

IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PREVENTION OF [VIOLENT] EXTREMISM IN CENTRAL ASIAN STATES

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Abstract. In the field of prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), one of the key areas is to debunk messages that increase the divisions in society and help attract new supporters to relevant organizations, as well as the development of unifying narratives that work for cohesion and are designed to provide ideological protection from extremist propaganda. While studies of world practices cast doubt on the effectiveness of individual tools of the “ideological field”, it is pertinent to study the narrative base of the PVE in the states of Central Asia that has been developed over the past decade. In this article, based on the study of key documents that determine the activities of the governments of the region in

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this direction, key narratives are highlighted. The comparative analysis of country-specific approaches made it possible to develop recommendations for the further development of the policy for the formulation of PVE narratives.

Key words: *Violent Extremism, Narratives, PVE, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan.*

ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ ЕЛДЕРІНДЕГІ [ЗОРЛЫҚ-ЗОМБЫЛЫҚ] ЭКСТРЕМИЗМІНІҢ АЛДЫН АЛУДЫҢ ИДЕОЛОГИЯЛЫҚ ШЕКТЕРІ

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Аңдатпа. Зорлық-зомбылық экстремизмінің алдын алу және оған қарсы тұру (P/CVE) саласында қоғамдағы алауыздықты арттыратын және тиісті ұйымдарға жаңа жақтастарды тартуға көмектесетін хабарламаларды жою, сондай-ақ біріктіруге және экстремистік насихаттан идеологиялық қорғауды қамтамасыз етуге арналған біртұтас нарративтерді әзірлеу маңызды бағыттардың бірі болып табылады. Әлемдік тәжірибені зерделеу «идеологиялық өрістің» жекелеген құралдарының тиімділігіне күмән келтіргенімен, соңғы онжылдықта қалыптасқан Орталық Азия мемлекеттеріндегі зорлық-зомбылық экстремизмінің алдын алу нарративтерінің базасын зерттеудің мәні бар. Бұл мақалада аймақ елдері үкіметтерінің осы бағыттағы қызметін айқындайтын негізгі құжаттарды зерделеу негізінде басты нарративтерге тоқталды. Елдерге тән тәсілдердің салыстырмалы талдауы зорлық-зомбылық экстремизмінің алдын алу нарративтерін қалыптастыру саясатын одан әрі дамыту бойынша ұсыныстар әзірлеуге мүмкіндік берді.

Түйін сөздер: *зорлық-зомбылық экстремизмі, нарративтер, зорлық-зомбылық экстремизмінің алдын алу, Орталық Азия, Қазақстан, Қырғызстан, Тәжікстан, Өзбекстан.*

ИДЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ РАМКИ ПРЕДОТВРАЩЕНИЯ [НАСИЛЬСТВЕННОГО] ЭКСТРЕМИЗМА В СТРАНАХ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

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Аннотация. В области профилактики и противодействия насильственному экстремизму (П/ПНЭ) одним из ключевых направлений является развенчание сообщений, направленных на усиление разломов в обществе и способствующих вовлечению новых сторонников в соответствующие организации, а также разработка объединяющих нарративов, которые работают на сплочение и призваны обеспечить идеологическую защиту от экстремистской пропаганды. В то время как исследования мировых практик ставят под сомнение эффективность отдельных инструментов «идеологического поля», имеет смысл изучить сформировавшуюся за последнее десятилетие нарративную базу НПЭ в государствах Центральной Азии. В данной статье на основе изучения

ключевых документов, определяющих деятельность правительств стран региона в этом направлении, выделены ключевые нарративы. Проведённый сравнительный анализ государственных подходов позволил выработать рекомендации по дальнейшему развитию политики формирования нарративов ПНЭ.

Ключевые слова: насильственный экстремизм, нарративы, ПНЭ, Центральная Азия, Казахстан, Кыргызстан, Таджикистан, Узбекистан

Introduction

In recent decades, the problem of preventing and countering violent extremism has become one of the most widely discussed in the world community. Ideologically motivated violence is still a global issue. While the territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq has reversed the upward trend of terrorist attacks that had been continuing since 2013, the overall level of violence remains substantial. According to the Global terrorism database overview, this is largely facilitated by the sharp increase in racist and ethnically motivated violence since 2019. [1].

