ANALYTICAL REPORT

Action Research within the framework of the project
"Social media for deradicalization in Kyrgyzstan: A model for Central Asia"

Messages, images and media channels promoting youth radicalization in Kyrgyzstan

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Edited by: **Ikbalzhan Mirsaiitov and Mirgul Karimova**

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ON
ACTION RESEARCH

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January 2017

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Content

This research shows the role of social media as a means of disseminating and consuming radical ideologies and narratives in the Kyrgyz Republic (KR). The term "social media" refers not only to the Internet, but also to mobile phone technologies where various mobile applications (or messengers) are actively used to exchange content and disseminate information.

The research employs a qualitative approach and uses the following methods:
a) analysis of the most popular social media among the local youth, kinds and types of information received and disseminated through these channels;
b) research of the type and the language of communication in the target youth environment;
c) identification of popular messages and meanings circulated through these channels and instilled in the minds of the youth, which leads to radicalization;
d) *one hundred and eight* structured interviews with active users and consumers of information from social media in eight districts of Kyrgyzstan:
    ▪ **Bazar-Korgon, Suzak** Districts in Jalal-Abad Oblast;
    ▪ **Aravan, Uzgen, Kara-Suu, Nookat** Districts in Osh Oblast;
    ▪ **Zheti-Oguz** District in Issyk-Kul oblast;
    ▪ **Kara-Balta** - the administrative center of Zhayil District in Chui Oblast.

[1]

These districts have been selected for a field research as the most susceptible areas to recruitment and violent extremism, from which more than 500 people at the time of writing the report, according to the statistics of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, have left for the war zone.[2] Also, some districts of the Osh and Jalal-Abad oblasts are especially susceptible to youth radicalization after the ethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in June 2010. There were outbreaks of protest riots with varying intensity in 2014-15 in the Zheti-Oguz district in connection with the operation of the Kumtor gold mine, and the youth were the main driving force. According to law enforcement agencies, there are a number of cases of residents of this district who have left the country for military action in Syria[3].

Respondents in the target areas were selected by random sampling, with consideration given to their age category from about 16 to 32 years. The interviews were conducted by a group of 6 field researchers using a non-formalized method. Their results were evaluated using 15 indicators[4]. These interviews serve as a

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[1] Research area map, the Internet template from http://wikitravel.org/en/File:Kyrgyzstan_regions_map.pngthe numbering and classification of districts is made by the author of the research using a multimedia resource

[2] Alina Kozhekova, "the number of belligerents is growing" [Алина Кожекова, «число воюющих растет»]. 24.kg news agency, March 2016.
http://24.kg/obschestvo/28522_golos_ameriki_chislo_radikalno_nastroennyih_jenschin_v_kyirgyizstane_mojet_byit_gorazdo_bols he/

[3] Twenty-five members of family from Issyk-Kul left for Syria. Turmush, 2016: http://isfana-t.turmush.kg/ru/news:1341213/?from=ru_turmush&place=newstoplast

[4] See Annex 1, "Methodology" on p. 25

basis for analyzing the information which users consume; its content, format, the degree of trust in it and subsequent communication channels.

The data obtained based on these interviews has helped to extract clear descriptions of meanings, messages, and images that are attractive to young people and can contribute to their radicalization. The term "radicalization" in this research denotes ideological and behavioral tendencies characterized by a shift towards intolerance of the current way of life and the state structure and by various levels of predisposition to violence through communications and joining militant extremist and terrorist groups.

MAIN FINDINGS

The banned extremist and terrorist groups in Kyrgyzstan, such as the Islamic State (ISIS, IS)[5] and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU, the Islamic Party of Turkestan)[6], widely use social networks to conduct their information campaigns and recruit young people. These groups conduct a global social campaign in the media to influence each user. According to the report "Jihad against Journalists"[7] released by the international journalist organization Reporters Without Borders, the ISIS central command supervises seven media divisions with separate specialties (video, text, photo, audio, visual graphs and translation sections) and collects information from 38 "media offices" around the world.

Their success is ensured by active followers in social networks which disseminate their material, thus becoming volunteers in promoting radical ideas. Currently, the expansion of the strategies of terrorist and extremist groups is aimed at creating multi-language content for its further dissemination in Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. That is why much of the information is now being spread in the Uzbek language which is the native language for a large ethnic group living in Kyrgyzstan.[8] This increases the accessibility to a certain audience in Kyrgyzstan and enhances their comprehension of the speech and visual images in the audio-visual material, and articles transmitted.

The continuing recruitment and relocation of the youth to combat areas is fueled by various professional and amateur videos distributed through social networks, short reports from the scene in local languages, slideshows in which the main characters are young Kyrgyz citizens in camouflage uniforms on the battlefield calling to join their struggle "in the name of Allah." Such content has become even more attractive to the local youth after September 2015, when a video[9] was posted where the militants of the "Islamic State" in Syria sent a suicide bomber – Babur Israilov, a 21 year old Kyrgyz citizen and a resident of Jalal-Abad oblast on a mission.[10] During the field research, the video was mentioned by several respondents who referred to this example as "motivation" for them and a reason to further search for such information on the Internet, as well as for communicate with its authors. The interviewees also pointed out photos and videos sent to them by their relatives and compatriots from combat areas "where the jihad is happening." The participation of relatives, compatriots, and neighbors is one of the serious factors that cause trust and the desire to go to war.

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[5] The Islamic State was recognized as a terrorist and extremist organization. Its activities in the territory of Kyrgyzstan were prohibited by the ruling of the Oktyabrskii Court of Bishkek as of February 13, 2015: http://religion.gov.kg/KY/religioznost_rastet.html

[6] The activities of the Islamic Party of Turkestan in the territory of Kyrgyzstan were prohibited by the ruling of the Supreme Court of the Kyrgyz Republic on August 20, 2003, and it is recognized as a terrorist organization: http://religion.gov.kg/KY/religioznost_rastet.html

[7] "Jihad against Journalists", Reporters without Borders, 2015: https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/2015-rsf-rapport-jihad-against-journalists-2015.pdf

[8] According to the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, as of May 1, 2016, 14.6% of the population of Kyrgyzstan is made up of representatives of the Uzbek ethnicity: http://stat.kg/ru/statistics/naselenie/

[9] The videos are located on several portals: www.facebook.com/tauhidvajihod, www.youtube.com/tauhidvajihod, and also one can write to him directly at tauhidvajihod@gmail.com

[10] During the field research, the video was mentioned by several respondents who referred to this example as "motivation" for them and a reason to further search for such information on the Internet, as well as communicate with its authors.

A sufficient level of Internet penetration in Kyrgyzstan[11], its affordability, freedom and almost complete coverage of the country by mobile communication and mobile Internet serve as a favorable factor for the increasing involvement of young people in various groups in social networks and messengers, applications and services for instant messaging. While the focus of this research was the study of media channels and popular meanings and slogans leading to radicalization, interviewees pointed to other forms contributing to this. For example, rejection of secular views and secular government in Kyrgyzstan, political disappointments, distrust of law enforcement agencies because those who fight terrorism "follow the orders of infidels," the desire to "establish a caliphate in Kyrgyzstan" in order to stop bribes, corruption and inequality.

The Internet users interviewed during the survey react to radical narratives leading to violent extremism in three different ways:
- o **The first group of respondents (61%)** – support the messages, trust the information based on their understanding of the distributed appeals, exchange information and seek further interaction to get answers to their questions;
- o **The second group of respondents (20%)** – are sympathetic to the information calling to join the war in Syria, because the news from there is reported not only in social media but also in official media; the feeling of pity for victims of war and the desire to help Muslims, brothers in faith also prevail;
- o **The third group of respondents (19%)** – contrast their own moderate views of Islam against radical appeals, while emphasizing the danger of extremism and pointing to the distortion of verses and hadiths from the Quran in videos and posts.

Some quotes from the interviews with respondents are presented in a table in the Annexes[12].

A descriptive portrait of the average respondent from the group of respondents: it is a 22-24-year-old young man, a student or unemployed, a believer, an active Internet user who regularly consumes information from at least three social media (mostly in Uzbek or Russian, less often in Kyrgyz) and who is dependent on the information received, based on which group of respondents he belongs to. Religion is an important part of his life, while he is in search of answers to many questions. He associates himself more with the "Muslim world," and religious identity is now primary for him. If he lacks sufficient religious knowledge, he often searches for answers to his topics of interest on the Internet or among Internet users of the same age.

The image of the ideal formed in minds of the interviewed young people based on the consumed information (by regions):
- o The analysis of respondents' answers in Bazar-Korgon and Nookat districts shows that, due to the influence of the information from the Internet and social media, the ideal for young people is the image of a Muslim who can support in jihad and enter paradise after dying for his faith. Almost all respondents in their answers indirectly described such an image of modern mujahideen who do not obey the secular rule.

- o The idealization of a similar image was observed among respondents in Suzak district, with the difference that an ideal hero for some interviewed local villagers is one who seeks "to build a caliphate by peaceful means."

- o For the youth from Kara-Suu district who were interviewed, as follows from their answers, the ideal image is also more peaceful. It is a religious man who believes that war is not appropriate and who gets answers to his questions from the imams in the mosque. He believes that it is possible to help brothers in faith by making du'a during Namaz. Such a person does not always trust the information, where there is a call for jihad, because he knows that jihad must be done in an Islamic state on the

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[11] Internet access in Kyrgyzstan is 1.5 times higher than in the United States, http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-243246869.html KyrgyzTelecom completes the transnational backbone, http://www.telecompaper.com/news/kyrgyztelecom-completes-transnational-backbone--1043806
[12] See Annex 2 on p. 28

orders of the caliph. "I think our leaders should give permission to the imams to provide a truthful explanation on various topics. Mainly about the Islamic State and about the caliphate." (From the interview with a local[13])

o   Most of the respondents in Uzgen district are likewise reserved in their ideals, which are similar to the image created by the residents of Kara-Suu. It is a peaceful, religious person. Many respondents stressed the need for a traditional understanding of Islam, in order not to succumb to the terrorist propaganda. Only one respondent in Uzgen said that he "used to dream of becoming a shahid" after watching Tahir Yuldashev's repeated sermons, but now he is leaning towards obtaining a religious education to better understand what is happening.

