Kurman Eid	Orozo Eid	Nooruz	Christmas	23 February, 8 March
Not important	10.2	14.8	21.3	19.4	53.7	0.9	3.7	28.7	68.5	50.0
Neutral	15.7	23.1	32.4	20.4	15.7	2.8	3.7	23.1	17.6	19.4
Important	74.1	62.0	46.3	60.2	30.6	96.3	92.6	48.1	13.9	30.6

In relation to regional differences, there was no significant difference in the importance given to the religious holidays of Orozo Ait and Kurman Ait and the secular holidays of 23 February and 8 March between the two regions. However, the degree of importance attached to holidays such as Day of Kalpak was much higher for Bishkek respondents (74.2%) than for those in Osh (46.3%).

Regarding more secular holidays such as Independence Day, Constitution Day, New Year, Nooruz and also the Day of State Language, these also turned out to be more important for the Bishkek respondents than for the Osh representatives.

Conversely, a much larger percentage of respondents from Osh answered positively to the question: 'Do you celebrate national holidays?' The researchers believe that this issue requires more detailed study.

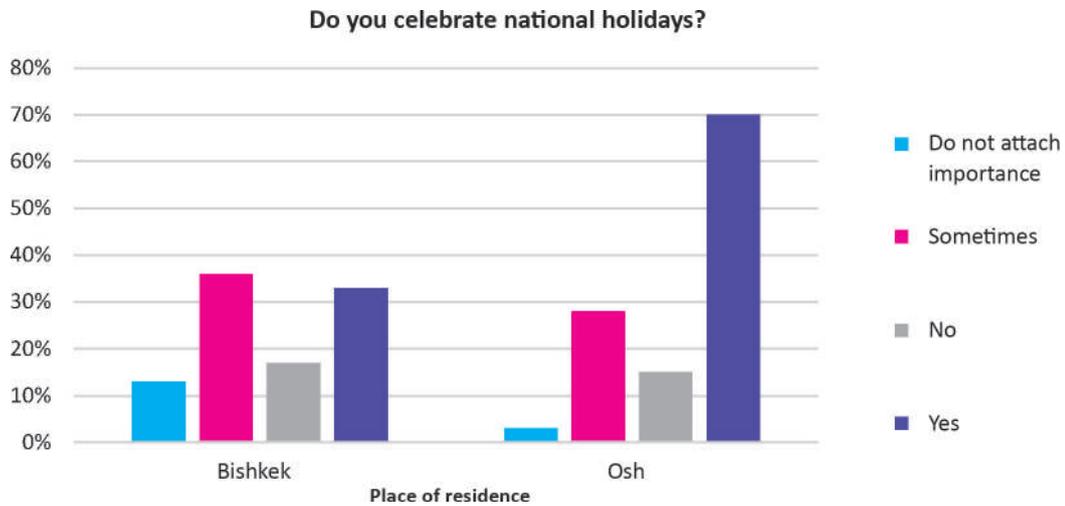


Figure 6: Celebration of national holidays by respondent place of residence (%)

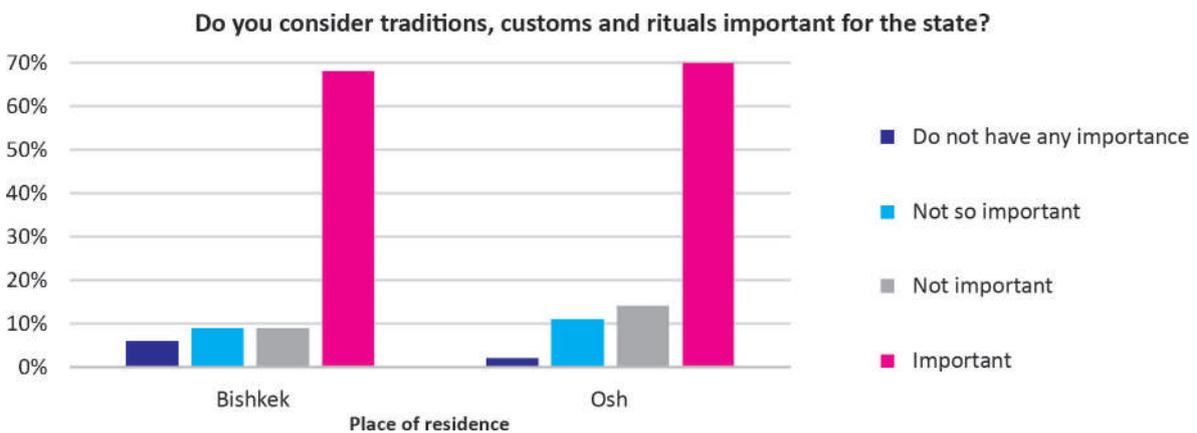
Regarding attitudes to traditions and customs as a whole, a higher proportion of Osh representatives observe partially or fully customs and traditions compared with the residents of Bishkek (Table 6). The percentage of respondents who do not observe customs and traditions was much higher in Bishkek, more than twice that of Osh.

Table 6: Attitudes to traditions and customs as a whole among respondents in Bishkek and Osh (%)

	How do you relate to the Kyrgyz traditions and customs as a whole?			Total
	Do not observe	Observe partially	Positively, take into account and observe	
Bishkek	12.9	37.6	49.5	100.0
Osh	5.6	42.6	51.9	100.0

It is also worth noting that older citizens of Russian nationality responded that they are positive about Kyrgyz traditions and customs and believe that they also observe them, because they have many friends and colleagues of Kyrgyz nationality, with whom they participate in honouring both holidays, traditions and customs.

The majority of respondents from both cities consider ceremonies, traditions and customs important for the state, while more people in Osh wear national clothes.



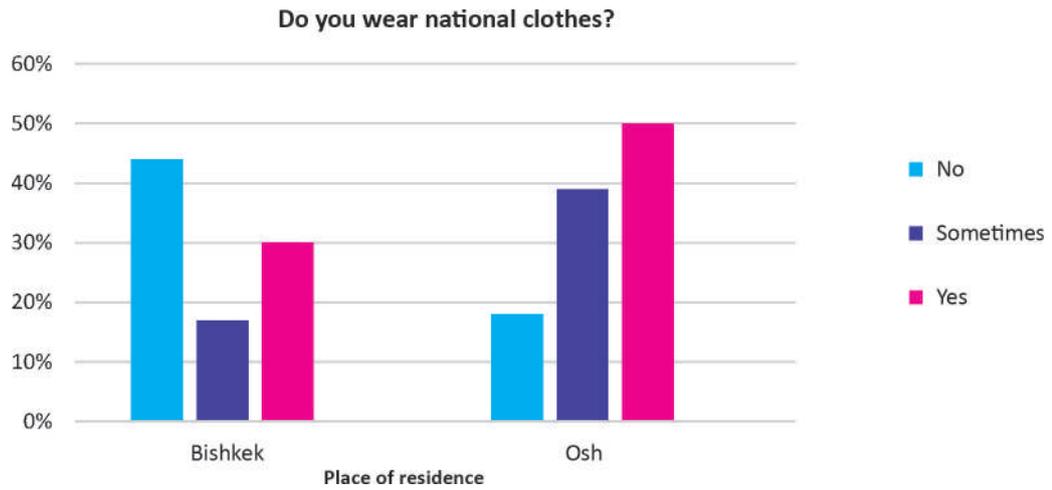


Figure 7: Attitudes to traditions and customs by respondent place of residence (%)

4. Conclusions

According to the results of this study, there is a significant difference between the attitudes of Bishkek and Osh citizens to the state and official languages. Unlike respondents Bishkek, none of the respondents in Osh answered that they do not know the state language, indicating that knowledge of Kyrgyz language is a necessity in this city.

Most of the population in Osh aged between 31 and 60 speak the state language regardless of gender and nationality. A larger percentage of respondents aged between 31 and 60 in Bishkek speak the official language. In both cities, only 1% of the population does not speak the official language.

It will be possible to conduct additional research on knowledge of the English language. Based on its results, we can consider the options for phased implementation of trilingualism (fluency in the state, official and English languages among the next generation of young people) to create a more competitive nation.

In response to the question regarding self-identification ('Who are you?'), Bishkek residents mostly point to national belonging, while Osh residents cite civilian belonging. In the latter case, a much larger number of respondents identify themselves by religious affiliation. Followers of Islam note that national values do not contradict and that they are largely based on religious values.

In terms of holidays, Kurman Ait, Orozo Ait and Independence Day were named the most important holidays. Constitution Day, State Language Day and Nooruz holidays followed in importance. New Year, 23 February, 8 March and Christmas were among the least significant. From a regional aspect, there is insignificant difference between the religious holidays of Orozo Ait and Kurman Ait, and the secular holidays of 23 February and 8 March. Independence Day, Constitution Day, New Year and State Language Day are more important for Bishkek respondents than for Osh residents.

More respondents in Osh partially or fully comply with customs and traditions compared with the residents of Bishkek. Most respondents in both cities observe ceremonies, traditions and customs important to the state.

The research provides a real picture of the attitudes of Bishkek and Osh residents to the state and official languages as well as Kyrgyz national values, indicating their level of importance in the formation of civil identity.

Since national-cultural identification is the basis of common civil identity, it is important to create a cultural-historical space. Strengthening cultural contacts performs a collective function, contributing to the unification and unity of the nation. It is also necessary to continue the spread of the state language, emphasising its prestige. Active use of the state language will be a factor in creating a common civil identity, the basis for unity of the country. It is important to strengthen the development of the official language in the south of the country,

To develop a supra-ethnic civil identity, we believe it is important to develop a mature civil society, with a developed sense of patriotism. This should be combined with the accomplishments of the international system – protecting human rights, freedom of speech, self-expression and self-realisation – while preserving the national traditions of the Kyrgyz people and expression of national identity.

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

Research team:

Roza Duisheeva, Abay Kenzhekulov and Aiperi Abdybaeva

Mentor:

Dr. Mametbek Myrzabaev – PhD, Director of the Research Institute
of Islamic Studies, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Executive summary

This report summarises the findings of a study conducted to explore the media's role in covering religious issues, as well as in building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy, in Kyrgyzstan.

The research used a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach. It comprised a content analysis of Kyrgyz media websites, as well as field research including a survey and in-depth interviews with experts.

The content analysis of the media websites reveals the media's role in covering religious issues in the country. The study concludes that the establishment of a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy is possible with the active participation of the state, civil society and the media. Current journalistic models must also be adapted to the local setting, taking into account the history and stages of development of journalism in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the national and traditional values of its population.

The research aimed to:

- assess the media's role in covering religious issues, as well as in building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy;
- identify and assess the trends in media coverage of religious issues in Kyrgyzstan;
- evaluate how the media covers religious issues and its dependence on state policy in the field of religion;
- analyse the frequency of and reasons for local media coverage of religious issues;
- evaluate the procedure (norms, rules) for preparing materials on religious issues;
- analyse whether and to what extent media representatives are influenced by their beliefs and attitudes when covering religious issues;
- analyse the media outlets' ideological preferences in covering religion;
- analyse the balance between the coverage of religious issues and democracy in a secular state; and
- analyse the competence of journalists to cover religious matters.

The research found the following:

- Internet sources are a popular way of receiving information about religion, with 63% of respondents saying they receive such information from the internet.
- The procedure of preparing materials is based on common standards and principles of journalism. Prior to publication, the editorial team carefully analyses the material.
- There is no consensus among journalists regarding the dependence of the media on state policy, but the prevailing belief is that journalism should be independent and outside of the influence of political forces.
- Currently, there are two serious problems in the media: the first is related to the establishment of a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy, the second to the level of competence of journalists covering religious issues.
- There is no particular ideology in the media. Local media outlets are more focused on breaking the latest and most sensational news.
- Current journalistic practices adhere to general principles, such as impartiality, objectivity and respect for equal rights.
- Today there are very few religionists among journalists: 4-5% of the total journalists in Kyrgyzstan.

Keywords: *religion, secular state, state policy in the sphere of religion, online media, websites, constructive dialogue on religion and democracy, basic principles of journalism, journalist, media representative*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Since Kyrgyzstan has become independent, there has been a growing interest in religion, primarily indicated by a sharp increase in the number of religious organisations in the country. In the 1990s, in the period preceding the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), there were 39 mosques and several Christian religious sites. Currently, 2,989 religious organisations are officially registered with the State Commission on Religious Affairs, out of which 2,595 are Islamic, 380 are Christian, 12 are Baha'i communities, 1 is Buddhist and 1 is Jewish.¹ The liberal religious policy of the state, active work of foreign missionaries and financial assistance of foreign religious organisations have all contributed to this growth.

Correspondingly, the role of the media in the formation of public opinion about the growing religiosity is likewise increasing. The media can maintain stability in the public arena, however, it can also play a potentially negative role. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the main characteristics of the Kyrgyz media's coverage of religious issues. This research is the first attempt to delve into this extremely relevant topic.

1.2 Research objective and question

The ***objective of the research*** is to examine the media's role in covering issues of religion in the process of building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan.

The ***research question is***: What is the media's role in covering issues of religion in the process of building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan?

To achieve this objective and answer the question, the research team set out to:

- study and identify the main characteristics of the media's coverage of religious issues, by means of conducting a content analysis of online media;
- determine the attitude of young people towards the coverage of religion and its interaction with democracy in the media, by means of a survey among young people in Bishkek and Osh, along with a comparative analysis of the two locations; and
- study the attitude of media representatives towards the coverage of religious issues, as well as towards building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy, by means of key informant interviews (KIIs) with journalists and media workers.

1. The influence of the religious factor on the socio-political situation in Kyrgyzstan: Sociological research, Committee on Religion of the President of Kyrgyzstan, 2016, p. 5, <http://religion.gov.kg>

2. Methodology

This research employed quantitative and qualitative research methods, including a desk review and field research.

The desk research comprised an in-depth content analysis examining how electronic versions of traditional media – that is radio and television channels, and news agencies – cover religious issues. Sampling was based on: 1) national (public) media, 2) international non-commercial media and 3) local media.

For the first category, the Kyrgyz Public Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation (KTRC) (www.ktrk.kg)² was selected. This is a state-owned TV and radio broadcaster with a public broadcasting status.

Radio Azattyk (www.azattyk.org), part of Radio Liberty/Free Europe, funded by the US Congress through the Broadcast Management Board, was chosen for the second category. Its mission is to "promot[e] democratic values and institutions through information journalism in countries where press freedom is either prohibited by the authorities or underdeveloped".³

The *24.kg* news agency (www.24.kg), the history of which dates back to over a decade, was selected for category three. The agency's informational products are used by print and electronic mass media in Kyrgyzstan.⁴

Sputnik (www.sputnik.kg), the Kyrgyz service of international news agency Russia Today, was also initially selected by the research team.⁵ However, a content analysis of this site did not end up being conducted, as the person responsible dropped out of the research team due to a change of residence location.

A questionnaire survey of 400 respondents living in the cities of Bishkek and Osh was also conducted in Kyrgyz and Russian languages. Participants aged 16-50 years took part, with age groups identified as per the generally accepted age groups in official statistics (i.e. 16-28 years, 29-35 years and 36-50 years). The participants were active internet users, primarily students and the academic community.

Seventeen Klls were also conducted with journalists, editors and other media representatives. Appendix 1 lists the questions asked in these interviews.

The data from the survey and interviews were used to determine the most topical issues related to the media's coverage of religion and in building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan.

2. The law 'About the Public TV and Radio Broadcasting Corporation of Kyrgyzstan' was adopted on 21 December 2011: http://www.ktrk.kg/static/files/zakon_ru.pdf. accessed date 24.03.2018

3. Home, Radio Liberty/Free Europe, <https://www.rferl.org>, accessed 24.03. 2018

4. 24.kg started its activities on 12 May 2006. About, 24.kg, https://24.kg/o_nas/, accessed date 23.03.2018

5. Russia Today is the largest Russian information provider for an international audience and comprises websites, a mobile application, regular and online broadcasting, and press centres. Russia Today, Ria News, https://ria.ru/lenta/organization_Rossija_segodnja/, accessed 23.03. 2018

3. Content analysis of media outlets covering religious issues

The content analysis sought to identify the main characteristics (content, presentation style and compliance with the basic standards of the Code of Ethics of Journalists of Kyrgyzstan) of the country's electronic media publications, including Radio Azattyk (www.azattyk.org), KTRC (www.ktrk.kg) and 24.kg (www.24kg). The content analysis was conducted for the year 2017, in which over 300 text materials on religion were published on these sites.

