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COVID-19 and economic recession in Central Asia: why should we pay more attention to socio-economic factors in the pathways to radicalization?

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Coronavirus-related crises have a negative impact on most states. In fact, we can observe at least two other concurrent crises originating from the Covid-19 crisis. Currently, we are in the early stage of an economic crisis whose extent is still unknown. To crown the economic and sanitary crises, we are also assisting to an “infodemic” - that is, the circulation of an excessive amount of information, sometimes not carefully examined, which makes it difficult to orient oneself on a certain subject due to the difficulty to identify reliable sources.²

Central Asia, a transit place par excellence and geopolitically sensitive, is no stranger to these facts and not immune to the crises that cross the globe.

The abovementioned crises highlight and worsen already problematic situations, even in states that until recently were considered among the most prepared to deal with them. For instance, the protests that cross the United States triggered by the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in the State of Minnesota is a clear sign that the prolonged lockdowns, the consequent economic contractions, the resulting layoffs, delays and difficulties of governments to manage multiple crises simultaneously only worsen political and social cleavages that existed in pre-pandemic times.

One of the sensitive and painful points in Central Asia was and remains Islamist extremism, finding fertile ground in a society regularly facing crises. The questionable management of the effects of the pandemic by Central Asian governments, the impoverishment and ethnic discrimination of a part of the population combined with the lack of alternatives risk to offer a favourable field for Islamists who want to propose their models as socio-political alternatives to the current regimes.

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² Treccani definition, for further details see:

http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/infodemia_%28Neologismi%29/

Lockdown, layoffs, misery and violence

Violence is a recurring element of 2020. It manifests itself in violence within the family and then reappears in street and politicised violence. Overall, due to the prolonged lockdowns and pre-pandemic frictions among family members, the number of family violence cases has increased considerably.

In an article published in April 2020 in Geopolitical Futures, George Friedman points out that the seismograph of the generalized malaise that dominates this year and an indicator of the beginning of social dysfunction is the global increase in cases of family violence.³

Likewise, it is clear that frictions between opposing parties, ideas and factions, both intra- and extra-parliamentary, is exacerbated by current crises and in some cases translates into protests, political demands and finally to street violence (e.g Black Lives Matter protests).

In the March 2020 editorial of the Italian geopolitical magazine Limes, which was dedicated entirely to the Covid-19 and its geopolitical implications, it is pointed out that epidemics change individual and collective customs. The tension accumulated in these months of lockdowns and shortages translated for many people into a lack of means and even worse into a lack of prospects for the future. These elements transform social dysfunctions developed in pre-Covid-19 times into real pressure cookers. It is also highlighted that "*the scapegoat, often hypostatized in communities or alien faiths is the illegitimate child of global change brought by the pandemic.*"⁴ And, in conclusion, that, "*either out of temptation or necessity, during this epidemic, the screws of authority tightened even in the most homologated liberal democracies.*"⁵

There is therefore a risk that the social contract understood in the Hobbesian sense can potentially fail. A state that fails to guarantee the sanitary and economic security of its citizens risks violating this pact, thus making political power and the monopoly of violence potentially illegitimate and legitimizing the right of resistance and rebellion.

The example of Kyrgyzstan

We could use the case of Kyrgyzstan to go into the details of the expected economic impact of the health crisis and its subsequent and undesired effects on pathways to radicalization.

Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked country that is amongst low middle-income countries and one of the poorest in Central Asia. Its economy is heavily dependent on gold exports (which account for one-tenth of the country's GDP), as well as remittances from citizens working abroad, primarily in

³ Friedman G., 2020, "The Beginning of Social Dysfunction", Geopolitical Futures [Online] Available at: <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/the-beginning-of-social-dysfunction/>

⁴ "L'ora piu chiara", 2020, Limes – Rivista italiana di geopolitica [Online] Available at: <https://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/lora-piu-chiara?prv=true>

⁵ Ibid.

Russia (equating to more than a quarter of its GDP).⁶ These have decreased in recent years due to the deterioration of the Russian economy.

The health crisis that Russia is going through added to the oil-price war Russia is concluding with Saudi Arabia generates a negative impact on the Russian economy and indirectly also on the Kyrgyz economy.

There has been no such dramatic fall in crude oil prices since 2009.⁷ In March 2020, the most valuable oil – the Brent, has reached a 30% price-loss, reaching a minimum of 31 dollars per barrel. In July 2020, Brent oil is priced between 42 and 43 dollars a barrel.⁸ The consensus of economists is increasingly clustering around the idea that a "V-shaped" economic recovery is unlikely in the current conditions.⁹ The immobility of the global economy that we are assisting to reduces global oil consumption and therefore the demand is not expected to grow in the coming months. This has again a significant impact on the Russian economy, which is still anchored to crude oil exports. So, to date, it is difficult to imagine a growth or an upkeep in remittances from Russia to Kyrgyzstan which implies subsequent harmful effects on the Kyrgyz economy.

