

Religious Topics in Central Asian Secular Telegram Channels¹

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Abstract: The article analyses the issues of modern interconfessional interaction in the states of Central Asia, by employing the marketing research methods in order to analyze the socio-political content and the problem of perception of the current religious situation in the electronic media, primarily in Telegram channels. Thus, we use both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Special attention is paid to the degree of religious topics' importance and the attitude of adherents of the same or another religion to religious manifestations. The author studied the question of users' attitude to radical Islam, including its extremist manifestations. A brief description and assessment of the degree of success of the authorities and officially recognized religious organizations are given, and the main external and internal political and socio-economic factors influencing the dynamics of inter-confessional relations are identified.

Keywords: Central Asia, religion, Islam, tolerance, extremism

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Introduction and Relevance

The intensive geopolitical changes that are currently taking place are a manifestation of a qualitative transformation of the system of international relations. The collapse of the USSR, the formation of new independent states, including the gradual formation of a new geopolitical region “Central Asia”, a term first coined by the first president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Finally, the collapse of the bipolar world system, its transition first to a unipolar phase and rapid ruin of unipolarity towards a bipolar or multipolar system of international relations, had a serious impact on the socio-economic, political and ideological processes in the post-Soviet landscape. The identity crisis, which manifested itself in the loss of a sense of security on the part of the superpower with which Soviet citizens identified, caused by the simultaneous loss of faith in proletarian internationalism and, to a lesser extent, in atheism. These served towards awakening serious interest of the Central Asian population in religious movements, primarily traditional, but to a large extent in the newly emerged, atypical for numerous local ethnic and regional communities.

As Naumkin notes, researchers of the Islamization process used economic, ideological, psychological, functionalist, individualist approaches, various security concepts and other methodological constructions. Multiple empirical studies were made, which is especially characteristic of post-Soviet authors (Naumkin 2006, 5-24). The manifestation and mutual perception of adherents of traditional and atypical cults, atheists and deists became the subject of study by political scientists, sociologists, religious scholars, theologians, but primarily journalists. The problem is most often considered through the Christian/Islamic dichotomy, including as a prolongation of the irreconcilable confrontation between the West and the East at the mental level. Numerous studies by Western European, American, post-Soviet and Eastern authors reveal such a manifestation as Islamophobia (UN 2021). The main causes of the emergence and development of this include foreign policy hegemonic aspirations of Western powers, the post-colonial discourse and mass migrations of representatives of the Muslim world to European countries and Russia. Also to blame are the consequences of terrorist acts and even the continuation of crusades against Muslims by Christians and Jews in a new turn of the historical spiral (see, Marranci 2004, 105-119; Abashin 2005, 20-26; Martín-Munoz 2010, 21-28; Allen 2010, 210; Polyakov 2014, 28; Duss et al. 2015; Schools of peacemaking and media technologies in Central Asia 2017-2019).

Another important area of modern research is the study of political Islam. As the well-known Kazakh orientalist Syroezhkin notes, for the Muslim countries

of the Near and Middle East, “the return to Islam” (more precisely, to “political Islam” or “Islamism”) took place on the basis of non-acceptance of imported capitalist and communist values”. Meanwhile in the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, identity was built on clan (clan, territorial) principle, not on religious community, which survived the Soviet era. This was the reason for the relatively slow penetration of radical ideas into the Central Asia. In addition to ideology, there was a society structure of organization parallel to the Soviet which did not collapse with the USSR. A number of other researchers are of the similar view (see, Syroezhkin 2003, 271-280; Rekk and Egorov 2022, 73-178; Zvyagelskaya 2000, 48-56; Myrkasymov 2003, 38-48).

Research Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative research methods are used in this article. In our opinion, it is advisable to use the SMM analysis methods (Social Media Marketing) when analyzing large amounts of digital media data, including those on socio-political issues. To optimize the work, it is possible to use ready-made platform solutions for data processing. In this case, digital platforms developed to increase the efficiency of marketing promotion were used: TGStat (<https://tgstat.ru>) and especially focused on analyzing Telegram channels marketing tools performance, Telemetr (<https://telemetr.me>) and Telega (<https://telega.in>). The methodology for their application to the analysis of socio-political processes is described in a number of scientific articles and has been piloted (Gadelshin 2021, 67-74; Bykov 2023, 58-75; Sumernikov et al. 2023, 302-356). In addition, cross-platform solutions of Social Network Analysis Systems (<https://soware.ru/categories/social-media-analysis-systems>) may be used.

The choice of Telegram channels as the object of the study was driven by the fact that Telegram is widespread in all Central Asian countries and Russia (the main destination for work migration),. It is the most widespread SMM channel in Uzbekistan, the largest country in the region. Telegram combines the qualities of a messenger and classic digital media, being used in both capacities by most users. The freedom not only to read, but also to evaluate and comment posts increases their research value. Finally, the use of Telegram is legal in all of the above countries.

The level of Internet engagement in Central Asia (with the exception of Tajikistan) corresponds to the developed countries. Telegram is one of the main information resources and means of communication in the countries of Central Asia and their ethnic diasporas abroad.

