

VULNERABLE TO MANIPULATION

Research and Policy Brief on Youth and Violence in the Kyrgyz Republic

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The Kyrgyz Republic has a young, rapidly expanding population, high levels of rural poverty, and a high dependence on Russia as a source of remittances, with more than half a million young people traveling abroad for work at any given time.¹ Layered on top of these economic challenges, a history of conflict along ethnic and geographic divisions, as well as growing reports of youth joining violent extremist groups, have spurred questions about the future of the country's youth and stability.

Research conducted by Mercy Corps and Foundation for Tolerance International in the Kyrgyz Republic explores risk factors for youth participation in violence.² We interviewed 159 people, including migrant youth, remittance-receiving youth, and local leaders in Osh, Jalalabad, Batken, and Issyk-Kul. Policymakers are particularly concerned with migrant youth's vulnerability to the influence of violent extremist groups, given evidence of recruitment of Central Asian citizens in places like Russia and Turkey.³ However, our research indicates that recruitment into groups such as Daesh also occurs at home and that the risks are not limited to violent extremism. Common themes of frustration, anger, and animosity across youth raise concern of the potential for participation in various types of violence, within the Kyrgyz Republic and beyond its borders. However, instability is not inevitable: government, civil society, and other stakeholders have an opportunity to build the resilience of youth and support stronger, more cohesive communities that can sustain peace.

Key Findings

- 1) Fault lines along religious expression create space for manipulation by violent extremist or other groups.** Perceptions of religiosity are deepening ethnic tensions, particularly between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz, as a number of Kyrgyz youth equated the more conservative religious appearance of Uzbeks with extremism. While the Kyrgyz government also voices these generalizations, targeting Uzbek youth as potential extremists risks making them more vulnerable to recruitment to violence. Furthermore, a growing divide between groups practicing cultural Islam and more conservative Islam leaves space for violent extremist groups such as Daesh to exploit.
- 2) Lack of confidence in government is eroding the credibility of the state.** Youth of all ethnic groups expressed doubt in elected officials to govern effectively and equitably. Perceived systemic corruption, lack of representative decision-making, and practices of voting in exchange for money have diminished the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of many youth. A general lack of national identity reported by youth also leaves a vacuum that conflict entrepreneurs could fill.
- 3) Youth are frustrated by unmet economic expectations and the pressure to migrate.** Young people have a keen awareness that they are far worse off today than they were just two years ago. Because of the deep economic crisis in Russia, many economic migrants are earning decreased income while abroad, and thus sending fewer, and less valuable, remittances back home. It is not

¹ <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15838&LangID=E>

² Mercy Corps is grateful for the generous support of USAID for this research.

³ International Crisis Group. 2016. "Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia." <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/syria-calling-radicalisation-central-asia>

the absolute poverty resulting from these reductions in remittances—while a grave concern—that threatens instability. Rather, it is the gap between economic expectations and the current reality that fuels the economic frustration revealed in our interviews with youth.

- 4) **Divisions persist between majority and minority ethnic groups.** A substantial number of respondents reported animosities and increased separation between ethnic groups in the Kyrgyz Republic. Ethnic minority respondents, particularly Uzbeks and Tajiks, described perceptions of exclusion and injustice, while members of the Kyrgyz ethnic majority expressed concern of threats to their national identity. Given a history of violence between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek groups in 2010, the continued—and potentially increasing—ethnic tension underscores the need to invest heavily in inter-communal violence prevention.
- 5) **Counter-narratives on the risks of going to Syria are heard but not fully understood.** Youth shared stories of how teachers, police, imams, and government actors convey the dangers of going to Syria. However, while nearly half of the youth interviewed could name specific groups like Jabhat al Nusra, Al-Qaeda, Daesh, or Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, they knew only that these groups are illegal and were not aware of their motivations or the threat they pose. Extremists may fill these gaps in understanding and draw young people down a dangerous path.

Recommendations

- **Invest now in increasing cohesion between ethnic groups.** Given inter-group tensions described by youth, the Kyrgyz Republic's history of inter-communal violence, and the grievances of youth who perceive social exclusion or discrimination, donors and government should design forward-looking conflict management and violence prevention programs. Development initiatives that involve ethnically diverse groups in planning and implementation can help improve trust between groups and decrease vulnerabilities to extremist influence.
- **Strengthen relationships between government and communities through increased engagement and civic education.** Research revealed a wide gulf between those who govern and the governed, particularly youth. Elected officials should hold forums with community members to open two-way communication and accompany these forums with action—such as achieving results in reducing election fraud—to ensure that improved relationships endure. Strengthening civic education in schools can also help youth understand their civic duties.
- **Provide youth—particularly youth who may migrate—with improved skills to resist the influence of violent groups.** Civil society organizations and schools should provide youth with transferable life skills before they have the possibility of migrating in the 9th grade. A focus on life skills can help young people to not only more confidently navigate life's social, political, economic, and personal transitions, but also be more resilient to messages of violence—whether along ethnic lines or for recruitment into international groups.
- **Sharpen counter-narratives on violent extremism.** An absence of sufficient specificity about motivations and threats posed by extremist groups can create curiosity from young people about those groups, and active extremist recruiters fill the void with details that serve their own agenda. Civil society and government—using local leaders and peers to amplify messages—should hone their strategy to include more details that help youth understand and combat violent narratives.

CONTACT

UMA KANDALAEVA, Country Director | Kyrgyz Republic
ukandalaeva@mercycorps.org