Besides a range of “hard” measures (referring to security and securitization), “soft” approaches are gaining ground in the contemporary policy of countering and prevention of violent extremism (P/CVE) [2]. They constitute a number of tools aiming to strengthen social cohesion and resistance towards violent extremism among the communities.

In turn, an ideological factor is central in the majority of “soft” PVE activities. Violent extremist groups adhere supporters by developing and promoting simple and effective narratives – PVE developers try to do exactly the same to protect the communities and individuals at risk.

In the Comprehensive international framework to counter terrorist narratives adopted by the UN Security Council in 2017, the following counterpropaganda narratives are listed: “scholarly rebuttals by religious authorities on issues like tolerance and non-violence; contradicting evidence on life in battle zones (including the testimonies of

former terrorists); personal stories of the impact of terrorism on victims and their families; and information on the scale and severity of human rights abuses committed by terrorist groups” [3, p.18]. The document also states that the narratives must be context-based, and supplemented by targeted interventions, and the development of critical thinking skills among the general audience [ibid.].

Importantly, the authorship of PVE narratives must not belong to a government solely; on contrary, the participation of different interest groups, including “at-risk” categories, can enhance this process, make the messages clearer and more sustainable.

In this article, an overview of the approaches to the ideological struggle in the policy of Central Asian states is presented. To do so, legal definitions of [violent] extremism, ideology-related provisions of national PVE programs, and perspectives towards the promotion of counter- and alternative narratives are considered; an analysis of these approaches was carried out.

Methodology

In this article, a narrative is understood as “utterance (l’énoncé)” capable of “account for the appearance and development of all (and not merely verbal) signification” [4]. According to Patterson and Monroe, a narrative “refers to the ways in which we construct disparate facts in our own worlds and weave them together cognitively in order to make sense of our reality <...> plays a critical role in the construction of political behavior” [5, pp. 315-316].

There are two main approaches¹ to challenge the flaws underpinning violent ideology. *Counter-narratives* aimed to “challenge, deconstruct, discredit and demystify” VE narratives by exposing the lies and sanctimony of the respective groups. By contrast, *alternative narratives* are intended to deal with positive attitudes of the general public, at-risk groups and individuals by “focusing on what we are ‘for’ rather than ‘against’”; this is typically accomplished by appealing to common values, tolerance and democracy [6, p. 6].

For the analysis of the narratives developed and used in Central Asian states, the analysis of the official documents bases (laws, strategies) was carried out, as well as a discourse analysis of the government officials in charge of PVE policy in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan has not been included in the research due to the inaccessibility of the relevant data.

Practice in Central Asia

The foundations of the PVE policy in Central Asia were laid in the late 1990s when laws on terrorism and extremism began to be adopted by the governments of the region. The actual development of the PVE component falls on the second half of the 2010s.

There are several documents reflecting the development of the narratives in the PVE policy of Central Asian states. Among them, the fundamental is a Joint plan of action for the implementation of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in the countries of the region. One of the main project achievements is the development of more than 3000 “promotional and raising awareness materials and products with a special focus on human rights and gender dimension”. The latest phase of the project (2021-2024) is dedicated to

“build resilience among youth against terrorist propaganda on the Internet and hate speech by promoting education, development of critical thinking skills, media and communication literacy”, to “promote a culture of tolerance and respect for diversity among ethnic and religious groups”, and to “addressing marginalization, social exclusion, stigmatization and isolation of communities, empowering women and the youth, including migrant workers” [7]. In many ways, it was this strategy that determined the further development of PVE in the region.