Table 1. Telegram users in Central Asia

Country	Internet users (mln.)	Internet users (%)	Telegram users (mln.)	Use Telegram as primary (%)	Telegram channels (thou.)	Telegram rankings in messengers' popularity ratings
Kazakhstan	17,73	88,92	4,84	27,3	11	2
Uzbekistan	31,1	85,51	18,06	58,01	137	1
Kyrgyzstan	5,72	82,78	1,09	19,06	3	2
Tajikistan	4,5	44,96	1,07	23,78	1	3

Source: Bykov 2023, 60-64

Total of 46 Telegram channels with an audience of 1.4 thousand to 234.1 thousand users were selected for analysis (as of 05/25/2024). Four channels pertain to the Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Tajik and Kazakh diasporas in Russia. Two channels are Turkmen with an audience of less than 1 thousand users, each with an absolute pro-government content and without the possibility of evaluation and commenting (Ponomaryov 2022, 3-4). The remaining 40 channels selected for the analysis represented Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. For this purpose, small (up to 5 thousand users), medium (5-15 thousand) and large channels (over 15 thousand users), both pro-government and in opposition to the existing regimes, were analyzed. Total number of their users exceeds 1.14 million. One person may be a user of several selected channels at the same time. The results are summarized below. Some channels allow you to only rate the news, some allow you to make comments and rate posts. The languages of the selected channels are Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Uzbek and Karakalpak. In Tajikistan one of the selected channels is Arabic, amidst predominance of Russian-language channels, which reflects the situation in the modern Internet environment in Central Asia. The author deliberately ignored banned channels, numbering 840 in Uzbekistan (Telegram 2024). In the case of Turkmenistan, most non-state resources are blocked in principle, regardless of their content. Translate.yandex.ru platform was used to translate the texts.

As mass media combined with the ability to send personalized data (messenger), Telegram channels enjoy serious mobilization potential, both constructive and destructive. This can be determined by the fact that Telegram channels bloggers were among the activists during the anti-government protests

in 2022 in Nukus, caused by Tashkent's desire to eliminate the Constitutional autonomy of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, including its right to secession (Kirillova 2022).

Current State of Central Asian Countries

Central Asian political region³ presently includes the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK), the Kyrgyz Republic (KR), the Republic of Tajikistan (RT), the Turkmen Republic (TR) and the Republic of Uzbekistan (RU), bordering each other, the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, Afghanistan and Iran by land, and also the Republic of Azerbaijan by the Caspian Sea.

Countries markedly differ in terms of population density. Uzbekistan (approx. 800 residents per 1 sq. km in the Andijan region) (The official report of the Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2024, 8) and Tajikistan are classified as high-density countries, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – low density and Kyrgyzstan – medium density. Tajikistan is the youngest country, judging by the median age and also with the highest population growth rates. The proportion of the surplus working-age population in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is much higher than the regional average, despite low unemployment figures. Central Asian countries account for approximately 92% of the total work migrants in the Russian Federation (Kostenko 2023), led by Uzbekistan and followed by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. According to various estimates, 2-3.5 million citizens of Central Asian countries were working in the Russian Federation in 2023.

There is no problem of illiteracy in the considered countries, with over 90% of citizens of corresponding age having secondary and incomplete secondary education. In terms of higher education, Kazakhstan is the leader, reaching 44%, other countries range from 22-28%. The economic well-being of the population also varies greatly. The most prosperous is Kazakhstan, which can already be considered as a medium-developed state. Active economic growth has been recorded in Uzbekistan since 2021. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are seriously lagging behind the level of medium-developed countries in terms of economic indicators. Statistics for Turkmenistan are difficult to verify, so it is difficult to determine the real level of income of the population and the economic well-being of the country. It can be stated that in terms of GDP all countries have

³ The earlier concept of 'historical region of Central Asia' geographically included also the territories of the present-day PRC's MNR, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and Inner Mongolia, as well as a number of border subjects of the Russian Federation. Currently, the term is rarely used in this capacity.

long outstripped the indicators of the corresponding Soviet republics at the time of the collapse of the USSR. In terms of the degree of industrialization of the economies, Kazakhstan is industrial, Uzbekistan - agro-industrial, with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan falling in the predominantly agrarian countries category. Judging by official data, Turkmenistan can also be classified as an agrarian-industrial economy. The main indicators of economic and demographic development of Central Asian countries are presented in the table below.

Table 2. Main Macroeconomic and Demographic Indicators of Development of Central Asia countries

	GDP (1991, Bln. \$)	GDP (2023, Bln. \$)	Growth (time-s)	Income per capita (2023, \$)	GNP per capita (2023, thou \$)	Urbanization (2024, %)	Population density (2024, pp/km ²)	Unemployment rate (2024, %)
Kazakhstan	24,92	119,25	4,79	13300	34,5	62,2	7,3	5,0
Kyrgyzstan	2,6	13,7	5,27	1900	6,8	34,1	34,6	2,2
Tajikistan	2,54	10,8	4,25	1189	5,8	29	72,3	1,8
Turkmenistan	2,95	45,61*	17,21	14270*	15,3**	47,1	12,9	5,1***
Uzbekistan	13,68	90,9	6,64	5812	10,9	51,0	82,3	8,0

Source: Statcommittee of the CIS ; Baliev 2024; Take-profit 2024

* Data provided by the official authorities of Turkmenistan (our recalculation) appears overestimated.

** There is no official data for Turkmenistan for 2023, the figure given is the 2021 IMF estimate.

*** Data as of 24.05.2023.

All post-Soviet Central Asian countries declared themselves secular republics, which is enshrined in their Constitutions and other legislation and by-laws. In the Soviet Union, only one Central Asian Religious Board of Muslims operated for the entire region, with headquarters in Tashkent (Uzbekistan). After the collapse of the USSR, each of the countries formed its own Religious Board of Muslims. All Orthodox dioceses in the region were subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate until 2023. The executive authorities of the Central Asian countries have created a variety of supervisory structures whose responsibilities include the regulation of inter- and intra-confessional relations and permits for the construction/opening/closure of religious institutions. In a number of countries, the Hajj is controlled by state and municipal bodies. Most often, units for the control of religious activity function as part of the ministries of internal affairs, state security agencies, in a number of countries special bodies were created temporarily with direct subordination to the prime minister or president of the

corresponding country (Polyakov 2014, 83-88)⁴. The relationship between the Religious Boards and state bodies is complex, but constructive on the whole. Moreover, many posts feature the idea that Religious Boards of the three countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) resemble state bureaucratic bodies.

