

Analysis of “The History of Religious Culture” - A Kyrgyz Government Initiative to Prevent Radicalisation and Violent Extremism among Adolescents

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Radicalisation has become an important issue for the Kyrgyz Republic with an increasing number of individuals leaving the country for conflict zones. The government of the Kyrgyz Republic adopted a number of policies to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism among youth. One of these measures is piloting a new subject, titled, History of Religious Culture, (История религиозной культуры) in public schools. The analysis in this paper aims to explore the experiences of teachers, who have taught the new class. The article also examines any differences in the level of resilience of pupils in schools, piloting and not piloting the new subject, towards radicalisation and violent extremism. Data used in this article comes from a survey with 760 adolescents across public schools in six regions of the country and key informant interviews with teachers who have taught the new class. Qualitative findings showed a positive experience of teachers who reported expanding their pupils’ and their own knowledge of various

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religions. Quantitative findings indicate that the new class, History of Religious Culture, may have had a positive impact on violence-related beliefs in pilot schools that reported views less supportive of violence. The study concludes that the government's response to radicalisation and violent extremism has expanded beyond a security approach by including education. This, however, poses a risk of securitising education.

Keywords: Resilience, radicalisation, violent extremism, adolescents, government response

Introduction

The problem of radicalisation and violent extremism has become salient in the Kyrgyz Republic in the past decade. More people from the Kyrgyz Republic (both total and per capita) than from other countries have gone to conflict zones such as Syria and Iraq (Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Esengul 2017). The number of individuals from the Kyrgyz Republic fighting in Syria increased from 250 in 2015 to 1000 in 2017 (Larionov 2018). The issue of radicalisation and violent extremism has particularly concerned young people (Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Esengul 2017). Since 2017, young people from Central Asia, including the Kyrgyz Republic, were reported to have been involved in terrorist attacks in New York, Stockholm, Saint Petersburg, and Istanbul (Evers et al. 2018).

Almost a third of the population in the Kyrgyz republic are young people between 15-24 years old (UNICEF, no date). Youth are a disadvantaged part of the population in the Kyrgyz Republic. They constitute the most unemployed social group and lack socio-economic opportunities. Young people migrate to other countries and are exposed to the risks of radical ideas abroad (Speckhard, Shajkovci, Esengul 2017; Nasritdinov et al. 2019; Tucker 2019).

As a response to this problem and to prevent radicalisation of youth, the government of the Kyrgyz Republic has adopted a number of policies and measures, which are discussed in more depth in the following section. One of these important measures was piloting a new subject, History of Religious Culture, in several public schools in accordance with the decree of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic (No 414-p dated as of the 20th of September 2017) (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2017a) to increase the knowledge of adolescents about different religions and to foster tolerance and understanding towards various religions so that they are resilient towards radical ideas and violent extremism.

There are broadly two categories of measures tackling radicalisation and violent extremism: 1) activities countering radicalisation and violent extremism and 2) activities preventing radicalisation and violent extremism. Activities for countering violent extremism aim to deter possibly already radicalised individuals from engaging in violence (Harris-Hogan et al. 2016). Activities for preventing violent extremism take a broader view and aim to prevent the radicalisation of individuals in the first place by addressing risks before radicalisation has begun (British Council 2017).

In the past several decades, preventive measures have received more support. For example, the recent review of interventions on the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism by the British Council (2017) showed that interventions on education and social entrepreneurship had positive outcomes for addressing risk factors of radicalisation. It has been argued that education should play a central role in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism as it is cost-effective (Harris-Hogan et al. 2016).

Education has been widely used in different contexts to build the resilience of youth against radicalisation and violent extremism. Education interventions have been undertaken to teach soft skills such as critical thinking, empathy, communication as well as to promote tolerance, understanding, social harmony, civic values, and citizenship. It has been assumed that these skills and values contribute to the resilience of youth to radicalisation and violent extremism (Bonnell et al. 2010; Novelli 2010; Aly, Taylor, and Karnovsky 2014).

However, there is also little evidence on the effectiveness of educational approaches to building the resilience of youth against violent extremism (Aly, Taylor, and Karnovsky 2014). One of the key issues is that there is a lack of tools to measure the resilience of youth in the context of radicalisation and violent extremism. Recently, Grossman and colleagues developed and validated a measure of the resilience of youth towards radicalisation and violent extremism (Grossman et al. 2020). The authors define resilience, in the context of control and prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism, as the resources and capacities of youth to resist narratives of and social network influences towards violent extremism. Their Youth Resilience Against Violent Extremism scale (YRAVE) is discussed in more detail in the methodology section (Grossman et al. 2020).