o   Those interviewed in Aravan district idealized the image of a person who is well educated in religion and understands the norms of Sharia, who can really assess what is happening in the Muslim world and explain it to those who have gone astray. A respondent from Aravan, expressing his opinion about the videos he watched, said: "*They [the terrorists] were catching people, … threw them into a cage . . . poured gasoline on them and burned them. Muslims who understand the essence say that this does not correspond in any way to Sharia. In Sharia, all punishment types are prescribed, but it does not say to torture with fire or water, or the electric chair.*"

o   The study of the majority of respondents' opinions in Zheti-Oguz district has shown that for the majority of respondents, the ideal is the image of a martyr who embarks on the path of jihad because of the increasing number of infidels. "I found that it ["ISIS"] is an ordinary state, the only difference is that it is Islamic and calling for the fulfillment of all prescriptions in their original form. Too many religious trends have appeared recently, so I urge everyone not to depart from the original Islam." (From the respondent's interview)

Two respondents listed the "Shiites" among infidels because they know that between them and the Sunnis "the conflict has been going on for a long time."

o   In the town of Kara-Balta, respondents more idealistically perceive the image of a Muslim living on the principle "jihad is our path." However, if necessary, violence can be justified, including the one used by the terrorist group "ISIS," which is banned in the Kyrgyz Republic. "*I began to be more critical of those who slandered against ISIS, I try to look at things from all sides, although I used to be among those who were negative towards ISIS.*" (Quotation from the interview with the respondent from Kara-Balta) "*I increasingly fear Allah, I feel fear for my deeds and sins, I feel that it is time to start doing something, to leave all my worldly affairs and follow my inner voice* ". (From an interview with a local)

The research has confirmed that the **main type of communication** through which young people receive the information carrying the propaganda of extremism is mass media. That is, a multichannel approach is widely employed as one of the conditions, developed for involving people in the digital era. Its main indicator is the possibility to choose between various communicative means of mass impact, namely social media and online news media outlets. Respondents identified these as the tools of obtaining and disseminating information. It is also important to understand that respondents trust those who send the messages. In most cases, trust is based on the fact that the content was sent by a relative, an acquaintance or a member of their community or an online group to which a respondent belongs. Viewers see material as particularly credible when the subject of the video makes and shares the content themselves. Analyzing the interviews, it is clear that these communicators serve as the generators of ideas for young people.

Some respondents said that they saw similar videos on official media (mainly broadcasted in news reports on television), which further increased the level of confidence in the developments in Syria. In this study, from **the visual images that respondents remembered from the videos and photos viewed on the Internet**, the following stood out:

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[13] The respondents' data is kept confidential due to the issue of their security.

a) young fighters, often ethnic Uzbeks, who speak Uzbek, in camouflage uniforms, on armored personnel carriers, in battlefields, or with automatic weapons;

b) men calling for jihad on camera, there are often familiar faces among them, which raises doubts such as "maybe there really is a jihad?"; with verses and hadiths from the Quran being simultaneously cited (on camera or off camera) with references to jihad; sympathy for jihad;

c) suicide bombers who, in the opinion of the respondents, commit "a heroic act in the name of Allah";

d) religious activists "speaking in the name of Allah";

e) mass executions of "infidels" and journalists dressed in orange-colored robes make some respondents feel sympathetic since "the war with infidels" is taking place;

f) child"soldiers of Allah" participating in combat operations and dying, serve as a reproach against those adult men who are not with them;

g) many corpses and crying or killed women and children, the appeals of militants on camera and off camera to take revenge on "infidels" for killing Muslims, the appeals to the consumers' conscience.

Respondents specified the following **common features** in some **videos and audio sequences**:
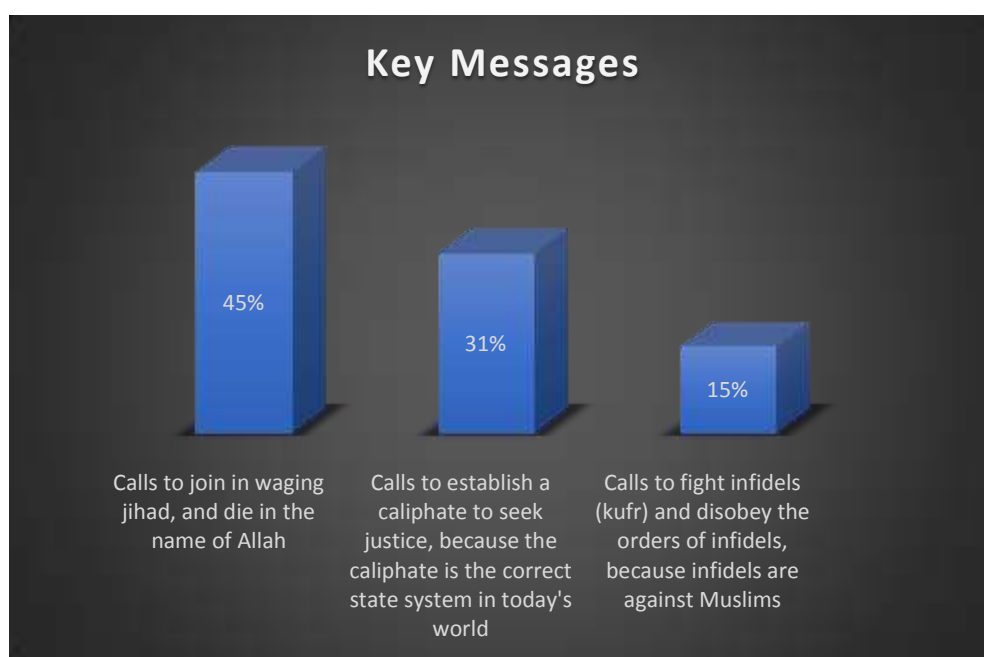
- "live camera" shooting, participation effect, "sepia" (or the effect of old photos) is used in photo reports, some scenes use only natural sound (i.e., the natural noise of the shooting area);
- Stand-up on camera, reportage shooting, a posing fighter with a gun in his hands or with a raised index finger, battle scenes;
- amateur shooting on a mobile phone, familiar faces;
- audio sequences - nasheed (Arabic music); quotations from the hadiths and verses of the Quran.

During the field research, the respondents named several messages that are most often found in the videos or audio clips, photos or text; they prompt discussions in their communities, touch their hearts, and can influence their future behavior in the society. These messages can be **classified into the following categories**:

- appeals to commit, join the jihad, and die in the name of Allah;
- appeals for the establishment of a caliphate in order to seek justice, since the caliphate is the only correct state system in today's world;
- appeals to fight "murtads" ("apostates" in Arabic) and "kufr" ("unbelievers" in Arabic), to defy the orders of infidels, since it is the right way when infidels are against Muslims[14].

Diagram 1 shows the ratio of key messages from respondents' answers, while Diagram 2 contains a breakdown of respondents by key messages:

Diagram **1: Key messages**

Key Messages

45% — Calls to join in waging jihad, and die in the name of Allah

31% — Calls to establish a caliphate to seek justice, because the caliphate is the correct state system in today's world

15% — Calls to fight infidels (kufr) and disobey the orders of infidels, because infidels are against Muslims

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[14] For more details, see "Main topics, messages and memorable images", on p. 19 of this research.

Calls to Wage Jihad and Die in the Name of Allah

- Students
- Farmers
- Sales/Services
- Unemployed

Calls to Establish a Caliphate

- Migrants
- Farmers
- Sales/Services
- Unemployed

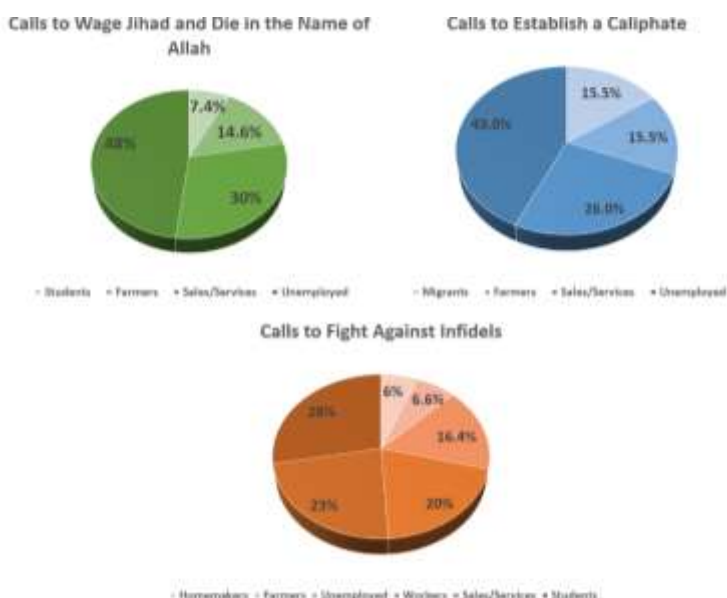*Diagram 2:* **The distribution of respondents that respond to key messages, in the context of their social and employment status[15]**

Calls to Fight Against Infidels

- Homemakers
- Farmers
- Unemployed
- Workers
- Sales/Services
- Students

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A "SOFT" APPROACH TO COUNTER-RADICALIZATION

Taking into account the findings of this research aimed at creating and conducting a campaign in social media, it is **recommended to**:

1. When creating content, build on the preferred topics and images referred to by respondents during this field research. Use a restrained approach to religion, without a connection to self-identity crisis, create images and meanings which are clear for the young audience, sharing them through story characters with whom they can identify. It should be images of people representing their identity groups: neighbors, compatriots, classmates, citizens of Kyrgyzstan who have firm moral and spiritual values, possess sufficient religious knowledge and pursue a way of life stemming from this understanding. As mentioned above, the respondents consider themselves to be part of the "Muslim world," so the meanings should be formed based on a discussion about the most repeated messages in the interviews with young people:

- o **What is jihad? What is true jihad?** Jihad examples in everyday life;
- o Another common concept is a "**caliphate,**" which for many of the respondents is the reason for joining jihad and, thus, renunciation of secularism. On the other hand, the respondents mentioned that in the "caliphate" all are equal and there is mutual understanding between the state and its citizens. Perhaps, by using this meaning, it is possible to show equality and mutual understanding indirectly, through other examples. However, this will only work at the level of comparison; i.e., if the comparison technique, as well as examples and statistics are applied in the production of content.
- o The third meaning instilled in minds of youth through videos and other extremist propaganda content is the **ideology of "takfirism"** ("disbelief" in Arabic). Through this ideology, the image of infidels and the division of society into groups are being imposed. When working with this kind of message, one can use visual techniques such as Questions & Answers with the involvement of religious representatives, or work through so-called "virtual objects." This is the creation of staged images in soap operas and talk shows, where the correct interpretation of meanings is conveyed through characters.