Religious Landscape Dynamics in the Post-Soviet Era

The demographic situation in the post-Soviet period has also changed significantly. Due to the higher natural increase in the titular ethnic groups and the migration outflow of European nationalities, as well as partly due to the policy of attracting representatives of the titular ethnic groups from abroad, the ethnic and religious balance in all Central Asian republics has shifted towards the dominance of titular ethnic groups and Sunni Muslims. This can be confirmed by the table below. This process became especially evident in Kazakhstan, where the Kazakhs constituted only a relative majority in the Soviet period. The main factor in the change in the situation in Kazakhstan was the outflow of the Russian and so-called Russian-speaking population (Belarusians, Ukrainians, etc.) primarily to the Russian Federation, as well as Germans to Germany.

Table 3. Ethno-confessional dynamics

	Population (million people)		Title (%)		Proportion of Muslims* (%)	
	1991	2024	1989	2024	1989	2024
Kazakhstan	16,99	20,03	39,52	70,98	47,3	69,3/74,0
Kyrgyzstan	4,46	7,18	52,37	74,04	52,0/72,1	82,7/84,0
Tajikistan	5,56	10,28	64,27	86,1	89,5	96,8/99,4
Turkmenistan	3,82	7,06	60,92	81,80	86,5	90,1
Uzbekistan	21,07	36,97	62,16	75,0	86,4	95,0/91,5
Total	51,90	81,51	58,75	75,93	68,0/75,2	85,0/90,8

Source: (Population Pyramids of the World from 1950 to 2100; World Population Review 2024)

* Official statistics not available. Expert assessments provided.

Despite serious changes in the demographic structure of society, interfaith harmony was preserved until the end of the second decade of the 21st century. The threat to social stability has been and continues to be posed primarily by

⁴ In Turkmenistan, for example, the Council for Religious Affairs (Genshi) was established under the President in 1996 to monitor religious practice in the country and to prevent the politicisation of Islam, as manifested in the activities of a number of clerics, including those who were in active contact with religious organizations from Iran, Afghanistan, the Middle East and especially Turkey.

clan and tribal contradictions and interethnic differences. Potential threat of religious conflict existed above the minimum, however below median level only for Tajikistan. Moreover, currently it is not so much the risk of confrontation between Muslims and Christians, but instead the possible clashes between Sunni Muslims of the traditional Hanafi madhhab, Shiites, and Salafis. Summarizing various threat factors, E.A. Ivanov and L.M. Isaev ranked them (from 1 – minimum threat level, to 5 – maximum).

Table 4. Assessment of the Overall Potential Conflict Indicator

Factor/country	RK	KR	RT	TR	RU
Ethno-tribal	2	5	5	5	3
Confessional	1	2	3	1	2
Elite conflict	1	3	3	1	2
Total	1,5	3,5	4	2,5	2,5

Source: Ivanov, Isaev 2019, 59-78

This situation has seen changes in the recent years. The main factors influencing this transformation were external for Central Asia – Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine and the events in Gaza, where, after attacks and hostage-taking by Hamas, Israel launched large-scale military operations against Palestine. The warming of relations with the Taliban on the part of the Russian authorities and its removal from the terrorist list of organizations by Kazakhstan is another factor not yet bearing significant impact on the religious situation in the region, but able to become another trigger in this process. Let us take a closer look at the perception of these processes.

One of the topics most frequently discussed in the Telegram channels of Central Asian countries is the sharp increase in the number of mosques. There used to be less than 400 mosques in Central Asia at the time of the USSR’s collapse. This was not enough to meet the spiritual needs of the population. Practically in all Central Asia countries in the first twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the state supported the construction of mosques, in an attempt to increase the loyalty of the electorate among other things. This was not always the case, often leading to the exact opposite result. This became one of the reasons why the authorities began to impose serious restrictions on the construction of mosques, impose bans on the activities of extremist religious organizations, and fight illegal Muslim educational centers (while continuing to participate in the opening ceremonies of new mosques and legal Islamic educational centers). This took place in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan back in the 1990s, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in the second decade of the 21st century, and also in Kyrgyzstan in recent years. Opposition to the growth of religiosity

on the part of the authorities was reflected in the negative assessment of their activities by Western countries. In 2019-2020, the U.S. Department of State added Tajikistan and Turkmenistan to the list of countries where religious freedom is systematically violated. Uzbekistan and Russia were included in the list of countries that could potentially be included in this list (Turkmen.news 2020).

The opposition between school and mosque is actively discussed on the digital media pages, too. In all countries, Telegram channels users write that the number of mosques exceeds the number of schools. At the same time, the issues of both openings and closures of religious centers by the authorities are being actively discussed. The validity of the claims by journalists and ordinary people may be inferred from the data below.

Table 5. School vs Mosque (end of 2023 data)⁵

	Mosques	Schools	Mosques per thousand believers	Mosques to schools ratio
Kazakhstan	2854	7471	0,21	0,38
Kyrgyzstan	2688	2350	0,45	1,14
Tajikistan	3938	946	0,40	4,16
Turkmenistan	700	1761	0,11	0,40
Uzbekistan	2149	10289	0,06	0,21
Total	12329	22817	0,17	0,54

As can be seen above, the number of schools is 2.5-5 times higher than the number of mosques in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. In Kyrgyzstan, the number of officially registered mosques and educational institutions is comparable, with a certain advantage in favor of the former. In Tajikistan, the number of legal mosques exceeds the number of schools by more than 4 times, which undoubtedly indicates a higher level of Islamization of its population in comparison with other Central Asian republics.