Further, the literature on the government response to the issue of radicalisation and violent extremism in the Kyrgyz Republic has predominantly focused on the control of the issue rather than on the prevention of it (Omeliicheva 2010; Speckhard, Shajkovi, and Esengul 2017). Moreover, the discussion of the government response in the literature has been generally embedded in the security discourse (Omeliicheva 2010). Methodologically, the analysis of the government response to radicalisation and violent extremism may have largely relied on the document analysis rather than primary data

from interviews and surveys (Omelicheva 2010; Olcott 2014, Olcott 2014, 2017).

The introduction of the History of Religious Culture class appears to be the first explicit initiative in the Kyrgyz Republic that aims to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism. Even though the subject has been piloted at least since 2017, the initiative had not been evaluated by the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) of the Kyrgyz Republic at the time of the current study (October – November 2019) for different reasons including a lack of resources.

The analysis presented in this article aims to explore the experiences of teachers, who have taught the new subject, and examine the differences in the scores of pupils on their resilience towards radicalisation and violent extremism in schools who have, and have not, piloted the new subject History of Religious Culture. Thus, the article contributes to the existing literature by examining recent policies of the government with a specific focus on education rather than security, having a clear measurement tool for resilience while using primary data based on an adequate sample size, and focusing on youth rather than groups at risk, as has been the case in the literature.

This study used the validated YRAVE tool consisting of 14 items to measure the resilience of adolescents (14-17 years old) to radicalisation and violent extremism in two specific settings in the Kyrgyz Republic: 1) public schools where the new subject History of Religious Culture has been piloted (hereafter pilot schools) and 2) public schools where this subject has not been piloted (hereafter non-pilot schools). A survey was conducted with 300 pupils from 14-17 years old in pilot schools and 360 pupils from 14-17 years old in non-pilot schools in six regions of the Kyrgyz Republic. Key informant interviews were conducted with teachers who have taught the new subject History of Religious Culture.

Government Measures for Preventing Radicalisation and Violent Extremism among Youth through Building their Resilience

In order to respond to the problem of radicalisation and violent extremism among the youth, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic has developed and adopted a range of policies and legislative documents. A government programme “Youth Policy for 2017-2020” was approved on the 10th of August 2017 (Resolution No. 471) (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2017b), which was further amended on the 11th of November 2019 (Resolution No. 599) (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2019a). There are four priority areas in the Youth Policy:

Priority I. Creation of favourable conditions for social and economic self-realisation and comprehensive development of new generations of the young in the Kyrgyz

Republic.

Priority II. Ensuring equal access for the youth to state and municipal services.

Priority III. Enhancing active participation of youth in the decision-making processes.

Priority IV. Improving the effectiveness of the youth management system.

The Youth Policy targets the issue of radicalisation and violent extremism among the youth in Priority II. Under this priority, there is an action task (No 2) which aims to promote youth development projects focused on the prevention of radicalisation among young people through social contracting of the third sector. In other words, the government selects non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based on a competition to implement projects that aim to prevent the radicalisation of and violent extremism among youth in the Kyrgyz Republic.

On the 18th of October 2019, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic approved Resolution No. 562 "Concept of the Youth Policy for 2020-2030" (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2019b). The Priorities of the renewed Youth policy, which have yet to start to be implemented are:

Priority 1. Formation and improvement of mechanisms, tools, and institutions that enable youth to participate in achieving their goals.

Priority 2. Expansion of active participation of youth as equal participants in making responsible decisions.

Priority 3. Integrated and systematic improvement of youth competitiveness.

There is also a Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic on Religious Matters for 2015-2020, approved by the Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic on the 14th of November 2014 No. 203 (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2014). The action plan on the implementation of this Concept (dated as of 9th of July 2015, No 315-p) aims to increase the level of religious literacy and tolerance and to prevent the spread of religious intolerance and radicalism among young people (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2015). Some of the actions in the plan are directly related to the MoES:

Action 2. Improving public policy in religious matters and increasing the efficiency of government bodies.

Sub-action 2.11. Development of methodological manuals and a series of events (lectures, seminars, etc.) on religion, tolerance and prevention of the spread of religious radicalism and extremism involving schoolchildren, students, representatives of the local community and the clergy.