3.1 Content analysis of Radio Azattyk (www.azattyk.org)

Quantitative analysis

One hundred and two textual materials about religion were published on the website in 2017, under the thematic headline 'Religion'. Of these, 55 (54%) are analytical and 24 (23.5%) are interviews or discussions with representatives of state authorities, religious leaders, law enforcement officials, leading experts in theology, civil society and the academic community. In addition, bloggers published 17 (16.6%) news items and 6 (5.9%) articles. The website publishes materials on religion 1-3 times per week.

In terms of content, the materials can be divided into three categories: 1) religion and politics, 2) religion and society, and 3) religion and the spiritual sphere.

The first category covers subjects such as security, religious organisations, the religious situation in the country, human rights, the state and religion, and elections and religion. In 2017, the site published 9, 4, 7, 3, 14 and 2 materials, respectively, pertaining to these subjects. The total number of materials in this category is 39, comprising 1 news item, 28 analytical pieces, and 10 interviews and reports on discussions in the sections 'Inconvenient Questions' and 'Arai Koz Charay'.

The second category covers topics such as public relations in the sphere of religion, family and children, and problems of polygamy. In 2017, the site published 12 and 3 materials, respectively, pertaining to the first two topics. The total number of materials in this category is 15, comprising 4 news articles, 5 analytical pieces, 3 interviews and discussions in the abovementioned sections, as well as 3 publications on the blog 'Special Opinion'.

The third category covers subjects such as religious education, education and science, history and culture, spirituality, and confessions (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism). The total number of materials in this category is 29, comprising 5 news items, 11 analytical pieces, 10 interviews in the abovementioned sections, and 3 publications by bloggers.

There were also 19 international and Central Asian pieces, comprising 7 news items, 11 analytical pieces, and 1 interview.

The site published one material on Buddhism, two on Islam and three on Christianity in 2017.

Qualitative analysis

The quantitative analysis shows that more than half of the text materials published in the 'Religion' section in 2017 are analytical. This indicates that the editorial staff is attempting to reflexively approach the material, by not only communicating facts, but also analysing them so that they can influence decisions in areas such as public administration, politics and state policy in the sphere of religion.

The topics of the materials should also be highlighted. They span issues such as state policy in the sphere of religion; education and religion; the religious situation in the country; national security (extremism, terrorism, issues related to Syria, etc.); religious organisations (Yakin Inkar, Tablighi Jamaat, Salafi); human rights; family and religion (children, polygamy); public relations, and specific features of confessions (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism). In the articles studied, journalists particularly analyse the causes and factors of extremism, terrorism, radicalism, the consequences of sending Kyrgyz people to Syria to participate in hostilities and the activities of religious organisations. The need to analyse such issues is primarily related to their challenges and threats.

Among others, the following materials were published:

- 'Radicalism starts small', 6 December 2017⁶
- 'Indifference makes the roots for extremism', 6 July 2017⁷
- 'Radicalism issues in Central Asia', 29 January 2017⁸
- 'Mansur: Many people regret coming to Syria', 29 August 2017⁹
- 'Who is standing behind the religious movements?', 8 January 2018¹⁰

A number of materials are comparative in nature and describe the situation in neighbouring states. Such articles should be paid attention to by the state and civil society to resolve issues such as polygamy, namaz (praying) by civil servants at work, among others.

- 'About seventy "Davatchi" are arrested in Russia', 16 November 2017¹¹
- 'Uzbek authorities ban polygamous marriages', 15 July 2017¹²
- 'Kazakhstan: Government employees do not go to Friday namaz', 1 September 2017¹³
- 'Nazarbayev is against the beard growing of the youth', 20 April 2017¹⁴

In addition, authors of the analysed materials highlight the fact that democratic values are more developed in Kyrgyzstan compared to other Central Asian countries as well as Russia.

- 'Russia bans the activities of Jahabaists', 21 April 2017¹⁵
- 'Jahabaist is sentenced to five years in Kazakhstan', 3 May 2017¹⁶
- 'Kazakhstan is prosecuting Jahabaists', 11 July 2017¹⁷

Materials on the relations between the state and religion are mainly around the main directions of the Concept of the State Policy on Religion, namely, state regulation of religious organisations' activities and religious education. These include:

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6. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_religion_terrorism/28898332.html. visited date: 4.04.2018
 7. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_iq_extremism/28599636.html. accessed date: 04.04.2018
 8. https://www.azattyk.org/a/central_asia_radikalisme_/28263496.html. accessed date: 04.04.2018
 9. https://www.azattyk.org/a/syria_kyrgyzstan_isis_terror_youth_mansur_2017/28694787.html accessed date: 04.04.2018
 10. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_central_asia_islam_religion/28956770.html accessed date: 04.04.2018
 11. https://www.azattyk.org/a/russia_moscow_religion_tablighi_jamaat_2017/28856269.html accessed date: 04.04.2018
 12. https://www.azattyk.org/a/uzbekistan_move_against_polygamy_and_kyrgyzstan/28612982.html accessed date: 04.04.2018
 13. https://www.azattyk.org/a/central_asia_kazakhstan_religion_law/28707139.html accessed date: 04.04.2018
 14. https://www.azattyk.org/a/nazarbaev_proposed_banning_beards_and_short_trousers_at_the_level_of_the_law/28441253.html accessed date: 04.04.2018
 15. https://www.azattyk.org/a/russia_religion_rights_jevovahs/28444425.html accessed: 04.04.2018
 16. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kasakstan_the_case_of_jehovahs_witness_ended_in_prison/284644 accessed: 04/04/2018
 17. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kazakhstan_religion_numan_rights_jehovah_17/28606554.html accessed: 04.04.2018

- 'Has the sphere of religion changed in six years?', 23 November 2017¹⁸
- 'Representatives of the Kyrgyz Muslim clergy who have received secular education', 27 June 2017¹⁹
- 'Does madrasa need a reform?', 10 January 2018²⁰
- 'Religious education: Taking into account national values', 10 January 2018²¹
- 'About strict control over madrasas', 15 March 2017²²

Main findings and discussion

The Concept of the State Policy on Religion says that to ensure national security and cultural identity, the state should create conditions for strengthening and developing traditional moderate forms of Sunni Islam on the basis of the Hanafism religious law school and Maturidite creed.²³ Articles, such as 'Maturidi ishemininin tamyry' [Roots of Maturids]²⁴ on the topic of traditional Islam, provide readers with an opportunity to understand the differences between Islamic religions, such as Maturids, Asharia and Hanafi Madhab.

The most important and widely discussed issues are initially covered as news items, followed by analytical materials or interviews with experts. This suggests that *Radio Azattyk* not only reports on topics related to religion, but also tries to study them in detail and from all sides. For example, a news article was published on 13 September 2017 entitled 'A journalist is arrested for provoking religious hostility'²⁵, which discusses a Bishkek court sentencing journalist Zulpukar Sapanov for provoking religious hostility. The same topic was covered on 14 September 2017 in an article entitled 'A court case about a journalist and religious tolerance'²⁶, with the inclusion of expert opinions. It would have also been worthwhile to report on the opinions of the judiciary in order to provide a legal assessment of the case, thereby presenting in-depth coverage of this issue.

It was noted earlier that most of the materials on the website are analytical in nature, which indicates the competency of journalists. An analytical piece entitled 'People traveling to foreign countries for daavat'²⁷, published on 17 April 2017, investigates the activities of the religious organisation Tablighi Jamaat. The author is concerned that the *muftiyat* does not register representatives of this organisation when they travel outside the country. The author provides the opinions of experts and also underlines the fact that other Central Asian countries and Russia have long banned the activities of this religious organisation. The article also states that extremist organisations such as Yakin Inkar proceeded from Tablighi Jamaat. This kind of analysis can signal to those responsible for national security. The article complied with the Code of Ethics of Journalists, according to which facts, judgements and assumptions should be clearly separated from each other.

18. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_religion_atambaev/28870049.html accessed: 04.04.2018

19. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_religion_education_islam_17/28581248.html accessed: 04.04.2018

20. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-religious-educati_report_2017/28422444.html accessed: 04.04.2018

21. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_religion_islam_education_medrese/28965128.html accessed: 04.04.2018

22. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_religion_education_madrasah_2017_religion/28370991.html accessed: 10.04.2018

23. Concept of the State Policy of Kyrgyzstan on Religion for 2014-2020, Ministry of Justice of Kyrgyzstan, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/68294>, accessed: 01.04.2018

24. M. Myrzabayev, Roots of Maturids, Radio Azattyk, 19 January 2017, https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_religion_mairambek_junusov/28164022.html

25. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_religion_court/28733366.html accessed: 04.04.2018

26. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_religion_rights/28735812.html accessed: 04.04.2018

27. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_religion_daavat/28434572.html accessed: 04.04.2018

However, the materials also have shortcomings. In a number of articles, only the interests of one side are reflected. For example, the site has repeatedly published materials about polygamy, namely, about the attitude of a well-known Islamic leader, Chubak Jalilov, who has publicly spoken about his second marriage. The articles below solely criticise Jalilov, thereby violating the principle of the Code of Ethics, according to which "the points of view of opponents, including those who have become the object of criticism of a journalist, must maintain balance". At the same time, there are quite a few supporters of this religious leader on social media.

- 'Call for polygamy: Disregard of the law by Moldaliev', 28 November 2017²⁸
- 'Illegal marriage of Chubak Aji, 28 November 2017²⁹
- 'Gulen-Chubak Aji meeting is under discussion', 12 July 2017³⁰

On 3 December 2017, an article entitled 'Do not play with theocracy'³¹ was published in the 'Opinion' section³², in which a blogger again criticised Jalilov.³³ The nature of these materials would suggest that the editorial staff is rather critical towards this religious leader.

On 11 December 2017, in the 'Opinion' section, an article entitled 'Polygamy and Islam'³⁴ was published. The author examines the issue of polygamy more thoroughly through the lenses of the canons of Islam and discusses a number of countries that have encountered the problem of polygamy. The author observes all norms of the Code of Ethics, considering the sensitivity of the topic.

Many materials were found to be similar in terms of the topic and style of presentation. They mainly contain the opinions of several parties, experts and heroes. It seems to be important for journalists to firstly present the opinions of the involved parties, then the experts, and only then to draw conclusions.

It can be concluded that all materials on the website are prepared in line with the Code of Ethics of Journalists of Kyrgyzstan, as well as the main principles of journalism. Compared with other websites where there are violations of ethical norms (for example, ktrk.kg), azzattyk.org ensures that all its materials meet the standards and principles of journalism, which is currently one of the main goals of all domestic media.

3.2 Content analysis of the KTRC (www.ktrk.kg)

Quantitative analysis

In total, 128 text materials on the subject of religion were published on the website from 28 December 2015 to 15 March 2018. Of these, 50 (29.7%) are analytical, 110 (65.5%) are news items and 8 (4.8%) are materials on international matters.

28. Z. Baktybaev, Call for polygamy: Disregard of the law by Moldaliev, Radio Azattyk, 28 November 2017, https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_interview_moldaliev/28883717.html accessed: 04.04.2018

29. E. Beyshenbekkyzy, Illegal marriage of Chubak Aji, Radio Azattyk, 28 November 2017, https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_human_rights_religion_social/28883451.html

30. This article is not about polygamy, but it criticises Jalilov. E. Nurmatov, Gulen-Chubak Aji meeting is under discussion, Radio Azattyk, 12 July 2017, https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_turkey_gulen_jalilov/28611688.html

31. Do not play with theocracy, Radio Azattyk, 3 December 2017, https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_polygamy_human_rights_blog/28892950.html

32. The 'Opinion' section publishes materials from bloggers that are independent from the editors of the website. A warning is provided that blog posts "may not reflect the point of view of Radio Azattyk".

33. https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_polygamy_human_rights_blog/28892950.html accessed: 04.04.2018

34. Polygamy and Islam, Radio Azattyk, 11 December 2017, https://www.azattyk.org/a/poligamy_religion_islam_kyrgyzstan/28902984.html accessed: 04.04.2018

According to their content, the materials are divided into two categories: 1) religion and politics, and 2) religion, culture and the spiritual sphere. These categories, in turn, are divided into several sub-sections.

Of the published materials, 57% belong to the first category and 43% to the second. This denotes that KTRC pays a lot of attention to religion and politics.

The first category covers areas such as security, religious organisations, the religious situation in the country, human rights, the state and politics. The greatest attention is paid to the state policy in the sphere of religion, with 26.2% of the total number of materials covering this topic. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that KTRC is state owned and has a public status. Security issues also occupy an important place, with 14.9% of materials on this topic. Meanwhile, 7.1% of the materials each focus on the religious situation and religious organisations. The lowest proportion of materials is human rights issues, making up 1.8%. Both analytical and news items comprise this category, with human rights materials mostly in the form of news.

The second category covers topics such as the clergy, education and religion, as well as spirituality. A significant percentage of materials (24.4%) concern the clergy. There are also materials about the activities of the muftiyat, as the official representative of all Muslims; traditional Islam; and religious holidays of Orozo Ait and Kurman Ait. About 92% of materials on the clergy are news items without any analysis.

Qualitative analysis

Published materials pertain to the main areas of the Concept of the State Policy on Religion, such as religious education and religious educational institutions. It should be noted that there are more analytical pieces on this topic than on other topics related to religion.

The topic of spirituality covers subjects such as confessions, and the history of Islam and Muslims. However, these materials – comprising informational messages and news – occupied an insignificant place on the site (7.1% of all materials).

Main findings and discussion

The KTRC, as the state-run media, was found to largely cover issues of state policy in the sphere of religion.

Regarding the quality of content, the analysis confirmed the existence of significant violations despite KTRC representatives (see section 5) disclosing that journalists should adhere to basic professional principles.

The first of these violations is the lack of balance. For example, an article entitled 'Is a word said at the mosque a reason for the suicide of a 15-year-old boy?'³⁵ reviews the issues of state policy in the field of religion, and religious education and its reform. However, the question of religion's influence on suicide is not fully disclosed. Secondly, no opinions of the mosque's supporters are provided.

The second violation is the lack of opinion of the parties involved. The article 'Bishkek: A person who threatened to blow up a shop was a member of a religious extremist group'³⁶ discussed a Yakin Inkar member's threats to blow up a shop. However, the author did not conduct a proper investigation of this serious incident, cited only information from a representative of law enforcement, and did

35. Is a word said at the mosque a reason for the suicide of a 15-year-old boy?, KTRC, 3 March 2016, 23. 02. 2018 <http://www.ktrk.kg/post/1562/kg> accessed: 23.02.2018

36. <http://www.ktrk.kg/post/19928/kg> accessed: 23.02.2018

not include comments from others. Moreover, the site did not cover subsequent events of this story. Such materials may contain distorted information, violating the principle of comprehensiveness.

Another article entitled 'There are many people in Arstanbap village who support religious extremism'³⁷ looks at the problem of security. It features a photo of a man with a gun and a beard, and provides comments only from law enforcement agencies and the State Committee for National Security. Opinions of other parties, for example, local communities, are missing.

The third violation is the incompetence and lack of professionalism of journalists covering religious issues. This is evidenced, for example, by the article 'There are about three thousand religious organisations in Kyrgyzstan'³⁸, which is about concerns related to the construction of mosques. The author perceives a religious organisation as a religious movement and argues that, "after gaining sovereignty, the activity of religious movements intensified in the country, giving rise to new directions"³⁹. The directions are understood by the author as mosques. In an article entitled 'Should we prohibit the writing of religious words?'⁴⁰, the author says that, "at the moment, 2,904 religions have been officially registered", also meaning mosques. The article 'Some religious workers' bad behaviour is harming religion'⁴¹ provides incorrect information about the presence of religious leaders during a fight at a mosque, whereas no religious figures were actually present at the time of this incident.