2. It is important to understand that in order to address the problem of violent extremism and radicalism, one must present religion in a language that is simple and accessible for the audience. Since the main

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[15] The details of the distribution of interviewed respondents, based on their social and employment status, are shown in *Diagram* 6 on p. 13.

consumers of content are young people in regions who pursue a traditional way of life and have not developed a sufficient level of critical thinking, the newly created media content should provide consumers with simple answers to the questions that worry them, without establishing a sign of equality between Islam and radicalism.

3. Given the fragmented linguistic space and drawing on the research data about the extremist propaganda that is spread, consumed, and understood by the audience mostly in three languages: Uzbek, Russian, and Kyrgyz, generate a media campaign in these languages. When writing texts for videos, native language speakers should be involved to convey accurate and precise meanings and to ensure greater reach of the broadcast speeches.

4. When distributing and posting media content, to use several accounts in social media and groups indicated by respondents as main sources of information. Use tags (markup of the hypertext language) and hashtags (tags for the distribution of text by topic) taking into account the keywords identified, so that the content will reach its intended audience. It is possible to create separate groups with similar names, but then it will be necessary to connect followers from these groups.

5. Since the theme of the media campaign is sensitive, it is necessary to apply techniques of information security and digital hygiene when posting and distributing content, in order to avoid loss of content, virus attacks, network aggression, etc. All information should be disseminated from dynamic IP addresses, it is also recommended to use VPN (Virtual Private Networks).

RESEARCH GOALS, APPROACHES, AND RESPONDENTS' DATA

The research goal has been to *analyze what type of messages, meanings and images lead young people to radicalization and through which media channels these meanings are most often transmitted*. Since this research involves sensitive and confidential topics, the field researchers expected that not all selected respondents would be willing to talk openly and give detailed answers to the questions posed. For this reason, the answers obtained may be subjective to some extent. On the other hand, the field work has become a matter of safety for the field researchers themselves who, in order to obtain results, had to conduct some interviews with caution, without advertising the goals and objectives of the project, when a respondent was a supporter of radical views.

This report summarizes the results of a survey of target groups of respondents in the aforementioned districts. The interviews were conducted from December 1st through 15th, 2016. A total of 108 respondents, randomly selected in the given regions were interviewed (12-15 people in each district). Each respondent answered an average of 16 questions. The data of each interview was recorded in special tables containing 18 sections. Then, all the data was processed manually, classified, and analyzed using specific indicators.

ETHNIC MAKEUP OF RESPONDENTS

KYRGYZ

UZBEK

Diagram 3: Percentage distribution of respondents by ethnicity

The districts in Osh and Jalal-Abad oblasts, where the interviews were conducted, are areas of high concentration of ethnic Uzbeks who, according to the data of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the KR, are more prone to radicalization than others[16]. In the other two areas – Zheti-Oguz district and the town of Kara-Balta, the administrative center of Zhayil district of Chui oblast, the interviewees were mostly ethnic Kyrgyz, as indicated in *Diagram* 3. Below, *Diagrams* 4 and 5 show the data of respondents by age, employment, and gender. groups
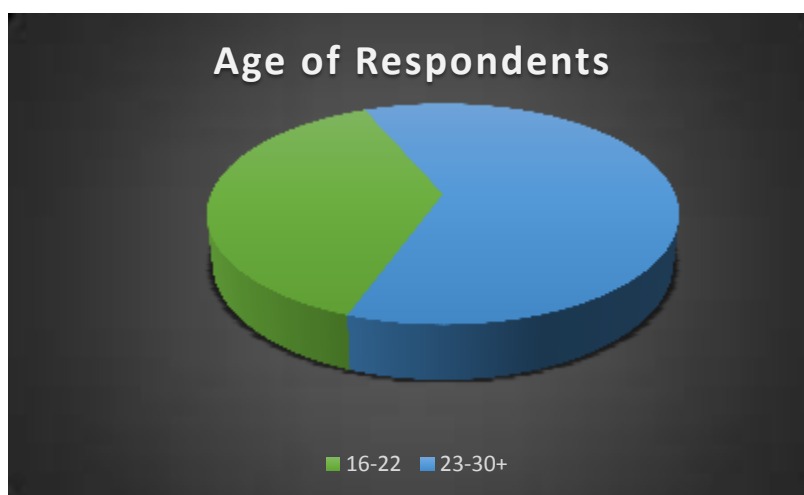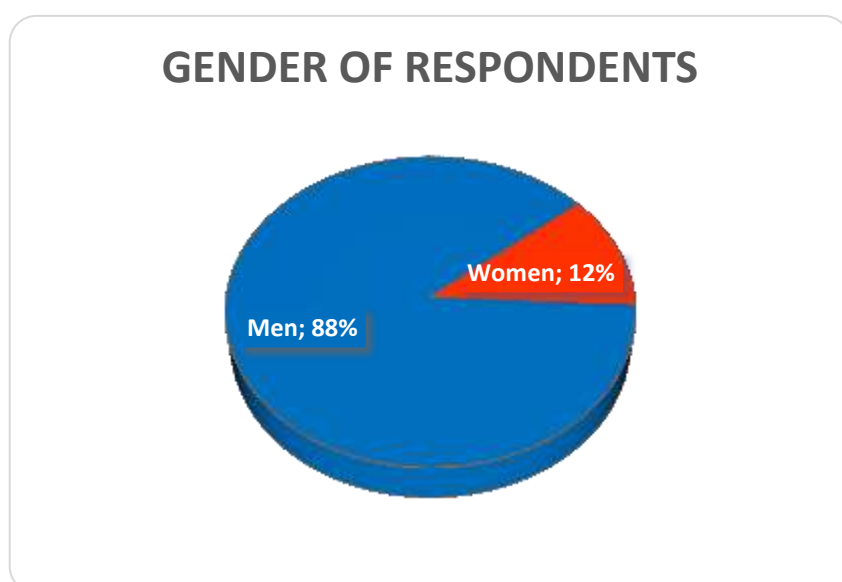

Age of Respondents

■ 16-22 ■ 23-30+

Diagram 4: Percentage distribution of respondents by age

Diagram 5 (below): **Percentage distribution of respondents by gender**

GENDER OF RESPONDENTS

Women; 12%

Men; 88%

Inasmuch as the age groups of respondents are an important characteristic in understanding their perception of radical ideas aimed at changing behavior; in understanding their views on specific appeals and their ability to recognize the extent of media manipulation. As can be seen from the diagram, the average age of respondents, who are active consumers of the information about military operations in Syria, videos with sermons and calls "*to join the jihad*", is 22-25. A specific point to consider is that many respondents in the group from 16 to 22 years, using Internet access, search for such information on their own by various keywords. Only then do they become followers or members of suchonline groups.[17]

During the interview, a respondent from Zheti-Oguz district said that he had received several videos through WhatsApp promoting radical ideas. According to him, he trusts the information because "*this is often discussed by schoolchildren, they share their impressions as if they have watched some kind of thriller*." Another interviewee from the Bazar-Korgon district, who views such content in social networks, said that one statement from the videos "*changed his view of the world and faith*." He quoted that statement: "*May Allah give strength to liberate the countries which infidels took from Muslims*." The respondent began to talk with the authors of such content, engaged in a discussion with them in the comments section under the posted video, where he wrote "*all that they say is right.*" Another local resident said that he was "*inspired*" by the video scenes where "*people of Uzbek nationality are fighting in Syria and even giving interviews: 'We are now going to take over Halab,'* " he quoted them. The respondent also noted that he would also like to "*go there.*"

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[16] The Uzbeks in the south of Kyrgyzstan are more susceptible to recruitment for Syria. Raim Salimov, deputy head of the 10th Main Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, February 2015: http://kyrtag.kg/society/uzbeki-na-yuge-kyrgyzstana-bolee-drugikh-podverzheny-verbovke-dlya-otpravki-v-siriyu-mvd

[17] For more detailed information on the stages of recruitment, see p. 14.

Since this research was aimed at studying common meanings and images transmitted through the Internet which push young people towards radicalization, the experts were not tasked with strictly observing the gender balance of the respondents. Still, there were both men and women among the respondents. The answers to general questions about the most frequent radical catchphrases in videos, trust in the information received, and channels of its distribution were similar for both groups. The gender specifics impacted on the choice of content consumed: the women interviewed generally prefer to view videos and photos involving women, and reach out to content distributors to get answers to their questions of interest. Thus, a respondent from Kara-Balta who gets such information from closed groups in the social network VKontakte, said during the interview that she had read an article that "*Islam permits shedding of the blood of an unbeliever if he attacks you first*." However, the woman is now tormented by the question: "*Is it possible to attack first, since we are allowed to shed the blood of an unbeliever anyway*?" It was with this goal in mind that she established contact with the distributors of the information, writing them to ask: "*Why do we not take the initiative and come out first, if it is permissible anyway*".

Closed groups in social networks are created to prevent other users from joining these groups, or to restrict viewing of the content that group administrators do not want to publicize. The flow of extremist propaganda is likely also being spread in these groups, and many young people receive such information there. On Russian social networks, one can use the VRazvedke program to gain access to information in closed groups[18]. On the other hand, there are many programs that allow advanced users to bypass the "obstacles" and consume the content from a closed group. At the same time, the awareness of young Kyrgyz girls about the extremist propaganda in the Internet indicates their growing interest in women's participation in the war in Syria. A distinctive feature of online communications is that they encourage such feelings, because they can contribute to the creation of common identities and the sense of belonging to some groups in the virtual space which may not exist in reality.

Other respondents who regularly watch the videos noted that they saw and read about the European women who joined ISIS. These women were speaking in Russian and talking about a good life *"in the caliphate."* A resident of the Zheti-Oguz district, who saw this, said that he now "*doubts whether they are really so terrible - these militants, if they accept people of all nationalities who were recently kufr for them?*" "*It means that they are open to everyone. This is not North Korea . . . but here (in ISIS) everything is different, people come as they wish and leave as they wish*."

The next marker is the social and employment status of respondents, which helps a researcher to understand the attitude of a person to a particular social phenomenon and his reaction to it. This status also includes the level of education and knowledge that determines the current environment of a person. The occupation of a person determines the pattern of his behavior and his level of understanding of

information consumed, his attitude towards the propagation of extremism and terrorism. The occupation data in *Diagram* 6 shows that the plurality of respondents, **26%, were teenagers and students**.