Sub-action 2.12. Organisation of seminars and training to increase the level of religious literacy and religious awareness among pupils and students of secondary and higher educational institutions.

Action 5. Improving the system of secular-religious education.

Sub-action 5.2. Development of the programme of the subject History of Religious Culture.

Sub-action 5.3. Introduction of History of Religious Culture as a subject of religious studies in schools as well as vocational and high educational institutions.

Sub-action 5.10. Development of the programme and necessary methodological support for training of pupils and teachers on the prevention of religious conflicts among young people and the development of spiritual security skills.

In a decree, No 414-p dated as of the 20th of September 2017, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic approved a plan of activities for the implementation of the Programme of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic to counter extremism and terrorism for 2017-2022 (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2017a). Action 3.1. of this plan aims to introduce the new subject of History of Religious Culture into the curriculum of public schools for 2018-2019. It is expected that the outcome of this action would be the formation of a critical attitude of students to the ideas of extremism and terrorism.

History of Religious Culture

The Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) together with the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA), the Kyrgyz Academy of Education, and other non-governmental partners developed and introduced the new school subject History of Religious Culture in 2016. The subject was piloted first in ten schools. For developing this subject, the MoES and SCRA partnered with the Oslo Centre, a Norwegian NGO (The Oslo Centre, no date). The subject aims to provide pupils with knowledge about how various religions originated and developed, and how they influenced and shaped people's lives. Pupils study different religions and religious traditions that have existed in Kyrgyzstan to develop tolerance towards various religions. The subject also intends to teach principles of a secular state and freedom of religion as well as foster in pupils analytical and critical thinking, understanding of religious and social problems, civic awareness, and skills for a non-conflict co-existence in a secular multi-religious society (The Oslo Centre, no date).

The subject History of Religious Culture is taught to pupils of the ninth grade. The textbook consists of ten chapters and has the following structure:

- Introduction. Aims and objectives of the subject History of Religious Culture
- Part I. Phenomenon of religious culture (3 hours)
1. Definitions and essence of culture
 2. Definition of religion. Structure and classification of religions
 3. Diversity of world religions
- Part II. First religious beliefs (3 hours)
4. Totemism. Fetishism
 5. Mythology. Shamanism. Tengianism
- Part III. Ancient religious beliefs (2 hours)
6. Zoroastrianism Manichaeism
- Part IV. Culture of national religions (3 hours)
7. National religions
 8. Judaism. Confucianism
 9. Taoism. Shintoism
- Part V. World religion: Buddhism (2 hours)
10. The emergence and development of Buddhism
 11. Spread of Buddhism on the territory of Central Asia
- Part VI. World religion: Christianity (2 hours)
12. The emergence and development of Christianity
 13. Christian culture
- Part VII. World religion: Islam (2 hours)
14. The emergence and development of Islam
 15. Muslim culture
- Part VIII. Spread of Islamic religion on the territory of Kyrgyzstan (2 hours)
16. Adoption of Islam by Kyrgyz people
 17. Combination of pre-Islamic beliefs of Kyrgyz people with Islam
- Part IX. State-confessional relations in modern Kyrgyzstan (3 hours)
18. Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the religious sphere
 19. State and religion in modern Kyrgyzstan
 20. Religious organisations in modern Kyrgyzstan
- Part X. Religions and conflicts in contemporary society (3 hours)
21. Interfaith agreements and tolerance
 22. Threat of extremism and terrorism to peace and sustainability
 23. Ideology of extremist movements: truth and myths

In addition to the textbook, methodological guidelines for teachers to teach the new subject were developed in 2018. Efforts were also invested into training teachers in 56 schools piloting the subject by the MoES with support from the Oslo Centre in 2017 and OSCE in 2018 (Prevention Media 2019). In the 2020-2021 academic year, the MoES

is planning to roll-out the subject to all schools in Kyrgyzstan and involve teachers from pilot schools in training teachers to start teaching the new subject (CABAR.asia 2020).

Measuring Resilience to Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

Strengthening the resilience of individuals to deal with the underlying factors of radicalisation and violent extremism is one of the main measures in the prevention of violent extremism (Aly et al. 2014). As can be seen in the case of the Kyrgyz Republic, the government has decided to pilot a new subject on the history of religious culture in public schools to increase pupils' religious literacy and encourage them to critically engage with information available about various religions and religious groups. The rationale is that pupils equipped with religious literacy will be able to resist the extremist narratives and be able to make an informed decision.