The fourth violation is non-observance of the principle of comprehensiveness, which can cause tension. For example, the article 'Hijab issue has become a weighty topic'⁴² contains one-sided statements, for example, "searching for national values from the history of ancestors, and not among Arabs".⁴³ The material criticises the Arabisation process, but the reader is not provided with opinions of different parties. In addition, the photo of a girl in burqa is used as an illustration, implying that the author or editorial staff does not know the difference between the hijab and burqa.

The fifth violation is that some materials are based on a comparative analysis. For example, it is not entirely clear what the author intends in the article entitled 'There are ten times more madrasas in Kyrgyzstan than in Uzbekistan'⁴⁴. The article says that Uzbekistan originally professed traditional Islam and did not allow the spread of various kinds of religious movements, while in Kyrgyzstan numerous madrasas are sponsored by foreign countries.

3.3 Content-analysis of 24.kg news agency (<http://www.24kg>)

Quantitative analysis

Materials on this website are divided into the following categories:

- **Power:** related to the state, government, decrees and decisions on religion
- **Society:** on social issues

37. <http://www.ktrk.kg/post/404/kg> accessed: 23.02.2018

38. K. Kalilov, There are about three thousand religious organisations in Kyrgyzstan, KTRC, 28 September 2016, <http://www.ktrk.kg/post/7161/kg>

39. Ibid.

40. <http://www.ktrk.kg/post/8176/kg>

41. S. Idirisov, Some religious workers' bad behaviour is harming religion, KTRC, 18 May 2017, <http://www.ktrk.kg/post/13293/kg>

42. Zhamalbekov, Hijab issue has become a weighty topic, KTRC, 6 September 2017, <http://www.ktrk.kg/birinchi/news/15928/kg>

43. Ibid.

44. Z. Kayipova, There are ten times more madrasas in Kyrgyzstan than in Uzbekistan, KTRC, 12 April 2017, <http://www.ktrk.kg/post/12331/kg>

- **Economy:** related to the country's economy and influencing factors
- **Incidents:** about emergency situations, conflicts
- **Techno blog:** a review of innovations in the world of technology and associated challenges
- **Agent 024:** reports on social problems faced by citizens (claims, complaints)
- **Sport:** sports news
- **Business:** advertising features, innovations and services of companies operating in the local market

The site has a section called 'News Brief', which publishes the most relevant news for the day – about 70 articles from the fields of security, politics, economics, new technologies and religion. The website does not have a separate section for the topic of religion.

The materials concerning religion are divided into the following categories: 1) religion and power/politics, and 2) religion and society.

The website does not have a separate section called 'Religion and Power', however, we used this category to summarise and analyse relevant materials on presidential decrees, orders of the government, religious questions raised by the government, discussions on the law concerning religion and changes to the law, and main decisions and actions of the government. The total number of materials in this category is 19, out of which 15 are news items and 4 are analytical pieces.

The second category covers issues such as public relations, family and children, education and healthcare. The total number of materials in this category is 65, out of which 36 are news items, 18 are analytical pieces and 11 are interviews.

There were three materials concerning religion in the 'Technoblog' section in 2017: 2 news items and 1 analytical piece. There were also 3 materials pertaining to religion in the 'Economics' category in 2017, all analytical.

The main method of searching for news about religion is the search function. It assisted in finding all materials on the topic of religion for 2017, namely, 90 articles comprising local and international news. All were published from 4 January to 24 December 2017. Articles on religion included the opinions of experts such as Kadyr Malikov (four materials), Orozbek Moldaliev (two) and Abdyshukur Narmatov (one).

Qualitative analysis

The majority of materials published on the site are news stories that do not give preference to any of the parties, informing the audience on a particular topic without giving anyone's opinion or using strong emotion. The agency also published materials that are not resonant or sensational.

Materials containing the views of different parties and interviews with several interlocutors were categorised as analytical. It was found that journalists writing for this information agency adhere to the principle of balance of opinions in analytical materials. Providing links to experts' opinions is one of the strengths of the agency's materials. The experts mentioned earlier, as well as others, are cited.

In addition, the website publishes materials based on research. This approach demonstrates the competence of journalists. However, the selected articles do not include references to the research, and do not provide its details and exact data. This arouses suspicion and does not inspire confidence.

Several of the analysed materials refer to a single research report. These were published on 5 December 2017 and are by Anastasia Bengard. The sensational headlines are: 'Only one fifth of imams in madrasas have basic education', 'Nobody knows how many Kyrgyz people abroad study religion' and 'The number of mosques in Kyrgyzstan has grown 100 times after the years of independence'⁴⁵. All articles cite the report *Education of Kyrgyz Citizens in Foreign Islamic Educational Institutions*, yet the authors of the research, or their qualifications and education in the field of religion are not indicated. No data are provided on the main methods of collecting information and no explanations are given for the research report. Yet, the articles have a judgemental tone.

It can be concluded that the *24.kg* news agency publishes mainly news materials, promptly covering events and informing the audience. None of the materials on religion are of a destructive character. Complex analytical articles are based on the experiences and opinions of experts. Weaknesses are related to journalists not providing referencing for the sources of documents and research they are citing in their materials.

45. A. Bengard, Only one fifth of imams in madrasas have basic education, 24.kg, 5 December 2017, https://24.kg/obschestvo/70121_tolko_pyataya_chast_imamov_vmedrese_imeyut_bazovoe_obrazovanie_/; A. Bengard, Nobody knows how many Kyrgyz people abroad study religion, 24.kg, 5 December 2017, https://24.kg/obschestvo/70110_nikto_neznaet_skolko_kyrgyzstantsev_zarubejom_izuchayut_religiyu/; A. Bengard, The number of mosques in Kyrgyzstan has grown 100 times after the years of independence, 24.kg, 5 December 2017, https://24.kg/obschestvo/70109_zagodyi_nezavisimosti_kolichestvo_mechetey_vkyrgyzstane_vyiroslo_v100_raz_/

4. The attitude of youth towards the coverage of religion in the media and its role in the interaction between religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan

A quantitative survey was conducted to obtain representative information about the populations of Bishkek and Osh regarding the coverage of religious issues in the media. The survey was conducted via a questionnaire with 400 respondents (200 in each city), who were randomly chosen.

4.1 Demographic characteristics

The following demographic characteristics were obtained from the participants: gender, age, education level, place of work and place of residence. The demographic indicators of the respondents mostly correspond to Kyrgyzstan's general population.

Age groups were identified based on the age groups of official statistics. The largest proportion of respondents fell in the age group of 16-28 years (n=370, 92.5%), followed by 29-35 years (n=21, 5.25%) and lastly by 36-50 years (n=9, 2.25%) (see Appendix 2).

Active users of internet sources, primarily students and representatives of the academic community, were involved in the survey.

4.2 Sources of information on religion

Respondents were asked to identify their sources of information about religion. In order for the respondents to identify the sources themselves, the questionnaire did not offer any answer options.

Of 400 respondents, 252 (63%) receive their information from internet sources, including websites, such as nasaatmedia.kg, azattyk.org, sputnik.kg and 24.kg, and social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram and Odnoklassniki (Classmates). Forty-seven (11.75%) respondents receive information from religious books and mosques/religious organisations; 14 (3.5%) from TV, newspapers and magazines; and 19 (4.75%) do not receive information on religion at all.

Comparatively, respondents in Bishkek and Osh gave similar answers (see Table 1), with only one insignificant difference: that out of 200 respondents in Osh, 39 (19.5%) receive information via azattyk.org, whereas in Bishkek only 6 respondents out of 200 (3%) obtain their information from this site (see Appendix 2).

The growing number of people using the internet highlights the importance of publishing reliable and objective materials on websites.

Table 1: *Sources of religious information in Bishkek and Osh*

Do not receive	Internet sources, social networks	TV, newspapers, journals, traditional media	Religious books, mosque/religious organisations	Other	Total	No answer	Total
BISHKEK							
10	127	10	21	6	174	26	200
OSH							
9	125	4	26	8	172	28	200
TOTAL							
19	252	14	47	14	346	54	400

4.3 Assessment of the media's coverage of religious issues

Respondents were asked to rate the selected websites, namely azattyk.org, sputnik.kg, ktrk.kg and 24.kg. They evaluated these using a five-point scale according to the following criteria: openness, neutrality, competence and constructiveness.

Bishkek participants rated 24.kg the highest (4.5 points) on all the criteria, followed by sputnik.kg (4.3 points), azattyk.org (4 points), with ktrk.kg receiving the lowest rating (3.4 points). Osh respondents likewise rated 24.kg the highest (4.7 points), followed by sputnik.kg (4.5 points), with azzattyk.org and ktrk.kg receiving the same score (4 points) (see Appendix 2). This clearly shows that respondents in Bishkek and Osh share similar views on popular websites' coverage of religious issues.

4.4 Attitude towards the media's role in the interaction between religion and democracy

Respondents assessed the media's role in the interaction between religion and democracy using a five-point scale (excellent, good, neutral, bad and very bad). Of 400 respondents, 141 (35.2%) rated it as neutral, 79 (19.7%) said it was good, 79 (19.7%) said it was bad, 25 (6.2%) called it very bad, 28 (7%) think it is excellent, 46 (11.5%) found it difficult to answer this question and 2 (0.5%) did not answer (see Appendix 2). This highlights the range of attitudes respondents have towards the media's role in the interaction between religion and democracy.

Respondents were also asked what matters to them when obtaining information about religion, whether it is the subject, general content, presence of experts' opinions or the source. Of 400 respondents, 164 (41%) said they pay attention to the source, 82 (20.5%) to experts' opinions, 79 (19%) to the subject, 11 (2.75%) to the general content, 21 (5.25%) to all of the above and 8 (2%) to other parameters. Thirty-five (8.75%) respondents did not answer this question.

This underlines that the majority of internet users pay attention to the sources of information, choosing certain sites that cover religious issues. Many people receive information about religion from nasaatmedia.kg, as it publishes videos with the participation of Chubak Jalilov. Visitors to the site have the opportunity to ask questions and immediately get answers. The opinions of experts also play an important role, with azattyk.org attracting more experts on religion compared to the other three studied sites.

To the question of whether the media may be the cause of conflict between secular and religious communities, almost half of the respondents (194, 48.5%) said maybe, 72 (18%) said yes, 17 (4.2%) answered no, 97 (24.25%) found it difficult to answer and 18 (4.5%) did not answer. Thus, the majority of respondents believe that the media may be the cause of the conflict between secularism and religiosity.

These data confirm the media's significant role in covering issues of religion and democracy, as the media acts as a kind of bridge between all spheres of social life.

5. Opinions of media representatives in relation to the media's coverage of religion

Seventeen KIs were conducted with representatives of domestic mass media to study the media's role in covering religious issues. A specially developed tool (see Appendix 1) included questions in the following main areas:

- preparing and publishing materials;
- media activities and state policy in the field of religion; and
- media representatives' ideological preferences, attitudes and beliefs.

5.1 Media representatives

The respondents included:

- 1 representative of the Trade Union of Media Workers in the Southern Region;
- 1 *Akipress* journalist in Osh;
- 1 *Akipress* journalist in Bishkek;
- 1 *Radio Azattyk* regional correspondent in Osh;
- 2 editors-in-chief of *Radio Azattyk* in Bishkek;
- 2 *Radio Azattyk* journalists in Bishkek;
- 1 *Asia TV* journalist;
- 2 KTRC journalists;
- 2 former KTRC journalists;
- 2 *Birinchi Radio* journalists;
- 1 BBC correspondent; and
- 1 *Maral FM* radio journalist.

5.2 Preparing and publishing materials

It was found that the procedure of preparing materials is based on common standards and principles of journalism. It was also found that editorial teams carefully examine and analyse materials before publication.

Radio Azattyk journalists noted that, unlike in other mass media outlets, a specialist in the field of religion (theologian) works in their editorial offices. The process of preparing materials for publication takes a long time, as all legal and journalistic aspects have to be checked. One journalist said that it takes at least a month or longer to prepare a piece on religion, as it is a very delicate and sensitive topic and requires in-depth study. Compliance with the basic principles of journalism, namely, citizens' right to reliable information, objective coverage of events and professional integrity of journalists, is likewise ensured.⁴⁶

Interviewed journalists overall believe that ensuring balance is one of the most important criteria and principles of their jobs.⁴⁷ One journalist stressed that it is important not to allow any discrimination on religious or other grounds.

46. Interview, 22 March 2018

47. Interview, 27 March 2018

Representatives of Radio Azattyk also note the importance of journalists protecting human rights when covering any topics, especially religious ones.

*"My main goal is to maintain balance and respect the rights of all participants in discussions on religious topics. If a person has a certain point of view in relation to a particular religion, we try to cover it accurately, because religion is a human right."*⁴⁸

While emphasising the golden rule of maintaining balance, all respondents highlighted the need to observe the principle of comprehensiveness, but did not deny that sometimes, when discussing sensitive issues of religion, they have a desire to voice their own beliefs and preferences. However, the general principles of journalism and the organisation they work for do not allow them to do so.

It was also found that some journalists research the issues they are covering using scientific methodologies. The former journalist KTRC said:

*"I rely on scientific methodologies. What is science? It is research, analysis and reflection. The most important thing is that the information is reliable... Objectivity presupposes authenticity: whether a journalist likes it or not, he must provide it. This is the principle of objectivity. To invite an expert to an interview and publish their opinions is not an objectivity, but a tool."*⁴⁹

Journalists also mentioned they obtain reliable information from the press service of the State Committee for National Security. The journalist of Maral FM radio disclosed:

*"During the preparation of materials on religion, radio journalists use press releases from the press service of the State National Security Committee. Employees of the press service send daily materials relating to religion... They give us messages, such as the Oktyabrsky District Court's conclusion is that the Yakin Inkar religious organisation is extremist. We find out from what year the organisation illegally carries out its activities, etc., and then release the material."*⁵⁰

A representative of Radio Azattyk said that since 2014, he has been covering issues of Islam, identifying the causes of its radicalisation and the factors relating to the radicalisation of the populations of the Fergana Valley, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, as well as those leaving for Russia and Ukraine. The materials are mostly documentary and all posted on azattyk.kg. About 80% of its programmes are dedicated to ordinary people, including relatives of those who left for Iraq and Syria.

*"We have to overcome difficulties and trials in order to fulfil the main task - to convey to the society and the state not only reliable information, but also the results of in-depth analysis."*⁵¹

The KTRC, *Radio Azattyk*, *Birinchi Radio* and *Asia TV* have their own sections on religion. In addition, some media outlets conduct training and seminars in order to ensure journalists are competent in covering religious issues. However, some journalists pointed out that there are significant gaps in the coverage of religious subjects, such as non-observance of the basic principles of journalism and violation of the Code of Ethics of Journalists (see section 3).

It was also revealed that each media outlet is guided by its own principles. For example, *Radio Azattyk* mainly focuses on the preservation of secularism. The KTRC places a significant emphasis on the role of state policy in the sphere of religion, as also evidenced by the results of the content analysis (see section 3.2). Thus, despite the existence of basic standards and principles of journalism, each media outlet has its own approaches to covering issues of religion.

48. Editor-in-chief, Radio Azattyk, interview, Bishkek, 27 March 2018

49. Journalist, interview, 27.03.2018

50. Journalist, Maral FM radio, interview, Bishkek, 12.03.2018

51. Journalist, Radio Azattyk, interview, 27.03.2018

Media representatives noted that experts seek to uncover the most important issues pertaining to religion. For example, the KTRC often invites representatives of the *muftiyat*, the State Committee for Religious Affairs and other well-known experts in the field to participate in discussions.

Most KII participants repeatedly called attention to the extremely small number of journalists covering religious issues and being experts in the field. According to estimates, these comprise 4-5% of the total number of journalists in Kyrgyzstan.

It should also be noted that as the state has indicated the main direction of the media's work in the Concept of the State Policy on Religion, domestic media should use it as a starting point when covering religious issues. In general, the situation of domestic journalism in covering religious issues seems unsatisfactory. The main reason for this is the lack of specialists on religion among journalists.

5.3 Media's dependence on state policy in the field of religion

Respondents were asked to what extent does the state policy influence mass media when covering religious issues. No common opinion was found among media representatives on this matter. Many are convinced that journalism should be independent and free from the influence of government policy and political forces. Others emphasised that the media should not go beyond the framework of the country's Constitution and not violate legal acts for the sake of state security.