Diagram 6: Percentage distribution of respondents by social and employment status

This is the largest group, which is also the most

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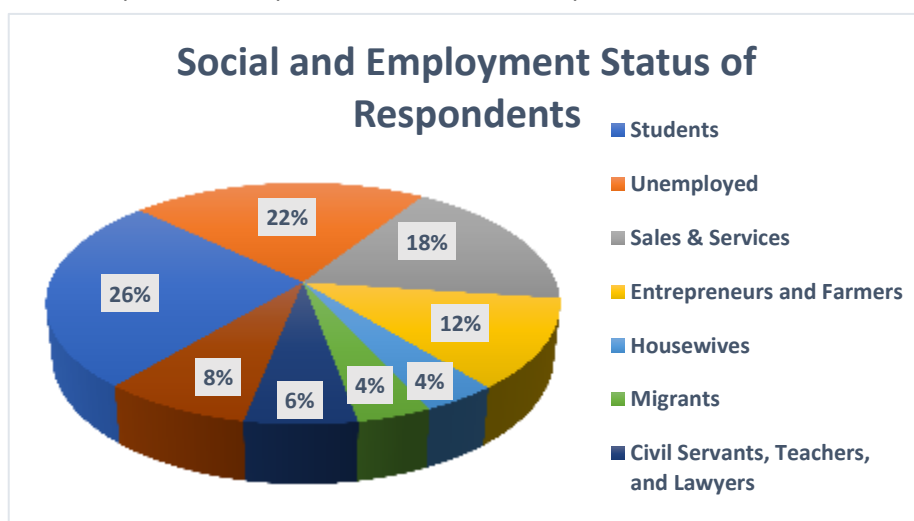
[18] http://vrazvedke.clan.su/index/0-8, To view a non-public page, pick up a web-link from the list and replace id = xxxx with the number of a non-public page in VKontakte.

vulnerable group with regard to online radicalization. The students interviewed were enrolled at various universities and other educational institutions throughout the country.

The next largest group by social and employment status, **22%, were unemployed**. This group included mostly young people who did not find suitable work after graduation, or those who are in search of a new job after their previous employment contracts expired. The next is a group of **workers in sales and customer services, or 18% of respondents** who worked as shop assistants, administrators and cooks in cafes, in shoe and mobile phones repair shops, junior medical staff and taxi drivers. More than half of the respondents from this group said they had a basic religious education. **Entrepreneurs and farmers accounted for 12%** and mentioned having seen the content propagating the war in Syria, calling for jihad, etc. This group included the elder respondents who were owners of shops, computer shop, cafes, and fruit and vegetable stands. **8% of skilled workers** were represented by such specialists as construction site managers, masons and plumbers. The mixed group, accounting for **6% of the total number of respondents**, included **intellectual workers: teachers, lawyers and one civil servant**. Finally, **migrants (4%) and housewives (4%)** represent small groups of respondents. **Migrants** were people who used to work seasonally in Russia and who had returned to Kyrgyzstan for winter because of a lack of work, and **housewives** were young women who recently married or were raising young children.

ANALYSIS AND TRENDS

During the course of this research, the data from 108 structured interviews conducted in eight regions of Kyrgyzstan were analyzed. The answers of each respondent were carefully studied using 15 indicators and most comments were manually grouped[19]. Also, 28 videos, articles and posts mentioned by the respondents were examined. In the first stage of the analysis, the most popular social media platforms which young people use to receive and share content were identified using the full set of information gathered. All respondents except one, received information from the Internet or via mobile applications (messengers). All respondents have or had at one time several accounts on popular social networks such as Facebook, Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Instagram, Twitter, and watched films and other videos on the popular video hosting site YouTube. WhatsApp, Telegram and Imo are popular apps for instant messaging where the young people get information.

The difference between social media and traditional media is that the former offers great opportunities for terrorist and extremist groups to spread their propaganda to a broad audience, foment hatred among the public towards an opposing group, create a sense of community, radicalize, demonize Islam, romanticize Sharia law and terrorist groups (e.g.: ISIS, IMU) which are banned in the KR, disseminate recommendations about travelling to combat zones, and create networks for new recruits. Today, the Internet has become a public place which replaces institutions, libraries, and mosques, and where Internet-imams deliver their sermons, communicate with believers and answer their questions. These attractive technologies allow guaranteed access to the online content for any user and give him an opportunity to publish and distribute any information. According to the Internet World Stats[20], the web-site for international Internet usage statistics, the Internet penetration in Kyrgyzstan was 36.2% as of June 2016: the number of users reached over 2 million people, of which 360,000 also use Facebook. This is slightly less than in neighboring countries (Kazakhstan – 54.3%, Uzbekistan – 52.4%), but considering the control and blockages in the neighboring states, the level of Internet freedom in Kyrgyzstan is much higher. According to the annual global ranking Freedom on the Net 2015[21], Kyrgyzstan is ranked (decently high) 35th, while Kazakhstan ranks 61st, and Uzbekistan 78th.

The youth of Kyrgyzstan, who were raised in the years of independence with traditions of pluralism, make up a large part of the active Internet community. During the last 10-11 years, as social networks have been gaining popularity in Kyrgyzstan, it is young users who have facilitated the online dissemination of information about the political changes in the country. For example, the March revolution of 2005 was first

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[19] For details, see Methodology on p. 25.
[20] Details can be found at http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm
[21] Freedom on the Net, Freedom House 2015: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2015

reported to the world by Kyrgyz users of social networks who posted photo reports from the scene on the Internet. Also, a distinctive feature of local Internet users is that they are accustomed to openly expressing their opinions on any issue, exchanging all types of information and creating various Internet communities. These factors, which are positive in terms of the development of freedom, simultaneously pose a serious threat to young people – to be involved in various radical groups or to become recipients of content distributed by terrorist organizations.

Methods and stages of recruiting young citizens of Kyrgyzstan to the ranks of illegal organizations

Initially, from 1990 to 2005, the recruitment of young citizens from Kyrgyzstan was conducted face-to-face. The extremist organization Hizb-ut-Tahrir (illegal in Kyrgyzstan) recruited youth during group and one-on-one meetings in houses and apartments. The recruiting process included several stages. At the first stage, a young man who was dissatisfied with his life, fate, social and economic status, the policy of the state and the official spiritual (Muslim) administration was selected. At the second stage, the young man was given several books from Hizb-ut-Tahrir issued by samizdat. The young man had to read them and pass a special examination to become a "doris" (apprentice). He was taught by a "mutamad" (mentor) which introduced the "doris" to the perspective and books of the organization. At the third stage, the recruit takes the oath ("bayat") and becomes a full member of the organization. Now that the Internet is generally accessible, recruitment now takes place through Internet sites such as www.hizbut-Tahrir.org and social networks such as Odnoklassniki and Mail.ru Agent.

Social networks have become a convenient platform for recruitment and for illegal terrorist organizations like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.[22] For the first time, since 2005, the IMU has started using its own recruiting centers – Internet sites such as www.sodiglar.net with literature, "nasheed" (songs), photos and videos. The public display of photos and videos began to attract the attention of those young people who were on the way to radicalism for one reason or another, while communication with them took place through forums in the form of Questions & Answers. Those wishing to come to Afghanistan and join the IMU could contact the organizers who planned the route, performed logistics, and provided financing. In his speech in 2006,[23] Tahir Yuldashev, the late leader of the IMU described the territory of Central Asia as the Mawarannahr region.[24] The activities and recruiting methods of the IMU became the basis for neo-extremist organizations and terrorist groups to develop methods for recruiting young citizens from 2012-2016. In social networks, not only literature and instructions, but also press centers for propaganda and "reporting" about the achievements of terrorist groups have appeared. The publication of video and photo reports on the "heroic deeds of militants" attracts the attention of those young people who, are looking for acquaintances, family members, relatives, and compatriots and, undergo sensational and emotional changes.

The analysis of publications, social media, and interviews with young people in the rural areas of the country has led us to the conclusion that there are several stages of recruiting young citizens to the ranks of terrorist and extremist organizations. **At the first stage**, press centers and ordinary militants create tailored videos and messages in various languages (Uzbek, Russian, Tajik). At this stage, it is important that everyone who views these videos identifies characters in them who are similar to his friends, relatives, compatriots, and classmates in them. Also, it is important to ensure that the videos and conversations affect the emotions and feelings of the viewer so that he begins to search for more detailed information and other similar videos. Finally, the recruiters use IT and media technology to make their videos and messages go viral, spreading exponentially among young people. At the beginning of this process, recruiters have a "passive stage;" observing without any involvement.

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[22] The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was established in 1996 in Afghanistan. At present, the IMU has disintegrated and some of its members have joined DAESH and the Taliban.

[23] The video appeal was issued in two languages (Farsi and Uzbek) for citizens of the Fergana Valley. The video summarized the activities of the organization for 10 years and announced plans for the future. It was in this address that Tahir Yuldashev announced that the IMU would be joining the Taliban movement.

[24] Mesopotamia - Amudarya and Syr Darya.

Once at the **second stage**, the young man, who became interested in the information, begins to search actively for additional material and videos. He posts comments on the videos, gradually getting caught up in the process. In this way, over time, the user develops a kind of dependence on the information he consumes; he changes internally, becoming less sociable, more closed off, and sympathetic to what is happening in the videos and messages. It is at this stage that the young man develops the feeling of rejection of his environment. He becomes disinterested in his family, relatives, and acquaintances. For him, the world around him suddenly becomes alien and hostile (i.e., others are infidels or living in the period of "jahiliyya," or pre-Islamic ignorance and disbelief), whereas the true life is not "here" but "there" (where they fight in the name of Allah). While the "seeker" is at this stage of recruitment, a "mentor" appears on the other side of the communication who will soon take up the careful preparation of the recruit for "service."

At the **third stage**, the recruit develops his new self-identity. He imagines himself at the scene of hostilities while mentally playing a new role as if he is testing himself. In this way, his previous identity and his inner world are replaced, and his psychology becomes attached to the new image. At this stage, it is important for the recruiter to establish contact with the recruit. Moreover, now the recruitment process involves "mentors" who begin to engage in the recruitment and preparation of new personnel on the individual basis. Here, the recruit lends himself to recruitment completely, believing his mentor, i.e. his worldview is entirely changed and his doubts disappear completely, especially after a personal meeting with the "mentor."

The **fourth stage** is mostly logistics. Depending on the financial situation and social status of the recruite, a route to the zone of "service" is proposed. At this stage, the young man is already under the full control of the recruiter. Funds are supplied to the recruit if he does not have any. Then, he gets a ticket (one way), and at each stop point – the logistics hubs - he meets specially-appointed people. In the case when the recruit has personal financial resources, he can choose his route himself, and "friends" meet him on the border of military operations.

Analysis of the data shows that the recruiting process often takes place "locally": a recruited family member recruits his own relatives, a friend - his friends, a student - his classmates, townsmen "work" among neighbors. It is well known that the belligerents on the side of terrorist and extremist groups in the war zone - in Syria and Iraq - are fighting there as families: siblings, husband and wife, father and son. All segments of the population are subjected to recruitment. As of today, there are reports that social, economic, and political conditions are not the main factor for participation in hostilities on the side of terrorist and extremist organizations.