Many illegal mosques also exist in Central Asian countries, in addition to the legal. The majority also happens to be in Tajikistan. The first mass operations of the authorities to close mosques began in 2007. By mid-2019, according to the head of the Committee for Religious Affairs S. Davlatzoda, the activities of 573

⁵ Data taken from official websites and printed publications of the Ministries of Education and Spiritual Administrations of Muslims of Central Asian states. The recalculation is ours.

mosques were officially banned in the country (Vechyorka 2019). In the last five years, the process of suspending the activities and closing illegal mosques has accelerated.

Everyday Religiosity

The undoubted reasons for the growth in the popularity of Islam in Central Asia were the growth in the number of religious institutions, religious organizations and Islamic educational centers. For instance, in Kyrgyzstan there are currently 51 religious charitable organizations and 38 others, training is offered in 14 religious educational institutions, including the Islamic University and the Islamic College, and 162 madrasahs are in operation (Sputnik 2024). Notably, these are just the legal centers. International Islamic research centers for Uzbekistan have been established in Termez, Samarkand, Tashkent and Bukhara. Since the academic year 2017/18, the curricula of another 9 madrasahs have received the opportunity to run bachelor's level programs (Gafurov 2018, 39-53). The situation is similar in other Central Asian countries.

One of the reasons for the serious Islamization of young people in Kyrgyzstan was the insufficient number of kindergartens. In 2018, they numbered only 1390, supporting just about 20% of Kyrgyz children. According to UNICEF, in 2008 this figure was even half as low (UNESCO 2008). The niche was filled with mosques, where working parents leave their children for the whole working day (Toropov and Tsargrad 2018). Today children who studied in mosques at the turn of the millennium are already becoming parents themselves.

The growth in the popularity and influence of Islam among representatives of Central Asian ethnic groups can be judged by the changes in the popularity of names, with Islamic faith associated names gaining popularity in the 2020s. Indicatively, in 2020-2021, the most popular name among newborn Kazakh girls was the name "Medina", the third most popular name in Kazakhstan among boys in the same period was "Nurislam", the top ten most popular male names also included "Islam" and "Muslim" (Musapirova and Kursiv 2021). The most popular name among Kyrgyz boys in the first half of 2023 was "Muhammad", the name "Nurislam" made the top 10, and "Fatima" ranked fifth in popularity among newborn girls (Ilyasov 2023). As for Uzbekistan, the name "Muhammadali" became most popular among newborn boys in 2023, with "Muslima" ranking third in popularity among newborn girls (Ten and Kursiv 2024). "Muhammedali" was among the most popular names for boys in Turkmenistan along with "Medina" for girls. Incidentally only in Tajikistan, the same names that were popular in the Soviet and early post-Soviet era remained

popular both among boys and girls (Rakhmonova 2021).

Such names and nicknames are not uncommon also in the Telegram channels. Arabic script is often used, with Quranic texts or images of a mosque for an avatar. All this reflects the growing popularity of Islam, with practically no one doubting this trend today. The only debate is centered on the direction Islamization is taking – either becoming everyday Islam (sometimes called secular), or its radical trends enhanced.

Publications on religious topics, and especially comments, appear regularly in the Telegram channels of the four countries under consideration and occupy a significant place in the total volume of publications and especially comments. Mostly discussed are matters of so-called everyday religion - rituals, festivals, opening or restoration of places of worship, personal achievements and failures. The most common type of reference to religion is the use of the following expressions during discussions: “Glory to God!”, “Praise be to Allah”, “Gratitude to the Almighty”, “Amen”, etc. Such references are found in over 21% of discussions. A very common type of manifestation of everyday religiosity is congratulating each other and all readers on major religious holidays: Eid al-Fitr (the holiday of breaking the fast after fasting in the Holy month of Ramadan) and Eid al-Adha (the feast of sacrifice) among Muslims and Christmas and Easter among Orthodox Christians (Asia-plus 2024). Moreover, the number of such mentions, despite the absolute dominance of Muslims in the structure of the Central Asian population, turns out to be approximately equal. Muslims not only congratulate each other on Muslim holidays, but also Christians on Christian holidays, and Christians congratulate each other on Christian holidays and Muslims on Muslim holidays. The following fact is quite indicative. During the plenary session of the IV Central Asian Conference of the Valdai Club, held on May 14-15, 2024 in Ufa, dedicated to: “Russia and Central Asia: Development and Security in a Changing World Realities”, the head of the Republic of Bashkortostan, which is part of the Russian Federation, inhabited mainly by Muslim Bashkirs and Russian Orthodox Christians, R.F. Khabirov talked about a similar case from the life of his own family. One of his daughters congratulated the other on Muslim holiday, receiving a response typical of Orthodox Christians during the celebration of Easter: - Eid al-Adha! - Truly al-Adha! This was not an exaggeration, on the contrary, this example being typical not only for mixed population Russian regions, but also for the Central Asian states.