KTRC representatives emphasised that it is necessary to take into account state policy in the field of religion in materials on this topic.

Other types of media in Kyrgyzstan, for example, international non-commercial media, do not depend on government policy. A representative of *Radio Azattyk* stressed that "any media should be above government policy, adhering to the basic principles of journalism".⁵²

Some journalists pointed out that after the adoption of the Concept of the State Policy on Religion in 2014,⁵³ which defines one of the areas (*madhhabs*)⁵⁴ of Islam, local media outlets, regardless of their mission, started paying attention to the religious situation in the country and religion in general. However, it also emerged that despite the adoption of the Concept, journalists, in some cases, do not adhere to it sufficiently. According to a Radio Azattyk representative, "despite the measures taken by the state, journalists and the owners of some media outlets do not pay attention, simply do not see the difference between the four Islamic madhhabs".⁵⁵

One participant believes that the media is directly dependent on government policy. "Now journalists are compiling materials based on press releases, without even editing them," he explains.⁵⁶ Representatives of some media outlets mentioned that they take information mainly from press releases of government agencies, as they believe it is the most reliable source. The same participant added:

52. Chief editor, Radio Azattyk, interview, Bishkek, 26.03.2018

53. Concept of the State Policy of Kyrgyzstan on Religion for the period of 2014-2020, Ministry of Justice of Kyrgyzstan, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/68294>, accessed 12.04.2018

54. A madhhab is a school of thought within fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). In the first 150 years of Islam, there were numerous madhahib, most of which no longer exist or have merged with other schools.

55. Chief editor, Radio Azattyk, interview, Bishkek, 27 March 2018

56. Interview of the former journalist KTRC, Bishkek, 26 March 2018

"A journalist should have three basic principles: informing, analysing and understanding. Unfortunately, these principles do not work for today's journalists. There is no competence. The model of Western journalism has ruined the taste of consumers of information. To get out of this situation, we must form our national journalism, that is, create an institution that would highlight the national values of the peoples of Kyrgyzstan, and not any religion or interests. Here I would like to state that there was journalism in the times of the Soviet Union that preserved these values." ⁵⁷

The influence of such factors as self-censorship should also be highlighted. According to journalists, there are two issues in this regard: 1) the probability of publishing incorrect information, and 2) intense reactions to material by religious figures and their followers. There have even been cases when followers have beaten journalists for criticising their religious leaders and organisations.

It was also noted that some materials on the topic of religion use photographs, quotes and statements, as well as terms such as 'extremism', 'fanaticism' and 'terror' when discussing the concepts of Islam that disturb people and provide an inaccurate portrayal of the religion.

The above suggests that the media in Kyrgyzstan should adapt modern journalistic models, taking into account the historical stages of the development of domestic journalism, the national and traditional values of the peoples of Kyrgyzstan, as well as the country's complex history. Only then can domestic journalism establish a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy. Meanwhile, a KTRC representative believes that the establishment of such a dialogue is possible with the active assistance of the state, civil society and the media, and with the close cooperation of law enforcement and national security agencies.

5.4 Ideological preferences, views and beliefs

Journalists need to approach the coverage of religious subjects delicately in order to not offend believers, for whom faith may be more important than life itself. The research aimed to uncover how dependent media representatives are on their beliefs and attitudes when reporting on religious issues. Do journalists' ideological preferences make them suitable for covering religious issues?

Media representatives were found to be inclined to the basic principles of journalism in their work. In certain cases, editorial policy must be respected. A journalist-editor said that the basic principles of journalism should not be violated when preparing materials.

"Working on the material, I have no right to impose my opinion, beliefs, ideological preferences. My experience in the media is a total of 25 years. During this time, such basic principles as impartiality, objectivity and observance of equal rights have taken a root in me, and I adhere to them when covering religious issues." ⁵⁸

Another journalist holds a similar opinion: "There are three main world religions: Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. If a journalist broadcasts about these religions, he should try not to take sides that he considers closer to him." ⁵⁹

Another media representative spoke along the same lines: "My position may play a role in my social circle, but not in my profession. I can use my ideological preferences at home, but I am a journalist at work." ⁶⁰

57. Ibid.

58. Azattyk chief editor, interview date 27. 03. 2018

59. Ibid

60. Azzattyk journalist. Interview date 26.03.2018

It should be noted that since gaining independence there has been a vacuum of ideology in the country regarding its many institutions. "There is no ideology in our country, we know this, therefore the media is not guided by ideological preferences," journalists say. Currently, many local journalists work on sensational materials to increase their income and improve the rating of their publications. This is also due to the absence of ideology. Media outlets are able to prioritise their preferences, including sensational news, to attract a wide range of readers as it is commercially beneficial.

Overall, journalists believe that the absence of ideological preferences among their publications demands that they remain impartial and in no case impose their personal opinions and beliefs. In addition, religion is a challenging topic that requires sensitivity in coverage.

6. Conclusions

The media plays an important role in Kyrgyzstan, in a context where the religious sphere is influenced by the challenges and threats of globalisation, including the tendency to spread various radical religious ideologies. Media is also important during the formation of democratic values and institutions.

Based on the findings, the following conclusions can be made regarding media coverage of religious issues in the process of building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan.

1. The websites selected for the content analysis (azattyk.org, ktrk.kg and 24.kg) cover issues such as state policy in the sphere of religion; education and religion; the religious situation in the country; national security (namely, extremism, radicalism, terrorism, the Syrian conflict); religious organisations; and human rights.
2. Radio Azattyk most adheres to the principles of secularism and democracy in its coverage of religion. Specifically, its materials analyse the causes and factors of extremism, terrorism and radicalism, as well as the causes, factors and consequences of sending Kyrgyz people to Syria to participate in hostilities. A number of materials touch on the main directions of the Concept of the State Policy on Religion, namely, state regulation of religious organisations' activities, religious studies and religious education. Most of the analysed materials (77.5%) are analytical, which indicates competence and professionalism of journalists. News items comprise 16.6% and the remaining 5.9% are blogs. A larger proportion of those surveyed in Osh (19.5%) read materials on Radio Azattyk compared to Bishkek (3%). In general, Radio Azattyk representatives comply with the norms of the Code of Ethics of Journalists of Kyrgyzstan, as well as the basic principles of journalism. Of the three selected websites, azattyk.org attracts experts on religion more frequently. Disadvantages include mainly non-compliance with the provisions of Articles 10 and 17 of the Code of Ethics.
3. The KTRC website publishes a significant proportion of materials (26.2%) relating to the state policy in the sphere of religion. This is primarily because the KTRC is state-owned media carrying out public service broadcasting. News items dominate the ktrk.kg website, comprising 65.5%, followed by analytical materials (29.7%). This indicates a low level of competence of its journalists in matters of religion. KTRC journalists were also found to violate basic norms of journalism. Only six (1.5%) respondents from those surveyed in Bishkek and Osh receive information on religion from the KTRC. Audiences of confessional media do not receive a complete picture of the place and role of religion in modern Kyrgyz society from publications of secular press.
4. The news agency 24.kg mostly puts out news, but also some analytical pieces. Journalists adhere to the principle of balance of opinions when preparing analytical articles. Links to expert opinion is also a strength of the materials on this site. Some articles are based on results of certain studies, with this method indicating the competence of journalists. Ten (4%) respondents receive information on religion from this source.
5. The majority of respondents (63%) receive information on the topic of religion from internet sources. Respondents pay attention to the source itself, choosing certain sites where materials on religion are published. The opinions of experts also play an important role. It was found that information on Islam is commonly received from video materials on nasaatmedia.kg. Information about religion is also sourced from books, magazines and the mosque. Only 3% of respondents receive information on religion from television. The majority of respondents in Osh read materials about religion in Kyrgyz, while in Bishkek it is in Russian.
6. The majority of respondents (48.5%) believe that the media can establish a constructive dialogue on or, conversely, cause conflict between secularism and religiosity. This confirms the media's significant role in the coverage of religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan.

7. All KII participants mentioned that basic principles and standards of journalism should be adhered to when covering issues of religion. Each media outlet was, however, found to have its own approach to such materials. The participating journalists also believe that it is very important for reliable information to be used in materials on religious issues. Some said that they consider the State Committee for National Security's press releases as a reliable source.
8. All KII participants believe that the personal convictions and views of journalists should not be reflected in their materials. In certain cases, the media outlet's editorial policy must be respected. Journalists explain the focus on sensational materials by the lack of ideology and the desire to increase a publication's revenue and ratings.
9. Journalists do not share a common opinion about the media's dependence on state policy. Some believe that the media should be independent and outside the influence of state policy and political forces, adhering to the long-standing basic principles of journalism. Others think that domestic media is entirely dependent on government policy. It was also found that local media outlets, regardless of their missions, started paying attention to the religious situation in the country and religion in general after the adoption of the Concept of the State Policy on Religion in 2014.
10. Domestic media needs to adapt modern journalistic models, taking into account the historical stages of the development of national journalism, the national and traditional values of the peoples of Kyrgyzstan, as well as the country's history. KII participants believe that only in this case can domestic journalism establish a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy. In addition, building this dialogue is possible with the active assistance of the state, civil society, the media, and with the close cooperation of law enforcement and national security agencies.
11. The number of experts on religion is extremely small among journalists in Kyrgyzstan: only 4-5% of the total. Some media outlets conduct training and seminars to ensure the competence of journalists in covering religious issues.

Appendices

Appendix 1: KII questions

1. What is your assessment of the media's role in covering religious issues, as well as in building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy?
2. As a media representative, how do you assess and characterise trends in the coverage of religious issues in Kyrgyzstan?
3. To what extent does the media depend on the state policy in the sphere of religion in covering religious issues?
4. What is the place of religion in your organisation? If it occupies a certain place, what is it connected with?
5. How often do you cover religious issues? What is the reason for this? When preparing materials on religion, do you refer to the legal acts of the state?
6. Can you talk about the procedure of preparing materials on religion before publication? Does your organisation have rules and regulations relating specifically to the coverage of religious issues?
7. How dependent are media representatives on their beliefs and attitudes when covering religion?
8. Are there any ideological preferences of media representatives when covering issues of religion?
9. How do you maintain balance between religion and democracy when covering issues of religion in a secular state?
10. Do you think modern journalists are competent enough in matters of religion to publish materials on this topic? Do mass media representatives undergo special training (seminars, trainings, exchange of experience, etc.) to provide high-quality coverage of religious issues?
11. Over the past five years, what has changed in the coverage of religious subjects and what are the features of materials on religious issues?

Appendix 2: Survey results

Bishkek

Age group of respondents	Number	%
16–28	186	93
29–35	12	6
36–50	2	1
Total	200	100

Osh

Age group of respondents	Number	%
16–28	184	92
29–35	9	4.5
36–50	7	3.5
Total	200	100

From which media source do you get most of your information on religion?

Bishkek		Number	%	Actual %
Do not receive		10	5	5.7
Internet sites		53	26.5	30.5
Social networks		18	9	10.3
TV		6	3	3.4
nasaatmedia.kg		34	17	19.5
azattyk.kg		6	3	3.4
sputnik.kg		2	1	1.1
24.kg		3	1.5	1.7
ktrk.kg		2	1	1.1
Journals, newspapers		2	1	1.1
Religious books		17	8.5	9.8
Other		6	3	3.4
muftiyat.kg		9	4.5	5.2
The mosque		4	2	2.3
EITV		2	1	1.1
Sub-total		174	87	100
No answer		26	13	
Total		200	100	

Osh		Number	%	Actual %
Do not receive		9	4.5	5.2
Internet sites		34	17	19.8
Social networks		7	3.5	4.1
TV		3	1.5	1.7
nasaatmedia.kg		22	11	12.8
azattyk.kg		39	19.5	22.7
sputnik.kg		10	5	5.8
24.kg		7	3.5	4.1
ktrk.kg		4	2	2.3
Osh TV		1	0.5	0.6
Religious books		25	12.5	14.5
Other		7	3.5	4.1
Different sources		1	0.5	0.6
muftiyat.kg		2	1	1.2
Daavat		1	0.5	0.6
Sub-total		172	86	100
No answer		28	14	
Total		200	100	

BISHKEK

What's your assessment of the coverage of religious issues on www.ktrk.kg in terms of the following attributes?

	Openness (N)	Neutrality (N)	Competence (N)	Constructivism (N)
Number	200	200	200	200
Average score	3.37	3.39	3.55	3.38

What's your assessment of the coverage of religious issues on www.azattyk.kg in terms of the following attributes?

	Openness (N)	Neutrality (N)	Competence (N)	Constructivism (N)
Number	200	198	200	200
Average score	4.05	3.79	3.89	3.99

What's your assessment of the coverage of religious issues on www.sputnik.kg in terms of the following attributes?

	Openness (N)	Neutrality (N)	Competence (N)	Constructivism (N)
Number	200	200	200	200
Average score	4.32	4.26	4.20	4.31

What's your assessment of the coverage of religious issues on www.24.kg in terms of the following attributes?

	Openness (N)	Neutrality (N)	Competence (N)	Constructivism (N)
Number	200	200	200	200
Average score	4.41	4.49	4.51	4.43

OSH

What's your assessment of the coverage of religious issues on www.ktrk.kg in terms of the following attributes?

	Openness (N)	Neutrality (N)	Competence (N)	Constructivism (N)
Number	200	200	200	200
Average score	3.96	3.98	4.00	4.18

What's your assessment of the coverage of religious issues on www.azattyk.kg in terms of the following attributes?

	Openness (N)	Neutrality (N)	Competence (N)	Constructivism (N)
Number	200	200	200	200
Average score	4.27	3.97	4.17	3.96

What's your assessment of the coverage of religious issues on www.sputnik.kg in terms of the following attributes?

	Openness (N)	Neutrality (N)	Competence (N)	Constructivism (N)
Number	200	200	200	200
Average score	4.55	4.48	4.50	4.60

What's your assessment of the coverage of religious issues on www.24.kg in terms of the following attributes?

	Openness (N)	Neutrality (N)	Competence (N)	Constructivism (N)
Number	200	200	200	200
Average score	4.78	4.69	4.72	4.73

BISHKEK

	Assess by scale (influence of media by character), what is the media's role in the interaction between religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan?	Assess by scale (influence of media by level), what is the media's role in the interaction between religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan?
Number	200	200
Average score	3.28	3.58

Assess by scale (influence of media by character), what is the media's role in the interaction between religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan?

	Number	%	Actual %	Accumulated %
Very bad	14	7	7	7
Bad	8	4	4	11
Think that bad	24	12	12	23
Neutral	76	38	38	61
Good	44	22	22	83
Excellent	8	4	4	87
Difficult to answer	26	13	13	100
Total	200	100	100	

Assess by scale (influence of media by level), what is the media's role in the interaction between religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan?

	Number	%	Actual %	Accumulated %
Very bad	12	6	6	6
Bad	8	4	4	10
Think that bad	14	7	7	17
Neutral	79	39.5	39.5	56.5
Good	33	16.5	16.5	73
Excellent	14	7	7	80
Difficult to answer	40	20	20	100
Total	200	100	100	

OSH

	Assess by scale (influence of media by character), what is the media's role in the interaction between religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan?	Assess by scale (influence of media by level), what is the media's role in the interaction between religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan?
Number	198	198
No answer	2	2
Average score	3.23	3.41

Assess by scale (influence of media by character), what is the media's role in the interaction between religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan?

	Number	%	Actual %	Accumulated %
Very bad	11	5.5	5.6	5.6
Bad	10	5	5.1	10.7
Think that bad	37	18.5	18.7	29.4
Neutral	65	32.5	32.8	62.2
Good	35	17.5	17.7	79.9
Excellent	20	10	10.1	90
Difficult to answer	20	10	10.1	100
Sub-total	198	99	100	
No answer	2	1		
Total	200	100		

Assess by scale (influence of media by level), what is the media's role in the interaction between religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan?

	Number	%	Actual %	Accumulated %
Very bad	8	4	4	4
Bad	4	2	2	6
Think that bad	37	18.5	18.7	24.7
Neutral	77	38.5	38.9	63.6
Good	26	13	13.1	76.7
Excellent	13	6.5	6.6	83.3
Difficult to answer	33	16.5	16.7	100
Sub-total	198	99	100	
No answer	2	1		
Total	200	100		

BISHKEK

What matters to you when it comes to materials on religion?