Popular media channels for recruitment

A compilation of respondents' answers about their most preferred media channels for obtaining information are classified and presented in *diagram* 7:

Diagram **7: Popular media platforms, where respondents get information**

YouTube, where respondents watch extremist propaganda videos, is the **most popular** among interviewees. This video hosting site is the primary channel for disseminating information from terrorist and extremist groups. The analysis of the distribution of video content shows a variety of methods used by media centers such as Al-Furqan (a media

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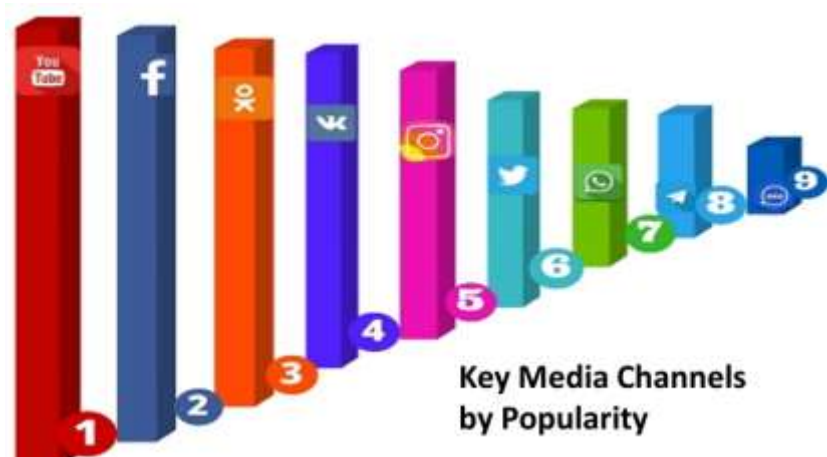
production center of ISIS) and the like.

During the research, the majority of the respondents named videos published on Youtube under the general title "*Tavhid va Jihod Katibasi*" ("Book of monotheism and holy war" in Arabic) mainly in the Uzbek language. All materials are published on behalf of the creator of tavhidvajihod.com which is currently not available, even through VPN (Virtual Private Network) connection. According to some respondents, they find such information

using keywords in the search bar. Other respondents said that they receive such videos as reposts from friends in social networks. A young man from Nookat who returned home from labor migration noted that he remembered a video on YouTube, "*which called for fighting against unbelievers and hypocrites everywhere, even at home. [It] quoted versesfrom the Quran, saying that hypocrites should be punished by death*."
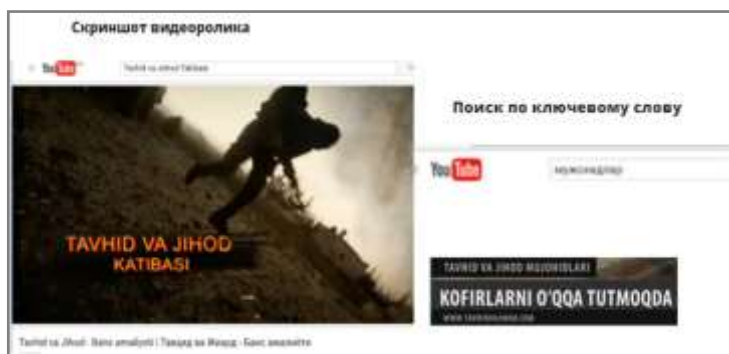

Screenshot of the Facebook page

The **second** most popular media channel, which all respondents noted, is **Facebook**. The bulk of terrorist and extremist propaganda is consumed by respondents on this site. Radical groups use Facebook to exchange operational and tactical information, as well as a gateway to extremist sites by linking groups on Facebook to the "necessary" pages and forums.

Additionally, this platform has long been used by groups as a means of mass information for the spread of terrorist ideology and the remote zombification of its followers. According to the official data from Facebook, the average age of users of this popular medium is 30. To date, more than a third of a million Kyrgyz users have registered, half of whom log in to their accounts daily. Since the information on this media platform is distributed in any language and for any population groups, almost every young person is a member of a community on Facebook. The survey of the respondents shows that the extremist propaganda information appears in their news feed, on their timeline, or as reposts from friends. The respondents did not name the groups which they had joined, or made the excuse that they "do not remember" whether they were members of some groups or communities. There is also a page on Facebook called "*Tavhid va Jihod Katibasi*" where such content is distributed.

According to the respondents, the Russian social networks **Odnoklassniki** and **VKontakte** were the **next**, no less popular channels for obtaining information. These platforms are also popular among Kyrgyz labor migrants working in Russia. More than 80% of the survey participants indicated that they have accounts on those networks. Many reported that they watched videos in Russian calling to join a jihad. The analysis of the answers also shows that images of "*Chechen mujahideen*"
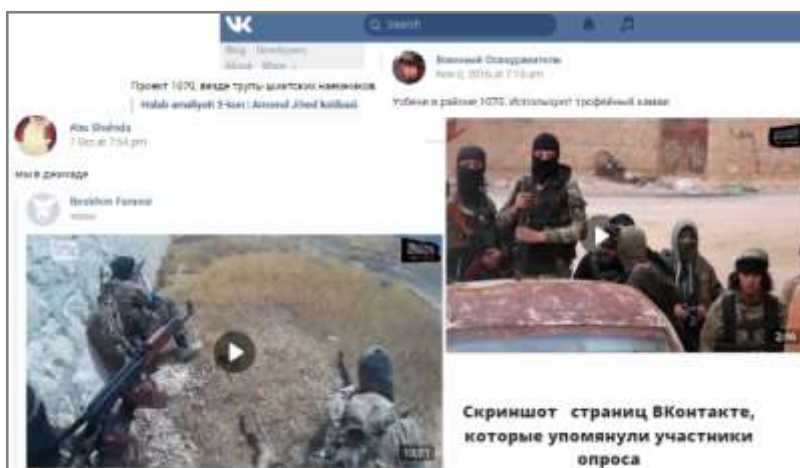
who have "*successfully battled*" with the Russian regime for a long time and are now taking part in the war in Syria also attract young people to such videos. Information is distributed both in an open format - between members of the network, and in closed groups such as *"Wars of Allah," and "Shahids."*

Instagram and **Twitter** occupy the **fifth** and **sixth** places respectively in the popularity rankings of respondents. They were mentioned by a small number of participants who primarily saw photos or slideshows showing areas of fighting in Syria with the involvement of citizens of Kyrgyzstan or Central Asia. The respondents remembered the captions under the photos in these social networks: "Olloh Zhangchilari" ("Warriors of Allah" in Uzbek), *"Shahids," "Jihad."* Some mentioned the page "*Tavhid va Jihod Katibasi*" where one can also get the latest information on those who joined the jihad.

Screenshot of the Twitter page

As a microblogging social network, Twitter is distinguished by the character limit for posts. However, until recently, many Western media even formed news stories from information received from Twitter feeds. This was used by terrorist groups circulating various fake news about attacks and casualties. Despite the fact that Twitter has closed many terrorist accounts, hundreds of new ones were created in response. For example, this was the case with the blocked account of the Syrian extremist and terrorist organization Jabhat al-Nusra[25] in 2015. When its account was detected and closed, within a day the organization created a new account which immediately got 20,000 followers. This fact confirms the coordinated work of terrorist and extremist groups in social networks.

The last group of media channels consists of three instant messenger mobile applications - **WhatsApp, Telegram** and **Imo**, which serve to instantly transfer limitless content: photos, videos, text, and audio messages. All respondents named these applications as a channel of receiving information. Now, instant messengers are becoming more popular in different regions of Kyrgyzstan because of their availability, affordability, ease of use, the possibility of syncing with a desktop and creating group chats, and the ensured access to delivered offline messages after they are received. Thus, a young respondent from Kara-Balta said that he was receiving videos with sermons by ISIS leader Abu Bakr through WhatsApp. According to the respondent, the sermons are "*very convincing,*" because they contain "*an appeal to join a big jihad.*" "*We are defending ourselves from the infidels, so we must fight for the truth and start a jihad for our hearts using a sword. Thus, has Allah commanded us,*" the young man quoted the sermon. He also added: "*This is his most memorable phrase to me, because here he was right.*" A respondent from Nookat who received similar videos via WhatsApp on his phone commented as follows: "*It was a positive and inspirational video.*"

Main topics of information, messages and memorable images consumed, which influence the perceptions of youth

The analysis of respondents' opinions and the study of the content indicated by them has shown that video and audio clips, photos, articles, and posts present skillfully crafted arguments based on legitimizing the actions of terrorist groups. To sum up what has been said by the respondents, it is apparent that the events are presented by extremists as a "*holy war;*" they emphasize the importance of religious identity for joining the war and promote the image of a rational and highly moral *"Islamic state"* with its own laws, where those who disagree with its philosophy are enemies.

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[25] Jabhat al-Nusra was banned in the Kyrgyz Republic by the ruling of the Octyabrskii District Court of Bishkek on June 23, 2015, http://religion.gov.kg/KY/religioznost_rastet.html

Another important thing is the "glorification" of characters represented in propaganda materials by young people, often Kyrgyz citizens, with whom the audience identifies their neighbors, relatives, and compatriots. They are usually dressed in camouflage uniforms with weapons in their hands or with a raised index finger, on combat vehicles or in trenches, firing shots. Describing the images that they remembered, the respondents indicated that "*it was a militant in the video*" who called to join the jihad and help Muslims in their struggle. For example, a representative of Nookat said that he remembered most of all the video,

Abu Saloh · Mujohidlarga eslatma | Абу Салох · Мужоҳидларга эслатма!