Kazakhstan

The term extremism has been adopted in Kazakhstan’s legislation with the Law “On Countering Extremism” in 2005. According to this law, “extremism is “organization and/or commission by individual and/or legal entity, consolidation of actions of individuals and/or legal entities on behalf of organizations recognized as extremist in the established procedure; individual and/or legal entity, consolidation of actions of individuals and/or legal entities pursuing the following extremist purposes”. 3 types of extremism are distinguished by this document: political, national, and religious [8]. Meanwhile, the programming of PVE that begins in 2013, is solely dedicated to the prevention of religious extremism, leaving aside the politically and nationally motivated ideology [9].

In the current State Program on Countering Religious Extremism and Terrorism for 2018-2022, the measures of the prevention of VE are aimed at “the formation in the society of immunity to radical ideology and zero tolerance to radical manifestations” [10].

The analysis shows that it is focused mostly on the promotion of counter-narratives, such as: “explaining the danger of terrorism and extremist ideas aimed at inciting religious hatred or discord, exposing the forms, methods and techniques of promoting the ideology of terrorism and extremism”, the “formation of

¹ The third type of communication is government strategic communications fighting misinformation and building ties with key stakeholders and the general audience; however, this instrument is outside of the scope of this research.

public opinion about the insecurity and futility of studying in foreign theological institutions on an unofficial basis”, etc.

Much less attention in the Program is paid to alternative narratives, they are partly mentioned in the chapter describing current state of affairs, where other programs and measures aiming at the development of patriotism and Kazakhstani identity among youth, modernization of public conscience, are listed. The only measure qualifies for inclusion in the group of alternative narratives is the “popularization of the Internet portal “Kazislam.kz” among the categories of Internet users who are in spiritual (religious) search” [ibid.]. This portal has been created to become a “dialogue platform for supporters of the religious policy of the state, which provides information about the call for kindness and mercy”, including patriotism, culture and traditions, history, secularity, tolerance, etc [11].

In the Internet, the main narratives promoted by the social media accounts of government bodies and local authorities include (but are not limited to) counterarguments against “non-traditional” or “destructive” ideologies (mostly religious in nature, but also legal), information about the processes and mechanisms of the recruitment carried out by violent extremist groups, values of patriotism, tolerance and multiculturalism “peculiar to the Kazakhstani society”, and (the least amount of) techniques of the development of critical thinking and fact-checking skills [12].

Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan, the Law “On countering extremist activity” has been adopted in 2005. It defines “extremism activity” as “activities involving the planning, organization and performance by any individual or organization, including non-governmental organisations, religious organisations or mass media of “any” actions directed to, among other things: “the forced modification of the foundations of the constitutional order and violation of the integrity

of the Kyrgyz Republic, the destruction of the security of the Kyrgyz republic, the seizure or appropriation of power authorization, the creation of military formations, carrying out terrorist activities, incitement to social, race, national or religious hatred related to violence or calls for violence, breach of national dignity, the carrying out of mass disorders, violence, acts of vandalism on the grounds of ideological, political, race, national or religious hatred or enmity on grounds of hatred or enmity in relation to any social group, propaganda of exclusiveness, superiority or inferiority of citizens on account of their religious orientation, social, race, national, religious or language origin” [13, p. 9]. The special attention is paid on “propaganda in support of extremist activities, public calls to support such activities and their financing”, which also is acknowledged as a type of extremist activity [ibid.].

Kyrgyzstan currently is on the stage of completing of its first cycle of PVE programming on the national level. In the Program of the Government of Kyrgyz Republic on countering extremism and terrorism for 2017-2022, “promotion of the values of tolerance, intercultural, interreligious and interethnic dialogue to eliminate the conditions conducive to the spread of extremism and terrorism” is called one of the 3 key principles of PVE policy, along with the supremacy of the law and human rights protection. Among the PVE activities, the information campaigns aimed at enhancing religious literacy and awareness-raising about the state policy on countering extremism and terrorism among youth, people who received religious education abroad, at-risk groups and detainees, are mentioned [14].