	Number	%	Actual %	Accumulated %
Source	77	38.5	41.4	41.4
Subject	49	24.5	26.3	67.7
General content	6	3	3.2	70.9
Experts' opinions	44	22	23.7	94.6
All of the above	10	5	5.4	100
Sub-total	186	93	100	
No answer	14	7		
Total	200	100		

OSH

	Number	%	Actual %	Accumulated %
Source	87	43.5	48.6	48.6
Subject	30	15	16.8	65.4
General content	5	2.5	2.8	68.2
Experts' opinions	38	19	21.2	89.4
All of the above	11	5.5	6.1	95.5
Other	8	4	4.5	100
Sub-total	179	89.5	100	
No answer	21	10.5		
Total	200	100		

BISHKEK

Do you think the media is a possible cause of conflict between secular and religious communities?

	Number	%	Actual %	Accumulated %
No	10	5	5.5	5.5
Maybe	88	44	48.1	53.6
Yes	48	24	26.2	79.8
Difficult to say	35	17.5	19.1	98.9
4	2	1	1.1	100
Sub-total	183	91.5	100	
No answer	17	8.5		
Total	200	100		

OSH

	Number	%	Actual %	Accumulated %
No	7	3.5	3.5	3.5
Maybe	106	53	53.3	56.8
Yes	24	12	12.1	68.9
Difficult to say	62	31	31.2	100.0
Sub-total	199	99.5	100	
No answer	1	0.5		
Total	200	100		

4

Interrelations between religious organisations
and local self-government:
Reasons and content of potential influence
of religious organisations on decision-making
processes at local level – practices
in Chui and Talas oblasts of the Kyrgyz Republic

Research team:

A. Dmitrienko, S. Sataeva, K.M. Suran, K.A. Tumyr

Mentor:

Dr. Ikbaljan Mirsaitov, (kandidat nauk in Political science)

Summary

"We know the actions of many reasons, but we do not know the reasons for many actions."

**Charles Caleb Colton, 1780-1832,
English writer and priest**

This report is based on the results of a study conducted from December 2017 to May 2018 as part of International Alert's project 'Constructive dialogues on religion and democracy'. The aim of the project is to support open public dialogue and discussion on the issues of freedom of religion and belief, the role of religion in people's lives, the relationship between the state and religious institutions, and state policy regarding religions. The project is implemented with the financial support of the Delegation of the European Union in Kyrgyzstan. The project partner is the Lyman Public Foundation under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic.

The study was carried out in accordance with the agreed methodology. It analysed normative legal acts, publications and materials from open sources, as well as qualitative and quantitative data obtained as part of the study.

Based on the data obtained during the study, the following findings are highlighted:

- All interviewed local self-government officials interact with religious organisations within the framework of their existing authorities. In a number of villages, there are public committees (platforms) for religious affairs under the leadership of the heads of local self-government bodies (LSGBs). Representatives of local authorities, members of the local community and religious leaders participate in these committees. As a rule, these platforms are used to discuss and develop mechanisms to counter radicalism and extremism, prevent interfaith conflicts and organise activities to promote tolerance.
- The issues of budget allocation and allocation of land plots are the most contentious ones in interactions between local governments and religious organisations. The results of this study indicate that one of the key factors influencing the decision-making process on these issues is the professional qualities of the decision maker.
- Based on the results of this study, targeted recommendations have been developed. A key recommendation is the need to increase the capacity of local government bodies in interactions with non-profit organisations in general and religious organisations in particular.

It is intended that the conclusions and recommendations outlined in this study will also help to inform further research.

Abbreviations

AA	– Ayil Aimak (territorial-administrative division of local self-governments)
AO	– Ayil Okmotu [local self-government body]
SAKM	– Spiritual Administration of Kyrgyzstan Muslims
LNA	– Legal Normative Act
LSGB	– Local self-government body
MIA	– Ministry of Internal Affairs
NCO	– Non-commercial organisation
SALSGIER	– State Agency for Local Self-Government and Inter-Ethnic Relations
SCRA	– State Commission for Religious Affairs
SCNS	– State Committee for National Security

Definitions

Local self-government	– independent activities of the local community in their own interests and under their responsibility, aimed at resolving issues of local importance
Decision making	– a process of analysing information, the result of which is devising a solution to a problem
Proselyte	– a person who has adopted a new religion

1. Introduction

In modern society, religion exists in several spheres. Firstly, there is the private religious sphere, which is largely determined by religious consciousness. Secondly, religion serves as the basis for cultural and citizen identity, as a cultural tradition. Lastly, religion exists in terms of the authority and legitimacy of religious organisations, state-church relations, the specifics of which are also influenced by ideas about religion in society.

The interaction between religious life and public life represents one of the urgent issues facing many states today, since religious organisations still have a significant impact on society. Numerous previous studies support this claim.

A considerable body of literature already exists focusing on this topic, with researchers and politicians both interested in the issue of interaction between the state and religious organisations. However, due to ongoing changes in society, this topic can never be completely exhausted.

This study focuses on local decision-making process and the role of religious organisations in this process. Decision-making processes are central to the management activities of both individual organisations and the overall state, since they largely determine the nature of the activity and its potential impact.

The significance of this topic was illustrated in the recent plenary session of the Jogorku Kenesh, at which the deputies elected judges of the Supreme Court. This meeting resonated widely with the public in Kyrgyzstan, clearly demonstrating the deputies' concern with religion and repeated references to God¹ rather than the law in their decisions, despite the fact that Kyrgyzstan is a secular state according to its Constitution.² It highlights how in Kyrgyzstan there is a high probability of mixing politics with religion.

In particular, this study examines the relationship between local government and religious organisations. This is an important topic, as employees of local self-government bodies (*ayil okmotu*, AOs) who are responsible for dealing with the public must be competent in a wide range of issues, since people often seek advice first from local self-government bodies.

-
1. One of the questions put to the candidates was 'Are you not afraid of God?' Article 32 of the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic states that "no one can be forced to express or renounce their religious and other beliefs"; At the meeting, it was decided to abandon the lunch break, in connection with the holy month of Ramadan. This decision is contrary to the legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic. According to Article 110 of the Labour Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, "the employee must be given a break for rest and food for at least 30 minutes and no more than one hour in the aggregate, which is not included during working hours"; The following statements were made at the meeting: "take an oath on the Quran", "send judges to daavat in the regions". A recording of the meeting can be found on the official channel of April-TV on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MoZyX541wl8>
 2. According to the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, (Kyrgyzstan) is a sovereign, democratic, legal, secular, unitary, social state. Separation of religious organisations from the state is a fundamental norm of a secular state, one of the guarantees of freedom of conscience. This rule means that:
 - the state does not impose on religious organisations the performance of the functions of state bodies, other state bodies, state institutions and local self-government bodies;
 - the state does not interfere in the activities of religious organisations if they do not contradict the legislation;
 - it ensures the secular nature of education in public educational institutions;
 - religious organisations can create their structure and conduct their activities in accordance with their own structure;
 - religious organisations do not participate in elections of government bodies and local governments;
 - religious organisations do not participate in the activities of political parties and political movements, do not provide them with material or other assistance.

Today, the issue of developing a specific national model for interaction between religious organisations and the state is becoming increasingly topical – a model that would allow for cooperation, but also pluralism of opinion and freedom of religion. By building relationships with religious organisations properly, heads of local administrations can play an important role in the effective management and development of issues affecting the local population.

According to data from the WIN/Gallup International, almost three quarters of the population (72%) of Kyrgyzstan are believers.³ Given that "the majority of the population are Muslims⁴ in the Kyrgyz Republic", the nature of interaction between state bodies and Islamic organisations and associations is of particular relevance. In addition, the increased number of mosques in the country should be noted. Given the increase in the number of religious organisations, it is likely that their potential influence on the decision-making process may also increase. According to Erlan Bakiyev of the 10th Main Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs: "in 2016, 2,743 mosques were active in the Kyrgyz Republic, while there were only 39 in the Soviet period."⁵

Despite the positive trends in cultural and socio-economic life – such as the creation of interfaith dialogue platforms, the organisation of charity events and events dedicated to the unity of the people – the religious situation in the Kyrgyz Republic also has problematic aspects related to the influence of religious organisations. Various examples of the influence of religious leaders and organisations can be cited. In 2016, for instance, the mufti of Kyrgyzstan banned early marriages.⁶ In the same year, a resonant burial of a proselyte took place in Ala-Buka district (a woman's body was reburied three times).⁷

3. The WIN/Gallup International Association has compiled a rating based on three surveys conducted in 2008, 2009 and 2015. Respondents answered the question whether they consider themselves religious or not. See article: Named the most religious country in Central Asia - rating, 25 January 2018, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/asia/20180125/1037407430/nazvana-samaya-religioznaya-strana-v-centralnoj-azii.html>

4. According to a study conducted by the ISAP KRSU, "81.2% consider themselves Muslims, 7.5% are Orthodox Christians and 12.3% are adherents of others, mostly new to the republic, religions and religious movements", <http://www.nisi.kg/93-ekspertnoe-mnenie/222-sub-ektivnye-storony-religioznosti-naseleniya-kyrgyzstana.html>

5. For 26 years, the number of mosques in Kyrgyzstan has increased 70 times - the Ministry of Internal Affairs, article from 22 November 2016, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/Kyrgyzstan/20161121/1030394466/za-gody-nezavisimosti-kr-chislo-mechetej-vyroslo-v-70-raz-mvd.html>

6. The Mufti of Kyrgyzstan issued a fatwa on banning early marriages, article from 22 December 2016, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28191065.html>

7. From Republican newspaper Business №, <http://delo.kg/index.php/2011-08-04-18-06-28/10456-telo-i-delo-umershej-baptistki>

2. Research overview

The main objective of this research was to examine the potential influence of religious organisations on the decision-making process in local self-government – both in terms of its causes and features, such as the types of management decisions that religious organisations can potentially influence. The research also sought to develop recommendations for stakeholders, including state and municipal authorities, along with non-commercial organisations (NCOs).

The focus of this particular study was on the activities of Islamic religious organisations in Chui and Talas oblasts in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Management decision making is quite an ambiguous process and is largely influenced by a variety of factors – both objective (situational) factors and subjective (personal) factors, such as the personality of the decision maker and their psychological characteristics. In the framework of this study, it would be virtually impossible to study the personal aspects of decision-makers in local self-government bodies that may influence the decision-making process. Thus, the focus was instead placed on the nature of situational factors, to help determine in which cases religious organisational influence is possible.

One cannot discuss the role of religious organisations in public life without looking at society itself, that is, its citizens and groups of citizens. Society is made up of both citizens of the state and members of religious associations or supporters of non-religious views. Moreover, society is one of the most important external factors influencing the decision-making process.

This study looked at the interaction of religious organisations and their role in the decision-making process on a number of levels:

- 1) state (representing itself and municipal bodies);
- 2) society (as a decision-making environment);
- 3) identity (as part of the local community).

2.1 Study locations

Chui and Talas oblasts in the Kyrgyz Republic were selected as the study locations as they are the least analysed areas. Most studies on religion are carried out in the southern region of Kyrgyzstan.

Within these two regions, the following locations were selected through random sampling.

Table 1: *Locations selected for study*

Talas oblast	Chui oblast
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talas town • Talas rayon: Kok -Oi • Bakai-Ata rayon: Bakai-Ata, Ak-Dobo, Ак-Добо • Kara-Buura rayon: Kyzyl-Adyr, Amanbaeva • Manas rayon: Pokrovka 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bishkek city, Tokmok, Kant, Kara -Balta towns • Jayil rayon – Kara-Balta town • Moskovskiy rayon – Belovodskoe, Alexandrovka, Sadovoe, Petrovka • Sokuluk rayon – Sokuluk, Verhniy Orok, Voенno-Antonovka • Alamudun rayon – Lebedinovka, Maevka, Leninskoe, Kara-Djygach, Kok-Djar, Baitik, Grozd • Chui rayon – Burana ayil okmotu, Iskra. • Yssyk-Ata rayon – Luxemburg, Tokmok and Kant towns • Kemin rayon – Kyzyl Oktaybr

2.2 Methods

The study involved both desk research and field research. The desk review analysed the following documents:

- the Legal Normative Act (LNA) regulating the authorities of local self-government bodies, as well as interaction issues between religious organisations and state and municipal bodies;
- reports of state bodies and research on issues of interaction between religious organisations and the state (represented by state and municipal bodies) and society;
- media reports describing incidents of religious organisations or leaders influencing decision making.

As part of the field research, interviews and survey questionnaires were conducted with a total of 379 respondents, including the following individuals:

- 11 experts on religion (religious experts, government employees, university lecturers);
- 20 religious workers (imams), of whom 4 were based in Talas oblast and 16 in Chui oblast;
- representatives of 20 AOs – of these, 6 were located in Talas oblast (in Kok-Oi, Bakai-Ata, Ak-Dobo, Kyzyl-Adyr, Amanbaeva and Pokrovka) and 14 of Chui oblast (in Belovodskoe, Sadovoe, Alexandrovka, Sokuluk, Orok, Kok-Djar, Kara-Djagach, Maevka, Lebedinovka, Grozd, Baituk, Luxemburg, Burana and Kyzyl-Oktaybr).

Gaining an insight into people's opinions on the situation in the religious sphere was important for this study. While a smaller proportion of the population are members of various religious organisations, the media appears to shape the opinions of the majority. However, their opinion may reflect the most common positions regarding religious matters in Kyrgyzstan and regarding the interaction between the state and religious organisations.

In terms of the survey part of this study, questionnaires were issued in the cities of Bishkek and Talas to study public opinion on issues such as the interaction of religious organisations with state bodies and with the population. A total of 145 respondents took part in the survey:

- 57 persons from Talas oblast (40%);
- 88 persons from Chui oblast (60%).

The survey sought to assess public awareness about the activities of various religious organisations, as well as to obtain information about the activities of religious organisations in the field in the above-mentioned localities.

A total of 234 respondents took part in the personal interviews, for which respondents were selected randomly:

- 90 from Talas oblast (38%);
- 144 from the Chui oblast (62%).

The main results of the study are categorised according to three main themes:

- religion and state;
- religion and society;
- religion and personal identity.

The first and major theme focuses on interaction of state and municipal bodies with the religious organisations. Research for this theme was based mainly on analysis of regulatory legal acts as well as the results of the field research in Chui and Talas oblasts. For the second and third theme, an attempt was made to analyse the management's decision-making environment.

3. Research results

3.1 Religion and state

Overview of state policy on religion in the Kyrgyz Republic

The Kyrgyz Republic is a secular and democratic state, giving equal rights to representatives of various religious faiths to conduct their activities, owing to the diversity of people living in this country. This right was adopted on the basis of a referendum held on 27 June 2010 and the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic 'On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organisations'. It is further enshrined in the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic. This right provided fertile ground for the growth of various religious institutions, including the development of religious public foundations and religious educational institutions in the country.

The principle of the secular state does not mean that religion is separate from society. The main document regulating relations in the religious sphere is the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, which directly prohibits discrimination on any grounds, including religion or belief. The Constitution guarantees all human rights and freedoms for every person, regardless of their attitude to religion, allowing the right to freedom of choice and the right to adhere to religious and other beliefs, as well as freedom to express such beliefs.

According to the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic:

- No religion can be established as a state or compulsory religion in the Kyrgyz Republic (Art. 7);
- Religion and all cults are deemed separate from the state (Art. 7);
- Interference of religious associations and clergy in the activities of state bodies is prohibited (Art. 7);
- Propaganda on grounds of national, ethnic, racial, religious hatred, gender and other social superiority that calls for discrimination, hostility or violence is prohibited (Art. 31);
- Every citizen is guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion (Art. 32);
- Every citizen has the right to profess, individually or together with others, any religion or not to profess any (Art. 32);
- Every citizen has the right to freely choose and have religious and other convictions (Art. 32);
- No one may be forced to express or reject their religious or other beliefs (Art. 32).