"*where a Kyrgyz guy with a beard, speaking in Kyrgyz and dressed in long clothes, is holding a rifle and says (on camera) that we need to go to Syria to protect the caliphate and become a part of the mujahideen groups. Soon, we found out that this guy is well-known, he is a resident of the Toktogul district, Jalal-Abad oblast.*"
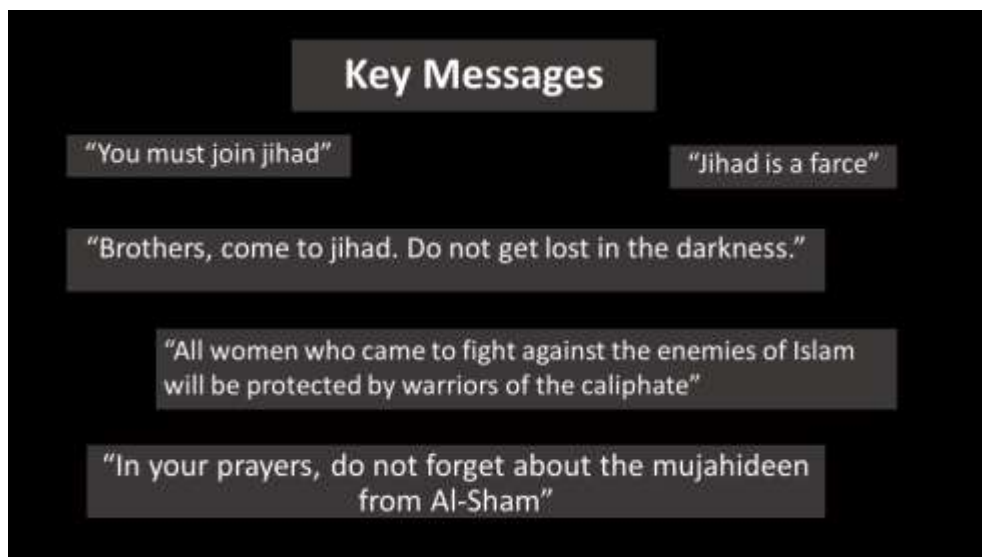
Screenshot of the YouTube video

Another respondent, from Uzgen, pointed out that he remembered a video called "*Muzhohidlarga eslatma*" ("Reminder to the Mujahideen" in Uzbek), where a man with a beard explained in the Uzbek language the need for Muslims to always carry weapons with them. "*He said that Muslims should never lay down their weapons. I realized that he was calling on all Muslims to fight the unbelievers.*"

Such figures strongly influence young people who are in search of self-identity and ideals among their peers. Under the influence of this information, they get ready to perform similar acts to establish themselves. Obviously, one of the strong tricks of terrorists to maintain their media brand is their efforts to create heroes, stories, and demonize what is happening with a focus on each unique audience: taking into account its language, geography, uniqueness, and state structure. In addition, for a complete understanding of the broadcast sermons or verses and hadiths quoted from the Quran, the consumer of this information must have religious knowledge, which not everyone has. Many respondents said they trusted any information which quotes from the Quran or is delivered by Internet preachers, without understanding the nuances and interpretations. For example, a resident of Nookat reported that he watched a video that "*called to fight with unbelievers and hypocrites everywhere - even at home, and verses were quoted that a hypocrite should be punished by death.*" The respondent said that the video aroused in him "*a sense of fear and distrust toward law enforcement agencies*" because he realized that "*the person who imprisons [terrorists] or fights terrorism in Kyrgyzstan actually obeys the orders of unbelievers.*" Consuming such information, users begin to feel the participation effect, many respondents said that they are tormented by their conscience and a desire to help their brothers in faith. Another man from Uzgen said during the interview that he watched a video with subtitles in Uzbek, where it was written: "*Sen shularni kuirib zhim utirgan bulsang, Allokhni tanimas ekansan*[26]." According to the respondent, the video displayed war, devastation in Syria, and the bodies of women and children who had been killed. "It touched me," the respondent said. "*After all, I am also a Muslim and I must help them*."

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[26] Translation: "If you are sitting and looking at what is happening, and if you are inactive, then it means that you have not yet known Allah."

Analysis of the preferred topics of video and posts identified **four main categories** most often referred to by the respondents in their answers. The thorough media analysis revealed that the content belonging to the **first category** was created in a negative tone, with a close-up view of fighters, blood, weapons, executions - everything that effectively influences the human consciousness. In the

theory of propaganda and information wars, methods of manipulating public consciousness focus on replicating negative content, creating virtual objects (sometimes based on real characters), anonymous authorities that are created specifically for a certain audience, and usage of the "emotional resonance" technique which is based on the method of emotional contamination. The propagandist appeals not to the


mind of the viewer, but to his emotional state. It is this principle that is employed in creating the content that contains the propaganda for extremism and terrorism - in order to impose emotional dependence on the audience. This is done to create a habit for the user to watch videos and read

articles on a specific topic. Subsequently, the consumer of information begins to regularly search for similar content and prefer it.

According to the fieldwork data (see *Diagram* 8), **70% of the respondents** make up **the first category** as those who stressed that they were drawn in by **the scenes of military operations, the mass executions of "infidels," and acts of suicide bombers uttering Allahu Akbar**. One respondent was watching a video in Russian, with subtitles in Arabic, where terrorists were preparing for an attack. "*Their 'chief' urged the militants to take serious actions, saying that everyone in the world, except for them, does not understand the truth and is in error. If they kill [infidels], they will thereby make a gift to the Most High. Everything was so real, you could not help but believe it,*" he said. Many respondents interviewed in the Jalal-Abad oblast said they were touched to the core by a video which "everybody *had already seen*" about 21-year-old Babur Israilov, a suicide bomber and a Kyrgyz citizen who is represented in the video as Jafar al-Tayar. A young man in an explosives-packed armored personnel carrier had burst into tears before completing a task – to blow up an object in the Syrian town of Foix. Before his mission, his commander advised not to forget that "*everything is in the hands of Allah.*" "*He is a shahid, he did not die for nothing. This guy was my fellow countryman,*" a young man from Suzak said during the interview. Some of the respondents reported that they watched the execution of soldiers by militants of ISIS.A respondent from the town of Kara-Balta

said that he was strongly impressed by the process of violence itself and the attitude of militants towards what they are doing. "*Militants with a calm face took a knife, and, saying Allahu Akbar, they cut their throats. This process attracted me rather than frightened me. It is like a thriller or a horror movie, but in real life. I sometimes intentionally find such videos to feel the same emotions and impressions.*"

Diagram 8: **Main topics and images according to respondents' data**
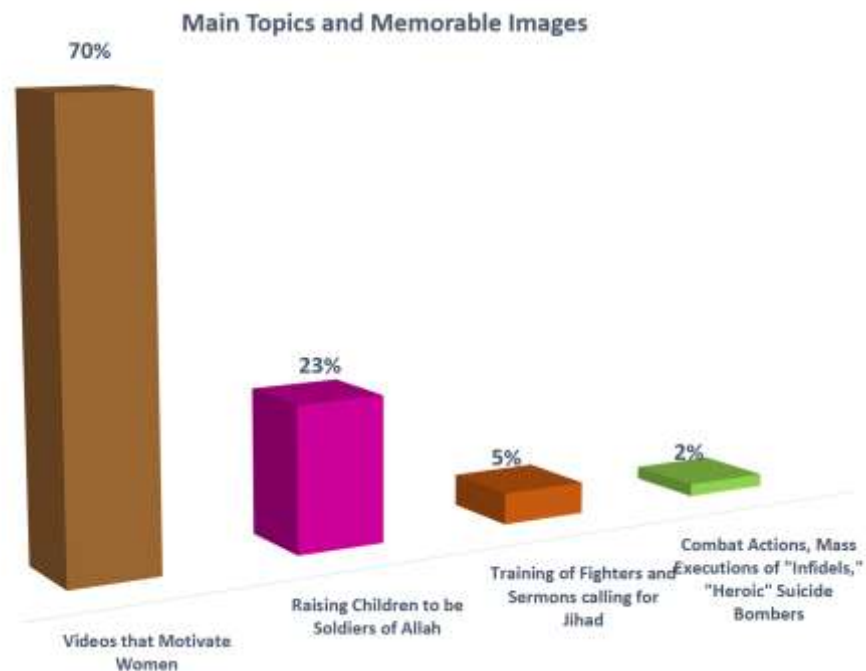
Similar opinions were also recorded in the information classified as **the second category: "Training of militants and the sermons calling for jihad".** This topic was noted by **23% of respondents** during the survey. For example, a young man from Suzak said that he remembered a video in which "*a mujahid said on camera: 'Our society is very sinful; despite this, Allah gives us food. Come brothers to jihad.'* " He also added that he watched how the insurgents train, how the cities are being bombarded: "*Maybe there really is jihad going on,*" the respondent said. When asked about possible future actions of people influenced by the information received, the resident of Bazar-Korgon district said that it would be "*interesting to go there to fight because there is a war against Muslims.*" His words were supported by a representative from Suzak district who said that if "*they declare a big jihad,*" then he is "*ready to join.*"

Main Topics and Memorable Images

- 70% — Videos that Motivate Women
- 23% — Raising Children to be Soldiers of Allah
- 5% — Training of Fighters and Sermons calling for Jihad
- 2% — Combat Actions, Mass Executions of "Infidels," "Heroic" Suicide Bombers

Several respondents mentioned the video appeals of Tahir Yuldash, the leader of the IMU organization under the name of "Islomiy Gurukh Uchun" ("For Islamic Governance" in Uzbek), who called for joining their ranks, as well as the appeals of Abu Bakr, the head of ISIS. A resident of Kara-Balta, who receives such content regularly in the group "Gabdulgafuril Muhammad (rahimagyullagh)" ("Let Allah be merciful to Mr. Gabdulgafuril Muhammad" in Arabic)[27] in the social network Odnoklassniki.ru, said that "*they are passionately calling for jihad and war against infidels . . . and do it convincingly, because they refer to particular surahs in the Quran.*" The respondent usually watches these video messages in Arabic with subtitles in Russian. "*I got the feeling that the caliphate would bring more benefit and would lead our country out of the ideological crisis,*" the interviewee said.