Resilience in the context of the prevention of violent extremism is defined as the resources and capacities of people, especially youth, to resist narratives of and social network influences toward radicalisation and violent extremism (Grossman et al. 2020). The British Council Report also provides an apt definition of resilience in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism as:

the factors, ideas, institutions, issues, trends, or values that enable individuals and communities to resist or prevent violence. This can also be described as the capability of people, groups, and communities to rebut and reject proponents of violent extremism and the ideology they promote, and to recover from violent extremism when it manifests itself (British Council 2017, p. 36).

Notwithstanding the growing common use of resilience in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremist policies, the research on the effectiveness of the concept is nascent (Aly et al. 2014). Especially, measuring resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism has been a challenge, including an assessment of the efficacy of educational interventions and social interventions in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism. Nevertheless, there have been efforts to tackle this gap in recent years.

Grossman and colleagues developed, tested, and validated the Youth Resilience Against Violent Extremism (YRAVE) Scale that specifically aims to measure the resilience of youth to radicalisation and violent extremism (Grossman et al. 2020). The measure was tested in Somalia, Canada, and Australia with young people from a wide range of culturally diverse backgrounds (Grossman et al. 2020). The measure consists of five dimensions: 1) cultural identity, 2) bridging capital, 3) linking capital, 4) violence-related behaviour, and 5) violence-related beliefs (Box 1). These domains

stem from their definition of resilience as the ability to resist and challenge: a) existing (or perceived) social and political injustice and unfairness and b) social legitimization of violent extremist propaganda, recruitment, and ideology. The resistance to the social and political grievances can be either internal (a personal belief system) or drawn from socio-cultural resources available to individuals in the society.

Box 1. Dimensions of YRAVE Scale

1. Cultural identity and connectedness includes a) familiarity with one's own cultural heritage, practices, beliefs, traditions, values and norms, b) knowledge of 'mainstream' cultural practices, beliefs, traditions, values and norms if different from own cultural heritage; having a sense of cultural pride, c) feeling anchored in one's own cultural beliefs and practices, d) feeling that one's culture is accepted by the wider community, e) feeling able to share one's culture with others;
2. Bridging capital includes a) trust and confidence in people from other groups, b) support for and from people from other groups, c) the strength of ties to people outside one's group, d) having the skills, knowledge and confidence to connect with other groups, e) valuing inter-group harmony, f) active engagement with people from other groups;
3. Linking capital includes a) trust and confidence in government and authority figures, b) trust in community organisations, c) having the skills, knowledge and resources to make use of institutions and organisations outside one's local community, d) ability to contribute to or influence policy and decision making relating to one's own community;
4. Violence-related behaviours include a) willingness to speak out publicly against violence, b) willingness to challenge the use of violence by others, c) acceptance of violence as a legitimate means of resolving conflicts;
5. Violence-related beliefs include a) degree to which violence is seen to confer status and respect; the degree to which violence is normalised or well tolerated for any age group in the community.

There are 14 items in the YRAVE scale (see Table 1). Respondents are asked to express their agreement or disagreement with the items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Table 1. Items of YRAVE scale

No	Domain	Measurement item
1	Cultural identity	It is important to me to maintain cultural traditions.
2		I am familiar with my cultural traditions, beliefs, practices, and values.
3		My cultural identity guides the way I live my life.
4	Bridging capital	I feel supported by people from other communities.
5		In general, I trust people from other communities.
6		I regularly engage in conversations with people of multiple religions/cultures and beliefs.
7	Linking capital	I feel confident when dealing with government and authorities.
8		I feel that my voice is heard when dealing with government and authorities.
9		I trust authorities/law enforcement agencies
10	Violence related behaviour	I am willing to speak out publicly against violence in my community.
11		I am willing to challenge the violent behaviour of others in my community.
12	Violence related beliefs	My community accepts that young people may use violence to solve problems.
13		Being violent helps show how strong I am.
14		Being violent helps me earn the respect of others.

Methodology

Data analysed in this paper comes from a survey with pupils between 14 – 17 years old in the pilot and non-pilot public schools as well as key informant interviews (KIIs) with teachers who have taught the new class History of Religious Culture in pilot schools. The analysis explored two specific research questions:

- 1) What is the experience of teachers who have taught the new class History of Religious Culture? What achievements and challenges have they had?
- 2) Is there any difference in the level of resilience towards radicalisation and violent extremism among pupils 14 – 17 years old in the pilot and non-pilot public schools?