The Law 'On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organisations in the Kyrgyz Republic' guarantees the right to freedom of religion and the right to atheistic beliefs (Art. 18). These rights correspond to the country's Constitution, adopted in a referendum in 2010, as well as the provisions of international human rights treaties of the United Nations (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Convention on the Rights of the Child). Any coercion is prohibited in citizens' determination of their attitudes to religion, in professing or disfavoursing a religion, in participating or not participating in worship services, religious rites and ceremonies, and in teaching religion.

The Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic on Religion for 2014-2020 (hereafter 'the Concept') is the basic document describing the state policy strategy in the sphere of religion. The Concept outlines the official vision regarding the state goals and measures required to implement the priorities of the 'Optimisation of state-religious and interfaith relations' section of the National Sustainable Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2013-2017.

According to the Concept, the state allows everyone the right to freedom of conscience and religion, including:

- the right to freely choose, have and spread religious and other beliefs, and to act in accordance with them in performing religious and ritual ceremonies;
- the right to profess any religion or not to profess any religion, alone or together with others, in public or in private;
- equality of rights and freedoms of a person and a citizen, regardless of their attitude to religion, membership in religious or public organisations and associations;
- equality of religious organisations before the law, which implies the establishment of a single legal basis and guarantees of freedom of religion and religious activities in the legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic;
- the freedom of parents or anyone acting on someone's behalf to provide the necessary religious and moral education for their children in accordance with their own convictions;
- a ban on the involvement of minors aged under 18 in religious associations, as well as on the teaching of religion, against their will and without the consent of their parents or other guardian;
- restriction of citizens' rights to freedom of religion only by laws, normative legal acts of the Kyrgyz Republic and only to the extent necessary to protect the foundations of the constitutional system, morality, health, rights and legal interests of a person and citizen, and to ensure the security of the state.

A survey was conducted among the population to assess adherence to religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan. One of the survey questions was: "In your opinion, are the rights and freedoms of believers implemented in our state?" The results are shown in the Figure below.

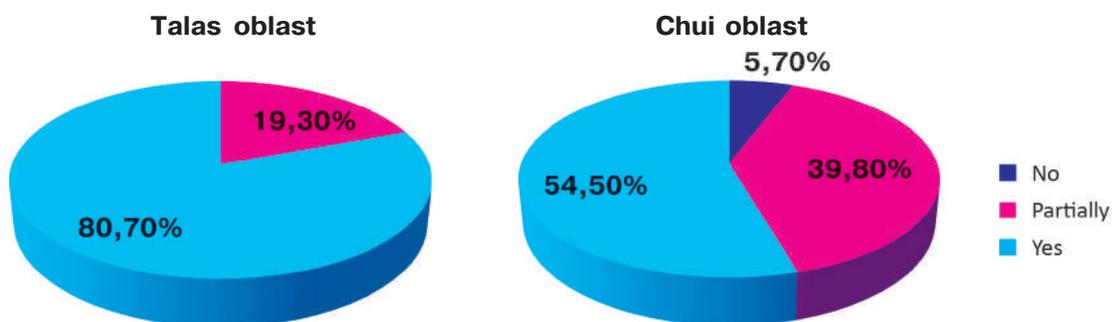


Figure 1: Rights and freedoms of religion, Talas and Chui oblasts

Only five respondents (living in Bishkek) stated that, in their opinion, the rights and freedoms of believers were not being implemented in the Kyrgyz Republic. The respondents were unable to explain the exact reasons for such a response.

It is noteworthy that Sam Brownback, Ambassador on Special Assignments of the US Department of State for International Religious Freedom, noted that Kyrgyzstan has a leading position in Central Asia in matters of democratic development and respect for religious freedoms.⁸

One of the priority tasks of the Concept is to determine the main directions and principles of state regulation of the activities of religious organisations and associations. The Law 'On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organisations in the Kyrgyz Republic' (No. 282) as of 31 December 2008

8. In what is Kyrgyzstan better than the neighbours, as told in the US State Department, article from 29 May 2018, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/politics/20180529/1039393943/ssha-toktogulov-braunbek-religiya-svoboda.html>

states that local self-government bodies must implement the state policy in the field of religion, through creating public committees on religion, together with the state body on religious affairs. The key objective is to ensure protection of public order, spiritual security, territorial integrity and constitutional order from religious extremism.

This function is described in greater detail in the Concept, where it is indicated that local state administrations and local self-governments are required to implement state policy in the sphere of religion by interacting with local communities, religious organisations, associations and leaders within public platforms. Public platforms can be local-level community committees for religious affairs under the leadership of heads of local self-governments, with the participation of representatives of local authorities, members of the local community and religious leaders.

The priority areas for harmonisation of the situation in the religious sphere through local government efforts in cooperation with religious organisations are:

- considering the issues relating to the religious situation in each territory and adopting measures necessary for its improvement;
- developing and submitting recommendations and proposals to the state and local authorities for improving state policy in the religious sphere;
- adopting measures to prevent and curb cases of incitement to religious hatred, abuse of religious beliefs, as well as incitement to violence or other such acts;
- fostering religious tolerance, patriotic and legal education of children and youth, supporting and strengthening the institution of the family;
- monitoring the activities of religious educational institutions in the territory of each locality;⁹
- improving the efficiency of regional advisory committees, other consultative and advisory structures within local authorities to carry out public monitoring, assess the situation and ensure timely responses to emerging challenges in the sphere of interfaith relations;¹⁰
- supporting positive ideas and practices in religious communities, using their potential to improve the situation in the local community.

In addition, the Concept stipulates the following points:

- state and religious associations should cooperate in the social, cultural, educational, charitable and economic spheres, as well as in ensuring public safety, including the prevention of extremism;
- harnessing the positive potential of religious associations is advised to solve the problems of the social sphere, preserve and develop the historical cultural heritage of the people of Kyrgyzstan, and improve the spiritual and moral atmosphere of society. The state cooperates with religious organisations that have a positive impact on helping to form the spiritual, ethical and cultural foundations of society in Kyrgyzstan.¹¹

9. To maintain records on religious organisations, the State Commission for Religious Affairs issued an order 'On the form and deadlines for religious organisations to submit reports on their activities' No. 4, as of 28 January 2012, with subsequent amendments made on 24 January 2017. According to the order, religious organisations are obliged to provide full information on the organisation's activities each year, no later than 1 March, by email to the State Commission for Religious Affairs under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic. Further details are available at http://religion.gov.kg/ru/o_forme/

10. According to Zakir Chotaev, Deputy Director of the SCRA: The Concept envisages the creation of public councils or committees at the local level, which include representatives of civil society, local self-government and state bodies. They should assist in the implementation of state policy in the religious sphere and in monitoring the activities of religious organisations. However, these councils are not created everywhere. Moreover, the creation of such a structure is a bit problematic due to insufficient funds and not everyone can realise this on a voluntary basis. Therefore, representatives are appointed in each oblast and there is a department consisting of four people in the southern region.

11. The Concept of the Kyrgyz Republic on Religion for 2014-2020

Analysis of the regulatory documents indicates that the public authorities do give sufficient attention to religious policy issues. It can be said that Kyrgyzstan has developed its own model of relations between the state and religion, which is unique due to the fact that almost all religious movements and organisations coexist in the Kyrgyz Republic, despite a few problematic areas in the sphere of religion.

Many researchers and experts in religion have been searching for optimal models of state-religion relations. The authors of this work agree with the following opinion: "The approval of the principles of tolerance, the right to freedom of conscience, striving for dialogue between different confessions, believers and atheists is optimal for the development of modern society and its stability."¹²

All respondents participating in the survey (randomly selected individuals, experts on religious issues, government representatives) were asked to express their opinion on the optimal model for state-religion relations.

Emil Nasretidinov, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the American University of Central Asia, argues that the "model of cooperation" should be the optimal one. His latest study on the radicalisation of young people¹³ showed that religious public figures have a large influence on young people, more than many other public figures.¹⁴

In Emil Nasretidinov's aforementioned study, more than a third of respondents (only young people participated in the survey, including schoolchildren, students and graduates) stated that they would be more likely to vote for the candidate if he/she was a religious person.¹⁵ This indicates increased religious identity among young people in the Kyrgyz Republic.

The Deputy Director of the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA), Zakir Chotaev, mentioned the need for interaction between the state and religious organisations several times during his interview. Excerpts from the interview are given below.

"State bodies interact with religious organisations in various areas: culture, education and some issues of social character. We are well aware that religious organisations, preaching moral and spiritual values, very often help people get rid of drug addiction, alcoholism, and bring their lifestyles in line with social requirements. Of course, sometimes you can see excesses when people become very religious, but nevertheless we see such a positive influence. Another area – when religious organisations provide charitable assistance, this is also very important. Now it is important to interact with religious organisations within the framework of the implementation of state policy in the religious sphere.

Clarification of religious values is being done to prevent the spread of radicalism and extremism ... Our department coordinates state policy in the religious sphere: we develop common measures, we coordinate, we implement. To a certain extent, we are monitoring the activities of religious organisations, we have the authority to monitor whether a religious organisation has violated the current legislation. Often, we get information about violations from law enforcement agencies.

*Scheduled inspections are carried out, but we do not have the opportunity to cover the entire republic and all organisations. Today, there are three thousand religious organisations that have been registered, and we have about 40 employees. We have now carried out planned inspections of religious schools, muftiats, Christian religious organisations, and systematic checks are being conducted on a large number of Muslim organisations."*¹⁶

12. P. Sorokin, Sociocultural dynamics and religion, Human, Civilization, Society, 1992, p. 430

13. Study entitled 'Vulnerability and resilience of young people to radical and extremist organizations: Analyzing six sectors'

14. From interview with Emil Nasretidinov

15. Data obtained from author during interview

16. From interview with Zakir Chotaev

Currently, all Islamic organizations, centres, foundations and charitable organisations, with the exception of informal Islamic organisations and movements, operate under the direction of the Spiritual Administration of Kyrgyzstan Muslims (SAKM). The SAKM is the largest Muslim association in the Kyrgyz Republic, with a central office in Bishkek and regional representative offices (*kazyyat*) operating at the level of oblasts and cities of regional importance of Bishkek and Osh, headed by spiritual heads (*kazi (cadi)*). The head at the district level is Imam-Katyp (*Khatib*). Each mosque is headed by an imam. To date, a total of 2,832 mosques have been registered in the Kyrgyz Republic.

SAKM → kazyyat (oblast) → hatibiat (rayon) → Ayil okmotu → rural mosques

The SAKM (Spiritual Administration of Kyrgyzstan Muslims) actively cooperates with the SCRA, the State Committee for National Security (SCNS), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (the 10th department), local self-government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (on the organisation of the *Hajj*).

Together SAKM with the SCRA, the SAKM implements the following tasks and participates in a number of projects:

- increasing the spiritual morality of the population (e.g. preventing violence, fostering respect for others, developing family values, discussing issues of suicide);
- improving literacy in religious matters;
- organising mini-seminars for the improvement of imams' skills (together with the Yiman Foundation);
- participating in drafting the regional development plan;
- raising public awareness on extremism and developing manuals on working against extremism for imams;
- organising events to raise awareness of traffic rules (e.g. holding lectures, carrying out explanatory work with taxi drivers at automobile stations).¹⁷

According to the *kazyyat* representative of Talas oblast, their activities today are limited to organisational issues and conducting holiday prayers on Orozo Ait and Kurman Ait, as well as distributing the *zeket* (payment by the rich for the poor).¹⁸

To summarise, therefore, the function of control over the activities of religious organisations is entrusted to the state authorities in the Kyrgyz Republic. The *akim* of the Chui rayon provided an insight into the types of activities that are being carried out at the rayon level, as outlined in the following excerpt:

*"There are 38 mosques in our area, and only seven of them do not have state registration. I think that by the end of the quarter, we will solve this problem. Coordination meetings are held on a quarterly basis, where all 38 imams are present, the prosecutor, the head of the ROVD (rayon department of internal affairs), SCNS, the heads of the ayil okmotu, we have 10 of them, and representatives of various public organisations. At each meeting, explanatory work is carried out. Events are periodically held in conjunction with the IDN (inspection on minors' affairs). They, along with the imams, visit schools and give lectures on traditional Islam. If the head of the ayil okmotu has suspicions on the ground, he gives a signal to the area police officer; the district police officer addresses the head of the ROVD. The process of entering daavat is carefully monitored. Area police officers check all required documents according to the law."*¹⁹

17. From an interview with Eratov Ravshan, representative of the DCMK, the unit on family complaints

18. From an interview with the *kazyyat* representative of the Talas oblast

19. From an interview with Apbasov K.S, Akim of Chui rayon

To gather information about the interaction of local self-government bodies and religious organisations, the research team conducted interviews with the representatives of AOs and religious leaders (imams). The interview with Zakir Chotaev, Deputy Director of the SCRA, also confirmed that religious leaders play an important role in local communities and are able to influence decision making in a number of areas of public life. A detailed description is provided in the interview extract below.

"Of course, the influence of religious leaders on local decision-making is there – it can be traced in different regions and different local communities in different ways. As an example, you can observe an increase in the religiosity of citizens, various proposals of a religious nature. There were also proposals that are contrary to the law. For example, the information was spreading in some local communities that Muslims should not receive vaccinations. After that, in 2014, preventive measures began to take place, yet some religious people resisted such measures. Although their position seems incorrect in terms of healthcare advice, they cannot be forced to adhere.

*Another example concerns banning the sale of alcoholic beverages. In accordance with the law, local authorities can decide to impose restrictions on the sale of alcoholic beverages. A further example relates to the holding of various cultural events, such as a Mavlyud (the birthday of a prophet), which is often held at a local level. Also, measures aimed at limiting the costs of celebrations or commemorations can be noted on the side of events of a positive nature. On the one hand, this is a positive phenomenon, but on the other, everyone has the right to make decisions independently. Still, it has an impact on the entire local community: when one holds a big wedding, the other takes a loan in order to keep up with the set standards. Sometimes, ayil okmotu, possibly under the influence of religious leaders, impose restrictions on the holding of expensive celebrations. They also have that authority."*²⁰

In the survey conducted with local self-governments, the following points were also made.

- Religious committees have been established in two *ayil okmotus* of the Chui oblast, which include representatives of the AO, the ROVD, religious leaders, activists and village elders (Belovodskoye, Lebedinovka). There is a commission in the village of Aleksandrovka that also deals with issues related to religion. It includes activists and village elders, representatives of the AO.
- The Council of Elders (Aksakaldar Keneshi) operates in the village of Ak-Dobo of the Bakai-Ata rayon of Talas oblast, and it also includes religious figures. The Council deals exclusively with social issues in society, calling for unity and the fight against waste. The village ended the practice of *zhyrtysh* tradition (a piece of cloth that is distributed at funerals) at the initiative of the Council. The imams in the villages of Kyzyl-Adyr, Pokrovka and Bakai-Ata made the same decision.
- All surveyed religious figures and representatives of local self-government bodies confirmed they are aware that religious leaders and organisations cannot participate in the activities of political parties and political movements.

"We often meet with leaders of political organisations (parties), but our foundation does not participate in political life, because it does not comply with secular laws. During the election campaign, we did not participate in the campaign work of any party or any candidate."