Much less frequently recorded, and this reflects the confessional composition of the population, are congratulations on Gregorian style Christian holidays (Catholic and Protestant holidays), as well as Jewish holidays (here Passover

and Hanukkah are most frequently mentioned). Congratulations on religious holidays make up about 5% of the total publications. Congratulations on secular holidays, such as the New Year and Nowruz, Victory Day, Independence Day, March 8 (International Women's Day), are very often accompanied by wishes of assistance from the Almighty, regardless of the confessional affiliation of the author and readers. Such congratulations are perceived as normal, do not cause negative reactions both from their specific recipients (if the congratulations are personal) and from the rest of the participants in the discussions. On the contrary, in most cases, such congratulations are accompanied by positive comments and joined by other discussion participants. The ongoing strengthening of the positions of traditional religions, primarily Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity, does not lead to an increase in interfaith contradictions.

Islamic Radicalism and Religious Extremism

From the time of establishment of the Anti-Terrorism Center under the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2004 until the end of 2023, more than 700 people, mostly Kazakhstan citizens, were convicted of religious basis extremism and terrorism in Kazakhstan (Sultanov, Broadcasting of Valdai Discussion club 2024). According to the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 16 foreign structures were included in the national list of terrorist and extremist organizations banned in the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2016, 15 of which associated with radical Islam (Zhakipbaev 2019). This list is more extensive in other countries. The numbers of militants relocating from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to Syria and Iraq in order to join the ISIS, reach 3150 people (UN Regional Office on Drugs and Crime in Central Asia, 2023).

The rating of countries that, according to commentators, can assist in resolving intra or interfaith contradictions, is interesting. No matter how surprising it may seem, but to a certain extent it coincides with the rating of countries that pose a threat. Thus, the rating of countries capable of helping to stabilize the religious situation in the event of its aggravation is as follows: 1. The situation will be resolved by the actions of the authorities of their own country (with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, where the activities of their own authorities are ranked 3rd), 2. Russia, 3. Neighboring Central Asian countries, 4. China, 5. Azerbaijan, 6. Turkey, 7. USA and Western Europe, 8. Iran, 9. Other countries, international organizations and transnational corporations.

Many Western countries, Russia, etc., are actively discussing the threats of Islamic extremism and terrorism emanating from Central Asia, which, after the

terrorist attack in March 2024 at the Crocus City Hall near Moscow, are often associated with the “Tajik threat.” Objective analysis data shows that in the actual Central Asian countries, the threat of terrorist acts and destabilization of the situation, including at the inter- and intra-confessional levels, is much lower than in most foreign countries. Global Terrorism Index has been compiled since 2013. It determines a country’s place in the ranking of terrorist threats compared to other countries, i.e., the higher the score, the lower the threat of terrorism. Many Western European countries and Ukraine consistently fall into the top 20 countries of the rating. Throughout the entire period of compilation of this rating, Russia is also significantly ahead of the Central Asian countries in terms of threats (see Table below).

Table 6. The Global Terrorism Index

Country	2012	2013*	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Kazakhstan	47		65	83	94	67	75	85	93	93	93	89
Kyrgyzstan	92		112	86	84	79	80	87	92	93	93	89
Tajikistan	59		68	84	56	72	74	50	45	50	47	69
Turkmenistan	116		124	124	130	130	138	138	135	93	93	89
Uzbekistan	86		111	124	117	125	132	135	134	70	93	76
Russia (diaspora)	9		11	23	30	33	34	37	39	45	44	35

Source: Vision of humanity 2023

* No data available.

This is by no means absolute proof that serious terrorist attacks and social upheavals are impossible in these countries, but it casts doubt on the thesis that such threats are higher here than in other regions, including highly developed countries. In order to determine the degree of involvement of the population in the discussion of topics related to religious extremism, content analysis was performed on the posts content of these channels for the year under study. For this purpose, the same set of marker terms was used for all of them: “radical”, “Islamist”, “fundamentalist”, “Salafi”, “extremist”, “terrorist”, “jihad” and variations of the same root words.⁶ Next, all cases not related to the country and ethnic group of the corresponding Telegram channel were excluded, following which, the ratio for the number of those who actively reacted to posts that touched on the topic of religious extremism - to the total number of yearly users was determined. The results were as follows.

⁶ In all countries, the term “fundamentalist” is not used in discussions, but regularly mentioned in the official media. Term “Salafist” is used very rarely. The reason for this could not be established.

Table 7. The Degree of Involvement of Telegram channel users in Discussions Related to Islamic extremism⁷

Country	Activity
Kazakhstan	2,84
Kyrgyzstan	6,23
Tajikistan	11,46
Uzbekistan	2,52
Russia (diaspora)	0,05