Measure

To measure resilience against violent extremism, we used the Youth Resilience Against Violent Extremism Scale by Grossman and colleagues (2017). To date, this is the only validated tool that we could find to measure young people's resilience in the context of violent extremism. Our study's limitation was that the methodological design did not envisage adaptation of the tool for the local context due to such practical barriers as the research time frame and budget. Nonetheless, since a team of researchers from Kyrgyzstan conducted this research, it was considered that overall the scale would work for the context of Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, we piloted the tool with a small number of respondents, which showed that the measurement questions were generally well understood and did not provoke negative reactions from the respondents. As a result of piloting, some revisions were made in the Kyrgyz and Russian versions of the tool. Apart from the YRAVE scale, the survey questionnaire had other questions focusing on various topics, namely demographic information, the experience of violence, academic performance, and an assessment of teaching style. In total, the survey questionnaire had 71 questions.

Sampling of schools and pupils

Non-pilot schools

The study population for non-pilot schools was defined as adolescents from 14-17 years old attending a public school in the Kyrgyz Republic. The country has seven administrative regions. Geographically the country is also divided into the northern and southern parts by a large mountain range. There are four regions in the north (Naryn, Issyk-Kul, Talas, and Chui) and three regions in the south (Osh, Jalalabad, and Batken). The southern part has more people.

A sampling frame was developed based on the list of public schools in the country obtained from the website of the MoES of the Kyrgyz Republic. Pilot schools, discussed below, were excluded from this list. Using the Probability Proportionate to Size (PPS) sampling strategy, 12 public schools from six of seven regions in the Kyrgyz Republic (Osh, Jalalabad, Naryn, Talas, Issyk-Kul, and Chui) were sampled. Thirty pupils from each sampled school took part in the survey. The selection of pupils within each school was randomised. Consequently, 360 students from non-pilot public schools took part in the survey.

The breakdown of the sample is presented in Table 2. Of the sample, 64% were represented by girls, and 36% by boys. This imbalance was due to the low school attendance of boys after the mandatory ninth-grade of education. Adolescents of 16

years old made up 46% of the sample. Of the sampled pupils, 97% were Muslims and 3% were Christians. Finally, 69% were Kyrgyz, 11% Uzbek, 10% Dungan, 5% Russians, 1% Uyghurs, and 4% other ethnic groups.

Table 2. Breakdown of the sample by pupils' gender, age, religion and ethnicity in non-pilot schools

Category		N	%
Gender	Female	231	64%
	Male	129	36%
Age	14 years old	12	3%
	15 years old	90	25%
	16 years old	165	46%
	17 years old	91	25%
	19 years old	2	1%
Religion	Muslim	348	97%
	Christian	10	3%
	No religion	0	0%
	Do not know	2	1%
	Prefer not to answer	0	0%
Ethnicity	Kyrgyz	247	69%
	Russian	19	5%
	Uyghur	4	1%
	Uzbek	38	11%
	Dungan	37	10%
	Other	15	4%
	Prefer not to answer	0	0%

Pilot schools

The MoES provided a list of schools where the new class History of Religious Culture had been piloted. The list contained around 20 schools. From this list, ten schools located in the regions from which non-pilot schools were selected using the PPS

method were included in the study to ensure that the results are comparable. Similar to non-pilot schools, 30 pupils from each sampled school were surveyed. Pupils were selected randomly. As a result, 300 students from pilot schools took part in the survey.

Table 3 presents the breakdown of the sample. Similar to non-pilot schools, 64% of the sample in pilot schools were represented by girls, and 36% by boys. Almost like in non-pilot schools, 44% of the sample were 16-year old adolescents. Similar to non-pilot schools, 95% of the sampled pupils identified themselves as Muslim and 3% as Christian. The ethnic composition of the sample in pilot schools was slightly different than that of non-pilot schools: 80% were Kyrgyz, 9% Uzbek, 5% Uyghurs, 4% Russians, and 1% other ethnic groups.

Table 3. Breakdown of the sample by pupils' gender, age, religion, and ethnicity in pilot schools

	Category	N	%
Gender	Female	191	64%
	Male	109	36%
Age	14 years old	7	2%
	15 years old	74	25%
	16 years old	133	44%
	17 years old	84	28%
	18 years old	2	1%
Religion	Muslim	284	95%
	Christian	8	3%
	No religion	2	1%
	Do not know	3	1%
	Prefer not to answer	3	1%
Ethnicity	Kyrgyz	241	80%
	Russian	12	4%
	Uyghur	14	5%
	Uzbek	28	9%
	Other	3	1%
	Prefer not to answer	2	1%

Key informant interviews

Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with nine teachers who have taught the new class History of Religious Culture in pilot schools that were selected for the study. KIIs were conducted based on semi-structured interview guidelines. Interview questions were developed beforehand to explore their experience of teaching the new class. However, interviewers had the flexibility to ask probing questions. Each interview lasted between 45 – 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded where permission was given by research participants. Notes were taken at all interviews.

Data analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using a thematic approach. The recordings of KIIs were transcribed verbatim and analysed. Codes were developed based on the interview guidelines. Open codes were added if needed. Quantitative data were analysed in STATA. Composite scores were calculated for each dimension of the YRAVE scale by adding the values for each item. Three negatively worded items on violence-related beliefs were reverse coded to ensure consistency across the dimensions. High scores indicate attitudes supportive of the statements. If there was missing data for at least one of the items, all the remaining responses of that survey participant for that particular dimension were excluded from the calculation of the composite score. Descriptive statistics were generated as a first step. To compare the pilot and non-pilot schools and identify if the difference was significant, an independent-samples t-test was used. The significance (p-value) was assessed at 0.05 level.

Results

Experiences of teachers

Based on the State Policy's action plan on religious matters for 2017 – 2020 (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2017b), discussed above, the MoES has been piloting the new subject History of Religious Culture in several public schools in various regions of the country. The interviewed teachers stated that the main objective of this subject was to provide information about different religions in a secular setting and for pupils to learn and engage in the discussion of various religions in order to develop tolerance and understanding (KIIs with teachers in Osh and Chui regions, October 2019). Fieldwork showed that pilot schools used a new textbook developed specifically for the class History of Religious Culture. The book examines different religions in the

past and present and provides an overview of their key principles. Specific attention is given to the world religions that are currently practised, namely Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. The book also touches upon the issues of extremism and terrorism. At the time of fieldwork (2019), the class History of Religious Culture was only taught to students in Grade 9 and only for one year. It was taught once a week as a part of the school curriculum.

Mostly, teachers of History were involved in teaching this subject. All teachers engaged in teaching History of Religious Culture in pilot schools were trained for three days by the authors of the textbook for each subject. The training not only included textbook content on various religions but also the methodology of teaching the subject to ensure engaged and interested students. A follow-up seminar in the middle of the academic year allowed for exchange of experience and reflections. Interviewed teachers also reported that the team of authors provided them with ongoing support via social media platforms such as WhatsApp. While the MoES did not monitor and evaluate this subject at the time of the fieldwork (2019), it distributed questionnaires to schools and regional education departments.

The interviewed teachers showed a clear understanding of the objective of the History of Religious Culture class that they taught. They repeatedly stated that the subject aimed to increase the literacy and understanding of pupils in various religions. A teacher from Ozgon district put it in this way: "We mainly taught three major religions, and we told students that it's not our goal to propagate one religion over the other and that every religion has good sides and bad sides. Once they read the book, they understood it for themselves" (KII with a teacher from Ozgon district, October 2019).

The interviewed teachers also reported that the training that they had received prior to teaching the subject and the process of teaching itself had expanded their own knowledge and understanding of religions. As a teacher from Kara-Suu district noted, they had lacked religious understanding due to the Soviet atheistic ideology, but the course allowed them to learn about different religions which they had never heard of (KII with a teacher from Kara-Suu district, October 2019).

Teachers also appreciated the support that they received from the authors of the *History of Religious Culture* textbook, particularly interaction through social media platforms such as WhatsApp which enabled teachers to ask questions and receive clarifications and guidance (e.g., KII with a teacher from Ozgon district, October 2019). Teachers also shared that the authors provided references to additional books and resources. Most of the interviewed teachers reported using internet sources for additional information but were concerned about the safety and credibility of various websites, which they feared might harm the children.

The interviewed teachers reported that the class History of Religious Culture was generally well-received by pupils and their parents. For example, a teacher from Ozgon

district noted that her/his students used to think that only Muslims lived in the Kyrgyz Republic, but that the subject opened their eyes to other religions in the country and the world (KII with a teacher from Ozgon district, October 2019). Another teacher from Talas shared that her pupils were very interested in Christianity and asked many questions about it, particularly Baptism (KII with a teacher from Talas region, October 2019).

A teacher from Chui region related that her/his students analysed the situation of those who had left for Syria and how their actions would be considered as terrorism (KII with a teacher from Chui region, October 2019). Pupils of this teacher came to realise that they did not understand extremist organisations like Hizbut-Tahrir, about which they had previously received different information (KII with a teacher from the Chui region, October 2019). A few teachers reported that they had discovered that children were more knowledgeable about Islam than them, since the children regularly visited mosques. This prompted the teachers to learn more about Islam to better engage in discussion with the children:

Students were really enthusiastic and excited about the classes. They were very active in discussions. Today children know about their religion more than adults, like us, because they learn and practice their religion. The fact that children have better knowledge about their religion became a challenge for me as a teacher. During the classes, students gave information about Islam, for example, based on the Quran and Hadith. As a result, I made a decision that I needed to explore more information for the course from additional sources such as the Quran and Hadith (KII with a teacher from Jalal-Abad city, October 2019).

The interviewed teachers shared that they had encountered a number of challenges while teaching the class History of Religious Culture. The challenges varied from practical to technical. Most teachers noted that it was overwhelming to teach an additional subject to Grade 9 pupils, who are expected to graduate and complete secondary school, and thus must prepare for year-end exams. For this reason they repeatedly noted that teaching the course in Grade 8 would be better (e.g., KIIs with teachers from Ozgon district and Talas region, October 2019). Teachers also reported that the book's language was overly complicated and should be simplified and more user-friendly for students.

The interviewed teachers stated that they needed more training and support resources. This is particularly important in certain districts such as Kara-Suu and Ozgon where parents/caregivers and other community members were initially less supportive of a non-religious person teaching a class on religion (KIIs with teachers from Kara-Suu and Ozgon district, October 2019). Some pupils were also more knowledgeable of

their religion, namely Islam (KIIs with teachers from Kara-Suu district and Osh city, October 2019), than teachers. Thus, teachers emphasized increasing their knowledge as a crucial need.

Teachers also noted that generally improving their capacity through use of new technologies, online resources, and various software such as PowerPoint would be beneficial for teaching this subject. Finally, a few teachers noted that increasing what they considered low compensation for teaching the course would boost their motivation (e.g., KII with a teacher from Kara-Suu district, October 2019).

The resilience of pupils towards radicalisation and violent extremism

As noted in the methodology section, the composite scores and individual items of pilot and non-pilot schools were compared using the independent-samples t-test. The significance (p-value) was assessed at 0.05 level.

Table 4 presents the scores of the pilot and non-pilot schools along with p-values. No statistically significant difference was found in the overall YRAVE scores of the pilot and non-pilot schools. Only two dimensions of the YRAVE scale showed statistically significant differences. First, the score of the pilot schools for Violence Related Beliefs is significantly ($p = 0.0001$) higher than that of the non-pilot schools. In other words, pupils in pilot schools held beliefs less supportive of violence.

Table 4. Composite scores of pilot and non-pilot schools for each dimension of YRAVE and an overall scale score

Dimension	Non-pilot schools	Pilot schools	p-value
Cultural identity	11.61	11.44	0.2289
Bridging capital	9.25	9.25	0.9812
Linking capital	9.78	9.39	0.0204
Violence Related Behaviour	7.07	7.15	0.5231
Violence Related Beliefs	11.09	11.72	0.0001
Scale total	48.78	49.01	0.5741

Means of all items within the dimension of Violence Related Beliefs were also significantly higher for pilot schools rather than non-pilot schools (Table 5).

Table 5: Means of items within Violence Related Beliefs

Item	Reverse-coded wording	Non-pilot schools	Pilot schools	p-value
My community accepts that young people may use violence to solve problems	My community does not accept that young people may use violence to solve problems.	3.60	3.82	0.0035
Being violent helps show how strong I am.	Being violent does not help show how strong I am.	3.83	3.98	0.0382
Being violent helps me earn the respect of others.	Being violent does not help me earn the respect of others.	3.65	3.93	0.0006

The second dimension that had a significant difference in the scores of pilot and non-pilot schools is Linking Capital. Pupils in pilot schools (9.39) trust and feel confident about government institutions less than pupils in non-pilot schools (9.78) ($p = 0.0204$). In particular, the mean of the item “I feel that my voice is heard when dealing with government and authorities” was significantly lower ($p = 0.0049$) for pilot schools (2.66) than for non-pilots schools (2.89). This shows that pupils in the pilot school feel less that their voice is heard when they deal with the government and authorities.

Discussion

The above findings present an interesting picture. Interviewed teachers who taught the new class History of Religious Culture generally had a positive experience, demonstrating their understanding of the subject and engagement in its delivery. Their accounts also shed light on the implementation of the government’s Policy on Religious Matters for 2015–2020 (approved by the Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic on the 14th of November 2014 No. 203) (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2014) in particular development of a new textbook, teacher training, and piloting of a new class in schools. The authors of the textbook also showed their commitment to supporting teachers.

Teacher responses also revealed that older generations, especially in such secular

settings as schools, may have limited engagement in religious learning and practices on a day-to-day basis. The accounts of several teachers clearly indicated that some pupils might be more knowledgeable about their religion (primarily Islam) due to visits to the mosque and practices at home. This is in line with the findings from a recent study on Islamic identity among young people in Kyrgyzstan, which also reported that young people were more knowledgeable about, and engaged in, the practice of Islam than the older generation (Kamp 2018).

This opens up an interesting and under-researched area for future study, examining religion in the everyday life of adolescents in the Kyrgyz Republic. This research would be particularly helpful to understand adolescents' awareness about different religions (i.e., religious literacy) as the interviewed teachers in this study reported that some students were unaware of the existence of other religions in the country before attending the class.

The challenges related by teachers generally echoed the shortcomings in the Kyrgyz education system (Shamatov 2013), including the capacity to use new technologies and online sources as well as limited support for teaching resources and lower salaries. Specifically, in relation to the new class History of Religious Culture, teachers reported needing more training in the subject of religion.

The survey results revealed a significant difference in the scores of pilot and non-pilot schools regarding Violence Related Beliefs. Pupils in pilot schools were less supportive of violence. In other words, these outcomes suggest that the new subject may have, to some extent, positively affected children as their beliefs have become less supportive of violence. However, it is difficult to firmly state that these differences can be solely attributed to the new class History of Religious Culture.

The dimension of Linking Capital also revealed significant differences between the two settings. The lower scores in pilot schools suggested that pupils there had less trust in government institutions than those in non-pilot schools. While the research offers no clear explanation for this result, the critical discussions of religion may have also made pupils in pilot schools more critical of the government.

This study's quantitative findings represent a positive step forward in a modest literature (Aly, Taylor, and Karnovsky 2014) demonstrating positive results from an educational approach to preventing radicalisation and violent extremism. The qualitative data more strongly supports this conclusion, although teachers interested in providing a favourable view may have been more willing to participate.

As part of a broader literature on government response to radicalisation and violent extremism in Central Asia, this study shows how the Kyrgyz government has stepped out of its previous control-based approach (Omelicheva 2010; Olcott 2014, 2016) to promote resilience building through education. The government's previous measures on radicalisation predominantly focused on controlling faith-based matters by banning

certain religious organisations and materials and introducing tough administrative measures (e.g., for registering the organisation). The development and roll-out of the new History of Religious Cultures course clearly shows that the government is adopting a preventive approach to radicalisation and violent extremism.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the Kyrgyz government's recent initiative to pilot a new class on the history of religious culture. Based on the qualitative data from key informant interviews with teachers who taught the course, the article reported positive class experiences from teachers and pupils. The positive accounts showed that both teachers and students may have expanded their knowledge and understanding of various religions.

The article's quantitative analysis examined whether pupils in schools where the subject was piloted had scored higher on resilience towards radicalisation and violent extremism. The analysis revealed statistically significant differences only for Violence Related Beliefs, suggesting that pupils in pilot schools were less supportive of violence. Pupils in pilot schools also showed lower trust in government institutions. These findings were tentatively linked to the new class on the history of religious culture, even though the establishment of direct causation is a challenge. The broader implications of the study are that an education-based approach may effectively build resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. This success, however, threatens to make education an important element in the political and security agenda.

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Author contributions

TJ designed the methodology and analysed the data. GA reviewed the literature. KJ interpreted the data and wrote the manuscript. KL coordinated data collection. NC, AS, GK, and MB contributed to data collection.

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