A comprehensive analysis of P/CVE focused narratives accomplished by the Civic initiative of Internet Policy in 2018, shows that more than 60% of the materials analyzed may be classified as alternative narratives. These materials represent such values as “the family and its values, the “correct” interpretation of

Islam, respect for traditions, the elimination of stereotypes in relation to believers, youth leadership and responsibility, equality and peace, the value of education, preventive work of law enforcement agencies and civil society, universal values". Counter-narrative materials (39%) are focused on "socio-economic issues, explanation of banned organizations and the war in the Middle East, the religious situation in the country, exposure to recruitment of various social groups, the spread of extremist ideas through various channels, issues of choice and finding the right path, the role of religion in decision-making, personal and civic responsibility, interviews with former extremists, preventive work of state bodies and civil society". The authors conclude that the main concern of these materials is the "We-They" dichotomy which carries the conflict potential; also, the problem of carrying out the media campaigns lays down in their controversial effectiveness: for now, there are no clear criteria have been formulated to evaluate it.[15]

Tajikistan

According to the Tajikistani legislation, extremism is the "expression of ideology and extremist activity aimed at solving political, public, social, national, racial, regional and religious issues by force and other illegal actions" [16].

Tajikistan was the first Central Asian state to adopt a national PVE strategy: it entered into force in 2016. The National Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan on countering extremism and terrorism for 2016-2020 raises fundamental ideological questions, such as harmonization of the "system of legal norms and values" with "international standards and universal values"; the "presence and real implementation of a unifying national idea"; role of women within the society [17].

The document contains reflections on the impact of the civil war and labor migration, underdevelopment of the unifying ideas within

the society, negative socio-economic factors that catalyze the radicalization processes among the target groups. To overcome these negative factors in terms of ideology, the Strategy proposes to "take effective measures to form a powerful ideological corps", "formation of a culture of tolerance in a religious environment", "support for the moderate clergy in their struggle against representatives of radical movements", "political, religious and cultural education of women", "to intensify work on the creation of counter-propaganda websites", to start online discussion about extremist materials "where you can express opposing points of view or engage in constructive discussions", etc. [ibid].

According to Sh. Rizoyon, the main problems of the implementation of counter- and alternative narratives in Tajikistan in the framework of the National strategy were the construction of mythical realities, hate speech in media and demonization of extremists. He concludes that in Tajikistan the effective alternative PVE narratives have not been developed, due to lack of financing and necessary expert support [18].

Uzbekistan

According to the Law "On countering extremism", extremism is "expression of extreme forms of actions aimed at destabilizing the socio-political situation, forcible change in the constitutional order of the Republic of Uzbekistan, forcible seizure of power and appropriation of its powers, incitement of national, racial, ethnic or religious hatred" [19].

The first National Strategy of the Republic of Uzbekistan on countering extremism and terrorism was adopted in 2021 and lasts until 2026. The purposes of this program document are, inter alia, "uniting the efforts of state bodies, the general public and the international community aimed at countering extremism and terrorism", "ensuring interfaith and interethnic harmony in society", and "development of a system of state measures to protect the population, especially young people, from

involvement in extremist and terrorist activities”. In comparison to the PVE programs of the other Central Asian states, the Uzbekistan’s strategy contains a list of the key narratives to promote in PVE policy; among those, the “formation among the younger generation of a respectful attitude to the law, legal literacy, interfaith and interethnic tolerance, interest in history, culture, spiritual heritage and customs of the peoples of the country”, “traditional, spiritual, moral and patriotic values”. To do so, it is planned to “raise awareness of citizens about the fundamental canons of Islam, which have been born in Uzbekistan for centuries”, “clarify the unacceptability of the ideas of extremism and terrorism by the Islamic religion”, create “among the population, especially among young people, immunity to the destructive ideology of extremism”, and to “improve the legal culture of the population by explaining the consequences of extremism and terrorism” [20].