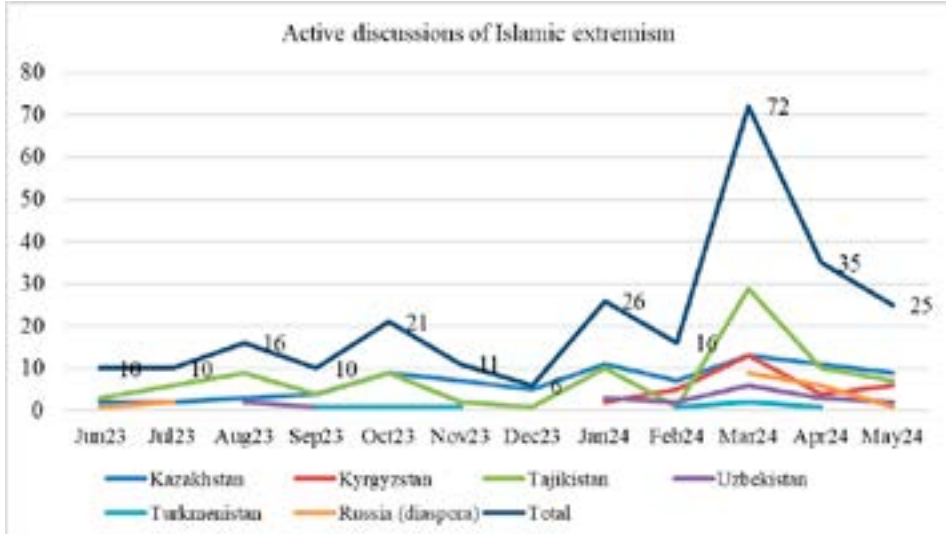
Notably, on average, each Telegram channels user in Kazakhstan viewed data and reacted (rated and commented) on Islamic extremism for the period from June 1, 2023 to May 31, 2024 less than 3 times, while users of Tajik resources for the same period received such data and reacted more than 4 times as frequently. In the channels of the Russian diasporas, religious extremism was the least popular topic, while the level of reaction in the Tajik diaspora channel was an order of magnitude higher here, also compared to the Kyrgyz and Uzbek diasporas. Meanwhile, the Kazakh diaspora has never touched on the problems of religious extremism at all. Within the Central Asian region, the problems of religious extremism aroused the least interest among Uzbek users, and the Kazakh audience also displayed very low interest indeed. The problems of Islamic extremism were most often addressed in Tajik Telegram channels; the average level of reaction to extremist information of a religious nature was in Kyrgyz channels. There is no correlation between such parameters as the ethno-confessional composition of the population, the level of education, population density and activity in Telegram channels on religious extremist topics. There is a positive correlation between this parameter and the standard of living of the population, the degree of urbanization, and the prevalence of mosques. In the regional context, the relationship between median age and involvement is recorded: the lower the median age, the higher the involvement.

A content analysis of youth media conducted in 2022 in Kyrgyzstan showed that there is no direct correlation between the level of Islamization and ideas about the perfect state structure. Moreover, among young people (18-35 years old), almost a third simultaneously advocate a return to Soviet values and construction of an Islamic state. At the same time, in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan the absolute majority of respondents of all ages (68%, 78% and 81%, respectively) believed that religion could be the main means of consolidation of the population, while only less than half agreed with this statement in Kazakhstan (43%) (Rekk and Yegorov 2022, 149)

⁷ Data from the author's study.

Of interest is the chronological dynamics of active discussions⁸ that touched upon religious extremist topics during the year under study. See the diagram below.

Diagram 1. Active Discussions of Islamic Extremism



Source: Author.

** The number of users of Turkmen Telegram channels is under 1 thousand people, discussions or comments are not technically supported by these channels, for this reason only the posts that mentioned the topic of Islamic extremism are indicated.*

As can be seen from the chart data, in general, the discussion of Islamic radicalism was not among the top five topics, with the exception of peak periods. The overall peak was in March and April 2024, which is explained by discussions around the terrorist attack in the Crocus City Hall near Moscow, committed by Islamic radicals from Tajikistan. In addition to the main topic – the terrorist attack itself – the issues of possible terrorist attacks in Central Asia and the restrictions imposed first by the Russian and then by the Kazakh authorities regarding the entry of labor migrants into the territory of their countries were actively discussed. The peak of 2023 was in October, when the main topics were the situation in Palestine after the start of Israeli military operations, as well as the discussion of niqab bans in Uzbekistan and the neutralization of members of the banned in the country “Jamaat Nasrullo” organization who had penetrated Tajikistan from Afghanistan.

The activity in discussions of the topic of religious extremism in the current

⁸ Active discussions were defined as those with more than 100 comments and/or more than 10,000 ratings.

year, 2024, significantly exceeds the activity of 2023. The splash of interest in the problem did not occur in March, when the terrorist attack was committed in the Moscow region, but back in January. Removal of the Taliban movement from the black list by the Kazakhstan leadership became the main factor in the growing interest of the audience in extremist topics. It should be noted right away that the majority of commentators spoke out against the correctness of such a decision of the authorities or expressed serious doubts.

In the country context, the issues of Islamic radicalism and extremism were most actively discussed in two countries – Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. On the same note, the issues of Tajik participation in extremist organizations abroad (Russia, Germany, Italy, Syria, Afghanistan) were most often discussed in Tajikistan. Incidentally, the basis of discussions in Kazakhstan centered on the issues of legislative regulation of religious activities to prevent terrorism, as well as the likelihood of exacerbation of extremist activities caused by the destabilization of the international situation, primarily Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, and to a lesser extent developments in other foreign countries, mainly Afghanistan and Israel.

One of the most important topics of discussion in Kyrgyzstan throughout the period under study was the influence of religion on education and especially the destructive activities of foreign humanitarian foundations, as well as the possible destabilization of the situation in the country, which was associated with the process of the return from abroad of militants and members of their families who participated in extremist organizations (mainly from Syria).

In Uzbekistan, the main discussions revolved around the actions of the authorities to prevent the threats of Islamic radicalism and terrorism. The most intensive discussion in terms of the number of participants involved (107.3 thousand) took place after the publication by state bodies on January 11 of a new black list of banned digital media, the reading and listening to which can lead to administrative and even criminal liability. Here, over a quarter of those who reacted and about 40 per cent of those who commented disapproved of this decision in whole or in part. Particular dissatisfaction was caused by the ban on listening to Nasheed Telegram channels.⁹

Many accounts, posts and comments were deleted by the Telegram channels moderators. The removal process is especially active on diaspora resources. Equally, only in these resources did we come across direct indications of recruitment, proposals to engage in smuggling and arms trade. Despite the work of administrators and possibly representatives of supervisory bodies, many extremist statements by both Islamists and ardent opponents of Islam as a religion, which, according to the latter, is itself a source of terrorism, have survived. Listed below are just a few of these. On the same note, we will cite some comments by opponents of extremism.

