

Preventive measures of countering extremist ideology leading to violence require more comprehensive approaches than just blocking and penalties.

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Extremist materials. Picture: the Kyrgyz interior ministry's press service

An analysis of existing media strategies on countering the spread of the violent religious extremist ideology online shows the need to implement measures to eliminate the reasons for increased attention to violent *extremist* narratives and to improve level of trust in society.

In 2019, 97 websites and 300 social media accounts were banned and blocked; the materials published there were recognized as extremist and terrorist by the decision of the courts of the Kyrgyz Republic^[1].

A year earlier, 139 websites and 220 online accounts were blocked due to extremism propaganda^[2]. In 2017, the number of banned and blocked resources was 159^[3].

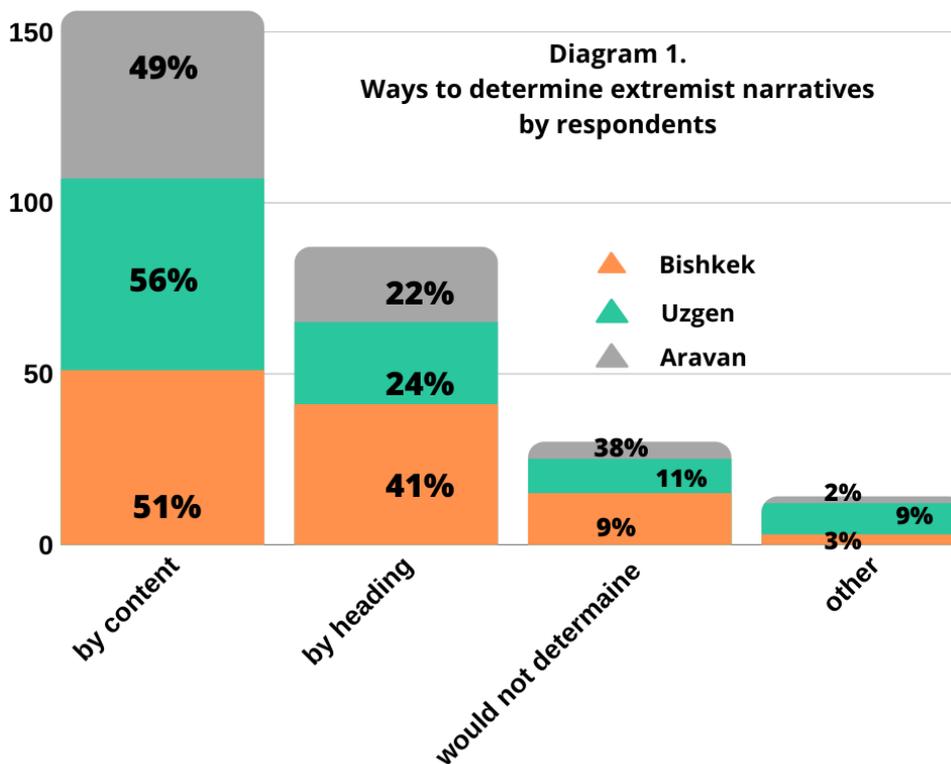
The dynamics indicate the annual growth of the number of banned websites, despite the fact that measures for countering extremist propaganda are taken: government agencies and public structures adopt programs, develop strategies and create response centers.

Nevertheless, the methodology remains the same: deleting online messages, blocking resources and holding people accountable for distributing and consuming illegal content.

However, citizens continue to receive, read and share extremist narratives.

When asked about how they determine extremist messages, more than half of the 300 survey respondents from 16 to 30 years old in Bishkek, Aravan and Uzgen (regional centers in the Southern Kyrgyzstan) said that they determine this information “by content”.

Among the main actions upon receiving the extremist messages, respondents indicated that they either comment on this, analyze or delete it.