5% of respondents – the third category - mentioned information that was related to propaganda aimed at **raising children as warriors of Allah**. According to the research of John Horgan, Professor of Global Studies and Psychology at the University of Georgia and co-author of the book "Small Arms: Children and Terror,"[28] ISIS has began to operate a separate unit called "Cubs of the Caliphate." Its creators initially planned to make it an instrument of terrorist propaganda, but now the children are brought up as full-fledged participants in military operations. Any videos involving children who fight along with adults and carry away the wounded from the battlefields, are one of the ways of causing the "emotional resonance" to impact the audience. Several young respondents in different regions of Kyrgyzstan talked about a video in which minor

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[27] Details of their content can be found at https://ok.ru/group/56654491680806
[28] More information about this source can be found at http://thewire.in/tag/small-arms-children-and-terror/

boys with headbands train at an ISIS camp. The original video in Arabic was dubbed in Russian and supplemented with an appeal to adult men to join "*true believers and not be deceived by the worldly life.*" One interviewee said that the video refers to a hadith which says that "*if the worldly life enters the hearts, Allah will make Muslims slaves.*" Another young respondent from Aravan mentioned that he had heard of a video in which "*a five-year-old son of an Aravan native, sitting on a tank, threatens the imam of the central mosque of Aravan, that he will cut off the imam's head when he comes to Aravan.*"

Various videos containing propaganda and motivating women to join the terrorist groups fighting in Syria were cited by **2% of respondents**; **the fourth category**. Respondents said that the content they viewed mainly touched on the issues of "*proper relations within families in the caliphate*" or the issues of "*protecting women by warriors of the caliphate.*" For example, a resident from Nookat said that she remembered a video in which "*the covered women in military uniform undergo military training and serve equally with men.*" She liked that military men "*were shy and did not look at women and help elderly*

Respondents Level of Confidence in Information Received

- Trust — 61%
- Do not Trust — 31%
- Unsure — 8%

women to cross the street and carry their things." Based on that, she concludes that "*all women who came to fight against the enemies of Islam will be protected by the soldiers of the caliphate.*" Speaking of the level of confidence, according to the survey data (see *Diagram* 9), **61% of the respondents trust** the information they receive from social networks.
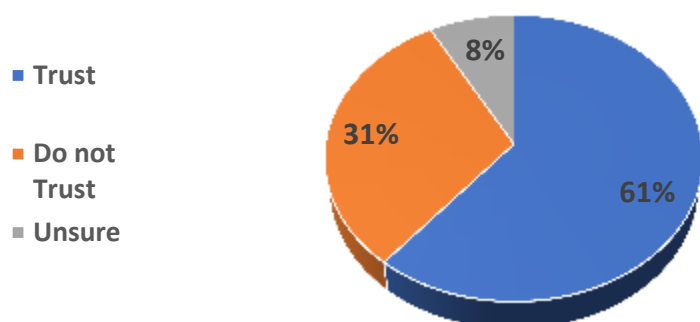
Diagram 9: **Level of respondents' trust in information**

However, the level of trust in such sources of information varies for various reasons. Several users in the Suzak and Bazar-Korgon districts said they trusted the videos they watched because "everything is in Uzbek, and everything is easy to understand." Others trust them because similar videos are disseminated through official media. The news programs of local and foreign TV channels often show the war in Syria, executions, and terrorist acts involving militants. This fact makes people trust the information consumed, since both official and unofficial sources (social networks or friends' reposts) talk about the same events

with similar video scenes and similar images. Some referred to a video where an imam praised martyrs for "*their courage;*" others said they trusted because their "*relatives have been there a long time and have called for us to join them . . . One could feel the authenticity of the situation,*" or because "*they speak in the name of Allah.*" The level of confidence for other users is related to the established opinion that the media and social networks show only truthful information; what is happening in reality.

Reasons for Confidence in Information Distributed

- They speak understandably, and in my native language. My friends and compatriots are in the videos" — 47%
- "There are quotes from the Quran, maybe there really is a jihad going on" — 28%
- "Everyone is talking about ISIS, including the media" — 10%
- "Because Muslims in the world are being exterminated" — 8%, 7%
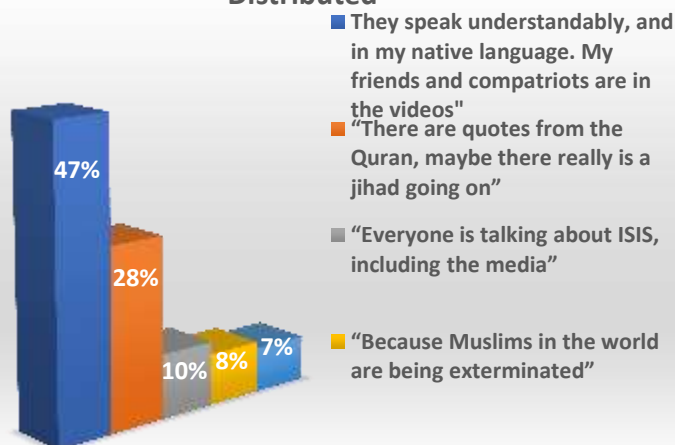
Diagram 10: **Reasons for confidence in information distributed**

As an example, a respondent from Kara-Balta described the video he saw about the execution of hostages by chainsaw: "*I trust what I see, because there is no smoke without fire.*" "*Besides,*" he added, "*they uttered [several times] the phrase which we usually say during namaz - Allahu Akbar.*" "*They showed several suicide bombers who heroically sacrificed themselves for the sake of Allah; they were suicide bombers who made explosions at the Istanbul airport, as well as explosions in a metro somewhere. At the end, the preacher said, 'Martyrs, praise to you and the strength of your faith and sacrifice for the sake of Allah.'*" Some respondents trust the information because "*there is much talk about jihad there.*" "*Jihad is fard [duty of a Muslim],*" a young man from Kara-Suu said, "*and I have heard a lot about the jihad in Syria from the people I trust, i.e. it is confirmed by the facts.*" Some said that such videos help them understand what is actually happening in reality. A guy from Suzak, after watching videos where "*brothers [in faith] under the leadership of Abu Saloh captured the village in Foix,*" began to search for information about developments in Syria. Now, he remains undecided: whether to continue living in Kyrgyzstan or to join the militants. A few more young people said that they trust and feel "*their pride for the Kyrgyz who have taken the right path,*" and they are "*waiting for such a period in history when all people will become Muslims.*"

Almost half as many respondents - **31% - said they do not trust** information on the Internet, which carries extremist and terrorist propaganda, but simply watch it out of interest or to find answers to their questions. Some noted that they do not believe because "*they were not there in person and did not see everything with their own eyes,*" others said, "*because what they see distorts Islam,*" some said, "*that the caliphate can be built without war.*" Respondents educated in religion said more often that "*these videos are well prepared and there must be a catch.*" According to a respondent from Aravan, the "catch" is about different interpretations of the verses from the Quran, which often accompany the video, but people who are not well versed in religious dogmas cannot distinguish them. A similar opinion was expressed by a resident of Uzgen; "*I do not trust, because it is difficult to separate reality from the lies,*" he said. According to to other respondents, sometimes their doubts are caused by audio sequences such as nasheed - Muslim hymns, which accompany many videos containing extremist propaganda.

8% of respondents found it difficult to identify the level of their confidence in the information. Some of these respondents lack information and clarification about the issues of jihadism and radicalization; they cannot assess the accuracy of information when Internet-imams deliver their sermons. "*I still cannot figure out what is true, I cannot choose the path that would be closest to the truth. Or maybe I'm a kufr? After all, the Quran was written not by Muhammad himself. How can we understand what is a true jihad?*" a respondent from Kara-Balta said in a conversation with a field researcher.

In conclusion, it should be noted that:
- There is no distinct category of young people susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups. The data from the field research conducted within the framework of the project "Social Media for De-Radicalization in Kyrgyzstan: A Model for Central Asia" confirms this fact. So, the victims of violent extremism are not necessarily socially and economically vulnerable representatives among the youth of Kyrgyzstan, they may be educated, prosperous or self-sufficient members of society.
- Such studies are often unable to take into account the voices of women and children equally with men's voices, despite the fact that in 2016 their number among the victims of recruitment was already 40%.[29] The problem is the difficult access to women, especially in more traditional regions of the country, including some "hotspots" (due to the increased level of recruitment).
- In terms of the theory of change, where the success of youth de-radicalization requires a platform for freely expressing grievances and promoting ideas of pluralism and diversity, such platform, most likely, is not enough if we consider the findings from the conversations with the 108 respondents and practices of other countries also struggling with violent extremism. Young people require regular and full attention in the social and economic, as well as in the political and ideological aspects of development, from all other members of society, especially the government.

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[29] More details can be found at http://rus.azattyq.org/a/27643975.html

- Work on de-radicalization requires a large-scale approach, when each cell of the country's population, each element of the state machine, and the civil society move on together, constantly investing in approbation of new approaches to solving the problem, the creation of which has required an "army" of many thousands of media and other experts from extremist groups.
- Victims of violent extremism need faith in a bright future, which they cannot find in their country. They do not pay enough attention to themselves, their relatives and truthful answers to existential questions. It is these "empty spaces" that recruiters use to "pack" the extremist content into attractive shells of "heroism," "the real truth of life on earth," "for the sake of a world without corruption," "if you are a real man or a mother of children" and other psychologically pressing appeals.

As a result, a counter narrative is not capable of protecting young people who are susceptible to violent extremism, since the question is not about "good" and "evil." Perhaps, alternative and positive narratives that show other ways of self-realization and, most importantly, build confidence, can help practitioners achieve results from their investments in the process of de-radicalization.

Annex 1: Methodology

**Research methodology within the framework of the project
"Social Media for De-Radicalization in Kyrgyzstan: A Model for Central Asia"**

For the youth of the Kyrgyz Republic, social networks and the Internet have become the main source of information and a "road map" for practical actions and life activities. Active youth use the virtual space of social networks not only as a platform for dialogue and communication, but also as a model for imitation and authority. Everything that is published on social networks is very often perceived as true, whereas publications in printed media or on television – as deceptive or false. The picture of the world represented in social networks becomes much more attractive than the actual reality. Young people do not only change their ideas about the world, the state, the society, but also develop new values that are in violation of social principles and moral principles.

The fact that social networks are not protected by law enforcement agencies and state structures provides a great opportunity for extremist and terrorist groups to conduct active propaganda and recruitment among the youth of Kyrgyzstan. The preliminary results of the desk study showed that 90% of young people subjected to radicalization receive information through social networks, from classmates, relatives, compatriots, and acquaintances.

However, the desk study could not provide answers to two practical questions:

1. **What key messages and semantic ideas that lead young people to radicalization are passed on to youth through social networks?** How do these messages affect the worldview of people in such a short time? What is the psychological portrait of a young person subjected to radicalization, and how does his attitude to the family, children, parents, or society change during the process? Why does this "type" of message make young people leave their (native) lands and go abroad? Is it really better abroad than at home?
2. **What media and social networks are most popular among young people in a particular region?** Why do young people believe these social networks and media most of all, and why do they use these social networks most often? What type of information, data, facts and news do young people receive through such channels and networks? How do these channels and networks influence the worldview of young people?

Target research area

1. Osh Oblast – Kara-Suu, Aravan, Uzgen, Nookat Districts;
2. Jalal-Abad Oblast – Suzak, Bazar-Korgon Districts;
3. Chui Oblast – Zhayil District of the town of Kara-Balta;
4. Issyk-Kul Oblast – Zheti-Oguz District.

Reasons for selecting specific regions for this project:

Firstly, the dDstricts of the Osh and Jalal-Abad Oblasts are most susceptible to youth radicalization after the tragic events of June 2010. In 2014-2015, there were outbreaks of protest riots of varying intensity in Zheti-Oguz District, related to the operation of the Kumtor gold mine, where the main driving force was youth.
Secondly, the youth began to leave for the war zones in the Middle East from all the aforementioned districts (numbers vary);
Thirdly, the youth, from all these areas, go for labor migration to Russia and Kazakhstan.