As in other states of the region, the discourse around the narrative against the ideology of violent extremism is built mostly within the religious field. Thus, for example, the President of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev in his speech on the UN General Assembly in 2017, highlighted: “the most important task is to fight for the minds of people, primarily young people <...> Our key task is to provide conditions for the self-realization of young people, to create a barrier to the spread of the “virus” of the ideology of violence <...> We consider the most important task to bring to a wide world community truly humanistic essence of Islam.”[21]

In their research of recruitment processes and responses in Uzbekistan, V. Mikhailov and J. Pirmukhametov are studying the main ideas used by the government and NGOs to address the violent extremist narratives: formation of an atmosphere of rejection of radical religious ideas within the society; addressing the questions related to the interpretation of the provisions of the Koran used for recruiting purposes; stories of former terrorist offenders; techniques of fact-

checking and skills to deliberate; national culture, music, traditions; useful advice and information for migrants [22].

Discussion

Counter-narratives remain the dominating ideological strategy to address the threat of violent extremism throughout the world. However, evidence shows that there is no proper data to prove that firing back hate speech, dehumanization and other violent extremist “values” by counter-narratives is effective. At the same time, alternative messages delivered with the assistance of professional mass media and influencers can shift the views within society to more “adequate” perceptions of (and responses to) VE propaganda [23].

When it comes to Central Asia, the prevalence of the religious component in both counter- and alternative narratives is obvious. The states with a Muslim majority passing through the process of re-Islamization after decades of Soviet rule, try to preserve, in some respects Soviet approach to religion. The dichotomy of “correct/traditional” and “incorrect/non-traditional” Islam has become the main religious-based counter-narrative to religiously motivated violent extremism in the Central Asian republics.

Following the global trend, the governments of Central Asia have adopted vague definitions of extremism, without distinguishing between those who just share radical beliefs and the ones who commit violent actions or intent to do so. Now, it is sometimes challenging for practitioners to explain the enforcement mechanisms of VE and terrorism-related crimes and offences. The explanations frequently conflict with freedom of expression, right of conscience, etc.

Another problem policymakers face is the so-called “lack of national idea/ideology” after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The absence of a universal unifying idea for the whole society still remains a meaningful consideration for those who participate in developing narratives

addressing VE propaganda. In this direction, the promotion of tolerance, multiculturalism and mutual respect within the society are also successful strategies, as experience has shown.

The next important issue is the form of expression of the PVE narratives. Sometimes, they may contain hate speech or be discriminative with the particular groups within the society. This can be even relevant to such alternative narratives as “family values” or “respect of traditions”.

And lastly, the participation of non-governmental actors in developing alternative and counternarratives is generally poor. As a result, some parts of the society feel underrepresented or even discriminated; some narratives do not work, because they do not address the grievances or the expectations of target groups.

Conclusion

The ideological content of the policy of prevention of violent extremism is still a relatively new phenomenon – not only for Central Asian states, but for the whole world community. The governments try to choose the right set of narratives aiming to stop the spread of violent extremist propaganda, but these narratives often miss their mark.

It is incredibly difficult to win a war of ideas, especially against an opponent that uses every possible means at all levels and has a strong base of ideology and supporters. Governments deal with misinformation, disinformation, misleading facts, and all other kinds of violent extremist

propaganda and recruitment. Nevertheless, the evidence shows that countermeasures in the ideological sphere can still be effective as long as a number of conditions are satisfied. Except for above-mentioned directions of international organizations, the following recommendations are relevant in the current circumstances for the Central Asian policymakers:

- To avoid hate speech in the development of counter messages.
- To work closer with the representatives of target groups, NGOs, media, and other stakeholders on formulation the alternative narratives.
- To get away from the religious-based model of counter messaging. Instead, to work more in the direction of the promotion of civic mindedness of at-risk groups and individuals.
- To continue and boost the development of critical thinking skills.

However, the evidence shows that appealing to ideology solely is a poor strategy that cannot deal with a complex of pull and push factors influencing the person’s decision to join an extremist group or to commit an ideologically motivated crime. That is why it is critically important to protect the promoted values (such as human rights or equality of opportunity) to prevent grievances and miscommunications within the society; to ensure inclusive decision-making processes and to improve interaction with marginalized groups. Overall, if effective, these measures will also impact positively to the resistance to violent extremist narratives.

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