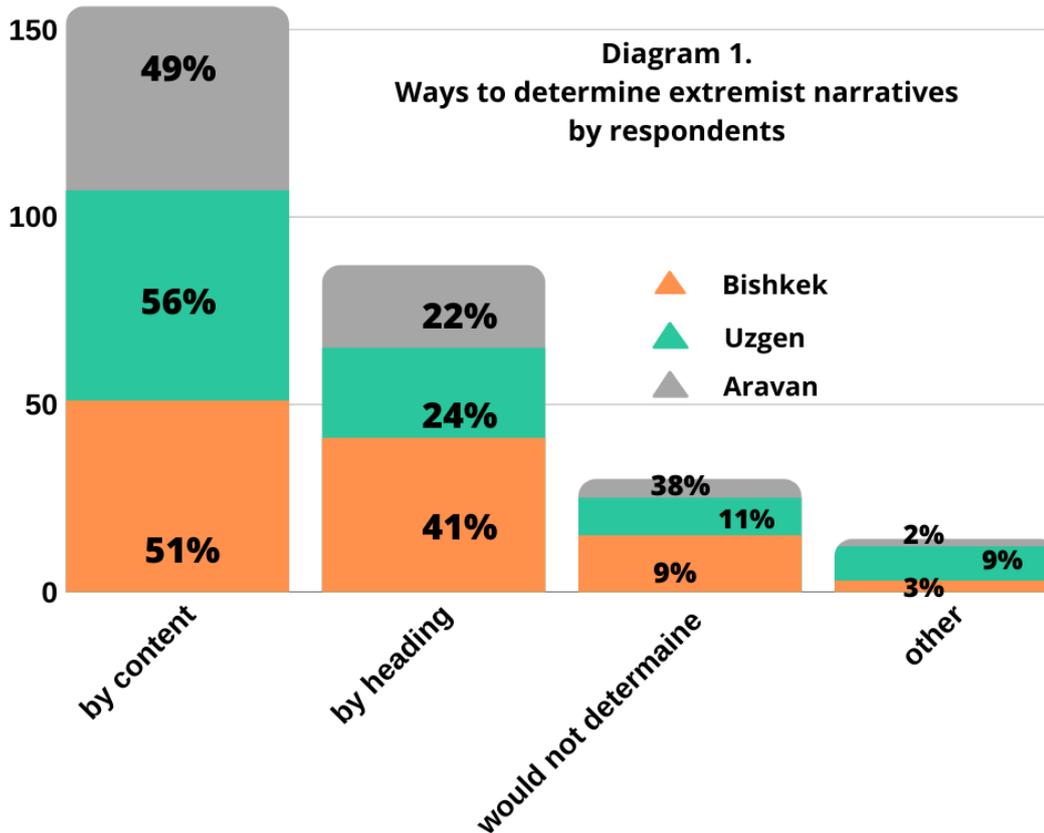


Source: International Alert. Infographics by CABAR.asia

Since an effective media strategy includes a number of tools for providing the population with the necessary information, the respondents were asked the question, “How often do

you come across the news about methods of countering violent extremism in the Kyrgyz Republic?” Most of the respondents answered “Never”.

(Aravan - 71,6%, Uzgen - 31%, Bishkek - 44%).



Source: International Alert. Infographics by CABAR.asia

Such data are provided in the compilation of analytical researches “Constructive Dialogues on Religion and Democracy”, which was created in 2020 by the Representative Office of International Alert in the Kyrgyz Republic[4]. Researchers assessed the accessible media strategies of government agencies: the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the State Commission for Religious Affairs, the State Committee for National Security, as well as six local non-profit organizations. They also studied existing tools and approaches of countering violent extremist ideology online.

Experts compared the methods and concluded that modification of the media strategy of Kyrgyzstan is “extremely necessary”.

International and Local Experience

The term “Countering Violent Extremism” is usually referred to approaches with various strategies and methods in media and communications.

The Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategy has become internationally known since 2015, simultaneously with IS, a terrorist and extremist organization (*banned in the Kyrgyz Republic on February 13, 2015 by the decision of the October District Court of Bishkek, and in other countries*), which actively used social networks for recruiting its followers globally.

By that time, many countries already had media strategies that were adjusted only in terms of the current agenda of countering extremist propaganda leading to violence. This approach included the implementation of the “three in one” model, which combined the close relationship of different types of media, conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

These methods, as researchers from the United States Institute of Peace claim[\[5\]](#), for example, allow measuring the impact of preventive strategies on violent extremism and its propaganda, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of the approaches.

The media impact [influence on reducing extremist propaganda] is proportional to the number of media strategies it uses, researchers Sheldon Himelfarb and Megan Chabalowski claimed in their work “Media, Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding: Mapping the Edges”, published back in 2008[\[6\]](#).

This idea was applied in European practices, especially during the surge in terrorism and extremism since 2015.

Dr. Kate Ferguson, Research Associate, University of East Anglia in her research asserts that special media and communication strategies are powerful tools for quick response when there is a threat of violent extremism[\[7\]](#).