⁹ Nasheed (Arabic نديشون) is a Muslim solo and choral male chant sung a cappella.

**Table 8. Examples of Statements by Opponents and Supporters of
Extremist Methods of Religious and Political Activity**

Statements by opponents of extremism	Extremist Statements by Supporters of Political Islam
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It seems to me that this is a signal already - if such young people follow the path of radicalism - we are losing the battle for the minds of the youth. - You need to teach children, probably, if you see that your child wants to live religiously - you need to check, not to be afraid yourself, we face Islam and are immediately fearful, but [you need] to help him understand the right and wrong. - Young people should study in schools, universities, if we live only by religion, we will never develop. - Radicals have become like uncut dogs, they are constantly detained. I hope they are all jailed soon. - Why are there so many fanatics of extremism and pedophilia in the southern regions? - "The punishment of such "heroes" [about members of Syria Islamist groups] should be more severe. We need to show the consequences of selling out your country. - The NSC (security agency) is working well! - May our country be peaceful. - Peace to Islam! - These are rather sects under the guise of Islam. Children are taught from an early age to agree to all the words of Ustaz, which repeats: "Go away for 40 days to dawah, leave everything and everyone!" - Sharia law will never approve of any innocent death or anything like that. - In Russia, let's be honest, radical Islamists are not banned, wtf, but everything that is prohibited in Uzbekistan is allowed in Russia, so for a long time all radicals have been leaving for Russia, because they knew that our security services would catch them and piss on them at the early stage, and in Russia you can do whatever you want, and you will not be touched, until you start writing directly about terrorist attacks, but now, after the terrorist attack in Russia, most of them began to be deported, and here they are met by our security services already, so now our services will have their hands full. - Uzbekistan is full of religious fanatics! They use religion, they are allegedly righteous Muslims, but in fact they are not, however they are very similar outwardly. - Muslim terrorists? The whole world sees that Israel is the real terror!! - "Not all Muslims are creatures like those bastards [the perpetrators of the Crocus City Hall bombing]. - "The creature that cut throats was recruited on the channel where he learned prayers. During Ramadan - a month, purification, kindness and mercy, they were sent to kill people, children! Can you imagine what and who preaches on such channels?! And how do they present the Holy Quran?! Those scumbags have no faith, no religion and no nationality! Alloh jazosini bersin!!! - They rape girls and get 6-7 years [in prison], and for listening to Nasheed, you get 15-20 years, trash. - The first president Islam did not like Islam, and the second followed his example, I respect them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Calls for jihad (the most frequent mentions). - Already see trans people converting to Islam (the author calls himself a "naïve radical"). - "Let those with brown backs and yellow fronts be white, let alone religion!" - "We'll slaughter people like you." - "I can stab you to death at any time." - I am waiting - I can't wait for the war with Kazakhstan [with a small letter in the text]. - Destroy that which destroys you. - "What have you lost here... in a Muslim country?" - You shit, go to Israel. - Non-Muslims are non-humans. - If you do not want to profess Islam, you will die a polytheist. - But a true Muslim has no other name than "Muslim".
	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Extremist Statements by Opponents of Islam</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allah crazy bio garbage. - These radicals should all be gathered and sent to Syria. Stripped of citizenship. - Slaves of the Arabs, sick of it. They breed exponentially. - This is how imams earn. Cryptocurrency. - Well done Muscovites and Russians, defending their land from Asian illegals and underground Wahhabis. - Those who wear the niqab should be checked first. - I smoked [drugs] and started jihad mining. - It is necessary to ban religion, since religion in fact does not make a person wiser, but stupid on the contrary. - As for Islam, this is a dangerous religion for a person! It has destructive power, man is controlled by Islam, it is a weapon. - "Shoot yourself!" - Was it you who wrote a confession?

State bodies also understand the mobilization and information capabilities of Telegram channels. Uzbekistani authorities are especially active on this front. Thus, after the terrorist attack in the Moscow region, information began spreading that a series of terrorist attacks were being prepared in the post-Soviet space, primarily in Uzbekistan (Reportyor 2024). In the country itself, rumors about upcoming terrorist attacks began to be actively circulated through the dominant channel for broadcasting information - Telegram channels, as well as calls to commit such actions. As a result, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was forced to make an official appeal to the country's citizens to ignore such reports or report them to the authorities. The text of the appeal, published by many Telegram channels, is quoted below.

“Dear citizens! Recently, against the backdrop of terrorist attacks committed in countries around the world, individual residents of Uzbekistan and neighboring states have been receiving messages via the Internet with an offer to mine public places, including shopping and entertainment centers, schools and other crowd facilities for monetary rewards. Most often, provocative messages are sent through the Telegram messenger. Unknown people promise to pay various sums of money, provide weapons and send an action plan, and, as a rule, these provocateurs do not respond to refusals. The worst thing is that attackers most often write to children. In a number of these countries, cases of intimidation are recorded, saying they allegedly know everything about the child. The provocateur accounts use no photos and the phone numbers are hidden.”

“Dear citizens! In case of receiving such messages, we ask you not to panic and not to forward them to public chats, to your friends and acquaintances, but immediately report to the internal affairs authorities via the emergency number 102. Block senders and don't engage in correspondence or conversations.”