Research goal

To analyze the type of messages and content lead young people to radicalization, and through which channels of transmission (social networks, TV, media) these meanings and messages are most often conveyed.

Research objectives:

1. Select a group of young people subjected to radicalization;
2. Analyze which social networks and which media are most popular among local youth, which format of information is preferred by the audience, and why. To identify the main media channels for obtaining and disseminating information;
3. Explore the types of communication and the language of communication which is popular among young people in social networks and media;
4. Collect popular slogans, messages, meanings among young people which lead to radicalization;
5. Identify, on the basis of the collected information, who is the generator of the idea of radicalization and ideals for the target research audience;
6. Find out what messages are popular among young people and what motivates young people to leave their homes.

Duration of field research: December 1-15, 2016

Expected outcomes:

1. Lists of popular social networks and media among young people are obtained in each of the districts;
2. Messages and content that push young people from each district to radicalization are identified;
3. An image of the modern ideal and a list of values of young people from each district are obtained;
4. Types of communication and the language of communication that youth of each district use on social networks and media are explored.

Research tools

At **the first stage** *of qualitative research*, methods of obtaining information will be determined, the chief of which will be the *method of unstructured (face-to-face) field interviews* with consumers of information in selected areas. *unstructured interviews* can be both individual and group interviews (two or more respondents). They are aimed at identifying the meanings circulated in social and online media and leading youth to radicalization. *unstructured interviews (face-to-face)* constitute a particular method of gathering information with a specific goal and only one topic. The source of information during this study will be members of the population of the four regions listed above, who do not have a connection in their work to the subject of analysis.

A group of selected and specially trained field researchers will conduct unstructuredinterviews in selected areas based on a predetermined topic and questions aimed at achieving the project goal. Each field researcher will be trained in methods of gathering data on the ground, working with sources of information, techniques of handling and transmission of results, safety issues during the research. The results of each survey will be recorded in a special table with certain criteria. During the field research period, field researchers will be in constant liaison with the project's chief researcher who will advise them on conducting unstructured interviews and other issues.

At the **second stage** of the study, all information collected will be systematized and analyzed using 15 indicators:
1. evaluation of the information obtained (facts and opinions),
2. the source of information,
3. its relation to the information obtained,
4. media channels for the dissemination of information,
5. frequency of information,

6. its overall tone,
7. type,
8. form,
9. the genre of the information obtained,
10. the degree of its influence on consumers,
11. the degree of the radical nature of the language used in media texts and/or
12. audio-visual content,
13. usage of propaganda tools,
14. of key messages containing ideas of radicalization,
15. lexemes instilled in the collective consciousness in order to change a mind-set and way of thinking.

The analytical work will also include:

- studying and identifying the true meaning of the information gathered;
- evaluation of the information, categorization of information sources, its credibility and reliability which is an important indicator since there is always evaluation subjectivity which must be minimized;
- classification of the data obtained by the reliability of its source, the information itself and the way they are obtained (the latest data and complete information will be considered first);
- direct analysis of information and key messages (if any) using indicators;
- writing a final report with findings and recommendations.

Annex 2: Quotations of some respondents about the impact of the consumed information on their lives

Respondent	Quotations from the interviews
Bazar Korgon District	*"I developed negative feelings because Muslims are being killed."*
	"I am interested and I wanted to go there to fight because there is a war against Muslims [there]."
	"I have a desire to fight the infidels and go to paradise as a martyr."
	"I began to look at people: who is who? Who is a Muslim, who is a kufr."
	"I feel weakness, inaction and hatred for everyone, for infidels."
	"We have to fight on our own, without support, for our goal. And therefore, we must not stop the war until we take Syria. We need to know why we are waging jihad."
	"To some extent, I am willing to go there [to Syria] . . . We will wage jihad together with other Muslims in the name of Allah."
	"My opinion about Syria has changed: I used to think that only Syrians are fighting there, but now I see that there are all Muslims, including Uzbeks. So, in the name of Allah, Muslim men continue to wage jihad in the land of Allah."
	"Allah said: 'Until there is a worldwide caliphate, do not stop and wage jihad'."
Aravan District	*"I think it is necessary to take apart their [of ISIS] videos [containing radical narratives] and to highlight in bold red color where they distort the real meanings of verses and hadiths, and right after that to show the true meaning of this verse or hadith."*
	"After watching these videos, I developed a great desire to learn more, to study Islam. When I read books, I want to put check off those topics or points that could have countered their [radical] ideology. I often argue with them when I come across them during my work and, believe me, in many cases they defeat me in an argument, even if they do not have that level of knowledge in religion." *". . . Those who call for jihad or embarking on a wrong path, they definitely have sophisticated oratory skills. To confront such speakers, the only way is to read more, learn and know that what they say is maybe not true."*
	"I want to teach more young people because I understand that all the troubles are due to illiteracy and lack of education."
	"While viewing such materials, I intentionally practice critical thinking, I ask necessary questions for the analysis and filtration of these materials. For me, the "red flag" is a very emotionally expressed idea and politically, religiously minded people who discuss big and important political issues, but at the same time they offer very simple solutions. In fact, religious solutions should offer only peaceful ways of solving the issues, but in these films, it is basically a change of the existing system, the environment, which is a "red flag" for me indicating that they are conducting certain recruitment. I would like the Ministry of Education to introduce critical thinking lessons for young people to develop the critical skills so that they ask questions and not just believe what they see."
Zheti-Oguz District	*"I am for the Islamic Caliphate in Kyrgyzstan! Our government will not do anything good, you may see it for yourself. Since you live in Kyrgyzstan, it does not matter who you are: Russian, "Sart," or Kyrgyz. You must practice Islam. These Baptists, whose number is increasing, must be exterminated and destroyed to their root."*
	"I have a feeling of pride for the Kyrgyz who took the right path. I long for a time when all people will become Muslims."
	"Look, "ISIS" presents itself to the people in a good light. Anyways, it is surprising that there are Russians among them, and not only Muslims. It

	means that they are open to all. This is not North Korea where something terrible may be planned, and we will not even know about it, because they are closed. But here everything is different, people come as they wish, they leave as they wish."
	"Why be so cruel to infidels? You can find more human ways to convince them otherwise. For example, in our village there are recently more and more Baptists and all kinds of Jehovah's. But I do not know yet how we can get rid of them, they are so smart-ass."
	"I have a feeling of acceptance and understanding of the words said about the praise of the martyrs for their strong faith and sacrifice for the sake of the Almighty, but at the same time I do not understand why the massacre of people is an action worthy of such praise?"
	"My friend has gone to Syria with his entire family. Then, I decided to find out why he did it, and to find everything that is related to ISIS, to Syria. I entered these words into the search engine in various networks, began to search for accounts and follow them from a fake account, after which I had hundreds of followers supporting ISIS. None of them invited me to come to Syria or even support ISIS. I did not expect this. This contradicted my idea about them. I began to watch the videos and became hardened ... I began to feel a certain sympathy for ISIS."
	"... I used to be wrong about ISIS. I thought they were terrorists, but it turns out that this is a normal state, the only difference is that it is Islamic and calls for the fulfillment of all the prescriptions in their original form. . . . really on TV we are shown how terrible ISIS members are, but it turned out that they are normal people. Lately there have been too many religious trends, so I urge everyone not to go away from the original Islam."
Kara-Balta	*"I became more critical of those who slander ISIS, I try to look at things from all sides, although I used to be among those who were negative about ISIS. Terrorists are mostly Americans, while the ISIS ideology is very reasonable, moreover, it is based on purely Muslim principles. We are defending ourselves from the attack of kufr, so we must fight for the truth and start jihad for our hearts by means of a sword. Allah commanded us so."*
	"Now, I know that I am not alone in a world where I have many friends who also believe that Islam is the only way to pursue the right life. In the future, after total Islamization, a righteous life is waiting for all of us; all people in the world will become true Muslims and will be given a worthy place in paradise. Thus it is written in the Quran."
	"I think that someone played us for fools. As always - it's the dirty Americans. Maybe I would not object to violence against the Americans who set up all this chaos, but I am certainly against those who distort the true essence of Islam. They deserve a more violent death . . . for example, death by electric chair."
	"I still cannot understand what is true, I cannot choose the path that would be closest to the truth. Or maybe I'm a kufr? After all, the Quran was written not by Muhammad himself. How can I understand what is the true jihad?"
	"I thought that the caliphate would have brought more benefits and would have led our country out of the ideological crisis. I began to understand that to solve the problem of the spiritual crisis in the world, war is inevitable. The main thing is that the ends should justify the means, and to avoid shedding too much innocent blood."
	". . . I must strive to withstand all the difficulties through which the soldiers of Allah pass. This is my mission. This is the mission of everyone, it is just that not everyone has realized this yet."
	"I get the feeling that infidels cannot be defeated, there are too many of them. We have more than 30 religions in the country, only counting those which are

	officially registered, and even more underground practices. I began to believe that we need Islam, first and foremost, as an ideology which we do not yet have. Such an outcome is much better than the emergence of many different sects and religious organizations and, consequently, separatist sentiments in society. I am for the Islamic caliphate in the country!"
	"Some of the beliefs of terrorists are in fact an attempt to preserve Islam in its original form. They are somewhat right, except for their violent methods. But still, what else can we do to fix the situation, because other methods will not work with them."
Suzaksky District	*"Maybe there really is a jihad"?*
	"If there is a jihad, every Muslim should join."
Nookat District	*"The new information sparked new questions for me about the public administration in secular states."*
	"I feel the Muslims' weakness in the world and the fact that our authorities are very corrupt in relation to the big powers."
	"I feel a fear and distrust towards law enforcement agencies, because I understand that the one who fights terrorism in the Kyrgyz Republic, in fact, carries out the orders of unbelievers."
	"I wish that Muslim women were treated in a similar way [like in ISIS] in our country, and that women would not expose their bodies to the public."
	"I began to hate those who are against Islam more, to hate infidels. We must liberate Central Asia [from them]."
Kara-Suu District	*"I used to think that we have many Muslims, as many men are praying and women are covered in kerchiefs, hijabs. But after watching these videos and photos, I realized that there are no true Muslims in our country. None of us are true Muslims. We say one thing, we do another."*
	"I think our leaders should allow the imams to provide a true explanation on these topics. Mainly about the "Islamic state" and about the caliphate."
Uzgen District	*"I lived a dream to participate in jihad and become a shahid."*