The strategic framework for such response is usually based on several aspects:

MEDIA STRATEGIES FRAMEWORK BASED ON "3 in 1" APPROACH



new forms of journalism solutions,
based on peace and conflict-sensitive media tools
focused
on the current demand of the local audience are
implemented in the mass media

peace-promoting citizen media, peace-promoting
entertainment media including methods, forms,
approaches of communications between
the authorities, the media
and society
as well as tools to achieve the strategy's goals



preventing extremism propaganda through
social marketing
to create and shape relationships with
target audiences
in order to cover their needs

encouraging media regulation
encompassing codes of conduct
to prevent incitement of hatred, not to promote
violent extremism propaganda



- implementation in media of the new forms of journalism solutions, based on peace and conflict-sensitive media tools focused on the current demand of the local audience
- development of peace-promoting citizen media, peace-promoting entertainment media including the methods, forms, approaches of communications between the authorities, media and society as well as tools to achieve the strategy’s goals;
- preventing extremism propaganda through social marketing to create and shape relationships with target audiences in order to cover their needs;
- encouraging media regulation encompassing codes of conduct to prevent incitement of hatred, not to promote violent extremism propaganda.

Kyrgyzstan adopted the first program on countering extremism and terrorism in 2017. It is designed for five years. Among the set of measures it mentions, “Improving awareness-raising activities regarding countering extremism and terrorism ... focusing on religious literacy increase and reporting on the state policies on countering extremism and terrorism”.

The Computer Security Incident Response Team, established by the State Committee for National Security, among other tasks, also monitors unauthorized access to various online resources in order to detect, delete or block content access.

Earlier, in 2014, the Kyrgyz government adopted the Concept of State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Religious Sphere, and in 2012 - the Concept of National Security.

However, none of the Concepts refers specifically to a media strategy.

Kyrgyzstan is a member of the military bloc of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), led by Moscow, and, along with China, Russia, Kazakhstan and other countries, is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Therefore, the country most often adopts all approaches of countering the violent extremism and terrorism from its partners.

An analysis of the strategies used in Kyrgyzstan showed that most often they are focused on religion.

This includes the introduction of a subject “History of Religious Cultures” into the curriculum of educational institutions, the support and active participation of NGOs in research activities, the participation of representatives of civil society and religious organizations in training and conferences.

Currently, the channels of external communication of Kyrgyz religious organizations and Islamic scholars are social networks and their own websites; many theologians have become popular in social media.

Their actions can be considered as a small part of the media strategy in strengthening relationships between religious leaders and the religious community.

On the one hand, this is correct and justified; however, in order to achieve the goals, they need the involvement of other people who want to consume information from secular sources, to stay informed about religious extremism and violence propaganda and to make their contribution.

“The potential of media strategies is not studied well in our country,” says **Gulnaz Isaeva**, an expert in religious studies, head of the Analytic Department of the State Commission on Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic. “On the other hand, we must clearly understand how media can really influence [the countering religious extremist propaganda].”

Iskender Bainazarov, legal expert from Bishkek, mentor in a research on the role of the non-profit sector of Kyrgyzstan in contributing to the countering terrorism and extremism in the Kyrgyz Republic, explains the reason for the low effectiveness of existing strategies.

“The state functions in the fragmented way. Even if it states smart opinions, they are not perceived by the society, as the level of trust [in the government] is low,” expert told CABAR.asia.

Therefore, the lack of feedback from society is another problem.

“There is no citizens’ involvement, and some believe that this is not necessary. Many may simply not realize the importance of an effective media strategy,” he adds.

According to Bainazarov, the most active in extremism prevention are the people whose relatives or friends somehow were involved with the problem of extremism, for example, were convicted of distributing or saving prohibited content.

Those who were not involved in this problem are nihilistic about the countering extremist propaganda. Everyone thinks that this is only the state’s problem,” the lawyer argues.

According to the research conducted by analysts in open sources, in the Kyrgyz Republic, more than twenty non-profit organizations implemented projects in the field of countering terrorism and extremism.

It was revealed that almost all civil peacebuilding institutions in Kyrgyzstan have similar problems and limitations. These are legally undefined status, methods of operation, coordination and interaction in the system of countering terrorism and extremism, which significantly reduce the competence of these organizations.

Focus group discussions and interviews in the civil sector revealed four main problems:

- duplication of projects, since there is no monitoring countrywide;
- lack of funding of civic initiatives in local communities that can be a good tool to counter extremist propaganda;
- lack of specialists in civil society on countering terrorism and extremism;
- difficulties in cooperation between government bodies and NGOs in the regions.

Among NGOs, the Internet is considered a common tool for countering extremist ideologies and violence, and thus, most of the projects were aimed at implementing such activities as: creating thematic pages, blogs, sharing the information and users' training.

Media expert **Ikbolzhon Isakov** also speaks about the problem of trust, which is difficult for the authorities to win among radical people.