“Remember that scammers do this to cause panic among the public! The Republics' law enforcement agencies are doing everything within their competence to neutralize any threat to security.” (Official telegram channel of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia 2024)

Proposals to commit terrorist attacks in the Russian Federation in April 2024 began spreading actively through messengers in the Kyrgyz Republic. Moreover, the main target audience for recruitment by terrorists were selected teenagers from migrant families. The representative office of the Ministry of Labour of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Russian Federation has also issued an official warning to its citizens working in Russia on this matter (Ministry of Labour of the Kyrgyz Republic 2024).

The degree of support for extremist attitudes can be judged by the relevant topics' reactions. There are currently a lot of options for reactions, different types of emoticons and likes. We have reduced them to three conditionals: supporting the government's fight against Islamism (positive), not supporting the fight against Islamism (negative), and undecided on their own attitude (neutral). The summary results were as follows.

Table 9. Attitude of Telegram channel users to countering Islamism by the state (%)

Country	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Kazakhstan	85	12	3
Kyrgyzstan	71	28	1
Tajikistan	72	26	2
Uzbekistan	67	26	7

Source: author.

As we can see, across all countries prevail those expressing opinions supporting the actions of the authorities aimed at preventing the growth of the influence of Islamists and extremist activities. The course of the Kazakh government enjoys the greatest support in this regard. There are very few of those who are undecided on their own position, which allows us to state a high level of polarization of opinions on this issue, and in the event of a real conflict, it potentially poses a threat tough physical confrontation, possibly leading to bloodshed. The indicators of disagreement with the actions of the authorities turned out to be very high (12-28%). The reason for this may be both disagreement with the forms of implementation of such a policy¹⁰, and sympathy for the ideas of political Islam.

¹⁰ According to the comments, this is the predominant reason.

Conclusion

Thus, Telegram channels are not only an important channel for broadcasting information, a means of communication and prompt notification (messenger), but can also be used as an indicator of public opinion research using qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. Telegram is widely used in Central Asia (with the exception of Turkmenistan). Being an open platform, it is able to carry both constructive and destructive data. It is advisable to use the analysis of Telegram resources in combination with other sources to verify and expand research opportunities.

The study enables us to conclude that in the post-Soviet era, the place of atheistic ideology in spiritual life was being actively replaced by religious ideology. Moreover, the process of strengthening the role of religion is characteristic of the Muslim and non-Muslim population of the region. In parallel with the growing expansion of the sphere of social application of Islam, opportunities arose for the penetration and spread of radical ideas. The process of politicization of Islam in all countries of the region is currently undergoing the second stage of its evolution (1. The stage of formation and actual merging with part of the political elites; 2. The stage of distancing the state from Islamic ideology and restrained opposition).

Analysis of the content of secular Telegram channels for religiosity reflects the following trends and phenomena. Manifestations of secular religiosity have become a positively perceived phenomenon in all countries of the region. At the same time, a significant part of supporters of secular religiosity is concerned about the penetration of Islam into the sphere of secular education. Also of concern is the fact that Islam has begun to play such a significant role that it acts as a disincentive for the development of education and, in this sense, technological and social progress. The attitude to political Islam and especially to such extreme manifestations as extremism and terrorism is debatable. Here, the majority of users in all republics are of the opinion that it is necessary to control, and more often to directly ban the activities of adverse organizations and media. Yet, the situation in the region is heterogeneous and varies considerably from country to country and from region to region. The situation appears calmest in Kazakhstan, where 90% support the government's policy of containing Islamism and other forms of extremism. Despite the fact that the topic is one of the topics discussed, most often it is commented on in the vein of countering possible threats. The situation is not so clear-cut in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and especially Tajikistan. Even despite the serious blocks of Islamist content, about a quarter of Telegram channels users represent the share of those who disagree with the anti-Islamist

actions of state bodies and a number of political parties and public organizations supporting these actions. This is a very high indicator, demonstrating not so much the general level of trust in the authorities, but the potential for possible destabilization of the socio-political situation in the Muslim communities of these countries and the population's distrust of the Religious Boards of Muslims, which, according to commentators' viewpoints, are controlled bodies.

In our opinion, a more unstable situation has developed in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. For Kyrgyzstan, according to commentators, the main threat is inside the country, while it is external for Tajikistan. In the course of the past year, interstate relations between these countries have become increasingly close, but the process of their border delimitation is not over yet.

It presently appears (in case of no other external or internal reasons unrelated to the religious factors), that the inter and intra-confessional situation is set to remain quite stable in all countries. Furthermore, the discussion of this topic in the digital media is not only able to mobilize anti-state elements, but, on the contrary, consolidate those who advocate the development of traditional Hanafism. Accordingly, this would help to relieve certain social tension caused by the March terrorist attack in the Moscow region, as well as serve the development of mutual understanding between representatives of Islam and other confessions traditional for the region. On top of that, it would also aid the expansion of interstate integration in countermeasures, including at the regional level.

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Андреј Биков

Верске теме на секуларним Телеграм каналима у Централној Азији

Сажетак: Овај чланак анализира савремене међуверске интеракције у државама Централне Азије. Посебна пажња посвећена је проблему перцепције тренутне верске ситуације у електронским медијимима, нарочито на Телеграм каналима. Анализирају се степен важности верских тема и ставови следбеника исте или различитих религија према верским манифестацијама. Посебна пажња усмерена је на ставове према радикалном исламу, и екстремистичким манифестацијама. Нуди се и кратка анализа успешности државних структура да препознају верске организације. Главни екстерни и интерни политички и социоекономски фактори који утичу на динамику интер-конфесионалних односа су идентификовани. У овом раду, покушали смо да употребимо методе истраживања маркетинга како бисмо анализирали друштвено-политички контекст, па смо користили квантитативне и квалитативне методе.

Кључне речи: Централна Азија, религија, ислам, толеранција, екстремизам