Director of Public Foundation 'Adep bashaty' (Source of Morality), Talas oblast

20. From an interview with Zakir Chotaev, Deputy Director of the State Committee for Religious Affairs

- A respondent in one AO in Chui oblast (Belovodskoye village) noted during the interview that all decisions on interaction with religious organisations are made on the basis of the Law 'On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organisations in the Kyrgyz Republic' and the Concept of State Policy of the Kyrgyz on Religion for 2014-2020.
- There is experience of cooperation on various social issues in Talas oblast. The leading social sector specialist of the Kara-Buura rayon state administration stated that they encourage imams to contribute to and participate in activities dedicated to the moral education of schoolchildren, as well as to inform the public (together with groups of family doctors) about the need for child vaccination.
- In the Chui oblast, interaction with religious organisations is limited to control in most cases (in the context of this study, the term 'control' means the verification of statutory documents, explanatory work on what activities are prohibited, and monitoring the activities of religious organisations without interfering with their inner life). It should be noted that the degree of control that AOs have over religious organisations is different. For example, in some villages and *ayil aimaks* (AAs), religious organisations are regularly checked (quarterly or monthly), while in others control is limited to annual inspections of documents. Also, in some villages, the function of monitoring the mosques' activity lies with the head of the village (Grozd village).
- Sometimes, imams are encouraged to mobilise the population or to disseminate information (usually in small villages). Two of the AOs in Chui oblast noted that they were turning to imams for help in spreading information among the population (Sadovoe, Aleksandrovka).
- A number of AOs in Chui oblast noted that they conduct joint activities with imams only based on orders 'from above'. The local self-government data showed that they do not independently initiate projects with the participation of religious leaders (Kok-Dzhar, Kyzyl-October).
- In both Talas and Chui oblasts, some imams took the initiative in organising clean-up days, planting seedlings, and opposing waste (excessive celebration ceremonies) and drinking alcohol.
- One of the most striking problems noted by representatives of the AO was regarding the burial of proselytes. Although this issue was transferred into the hands of local self-governments,²¹ local authorities are often unable to resolve the burial issue against the will of the religious majority. The study revealed cases of conflict based on the allocation of land for the burial of proselytes in the villages of Kok-Oi, Kum-Aryk, Kyrk-Kazyk and in three cases in the village of Amanbaevo in the Talas region. No conflicts on this basis were reported in Chui oblast. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the issue of land allocation for the organisation of cemeteries for different faiths should be decided at governmental level and that the decision should be fixed by law.

It can be assumed that one of the reasons why people change to another religion (in most cases, to Protestantism) in the regions studied is due to the financial resources of religious organisations, as illustrated by the following quote.

"Once our family had great difficulties. A young woman came to me in the market and promised to help. She gave me a book in Kyrgyz, then she took me to the house, said that I could come there. In the house, music played all the time, and they offered wine. Most of the visitors were Kyrgyz. I liked the fact that this organisation distributed food and

21. As per Article 18 (Part 8 of Clause 1) of the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic 'On Local Self Government', ensuring the functioning of cemeteries and the provision of funeral services are the responsibility of local self-governments. According to Article 16 (Part 3) of the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic 'On the Freedom of Religion and Religious Organisations in the Kyrgyz Republic', the recognition of the rules on the use of cemeteries and provisions on cemetery fees are governed by the provisions of local self-governments.

clothing to those in need and helped the sick. But every day, we were given several books and asked questions about the texts. I started going there hoping to get paid. When my husband found out about this, I was severely beaten. I did not go there anymore. After that, they kept disturbing me for a long time, came to my home even at night and knocked on the door."

59-year-old woman, Kyzyl-Adyr village, Talas region

The above example confirms the need for more measures such as those aimed at the development of regions, the fight against poverty and unemployment, and the improvement of living conditions.

It is noteworthy that interaction with religious organisations of the Protestant movement is minimised. For example, respondents in the villages of Belovodskoye and Lebedinovka noted that they invited the representatives of Protestant religious organisations to participate in various events, but that they themselves did not express any such intention or desire. In all the other AOs, the responses indicated that interaction with these organisations is only to verify documents at the beginning of each year. In one of the AOs in Chui oblast, the respondent remarked that he did not interact with the Protestant religious organisations since this went against his religious views.

Religious organisations contact the local self-government bodies in relation to the following issues:

- allocation of land for building mosques;
- provision of financial support for the repair or payment of utilities;
- assistance in preparing documents.

The first two issues are of the greatest interest to this study, since there is a possibility that religious organisations or individual religious figures may influence the decision-making process at the local level.

According to the results, poor knowledge of the law by decision makers is the main factor allowing for such influence. In most cases, the respondents found it difficult to accurately answer the question on funding of public organisations, particularly religious ones.

"We have no right to allocate funds for the construction or renovation of mosques, since this is an inappropriate use of funds. We can allocate land. Citizens themselves can allocate a plot. Recently, one of the residents presented a part of his land for the construction of a mosque, on his own initiative. In 2016, land was also purchased for the construction of a mosque, using sponsors' funds."

Representative of Sokuluk AO

It is impossible to get a complete picture without understanding the perspectives and opinions prevailing in society. Below are the results of a population survey.

- A total of 40% (58 out of 145) of respondents believed that the state should interact with religious organisations in countering extremism and radicalism.
- One of the main bodies ensuring security in the religious sphere is the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which is trying to cooperate with religious organisations. Such cooperation has not been seen before. The Ministry of Internal Affairs works with the clergy and non-state expert organisations (e.g. Independent Analytical Research Center 'Religion, Law, Politics', Adep Bashati Public Foundation) in almost all populated areas. The concept of cooperation includes three aspects: cooperation against extremism; assistance to employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the spiritual sphere (the idea of introducing chaplains to the Ministry was voiced); and cooperation in preventing other legal violations.
- A quarter of respondents in the Chui oblast believed that the state and religion should be strictly separated from each other; in Talas oblast, only one respondent (out of 57) expressed this opinion.

- More than 20% of respondents in Talas oblast believed that the state should be guided by religious principles in the management of society; 10 out of 88 respondents expressed this opinion in the Chui oblast.

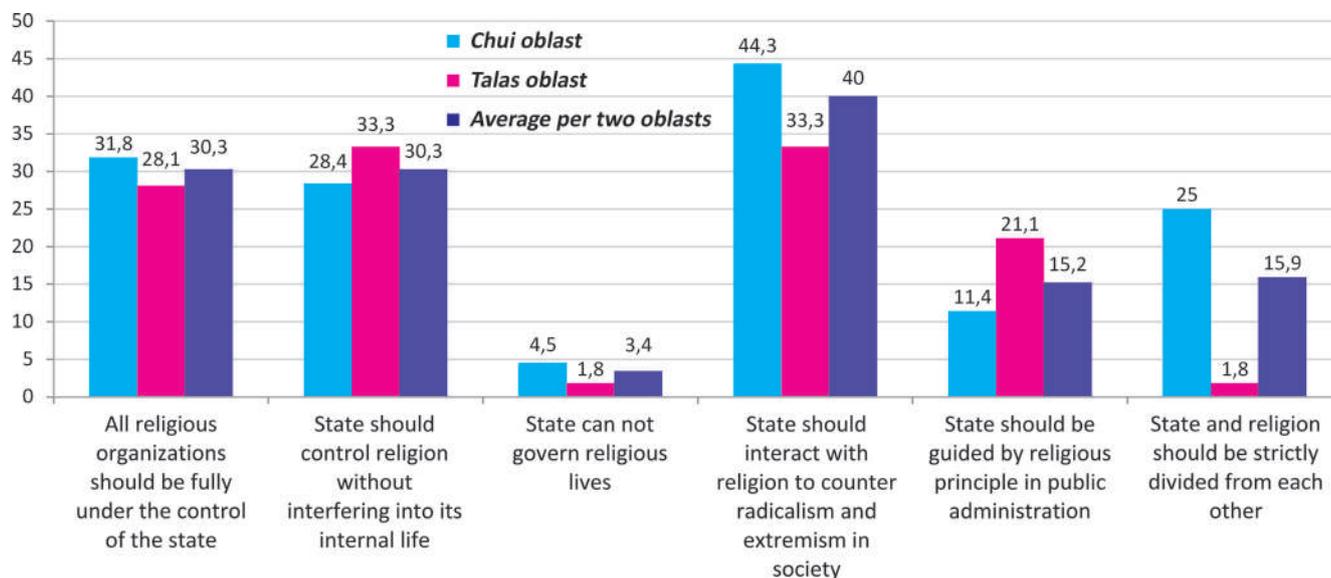


Figure 2: Respondents' opinions on state-religion relations, Chui and Talas oblast (%)

To conclude, it is worth noting that the majority of respondents agree that the state should build partnerships with religious organisations. State bodies should not only control, but also cooperate and participate in equal dialogue with religious organisations. It is necessary to accept the reality of a multi-faith society and proselytes, and to foster greater tolerance in attitudes towards the representatives of other religions among the population. Religious organisations should play a special role in achieving this objective, urging their followers to practise tolerance.

3.2 Religion and society

Religion forms the worldview of believers. Therefore, even in secular states, religious organisations indirectly influence society, as they shape attitudes to life, beliefs and often the citizen identity of those who are members of a religious community.

Characterising attitudes to religion in Kyrgyzstan, there seems to be a tendency for more loyal attitudes towards religions that are considered traditional to the region (Sunni Islam, Orthodox Christianity), and more hostile attitudes towards new movements.²²

No more than 5% of respondents in each of the areas expressed the opinion that they negatively relate to the activities of religious organisations. Slightly less than half of the respondents in Chui oblast and three quarters of the respondents in Talas oblast expressed positive attitudes towards the activities of religious organisations. More than a third of respondents in Chui oblast remarked that they negatively relate to the so-called 'non-traditional trends' (most often, respondents cited the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses, Hizb ut-Tahrir and just 'sects'). All other respondents expressed a neutral attitude in this regard.

22. Presidential Order No. 11 of 22 January 2014 established the lyman public fund for the development of spiritual culture, the Charter for which was approved by the head of the Presidential Administration. In accordance with paragraph 11 of the Charter of the Public Foundation 'lyman', one of the areas of the Foundation's activity is "providing support to traditional religious organisations in the Kyrgyz Republic". The legislation does not define 'traditional religious organisations', but the draft law 'On state support for traditional religions', proposed by the deputy of parliament in 2014 for public discussion, recognises the DCMK and the Russian Orthodox Church of Kyrgyzstan to be religious organisations of traditional religions of Islam and Christianity. Although the law was not adopted, the Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic on Religion for 2014-2020, approved by a presidential decree in 2014, refers to the Hanafi mazhab of Sunni Islam and Orthodox Christianity as traditional religions.

It is noteworthy that some Kyrgyzstanis consider Protestant practices such as Baptism as a sect. Moreover, a large proportion of the population seem to perceive the terms 'religious organisation', 'sect' and 'terrorist organisation' as synonymous terms. This conclusion was made based on the findings of the population survey, which was conducted in an interview format. The respondents answered the question 'Which religious organisations are you familiar with?' either with "No, I don't know any sects" or by listing the religious organisations prohibited in Kyrgyzstan. One respondent gave the following answer: "I do not know. These are the affairs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State National Security Committee, but not of an ordinary citizen." According to the results of a number of studies that were reviewed during the desk research, "the degree of awareness of the respondents and the formation of their image of an extremist organisation are primarily influenced by the media."²³

As mentioned earlier, the Concept of State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic on Religion for 2014-2020 is the main document describing the strategy of state policy in the religious sphere. The Concept notes that: "the positive potential of religious associations is attracted to solve the problems of the social sphere, preserve and develop the historical cultural heritage of the people of Kyrgyzstan, improve the spiritual and moral atmosphere of society. The state cooperates with religious organisations that have a positive impact on the formation of spiritual, ethical and cultural foundations of the society of Kyrgyzstan."

The results of the population survey give in insight into public opinion about the capacity of religious organisations to solve social and moral problems in society. General results of the survey and separate opinions are given below.

Should religious organisations solve the social problems in society?

In response to this question, almost a quarter of respondents (33 out of 145 respondents, 23%) expressed the opinion that religious organisations should provide material support to vulnerable groups in society. However, many noted the lack of transparency in the distribution of donations, as illustrated in the following quote.

"Many of my friends are afraid to give money to the mosque, because there is no openness. My friend was refused help; they said that there was no money, but we know that people make a lot of donations. I believe that religious organisations should be open and have a reserve to assist the poor in the purchase of coal, the organisation of funerals, allocate money to people who have health problems."

49-year-old woman, Tokmak

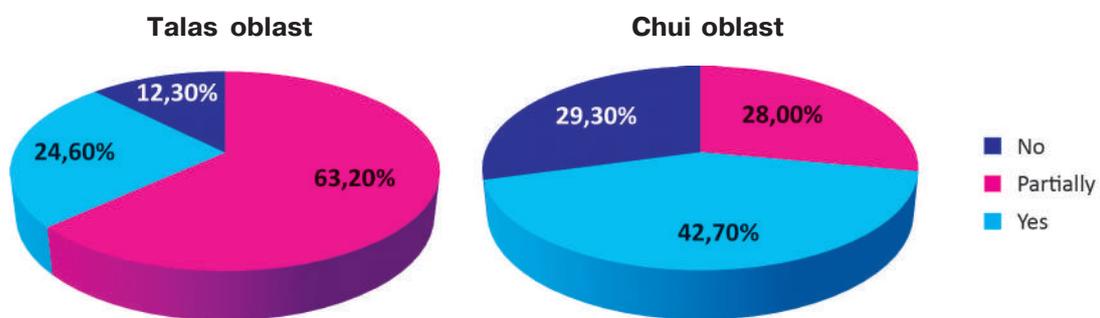


Figure 3: Should religious organisations solve the social problems in the society?

23. Toktosunova Elmira Satybaldievna, Extremism in the conditions of systemic transformation of the modern Kyrgyzstan, September 2016, p. 21

The respondents also made a number of suggestions regarding religious organisations' role that can be summarised as follows:

- provide charitable assistance – the respondents referred to orphanages, nursing homes and homeless people in particular;
- work with socially vulnerable people – not only by providing charitable assistance, but also by giving informational support to send to the appropriate state bodies and existing non-governmental organisations involved in supporting socially vulnerable groups in society;
- popularise secular education;
- ensure additional burial control (preventing local corruption);
- use the mosque infrastructure to develop social projects.

In addition, a number of examples were given of positive initiatives by religious organisations, including the following.

- The public organisation 'Aykul' in the Talas region has been engaged in activities in the city and villages aimed at tackling school racketing and bride kidnapping, as well as raising awareness of women's rights in the Kyrgyz Republic, with the assistance of the kazyyat and the central mosque.
- During the survey, experts noted that the problem of early marriages among young people aged under 18 (minors) has become less explicit. In addition, the imams confirmed that they regularly explain to the public about the prohibition of early marriages and marriages without an official registration.
- Imams and representatives of several religious organisations in the Talas region have started initiatives seeking to combat violence in schools. The death of a schoolboy, which resulted from a fight between schools in the villages of Pokrovka and Bala-Saruu, served as a catalyst for tackling these issues.
- Several respondents in Chui oblast referred to the activities of the Assalam Foundation (Kuwait). According to the akim of Chui rayon, fifteen five-apartment houses for low-income families were built in 2017, with the financial support of this Foundation, and five houses were built in Chui village. There are plans to build social facilities in the future.

Should religious organisations solve the moral problems of society?

In response to this question, respondents mainly stated that, in their opinion, religious leaders should pay more attention to the issues of morality, unity of the people, the family institution and promoting a healthy lifestyle.

In Talas oblast, it was mentioned that imams are participating in activities focused on early marriage, squandering and unity.

"The representatives of six tribes live in our village, before there was internal division according to kinship and tribal characteristics. As a result of the work of the imams, the council of aksakals and rural deputies, this phenomenon is no longer present."

Representative of aiyl okmotu in Ak-Dobo village, Talas region

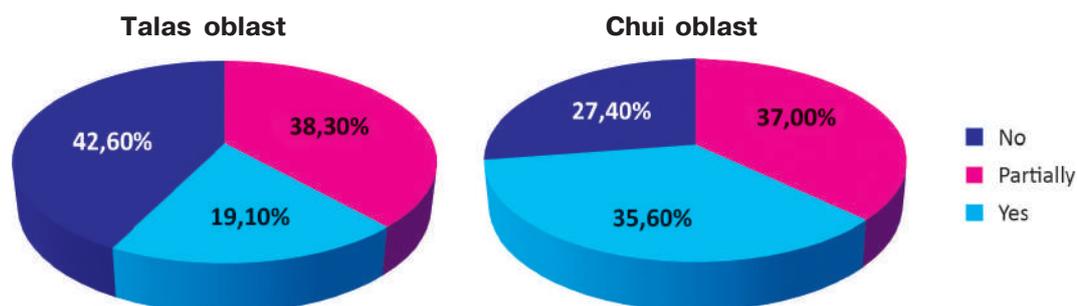


Figure 4: Should religious organisations solve the moral problems of society?

Many experts suggest using the positive aspects of religions to help solve the spiritual and moral problems of society. Examples include using the universal human value potential in tackling negative phenomena in society such as drug addiction, alcoholism and prostitution. Other examples include promoting family values and instilling in children the best human and high moral qualities: expressing love for people, helping the weak, showing mercy and respect for elders, striving for justice, and practising tolerance towards people with other views, religions and nationalities.