"The state is trying to share some kind of general content via TV news, which these groups [radical] do not watch. Accordingly, it is impossible to convey information to the target audience," Isakov said in CABAR.asia interview. "At the same time, extremist propaganda promises them at least a paradise. They somehow believe that they will get there."

If one analyzes countering extremist ideology by the government, it can be considered more punitive and frightening. The intimidation is broadcast, and articles of the Criminal Code are described, according to which people who read, view or distribute illegal content can be held accountable.

"When we conducted a survey and asked people whether they would go to the police if their relatives or friends start spreading such information, they said they would not, because they were afraid they would be punished themselves," Isakov emphasized.

Gulbadam Gadelkhanova, analyst from the School of Peacemaking and Media Technology in Central Asia, believes that due to the lack of a single counter-extremism format focused

on curbing illegal content in the media, the measures taken by the authorities and public organizations are miscellaneous.

She referred to constantly media monitoring and content examination, which demonstrates the level of competencies, including of the countering violent extremist propaganda.

“If the studies of the media and Internet [in Kyrgyzstan] over the past five years are summarized, then there will not be a noticeable difference in the principles of the [journalistic] reports, despite the fact that approach has changed a lot during the terrorism age,” she says. “The only thing that has increased in the media and Internet is religion reports. Of course, they educate, but this is not something that can counter violent extremism propaganda.”

Since media and communications can influence the attitude and people’s behavior, including those affected by the extremist propaganda, one of the main counter measures is media assistance. However, assistance is required from independent media, inclusive, responsible and contributing to a society that rejects violence, prejudice and separation.

When conducting media research on this issue, continues Gadelkhanova, the main question that we asked before the analysis was: can existing media approaches engage people in debates and discussions and encourage communication between political, ethnic, religious and other social groups? This is precisely what increases the level of trust in the state among the population.

Have our media created platforms where the audience is free to discuss these topics? What is the level of tolerance on such platforms?

“We have not received a clear answer to these questions in our research so far in recent years,” concluded Gadelkhanova.

What Can Solve the Problem?

Studying the global experience of media strategies and introducing some initiatives into local practices can help Kyrgyzstan to be proactive and implement better methods of countering violent extremism.

Experts say interventions at all levels, as well as investment and time are required. Such a comprehensive approach would eliminate a number of reasons for tension in society that can make people, especially youth, to look for answers to their questions in extremist content.

At current stage, it is necessary to improve communication strategies of working with the public and Internet users.

“The general concept should be reviewed and instead of advertising punishments [for violent extremist propaganda], it is better to have state bodies’ messages inviting people to cooperate,” media expert Ikbolzhon Isakov suggests.

However, cooperation must be supported by fulfilling the promises. These can be various solutions for socially significant issues at local levels.

It is necessary to use existing resources and involve local media activists in this, for example, bloggers from districts and villages. They can help reaching the wide audience. This will make it easier to build trust, and then individually discuss countermeasures.

Another important factor is the work on changing the behavior of law enforcement agencies representatives and their understanding that punitive measures do not help achieving goals, Isakov adds.

Iskender Bainazarov, legal expert, discussing a systematic approach, points out the necessity to create the social intolerance for religious extremism propaganda in the media.

“Countering extremist propaganda should be the responsibility of citizens themselves,” he says.

The media strategy should offer such solutions so that people themselves do not share or repost unverified content that may be extremist.

“For this, you just need to learn to be critical of each piece of information received,” Bainazarov concludes.

This article was prepared as part of the Giving Voice, Driving Change - from the Borderland to the Steppes Project implemented with the financial support of the Foreign Ministry of Norway.

[1]
<https://barometr.kg/v-kyrgyzstane-v-2019-godu-zablokirovali-97-sajtov-i-300-akkauntov-za-propagandu-ekstremizma>

[2]

Source: <http://kant.kg/2019-04-17/v-2018-godu-po-resheniyu-sudov-byli-zablokirovany-220-internet-akkauntov/>

[3] <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28962814.html>

[4] Constructive dialogues on religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan - Research reports, 2020

<https://www.international-alert.org/publications/constructive-dialogues-religion-and-democracy-kyrgyzstan-vol-2>

[5] Media, Conflict Prevention and

Peacebuilding <https://www.usip.org/publications/2008/10/media-conflict-prevention-and-peacebuilding-mapping-edges>

[6] Same

[7] Dr Kate Ferguson Research Associate, Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research University of East Anglia, Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies, 2016 ,

<https://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Countering-Violent-Extremism-Through-Media-and-Communication-Strategies-.pdf>



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