If current trends related to the crude oil price has a direct negative impact on the Russian economy and thus a negative domino effect on the remittances to Kyrgyzstan, there are more comforting news with respect to gold. Gold, as mentioned before, is another source of wealth for this country. According to a market update published by the Gold World Council, there are three important things to consider with respect to gold:

- gold has performed well despite Covid-19 hitting markets;
- higher allocations to gold have improved the performance of a typical Central bank total reserve portfolio during this crisis period; and
- gold is fulfilling its role as an indispensable Central bank reserve asset.

Therefore, it is important to highlight that gold is reconfirmed as a safe ground in times of crisis and that this sector could be a foothold for the Kyrgyz economy as gold has generated globally strong returns this year.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the gold's sector is heavily dependent on Foreign Direct Investments (FDI). According to UNCTAD's World Investment 2020, FDI flows to Kyrgyzstan amounted to USD 209 million in 2019, a significant increase from USD 139 million in 2018. FDI stock reached USD 5,6 billion in 2019. Most FDI flows have gone to mining-related activities. The main investors in

⁶ Data based on the investment and country risk analysis of Société Générale [Online] For further details see: <https://import-export.societegenerale.fr/en/country/kyrgyzstan/economy-country-risk>

⁷ See Rivolta D., 2020, "La guerra del petrolio di Russia e Arabia Saudita tiene basso il costo del barile", Notizie Geopolitiche [Online] Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yb5mvzsd>.

⁸ Data based on the Italian Stock Exchange (Borsa Italiana). For the interactive dashboard see: https://mercati.ilsole24ore.com/materie-prime/commodities/petrolio/BRNST.IPE?refresh_ce

⁹ See Phred Dvorak, 2020, "Differences Between New Coronavirus and SARS Show Why Quick Economic Recovery Is Unlikely", The Wall Street Journal, [Online] Available at : <https://www.wsj.com/articles/differences-between-new-coronavirus-and-sars-show-why-quick-economic-recovery-is-unlikely-11591959607>

¹⁰ Information based on the World Gold Council market update of May 18, 2020. For further details see: <https://www.gold.org/goldhub/research/market-update/gold-and-central-bank-reserve-management-during-Covid-19-pandemic>

Kyrgyzstan are Canada, China, the United Kingdom, Russia and Kazakhstan.¹¹ These are all states that are currently struggling with the effects of the pandemic on their economies. Therefore, the uncertainties related to FDI trends in 2020 are unlikely to disappear this year.

Yet, despite this few comforting news, Kyrgyzstan has to face issues related to the distribution of wealth in times of pandemic, the coordination of and impact of the measures taken by the government and the widening income gap within the Kyrgyz society.

The poverty rate in Kyrgyzstan is 19.6%. Meaning that such proportion of population is living under USD 3.20 per day. Unemployment was estimated at 6.6% in 2019, a rate that is expected to remain stable in 2020-21, despite the negative economic impact of the COVID-19. Income inequality in the country has been declining since 2006. The Gini index was 27.7 in 2018.¹² A significant leap forward compared to 2006 (37.4). However, it remains at problematic levels.¹³¹⁴

According to the audit and professional services firm KPMG, in response to the health crisis, the Kyrgyz government has taken the following measures for the poorest sections of society:

- about 490 thousand citizens from socially vulnerable groups will receive social payments from the Government;
- the government allocated 4459,5 tons of flour;
- 200 million som (ca. 2 669 945 USD) allocated for the purchase of food for families from socially vulnerable groups.¹⁵

The question that arises is whether these measures will be sufficient for a country with a poverty rate of 19.6%. In addition, it would be interesting to study what has been done in terms of strategic communication by the government of the measures taken for the weakest segments.

The issue of strategic crisis communication by governments, including the G8 ones, is another sore point in a context of infodemic where truth competes with widespread lies creating confusion even for Internet users who have a high level of "e-literacy".¹⁶

¹¹ Data based on the investment and country risk analysis of Société Générale [Online] For further details see: <https://import-export.societegenerale.fr/en/country/kyrgyzstan/economy-country-risk>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ A Gini coefficient of zero expresses perfect equality, where all values are the same (for example, where everyone has the same income). A Gini coefficient of one (or 100%) expresses maximal inequality among values (e.g., for a large number of people, where only one person has all the income or consumption, and all others have none, the Gini coefficient will be very nearly one).

¹⁴ To ease comparison for example the Gini coefficient of Germany was 31.1 in 2016. See the World Bank data at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=DE>

¹⁵ Data based on the KPMG assessment of Government and institution measures in response to COVID-19 in Kyrgyzstan, Last update on April 27, 2020 [Online] Available at:

<https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2020/04/kyrgyzstan-government-and-institution-measures-in-response-to-covid.html>

¹⁶ See Carone M., Damanti G., 2020, "L'informazione "virale" non passa il test della crisi" (p.331) - Limes Rivista italiana di geopolitica, [Online] Available at: <https://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/linformazione-virale-non-passa-il-test-della-crisi>

Poverty, emigration and radicalization abroad

The economic situation in Kyrgyzstan, the percentage of the population living below the poverty line and the subsequent high rate of emigration to Russia increases the risks of radicalization. Nevertheless, there is no agreement on to what extent these socio-economic factors impact pathways to radicalization.

In a research paper published in December 2018 by Edward Lemon in collaboration with Vera Mironova and William Tobey it is given a complete and interesting picture on who are jihadists from ex-soviet Central Asia and why do they radicalize.

The paper is based on many interviews with jihadists or former jihadists from Central Asia and in one paragraph highlights the following: *While the causes of radicalization vary widely, field research by two of the authors, as well as other scholars, suggests that two significant factors are (a) real and/or perceived injustices or failures that lead to an extreme rejection of society and (b) affinity for “a culture of violence.” These factors can overlap with a search for adventure and/or a sense of belonging and meaning. Contrary to popular belief, **relative poverty**, religiosity and **lack of education do not seem to be strong predictors of radicalization.***¹⁷

On the contrary, the researcher Alte Mesoy points out that *“the consensus in past research into terrorism and radicalization into violent extremism (RVE) is that generally there is no link between poverty and radicalization, and if such a link exists, it is a weak one. However, insufficient attention has been paid to how terrorism has changed over the last few years to become a phenomenon that frequently occurs in weak, conflict-ridden states. In these states, **poverty seems to play an essential role in radicalization**”.*¹⁸

Most researchers seem to converge on the fact that political instability and a culture of violence is a favourable breeding ground for radicalization. Ethnic clashes between the Uzbek minority and the Kyrgyz population in 1990 and 2010 as well as the revolutions of 2005 and 2010 show that Kyrgyzstan has a background of conflict and violence.

It seems, however, that less attention is paid to North-South cleavage and the impact this may have on access to economic resources in Kyrgyzstan. Such distortions in the Kirghiz politics might have an indirect correlation with the role that socio-economic factors play as radicalization triggers.

The North-South divide exacerbates inequalities in terms of resources allocation. This regional divide matters, as the identities of the North and the South are distinct. Parties and business groupings tend to have their strongholds in one part of the country or the other. Once in power they have clear preferences in terms of allocation of economic resources and usually allocate significantly more to the regions they stem from. Since independence in 1991, governments led by

¹⁷ Lemon E., Mironova V., Tobey W., 2018, “Jihadists from Ex- Soviet Central Asia: Where Are They? Why Did They Radicalize? What Next?” U.S.-Russia Initiative to Prevent Nuclear Terrorism Project, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

¹⁸ Mesoy, A., 2013, “Poverty and radicalization into violent extremism: a causal link?” Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, (p.1) [Online] Available at: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/158431/e60a8a679f48427d592a1906daf569d4.pdf>

northern presidents have allocated more resources to the north and southern presidents to the south.¹⁹

In the pandemic context, an allocation of economic resources and state aid that is or can be perceived as unbalanced could increase the sense of social injustice - an important factor in the causes of radicalization. A strong political argument that can be used by opposition parties but also by Islamists.

Islamism is generally proposed by its promoters not as a mere religious alternative but rather a socio-political alternative against social injustice.²⁰ Therefore, once again it is interesting to devote more attention and study to socio-economic factors and access to resources as a cause of RVE. The widespread perception of injustice is a powerful weapon in the hands of recruiters.

Inequalities, emigration and risks of radicalization

In Kyrgyzstan the most vulnerable group to radicalization are young men.

A study published in 2019 explored what makes young people in Kyrgyzstan more vulnerable or more resilient to radicalization.²¹ The study identifies five main sensitive domains that present links to the radicalization of young individuals in Kyrgyzstan:

- grievances ;
- politics ;
- religion ;
- socialization ;
- psychology ; and
- socio-economic reasons

Again, when analysing grievances and perception of social justice among young people in Kyrgyzstan it focuses mainly on the experience of discrimination which correlate with vulnerability to radicalization.

This partially explains a particularly high success rate in recruiting young Uzbeks from the Ferghana valley. However, again, researchers develop significantly less on the socio-economic domain “*because the analysis of survey results did not produce significant correlations between family income and vulnerability/resilience to radicalization.*” Using family income as sole

¹⁹ Matveeva A., 2010, “Kyrgyzstan in Crisis: Permanent Revolution and the Curse of Nationalism”, Development as State – making, Working Paper n. 79, Crisis States Research Centre, [Online] Available at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csdc-working-papers-phase-two/wp79.2-kyrgyzstan-in-crisis.pdf>

²⁰ Poujol C, 2005, “Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia : Democracy versus Justice”, in *Towards Social Stability and Democratic Governance in Central Eurasia, Challenges to Regional Security*, edited by Irina Morozova, IOS Press, pp. 50-63.

²¹ Nasritdinov E., Urmanbetova Z., Murzakhililov K., Myrzabaev M., 2019, “Vulnerability and Resilience of Young People in Kyrgyzstan to Radicalization, Violence and Extremism Analysis across Five Domains”, Research Institute for Islamic Studies, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, CAP paper, no. 213.

potential driver of radicalization in this context limits the scope of the research and shows again the blind spot that RVE-research has in this domain. The authors acknowledge that perspectives on the role of socio-economic conditions vary but provide little more than a quick review of the literature on the subject.

As mentioned above, the contrast between the points of view on the correlation income – radicalization is evident.

Lee suggest that a significant number of radicalized young people come from middle-class families and have high levels of education.²² On the contrary, McCauley and Moskalenko argue that poverty, marginalization, and exclusion can lead to radicalization.²³

Put aside the diatribe related to the causes and focusing rather on the effects, it is well-known that the outcome of poverty, marginalization, and exclusion is usually emigration.

Emigration plays an important role in the radicalization of young Central Asian men. Noah Tucker reports that some 80 to 90% of ISIS fighters from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are radicalized and recruited while in Russia as migrant workers.²⁴ Hence, this is a risk that a minority of the Central Asian migrant workers are exposed while seeking an improved standard of living, because the conditions or job opportunities in one's own region are insufficient.²⁵

The main argument of McCauley and Moskalenko “*is that radicalized individuals are not abnormal. They are normal people who lead normal lives who have strong beliefs and passions and at a certain point in their lives (possibly in response to a trigger event) begin to act on those strong beliefs in response to any number of internal and external influences*”.²⁶

Much research is dedicated to the direct triggers or events. Nevertheless, there is significantly less literature analysing the background of events and indirect socio-economic factors such as disparities or lack of opportunities in having access to:

- employment;
- education;
- health services;
- welfare benefits.

Conclusion

²² Lee A., 2011, “Who becomes a terrorist? Poverty, Education, and the Origins of Political Violence” World Politics, Vol. 63, No. 2, 2011, (pp. 203-245).

²³ McCauley C., Moskalenko S., 2011, “Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us”, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁴ See Hille K., 2015, “Russia and Radicalization: Homegrown problem” Financial Times.

²⁵ Migrant worker or economic migrant refers to a person who leaves its country of origin purely for economic reasons that are not in any way related to the refugee definition, in order to seek material improvements in their livelihood (e.g. improved standard of living, because the conditions or job opportunities in one's own region are insufficient.)

²⁶ McCauley C., Moskalenko S., 2011, *op.cit.*

There is abundance of literature and research focusing mainly on security and counterterrorism with regards to Central Asia – a striking imbalance with regards to research related the psychological, social and economic factors leading to radicalization.

As Kangas points out, *“for over twenty years, the Central Asian states have faced periodic challenges of violent extremist groups and radical ideologies” and that “to an extent, the national narratives are similar, in that extremism is deemed an existential threat that needs to be managed with the harshest measures.”*²⁷

Such developments led to a mainly securitarian approach in RVE-related literature. Hence, given the extent and impact of a relatively symmetric worldwide economic crisis it is important to understand the indirect role of socio-economic factors in the paths of radicalization into violent extremism. A change of course is necessary.

Understanding that such factors have an impact on RVE but neglecting them in this research domain leads to inexcusable blind spots in combating extremism through both policies and strategic communication and counter-messaging.

There is no doubt that terrorist organisations around the globe are seeing an opportunity in the Covid-19-related crises to further their agenda and sharpen their arguments, communication and recruitment skills and techniques.

The coronavirus crisis exacerbates current political, ethnic and economic cleavages within societies. Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan make no exception. Social injustice stemming from economic inequalities is a powerful tool in the hands of recruiters. Discrimination, social-exclusion and grievances experienced while working abroad increases the radicalization risks Central Asian workers are subject. The communication of and reaction to this unprecedented economic crisis will be the yardstick by which policymakers navigating it will be judged. Understanding the causes of radicalization related to poverty in a context of an evident and growing scarcity of resources is hence a priority academia cannot neglect anymore.

²⁷ Kangas R., 2018, “Redefining Extremism in Central Asia”, Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security, Institut für Strategie- Politik- Sicherheits- und Wirtschaftsberatung, Issue n. 541 April 2018 (p.2).

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