3.3 Religion and personal identity

In the course of the study, the authors sought to explore whether or not religion is important in people’s daily lives and if it is a dominant factor in regulating behaviour. Data obtained from the survey revealed the following findings.²⁴

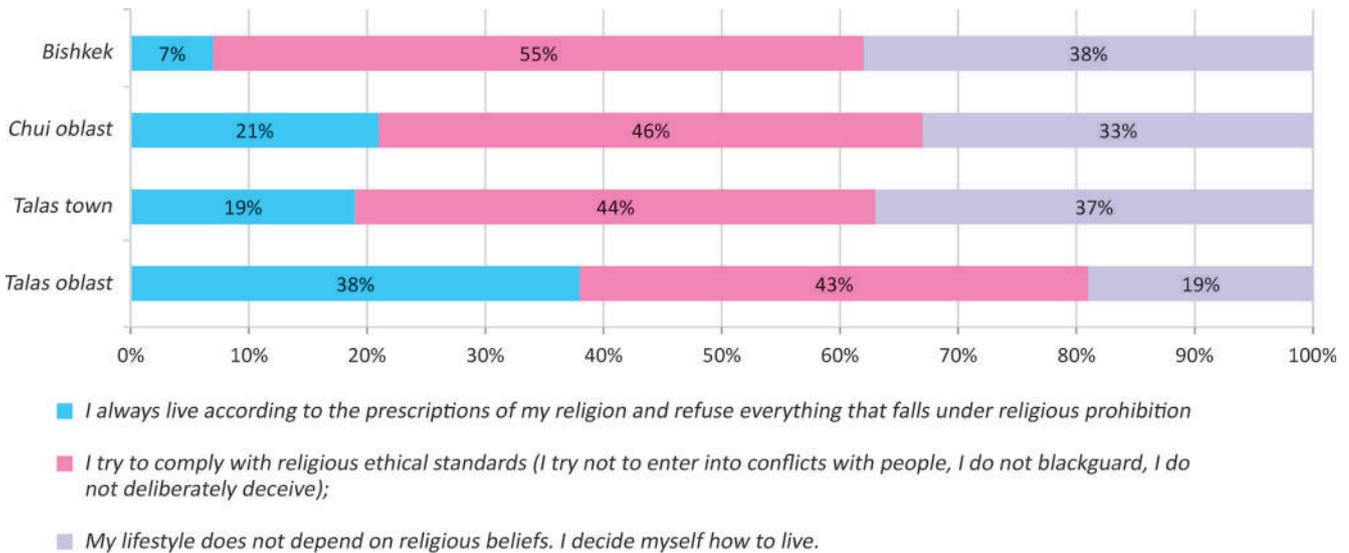


Figure 5: Religion and personal identity

Comparing the religiosity of the population in cities and villages, it emerges that a higher proportion of religious people live in the villages. It is noteworthy that the proportion of people who hold a relatively neutral position in this regard are about the same in both cities and villages. The main difference is in the ratio of the two groups – those for whom religion is an important factor in the decision-making process and those for whom it is absolutely irrelevant.

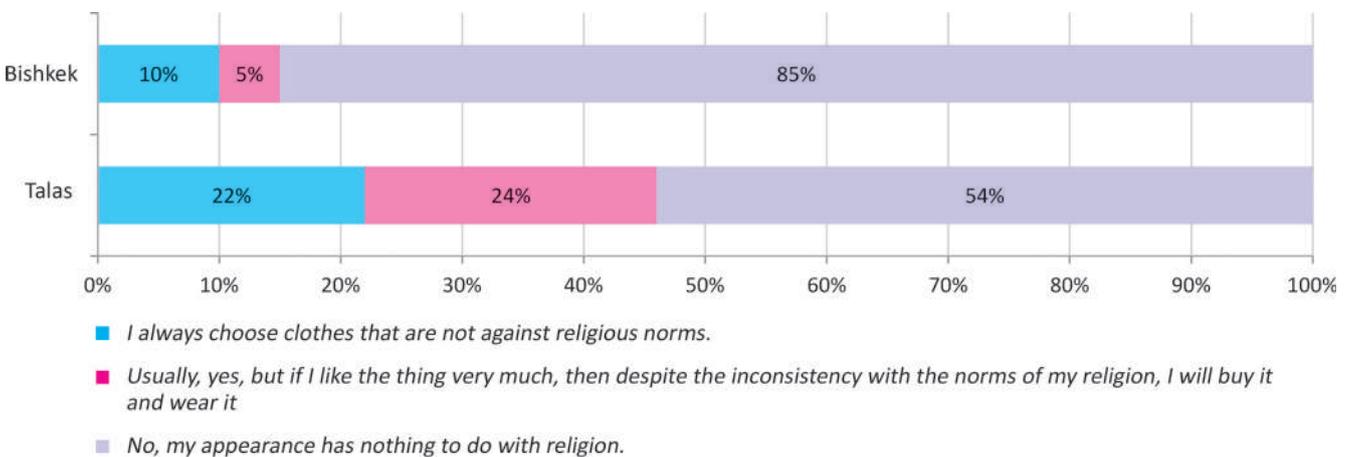


Figure 6: Religiosity and personal choice

24. The data is presented by oblast, with the exception of Bishkek and Talas cities.

In the survey, respondents were also asked to rate their attitudes towards certain phenomena and practices on a scale from 1 to 3, where '1' is negative, '2' is indifferent and '3' is positive. The average scores for the two regions are shown in the Table below. Answers are presented in order from lower to higher grades.

Table 2: Respondents' attitudes towards particular practices in society, average score

Practices	Average indicator (n = 145)
Polygamy	1.30
Religious marriage 'nike' with no official registration of marriage	1.37
Daawat/Dissemination of religious literature and leaflets	1.43
Wearing clothing with facial cover (nikab, parandja (burqa))	1.48
Wearing religious clothing in schools/universities, government offices	1.59
Constructing namazkana (praying place) in the parliament of the KR	2.03

One respondent made the following comment in relation to the practice of polygamy:

"I have a positive view on polygamy, because it is in accordance with the laws of sharia. My father had three wives. The Prophet Mohammed married a widow. If a law allowing polygamy is introduced, I will marry a widow."

Representative of kazyyat, Talas region

The Figure below provides a breakdown of the respondents' answers by oblast.

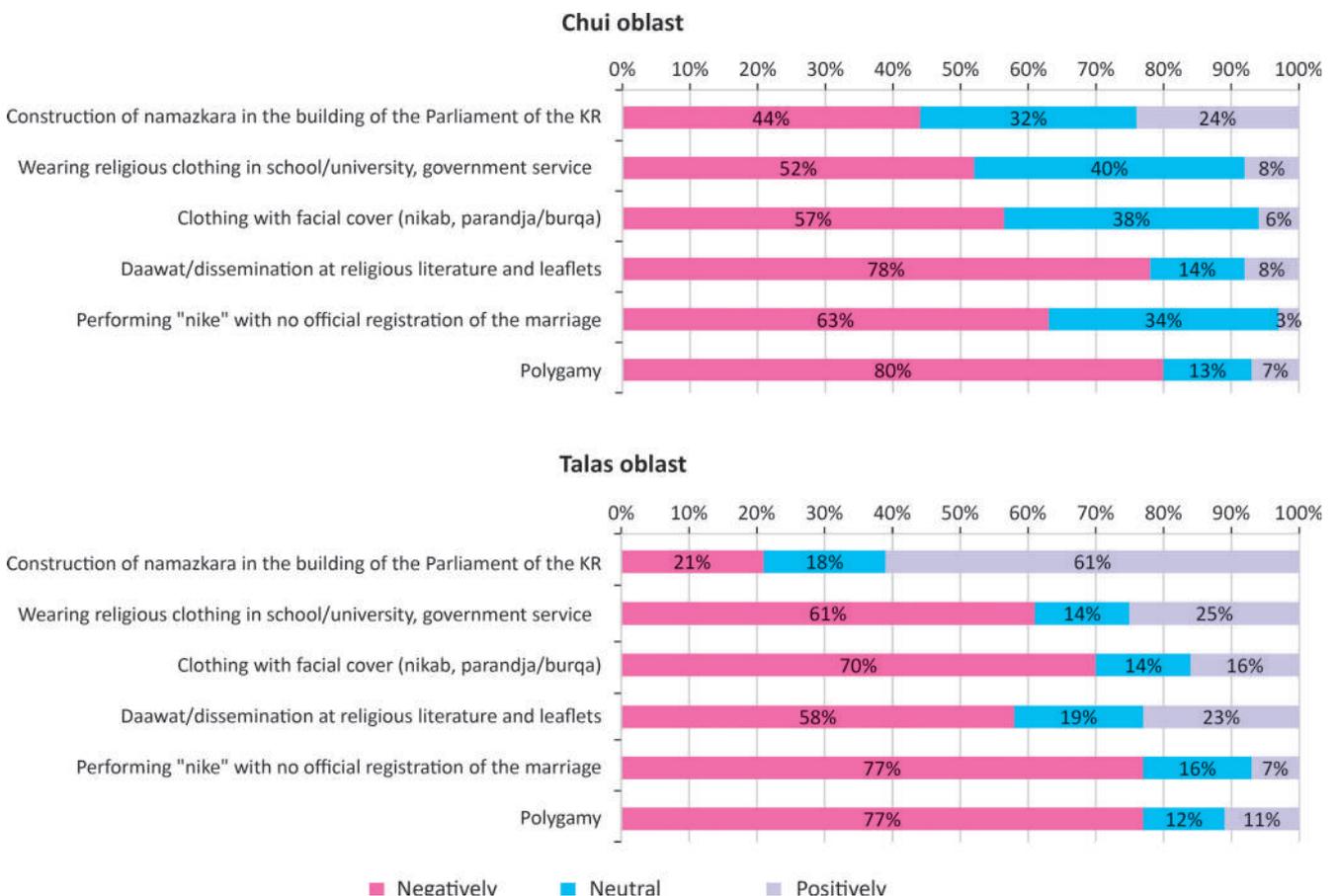


Figure 7: Respondents' attitudes towards particular practices in society, %

The results show that, in both areas, respondents expressed highly negative attitudes towards the practice of polygamy. However, it should be noted that 13 out of 145 respondents were in favour of allowing polygamy. Attitudes towards daavat and the construction of namazkanas in the parliament building of the Kyrgyz Republic varied significantly between the areas: almost three times more respondents in Talas oblast (relative to the total number of respondents) expressed positive attitudes towards the practices mentioned.

Based on the responses given, it can be assumed that:

- the level of religiosity is higher in Talas oblast than in Chui oblast;
- the level of tolerance of other faiths is higher in Chui oblast than in Talas oblast.

4. Conclusions

This study sought to examine the potential influence of religious organisations on the decision-making process of local self-government bodies – both in terms of the causes and nature of this influence.

The degree of interaction between local self-government and religious organisations in the target rayons and villages is not the same: influencing factors include the external decision-making environment (e.g. the population living in the village territory) and internal factors, particularly the qualities of individual decision-makers. Excluding the personal (subjective) characteristics of the decision makers (temperament, character, abilities, orientation and, in the context of this study, religion can be distinguished), professional qualities (level of education, professional qualifications, work experience) can be identified as the largest category in terms of the objective characteristics of decision makers.

Given the difficulty involved in influencing external environment factors, the focus should be placed on internal factors, namely, the professional qualities of decision makers.

The study revealed that local self-government bodies are not sufficiently informed about the mechanisms of interaction with religious organisations. Therefore, in the decision-making process, it is possible for local self-government interaction with religious organisations to be influenced by subjective factors, such as the personal characteristics of decision makers.

Analysis of the practice of interaction between local self-governments and religious organisations has shown that budget allocation and allocation of land plots are the most contentious issues. The results of the study indicated that decision makers' poor knowledge of the law is the main factor affecting the level of influence. When a decision maker does not have a ready-made solution, they will seek a solution. This can reduce the effectiveness of the work of local self-government bodies and also increase the risk of making the wrong decision under the influence of all possible factors, primarily subjective ones.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that in a number of local self-government bodies, public platforms were formed consisting of local authority representatives, members of the local community and religious leaders. As a rule, these platforms are used to discuss and develop mechanisms to counter radicalism, prevent interfaith conflicts and organise activities promoting tolerance.

Based on the data obtained during the study, the following conclusions can be drawn and a number of problems highlighted:

- interethnic conflicts are apparent 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. Interaction with these organisations is limited to the minimum requirements for control over the organisation (i.e. verification of registration documents and permits for events);
- there is a perception among a large proportion of the population that the terms 'religious organisation', 'sect' and 'terrorist organisation' are synonymous. Based on the research for this study, as well as desk analysis, it can be concluded that this is the result of a one-sided presentation of information in the media and online.

5. Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the authors propose the following recommendations.

1. Strengthen the capacity of local self-governments
 - If possible, certify 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, the formation and distribution of local budgets, and the allocation of land.
 - Conduct advanced training for key employees in local self-government, training local kenesh representatives on the formation and distribution of budgets.
 - Increase awareness of local self-government bodies on interaction with religious organisations, for example, through training seminars or information leaflets and booklets (as agreed with SCRA, GAMSUMO):
2. Conduct an information campaign among the population to describe the mechanism for the allocation of quotas for the Hajj (SCRA);
3. Recommend a reporting mechanism for mosques to increase the transparency of donation distribution (SCRA);
4. Assist in solving the problem of interethnic conflicts between the representatives of Kurdish and Kyrgyz nationalities in the Talas oblast (MIA, LSGB);
5. Recommendations for further research (International Alert, NGO):
 - Conduct a study on the role of religious organisations in the process of allocating local budgets and allocating land plots. The purpose of this study would be to determine the potential for influence of religious organisations on the process of allocating local budgets and land by local self-governments.
 - Undertake a study the activities of public platforms (committees on religious affairs) in the field to identify best practices.
 - Conduct periodic analysis and monitoring of media reports on religious topics.

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Annex 1: General data on local self-government

Law of the Kyrgyz Republic 'On Local Government' of 15 July 2011, No. 101

Local self-government is exercised by local communities through:

- representative bodies of aiyl aimak and city (local kenesh – aiyl and city);
- executive bodies of aiyl aimak and city (city mayor's office, aiyl okmotu);
- direct participation of citizens.

Issues of local importance (Article 18 of the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic 'On Local Self-Government')

For the organisation of the functioning and development of a livelihood support system for the territory, socio-economic planning and the provision of social and cultural services to the population, the following local issues are under the jurisdiction of local governments:

1. ensuring the economic development of the relevant territory, as well as attracting investments and grants;
2. management of municipal property;
3. formation, approval and execution of the local budget;
4. supply of drinking water to the population;
5. ensuring the operation of the sewage system and sewage treatment plants in populated areas;
6. ensuring the functioning of municipal roads in populated areas;
7. organising lighting of common areas;
8. ensuring the functioning of cemeteries and the provision of funeral services;
9. improvement and landscaping of public places;
10. ensuring the functioning of parks, sports facilities and recreation areas;
11. organising the collection, removal and disposal of household waste;
12. ensuring the functioning of municipal transport and regulating the operation of public transport within the boundaries of populated settlements;
13. control in the field of protection and use of historical and cultural heritage of local importance;
14. organisation and maintenance of the work of local libraries;
15. establishing land use rules and ensuring compliance with the norms and rules of urban planning and architecture;
16. advertising on the territory of the respective locality in the manner established by the legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic;
17. promoting the protection of public order;
18. creating conditions for the development of folk art;
19. creating conditions for the organisation of leisure;
20. organising the implementation of activities to work with children and youth;
21. providing conditions for the development of physical culture and mass sports;
22. assistance in the prevention and elimination of consequences of emergency situations;
23. exercising powers in the sphere of subsoil use referred to the jurisdiction of local self-governments by the legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic on subsoil use;
24. provision of consulting and legal assistance to the population;
25. implementing a set of measures to protect against family violence in the manner established by the legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic.

The powers listed in paragraph 1 of this Article are not exhaustive and do not restrict local communities and their bodies from exercising other powers not prohibited by the legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic.