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Reconstructing an Islamic Identity in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

**Understanding the interplay between state-created national identity and
Islamization among Kyrgyz students in Bishkek**

Keywords: Islamization in Central Asia, Identity politics, Instrumentalization of Islam, Islamic discourses

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1. Introduction

The Kyrgyz Republic declared independence from the Soviet Union on August 31, 1991. Starting from the period of Gorbachev's reforms in 1980, the Kyrgyz society experienced more freedom in the cultural and political sphere (Borbieva, 2007:13). According to the ethnographer Mathijs Pelkmans, the Kyrgyz people defined the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union with the term *bardak*, which means chaos. This term encompasses the frustration of economic hardship and the difficult standards of living, but also the disillusionment with the secular Soviet ideology caused by the arrival of new ideas about religion (Pelkmans, 2009). New notions of Islam were introduced in Kyrgyzstan in the period after independence, which challenged the popular understanding of Islam that existed in Kyrgyzstan for ages. In this process, the state acted as a neutral observer that mainly monitored the emergence of new religious influences (Seifert & Usabaliev, 2011: 160). However, this policy changed when the situation in Afghanistan became more unstable and when organizations like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) became more active in Kyrgyzstan in the late 90's. In this second stage, the state invested in a policy that was more restrictive towards foreign religious organizations. By monitoring religious groups and carrying out arrests of suspected members of potential extremist movements, the state tried to prevent Kyrgyzstani citizens from radicalizing. However, the results of this policy proved to be counterproductive (Khadimov, 2017: 12). In order not to alienate the population that became increasingly Islamic, the government therefore decided from 2006 onwards to invest in a new policy and incorporate Islam as a core element in their national narrative. In this third stage 'the state began to see Islam as an instrument it could use to strengthen its power, and the Muslim community as embodying a potentially powerful mechanism that it could use to mobilize the population to solve specific political problems' (Seifert & Usabaliev, 2011: 161).

By looking at the role of Islam in contemporary Kyrgyz society, it can be concluded that there are many political and religious forces that are trying to claim their place in the religious sphere. In this complex situation, the strategy of the Kyrgyz state is to instrumentalize the notion of Islam to promote its own status and to legitimize their control of the religious sphere. In its promotion of Islam, the state is building on the historical notions of Islam. According to scholars, an important characteristic of Kyrgyz Islam is that pre-Islamic influences have had an effect on the way that Kyrgyz practice Islam. Louw writes that 'the Kyrgyz have long had the reputation of not being very religious – of not being 'real' Muslims, and of practicing a form of Islam which is mixed with pagan, pre-Islamic, animistic or shamanistic elements (...) (Louw, 2013: 517). This falls in line with many Muslim communities in Central Asia, who have also used pre-Islamic religious practices to create narratives that could explain their origin and the history of their communities. In the navigation of their Islamic identity, the practicing of religious rituals

based on textual sources, like the Qu'ran, was less important. Instead, many Central Asians based their Islamic identity on a set of Islamic practices mixed with a set of local norms and values (Khalid, 2007: 21-22). Ultimately, the branch of Islam that became the most popular in Kyrgyzstan and the rest of Central Asia, was the Hanafi *madhab*. Being one of the four schools (*madhhabs*) in Sunni Islam, the Hanafi school is known for its rationalistic approach of Islam and its tolerance to pre-Islamic traditions and therefore 'helped to escape tensions between the new and old systems of beliefs' (Naumkin, 2005: 7). In this way, the local norms and values of the Kyrgyz tribes were incorporated in the Islamic tradition and thus became an inseparable element of a localized form of Islam in Kyrgyzstan (Ashymov, 2003: 136).

McBrien and Pelkmans write that the new Kyrgyz constitution and government policies after the collapse of the Soviet Union provided religious freedom and opportunities for the influx of missionaries to Kyrgyzstan (McBrien & Pelkmans, 2009: 88). Christian groups have been actively involved in missionary work and proselytizing people to Christianity, while Islamic organizations from Muslim states like Saudi-Arabia, the Gulf States and Turkey have supported the Muftiate of Kyrgyzstan in the training of Islamic clergy and the building of Islamic schools and mosques. Furthermore, by providing funding for Islamic literature and scholarships for promising Kyrgyz students, these states have contributed to the rise of Islamic presence in society. Heyat mentions that number of mosques rose from 39 mosques in 1991 to 2001 (2004: 276). The role of Islam became more important in the period after independence with the rise of Islamic literature in the public sphere and the emergence of Islamic religious lessons in school and Islamic programs on radio and television (Heyat, 2004).

The aim of this thesis is to research how the government is perceiving the increasing Islamization as a threat to the 'traditional' form of Islam that is present in Kyrgyzstan, and how it is using the notion of religion to create a national identity that could 'restore the order' of the 'nation-state' (Biard, 2017: 111). As literature shows, much has already been written about the relationship between Islam and the state in Central Asia by academics, policy makers and journalists. A majority of this content is, however, focused on the topic of extremism, radicalization and Islamic terrorism. Although it is important to research radicalization processes and anti-terrorism policies, many articles that are focused on extremism are often oversimplifying the role of religious revivalism and role of Islam in society. According to Montgomery, policy papers that cover Islam in Central Asia are mostly interested in the few radicalized Muslims than in the story of the rest of Muslim population. In this way, the opinion of the majority of the population is often underrepresented (Montgomery, 2014). As scholars argue, the topic of Islam in Central Asia is much more complex than some articles portray it to

be, which also underlines the necessity to perform ethnographic research to demonstrate the opinion of the population (Artman, 2016b; Montgomery, 2016).

In an attempt to understand the impact of both political and religious forces on the Kyrgyz population, the aim of this thesis is to analyze how the state is promoting Islam and their religious policies and if the perceptions of the population align with the arguments that are mentioned in state discourse. The central research question of this thesis is therefore: *do the perceptions of students align with arguments in state discourse regarding the role of Islam in contemporary Kyrgyzstan?* In order to answer this question, this thesis will look at state policy from a top-down perspective and from a bottom-up perspective. By using this two-pronged approach, this thesis will combine desk-analysis of state discourse with field research in Bishkek. The first approach is to look at the way that the Kyrgyz state has emphasized traditional aspects of Islam and the historical connection with Kyrgyz ethno-national identity in state discourse. By looking at both state policy, which is the *Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Religious Sphere for 2014-2020*, and state narrative, which are public remarks by government representatives, this research will look at four major themes in state discourse that promote government policies in the religious sphere. The second approach is to analyze if the perceptions of Kyrgyz students align with the view that is promoted in state discourse. By interviewing twenty-four students that are studying at three significantly different universities in Bishkek, this research attempts to provide an insight on how students in Bishkek are currently constructing their Islamic identity and how they are perceiving the role of the state in the religious sphere. Due to the limited time of this research, only twenty-four students could be interviewed in this research. However, looking at the goal of this research, a small sample size provides more opportunity to focus on the personal experience of students and offer them more freedom to share their opinions.

Since there was not one framework that could be applied to compare both the analysis of state discourse as the results of the interview, research draws on a variety of different frameworks. In this way, research for this thesis can be defined as exploratory research. By applying the theoretical concepts of the legitimization of religion by governments (Peyrouse, 2007; Biard, 2017; Omelicheva, 2017), believing and belonging (McBrien, 2017) and balanced existence (Louw, 2013), this research aims to both analyze state discourse and remarks of students and explain if students are perceiving the role of Islam and the role of the government in a similar way as the government does. Ultimately, by analyzing both the top-down perspective and bottom-up perspective, this thesis will demonstrate that there two major angles visible in the students' view on Islam. The first angle shows that the majority of students are voicing similar arguments as state discourse and thus perceive the government also as the responsible actor to safeguard Kyrgyz traditions and the security of the country. However, as the second angle

will point out, students are increasingly being influenced by new interpretations of Islam which also leads them to reconstruct their Islamic identity in a different way than government discourse promotes. This shows that, although the perceptions of students for the most part align with state discourse, external discourse are able to influence the perceptions of students and change their view on the connection between Kyrgyz identity and Islam.

It is important to note that there is a clear distinction between the word 'Kyrgyz' and 'Kyrgyzstani'. The first definition defines nationality while the latter defines citizenship. For example, a citizen of Kyrgyzstan who is ethnic Uzbek can be defined as a Kyrgyzstani but not a Kyrgyz. Since only ethnic Kyrgyz were interviewed in this research and ethno-national identity proves to be an important element in this research, this thesis will mostly speak of the Kyrgyz students. When writing about the government, scholars have both used 'Kyrgyz' and 'Kyrgyzstani'. This thesis will use the term Kyrgyz when referring to government and ethnic identity and Kyrgyzstani when talking about the whole population.

2. Islam in Kyrgyzstan: A Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, a growing number of scholars have become interested in the topic of identity politics and Islamization in Central Asia. In this process, academics and policy makers have looked at the political development of the individual Central Asian nation states and analyzed how Islam is used by the states to construct a national narrative. Similarly, the topic of Islamization in Central Asia has been the subject of many academic articles and policy papers. Since the research of this thesis will look at the role of Islam in Kyrgyzstan from a top-down and a bottom-up perspective, this chapter will provide an overview of the growing body of literature on identity politics and an overview of the body of literature on the evolving Islamic religious orthodoxy. In this way, the literature review will show the most important concepts and frameworks that are used to analyze the empirical research.

2.2 Government Policy

2.2.1 Identity Politics and the Creation of an Ethno-National Identity

The function of religion as an element of Kyrgyz national identity became important during the post-Soviet period when the Kyrgyz government began to promote religion as an essential part of the Kyrgyz ethnic identity (Radford, 2014: 24-25; Biard, 2017: 112). These religious policies draw on the 'the interrelated processes of ethnicization and folklorization of religion' during the Soviet period, that, according to Pelkmans, 'are crucial for understanding the twists and turns of religious change after the implosion of communist ideology' (2009:6). Soviet religious policies contributed to the merging of a religious and ethno-national identity, which eventually led to the fact that many post-Soviet citizens aligned their religion with their ethnic identity. In this sense, according to McBrien, religion was not a threat to the secular Soviet state since religion was transformed by Soviet policies to become an element of national belonging. In this way, McBrien writes that religion functioned in cooperation with the secular state, and that even 'this notion of religion was necessary for the power and being of the Soviet secular state' since it could be used to support Soviet measures (2017: 9).

According to some scholars, the contemporary Central Asian states created an 'official' form of Islam in their nationalist ideologies and used it as legitimization for their state control over religious affairs (Pelkmans, 2009, Biard, 2017; Omelicheva, 2017). In this process, 'Central Asian authorities recognize and emphasize some religious elements by elevating them to

markers of identity and state, but also subordinating them to the goals of the state' (Peyrouse, 2007: 102). In the case of Kyrgyzstan, Nasritdinov and Esenamanova argue, the Kyrgyz Constitution defines Kyrgyzstan as a secular country that is based on neutral views. However, they identify a government policy whereby the previous government is 'promoting a locally appropriate model of Islam that does not contradict local customs and traditions and is modern at the same time' (Nasritdinov & Esenamanova, 2017: 224). In this approach, the Kyrgyz state is using Islamic symbols to justify political measures, to mobilize the Islamic population and to create a moral framework that can be used to legitimize cultural and religious approaches (Artman, 2016: 253). According to Biard, the notion of religion is used by the state to 'sanctify the nation' and for the 'consolidation of the nation-state' (Biard, 2017: 112).

Due to the fact that the state uses Islam to legitimize their political measures, the state also perceives the influence of Islamist groups in Kyrgyzstan as a 'potential ideological rival and factor of destabilization' (Biard, 2010: 325). The Kyrgyz government is therefore distinguishing between a moderate form of Islam and a radicalized form of Islam in their state narrative. By promoting a moderate Islam as the national religion and condemning radical Islam as a negative, foreign influence, the state tries to differentiate between a 'good' and a 'bad' form of Islam (Abashin, 2012: 160). The state views 'good' versions of Islam as religion that supports the national values and traditions of the country and, while 'bad' versions of Islam try to undermine this and should therefore be banned (Louw, 2013: 515) Biard writes that 'in the case of Kyrgyzstan, 'good' Islam corresponds to a supposed Kyrgyzness and serves as a vehicle of the nation and its supposed uniqueness (...) (2017: 113). For the state, it is therefore important to make sure that a form of Islam is practiced in Kyrgyzstan that is compatible with the laws of the secular state. According to McBrien, 'Since independence, the Kyrgyz government has attempted to control definitions of Muslimness to ensure that 'tolerant', 'democratic', and 'moderate' interpretations of Islam are practiced in its borders. In doing so, it promotes a vision of Muslimness consonant with that of the Soviet era, which was in essence an element of national identity' (McBrien, 2017:85).

Although the Kyrgyz state is suspicious of foreign influences, 'un-traditional' Islamic movements have been enjoying relative freedom in Kyrgyzstan in comparison to other Central Asian states like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. According to Hann & Pelkmans, freedom of religion have led to the fact that many Islamic movements have been able to gain more ground in Kyrgyzstan (2009). An important example in this process is the influence of Islamist group Tablighi Al-Jamaat on Kyrgyz society. While being banned in other Central Asian states, this organization can operate without restrictions in Kyrgyzstan due to its a-political nature (Artman 2016: 4). The organization is popular in Kyrgyzstan because it is promoting an understandable, text-based form of Islam. However, even today, some politicians in Kyrgyzstan are suspicious

of its activities and are still considering banning the organization (Artman, 2016: 4-5). While literature often portray major Islamist groups in Kyrgyzstan, like Tablighi Al-Jamaat, Hizb ut-Tahrir and others, as violent Islamist groups, not all of them are promoting violence and the violent groups have very little impact on Kyrgyz Muslims (Heathershaw & Montgomery, 2014; Artman, 2016). In their Chatham House policy paper on the 'myth of radicalization in Central Asia', Heathershaw and Montgomery critique the fact that it has become custom in literature and government narratives to connect Islamization to radicalization. According to them, Central Asian states have used the threat of Islamization and radicalization as legitimation for their policies. They identify an increased level of public piety but argue that there is no proof that this also leads to radicalization among Muslims (Heathershaw and Montgomery, 2014: 7).

2.3 Contemporary Islamization

According to literature about Islam in Central Asia, the level of religiosity among Muslims in Kyrgyzstan is rising rapidly in the past two decades. Several studies suggest that an increasing number of people are identifying themselves as Muslim and are participating in Islamic practices (Ro'l and Wainer, 2009; Louw, 2013; Pelkmans, 2017). In a recently published article, public opinion surveys that were conducted in Kyrgyzstan in 2007 and 2012 show that almost 95 percent of the Kyrgyzstani population identify themselves as Muslim in 2012, that the percentage of weekly attendance of religious services more than doubled (112 percent increase), and those engaging in daily prayer grew by 62 percent from 2007 to 2012 (Junisbai et al, 2017). This revival of Islam is also visible in the public sphere where we can see that the number of mosques has grown from 39 in 1991 to 2,362 mosques in 2013. In his article about the Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan, Jalil mentions how more Kyrgyz students are studying at Kyrgyz Islamic faculties and are going abroad for Islamic education, how the halal food industry is growing rapidly and how a rising number of Kyrgyz Muslims are performing the *hajj* to Mecca (Jalil, 2017: 9).

2.3.1 Tradition and National Identity

One of the first studies that tried to identify the growing role of Islam in the Kyrgyz society was the paper 'Re-Islamization in Kyrgyzstan: gender, poverty and the moral dimension' by Farideh Heyat (2004). Heyat explains in her study how Islamic practices gained popularity among the population in the south of Kyrgyzstan and how the number of mosques and madrassas grew rapidly. In this Islamization process, Heyat identified the influence of foreign countries, who promote a different kind of Islam than the 'syncretism of nomadic beliefs and customs' that was common in Kyrgyzstan (2004: 276). The impact of these foreign influences on the identity of Kyrgyz Muslims is discussed by Borbieva (2009), who argues that Islamic ideas conveyed by translated books, Islamic institutions and websites alter the local interpretations of Islam.

According to her, these ideas reconstruct 'the issue of identity, comprising questions of religious authority (Who can speak for Islam?), ethnicity (Does Islam accommodate the idea of "Muslim by birth"?), and political allegiance (Does participation in political Islamic groups make one Muslim? Can one be Muslim and participate in a secular state?)' (Borbieva: 2009: 14).

In this process of new emerging religious ideas, the role of local Islamic tradition and their connection to the national identity of Kyrgyzstan is negotiated and debated by members of the community. Concluding from interviews with religious leaders and government representatives, Artman describes how 'national traditions have [...] become a site of contestation between Muslims articulating different understandings of what constitutes "real" Islam' (2015: 4). According to Artman, the influence of Islamic movements like Tablighi Al-Jamaat has led to a public debate about the practices of local Islam. Followers of these Islamic movements have been critical of local customs, like visiting shrines (*mazars*) and visiting healers, and deemed them 'un-Islamic'. This standpoint is also supported by many other Kyrgyzstani Muslims who are convinced that people who practice local customs don't have enough knowledge about Islam. In contrast to this, Artman identifies the fact that many 'traditional' Muslims, including government representatives, are cautious about the viewpoint of the 'purist' Muslims and are worried that 'what is considered to be "foreign" Islam is incompatible with the traditional bases of Kyrgyz national identity' (Artman, 2015: 2).

2.3.2 *Believing and Belonging*

In the basis, these developments show that new purist forms of Islam are challenging the basic notions of Kyrgyz national Islam that are strongly connected with Kyrgyz ethnic identity. This national form of Islam is not homogenous but composed of multiple different interpretations of Islam. As Borbieva argues, Kyrgyz Muslims have long based their understanding of Islam on collective traditions and rituals that have been carried from generation to generation. But these new 'foreign' forms of Islam are more text-based and therefore 'challenges the notion of Muslim-by-birth, asserting that 'Muslimness' is not primordial, inborn quality but a state of being that is constructed (and reconstructed) through action', which also affect their ideas about the meaning of Islam (Borbieva, 2009:20-21). This transition, where Muslimness is no longer understood as an ethno-national identity but as an identity that is more focused on action, is also the central theme in McBrien's recently published book 'From Believing to Belonging'. Based on historical literature and her extensive fieldwork among the Muslims population in the southern Kyrgyz city Bazaar-Korgon, McBrien constructed the framework of believing and belonging, wherein she argues that there is a shift in religious identity among Kyrgyz Muslims from an ethno-national notion of Muslimness that is more focused on belonging to a liberal interpretation of Muslimness that is focused on believing. In her book, McBrien demonstrates

how Muslims in Bazaar-Kargon were gaining more knowledge about Islam from outside sources, like books and audio recordings, and how this contributed to a new notion of Muslimness that is primarily a 'faith-oriented identity' (2017: 48). For Muslims who perceived their Islamic identity as a form of belonging, these new forms of Islam were received with suspicion since 'it invalidated their everyday mode of religious and ethical life' and it 'negated the idea of Muslimness as belonging' (McBrien, 2017: 174). In this way, these new notions of Islam also invalidated the definitions of Islam that are connected to national identity and can thus be seen as processes that are challenging the form of Islam that the Kyrgyz state have been promoting and the authority of the Kyrgyz state itself (McBrien, 2017: 57- 58).

2.3.3 Generational Difference

In this process, there is a considerable difference between the generation that grew up after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the generation that grew up during the Soviet period. Public opinion surveys by Ro'l and Wainer (2009) and Junisbai et al. (2017) show that especially young people are starting to practice a more non-traditional form of Islam. According to Myrzabekova, 'the youth of Kyrgyzstan have an interest in Islam and eagerly embraces religious ideology, whereas older people who grew in secular Soviet Era are more resistant. It is hard to change them, whereas youth is susceptible and tends to normalize the Islamization process' (Myrzabekova, 2014: 8). Still, for many young people it can be difficult to fully devote themselves to Islam. According to Louw (2013), many young people are trying to balance live their lives between to Islamic rules they have learned by external sources and the Kyrgyz traditions that they have learned from their parents out of fear of being described as 'fanatics'. In her article about the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Islam in Kyrgyzstan, Louw provides the example of Asel, a Kyrgyz student in Bishkek who wants to learn more about Islam. Louw writes: 'she [Asel] persistently tries to strike some kind of balance, pursuing her interest in Islam and in becoming a better Muslim, seeking to behave according to the rules of Islam as she knows them from the mosque, but also to behave according to the standards of acceptable behavior characteristic of society as such and, in particular, her older family members' understanding of Muslimness (...)' (2013: 521). Since many young people in Kyrgyzstan want to be committed to both sides, they often are forced to weigh the different elements against each other. This attempt to both follow the rules of Islam and respect the tradition of the elder generation is what Louw defines as a 'balanced existence'. In their attempt to not only follow 'blind belief or cynical pragmatism', young people are therefore searching for the middle road (Louw, 2013: 522).

McBrien also provides an important example in her book to show the difference between the 'Soviet' generation and the 'post-Soviet' generation. According to McBrien, the young generation is interested in attending and organizing wedding parties, because weddings offers

them a safe space where they could learn more about Islam beyond the control of their parents. However, the elder generation 'experienced the weddings as an implicit threat to their way of life and perhaps ultimately the legitimacy of their control and authority over their children and their community' (2017: 78). The difference between believing and belonging is therefore also a difference between a post-Soviet generation that welcomes new interpretations of Islam and a Soviet generation that is afraid that 'these interpretations would undermine the most basic ideas, practices, and institutions of their Kyrgyzness' (McBrien, 2017: 77). In distinguishing between a 'bad' form of Islam and a 'good' form of Islam, an important difference between these generations are the sources of legitimacy and authority. Concluding from years of field- and data research in Kyrgyzstan, Montgomery argues that the specific way that Kyrgyz Muslims view their Muslim identity and the importance of Islamic practices are dictated by the way that they learn about Islam. Although the medium of religious knowledge can change over time, before it could be collective traditions and now videos on Youtube, the issue of legitimacy and authority remains important (2016: 161). In this way, Montgomery argues, these sources eventually also influence the way that Kyrgyz Muslims think about their tradition and their own ethno-national identity (Montgomery, 2016: 160).

2.4 Conclusion

Concluding, the literature mentioned in this chapter provides clarity on how the state is using Islamic symbols and Islamic traditions in their national discourses to construct an ethno-national identity. Simultaneously, literature shows that a rising number of young people in Kyrgyzstan are constructing and reconstructing their ideas about Muslimness by new sources that are shaping and transforming their religious and ethno-national identity. However, as was mentioned in the introduction, many articles are concerned with the political implications of Islamization and are mostly focused on the topic of security and radicalism. As David Montgomery argues, there is a gap between the way that policy papers and ethnographic papers write about Islam in Central Asia. He argues that 'the policy frame is more concerned with the few Muslims labelled as 'threats' than it is by the majority of the population because the extremes make better stories and are the concerns that policies seek to change'. However, according to him, the ethnographic perspective can sometimes be too subjective and too biased (Montgomery, 2014). This shows that there is a gap in literature when it comes to research that could provide understanding on the creation of state policies on religion as well as the Islamic identity of Kyrgyz people. Similar to what Montgomery argues, this thesis therefore emphasizes the need to compare the top down perspective with the bottom up perspective to bridge the gap in literature. It is necessary to look at the way that the state have promoted Islam for the construction of a national identity and how the views of young people on Islam are aligning with these state discourses.

3. State Discourse on Religion

3.1 Introduction

As literature showed, the Kyrgyz government has mobilized the notion of Islam in order to promote national security and national ideology. Official state documents have emphasized the unique position of Islam and government representatives have promoted Islam in public remarks. At the same time, the state is also suspicious of public religiosity. It views foreign Islamic discourses and practices as unwanted influences that could lead to instability. The state has therefore invested in a state discourse that is aiming to distinguish between a 'safe' and 'moderate' form of Islam that is compatible with Kyrgyz national identity and a 'radical' or 'extremist' form of Islam that could threaten this identity. In order to understand how the government instrumentalized Islam in its state discourse, this chapter will analyze two main elements of this discourse: state policy and state narrative. Although literature has used these definitions for a wide range of different concepts, this thesis defines state policy as the official government line in state documents and state narrative as the official government line that government representatives and representatives of government voice in public remarks. State discourse, in this view, is defined as the combination of state policy and state discourse. By looking at both perspectives, the analysis of state discourse thus does not limit itself by only looking at official state documents but also provides a broader picture by incorporating state narrative.

First, state policy will be analyzed by looking at the key policy document on religion: the *Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Religious Sphere for 2014-2020*, which from now on will be called the Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere. The government introduced this concept during a meeting of the Security Council in 2014. In this concept, the state promotes the importance of 'traditional Kyrgyz Islam' and underlines the need for "the conservation and development of national cultures, language, traditional spiritual values of the Kyrgyz and in general the peoples of Kyrgyzstan, and therefore doesn't allow their opposition by any religious value" (As cited by Nyatakicia, 2016: 22). According to local scholar Esenamanova, this policy was created by the Kyrgyz state due to the 'threat for the loss of national identity under the influence of foreign ideologies' and 'the threat of an ideological split in Kyrgyz society' (Esenamanova, 2015). The Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere therefore functions as a good example to analyze state policy. Secondly, state narrative can be identified in the public remarks of political leaders who promote 'correct' Islamic knowledge and practices in public remarks. Likewise, government representatives from

institutions like the State Commission for Religious Affairs and the Muftiate are expected to voice the same state narrative. The State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) is a secular institution that is operating under the jurisdiction of the president of the Kyrgyz Republic. The institution is responsible for registering religious groups, providing licenses and monitoring organizations (State Department, 2014: 2). The Spiritual Administration of Kyrgyzstan, better known as Muftiate, is an independent religious institution that is responsible for issuing out fatwas, educating people about the right Islamic practices and supervising the religious institutions (Wolters, 2014: 11). The Muftiate is officially not state controlled but an independent institution. However, scholars (Artmans, 2016b, Lenz-Rayman, 2014; Biard, 2017) argue that that the state influences the activities of the Muftiate and that 'religious leaders are used by the government to promote state policies among the population' (Lenz-Rayman, 2014: 197-198).

After analyzing both state policy and state narrative, this thesis has identified four major themes in state discourse; the glorification of the Hanafi school of Islam, the condemnation of foreign Islamic dress, the use of a 'discourse of danger' to condemn foreign form of Islam and the need to invest in religious education to prevent extremism. In both the Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere as public remarks from government representatives, these four issues proved to be reoccurring arguments in government rhetoric. This chapter will analyze these four themes to show how the Kyrgyz state has been using the notions of a 'traditional Kyrgyz Islam' and 'extremist Islam' to create legitimacy for government policy and to promote a localized form of Islam that that does not contradict local traditions and local dress, but is compliant with secular laws.

3.2 Traditional Kyrgyz Islam

One of the main principles that the state is trying to promote in the Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere is the strong connection between the Kyrgyz ethno-national identity and the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence. This legal school is based on the legislation of Abu Hanafi, and has been the dominant school in Central Asia for ages. According to scholars of Islam, the Hanafi school is known as the most liberal legal school of Islam because the legal doctrines are more flexible than in other Islamic schools and it also provides more freedom for practicing local customs (Warren, 2013). By underling the importance of the Hanafi school and by focusing on the moderate and tolerant aspects of the Hanafi school, the government tries to promote a traditional yet modern kind of Islam in state policy. This can be identified in the Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere, which states that:

'The state will create conditions for the strengthening and development of a traditional and moderate form of Sunni Islam on the basis of the Hanafi religio-legal school and the Maturidi creed. This school, which is shared by the majority of the citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic, has a historically proven capacity for tolerance, goodneighborliness, and respect in conditions of ethnic and religious diversity' (As cited by Artman, 2016a: 262).

Many influential religious leaders in the country, like the theologian Kadyr Malikov, have cooperated closely with the government on issues related to religion and voiced their support to a notion of religion that is based on a 'traditional form of Islam'. It is important to underline though, that in this sense, 'traditional' is not understood as a form of Islam that is opposed to liberal and modern values. In contrary, the government is only using the definition of 'traditional' to emphasize the historical connection between Kyrgyz tradition and Islam. In their attempt to differentiate between a Kyrgyz form of Islam and foreign forms of Islam, the government is actually promoting the progressive and liberal values of 'traditional' Islam. According to Artman, Malikov understands the notion of 'traditional form of Islam' as a 'normative definition of Islam' that could be used to identify foreign influences. Islam is, in this sense, perceived as a religion that is aligned with the state and with Kyrgyz national culture, while foreign forms of Islam are described as 'fundamentally alien and hostile' and 'as a threat to Kyrgyz national identity' (Artman, 2016a: 263).

3.2.1 Tolerance towards Local Traditions

Government representatives often emphasize the unique tolerant nature of the Hanafi school in order to demonstrate that this form of Islam is not in conflict with the pre-Islamic local traditions of Kyrgyzstan and the traditional nomadic customs. All of the three former presidents of the Kyrgyz Republic have spoken out in favor of a moderate form of Islam and underlined that Kyrgyz Islam is based on tolerance instead of extremism. The first president, Askar Akayev said: 'Our brand of Islam absorbed many of the cultural traditions of the peoples in the region (As cited by McBrien and Pelkmans, 2008: 91). The second president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, defined Islam as a tolerant and peaceful religion and said that 'true Islam has nothing to with religious extremism' (As cited by McGlinchey 2009: 18). The previous president Almazbek Atambayev has often underlined the importance of the Hanafi school of Islam and its connection to a traditional form of Kyrgyz Islam. On multiple occasions, Atambayev underlined the fact that the Hanafi school is a branch of Islam that respected religious diversity and tolerance. In an interview with a Kyrgyzstani newspaper, Atambayev explained that 'the Kyrgyz people were never religious fanatics. That our forefathers belonged to the Hanafi *madhab* was not a coincidence. I would like to stress one feature of the Hanafi *madhab*. In

modern parlance: it was tolerant' (As cited by Artman, 2016b, 6). In a speech that Atambayev gave during a conference in Bishkek last September, he underlined the significance of the Hanafi school and the need to 'preserve' traditional culture:

'The Islamic school, that has developed here - the Hanafi madhhab, the Sufi teachings, do not oppose the doctrinal Islam to local tradition. (...) At one time, our ancestors accepted Islam also because it did not contradict the local customs and traditions, the worldview of nomads. Today it has become an integral part of our traditional culture (...). The current wave of extremism and terrorism, under guise of religious slogans, can be overcome through the strengthening of national states, the preservation of their own culture, language and identity. Moreover, the way of life, manners, clothing and culture of Muslims of other countries, should not be imposed, under the guise of Islam. Such attempts can lead to divisions in society, increased tension and conflicts' (Atambayev, 2017).

Concluding from this remark, Atambayev condemns the 'dogmatic' forms of Islam that try to abandon the national traditions, language and culture. He clearly draws a line between a Kyrgyz form of Islam that is rooted in local (pre-Islamic) customs and traditions and a form of foreign Islam that is trying to impose foreign traditions and clothing. According to him, the 'strengthening of national states' and the 'preservation of their own culture, language and identity' is needed to put a hold to these foreign influences (Atambayev, 2017).

3.3 Religious Clothing

One important theme that is often underlined in state discourse is the dangerous potential of foreign Islamic dress. The state is highly critical about the increasing popularity of the hijab, while civil society groups try to promote the rights of women who are starting to cover their heads. However, although there is still a lot of public discussion about the wearing of the hijab, religious clothes are not banned in Kyrgyzstan. This stands in contrast to Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, where the government promotes traditional headscarves but prohibits the "foreign" fashions of wearing the hijab' (Lenz-Rayman, 2016: 187). In Kyrgyzstan, the situation is more complicated. While the government provides freedom for citizens to wear whatever they want, they are also actively trying to promote Kyrgyz national dress and propagating against 'foreign' Islamic dress. During a press conference in 2014 where the Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere was introduced, Atambayev underlined the need to protect the national identity. He says:

'If we do not pay attention to that [foreign influences, MK], we will gradually lose our national identity. If someone imposes the so-called Islamic clothing and hijab on us, there will be a time when those who wear traditional or comfortable contemporary clothing will be called unbelievers. In the Holy Quran there is no concept about what clothing is Islamic and what is not. Islam only requires clean and neat dress' (As cited by Nasritdinov and Esenamanova, 2017: 224).

One of the clearest examples that demonstrated how government is trying to discourage Kyrgyzstani citizens from wearing Islamic dress were the government-sponsored billboards that were installed in Bishkek in the summer of 2016. These billboards showed a picture of women in traditional Kyrgyz clothes, next to two pictures of women in closed veils. The text under the pictures read: 'My poor people! Where are we heading to?' The billboards were installed by the spiritual foundation Yiman, an organization that was created by Atambayev, and supported with financial donations from the presidential administration of Atambayev (Freedom House, 2017; Nasritdinov and Esenamanova, 2017: 218). The billboards caused for a lot of commotion. People were discussing the billboards on social media, religious institutions condemned the effort and civil society groups accused the government of limiting the freedom of religion. In reaction to this criticism, government representatives supported the billboards in public statements. According to Orozbek Moldaliev, the head of the State Committee on Religious Affairs, the banners were meant to show that Kyrgyz women normally never wear black (Nasritdinov and Esenamanova, 2017: 218). Atambayev remarked during a press conference that 'woman in miniskirts don't become suicidebombers. (...) Our women have been wearing miniskirts since 1950s, and they never thought about wearing an explosive belt'. In his statement, Atambayev specifically used the potential danger of a terrorist attack warn against the rising popularity of Islamic dress. According to him, Islamic clothes could influence people to become more radical and eventually more dangerous (BBC News, 2016). According to Freedom House, 'Atambayev said that he would order similar banners to be displayed around the country as a way to resist the "imposition of foreign culture"'. Eventually, the continued criticism from civil society organizations led to the removal of the billboards (2016).

3.4 Religious Extremism

Atambayev's remarks about the potential radicalization of people who wear Islamic dress is a good example of a state narrative that is using notions of radicalization and extremism to condemn more purist forms of Islam. Similar to other Central Asian states, the Kyrgyz government instrumentalizes notions of extremism and radicalism and portray themselves as the defenders of a democratic and secular society while condemning new forms of religiosity as threats to the state (Biard, 2017: 114). In state narrative, Islamization has often been

appointed as the main indicator that the level of extremism is rising. Heathershaw and Montgomery define this approach as a 'discourse of danger'. According to them, this discourse claims that an increased level of religiosity in the public sphere will lead to radicalization and eventually to a form of political Islam that can rebel against the state. In this, '[t]he direct claim of this danger discourse is that Islam, to the extent it is political, is a threat to the social order that the state is purported to maintain' (Montgomery & Heathershaw, 2016: 192). In reality, violent acts in Kyrgyzstan are rarely inspired by Islamic ideologies and evidence shows that an increased level of religiosity does not actually lead to rebellion against the state. On the contrary, research shows that an increased level of Islamic orthodoxy actually contributes to more political stability (McGlinchey, 2010; Montgomery & Heathershaw, 2016: 195; Junisbai et al, 2017). Still, by using terms as 'fundamentalism' and 'Wahhabism' in state narrative, the state is able to crack down on a multitude of organizations that have different ideologies and political goals (Tromble, 2017: 359; Omelicheva, 2017: 9).

Representatives from state organizations like the State Commission of Religious Affairs and security agencies are often talking about extremism. According to Wolters, 'security agencies in Kyrgyzstan certainly engage in the employment of the "discourse on danger" and regularly and publicly declare about the risks of extremists to the national security' (2014: 16). This is, for example, argued by Zamirbek Turnsunbekov, a senior analyst at the State Commission of Religious Affairs. According to Turnsunbekov:

'(...) Radical Islam threatens to cause the Kyrgyz language and traditional styles of dress to vanish. Some radical Islamists use Arabic words while speaking in Kyrgyz. This [state of affairs] might lead to the loss of Kyrgyz national identity. This is why the state began to pay attention: the growing popularity of Islam goes against Kyrgyz culture' (Cited and edited by Artman, 2016a: 250).

And according to the former director of the State Commission of Religious Affairs, Toygonbek Kalmatov:

'Our people themselves do not take in untraditional teachings with alien ideologies and objectives. But they [foreign religious groups] approach us, mainly the socially vulnerable sections of the population, by using financial funds from abroad. (...) This process, which creates destabilization and interference in internal affairs, gives rise to conflicts' (As cited by Tromble, 2014: 533).

Both remarks show how some government representatives are viewing foreign expressions like 'Arabic words' and 'untraditional teachings with alien ideologies and objectives' as

something that could be destructive for Kyrgyzstan. In this way, they are linking the threat of conflict and destabilization to forms of Islam that are not suitable with traditional Kyrgyz Islam.

3.5 Religious Education

In public remarks in national media, government representatives often emphasize the fact that the poor level of religious education in public schools or institutions of Islamic learning, *madrassas*, can contribute to an increase in radicalization. According to the director of the SCRA, Orozbek Moldaliyev, the 'lack of good religious education in religious institutions is a fundamental problem that ... furthers the spread of radicalism and extremism' (Nazarov, 2016). The former deputy director of the SCRA, Kanatbek Murzakhalikov, claims that 'those who study Islam randomly lack a deep-rooted grasp of Sharia's canons or the hadiths and are therefore more susceptible to radicalisation -- even though they go to mosques and pray five times a day' (Sultanov, 2017a). The best way to counter these radicalization processes, according to government representatives, is by investing in government-controlled religious education that could deepen the knowledge of Islam. In the Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Religious Sphere, the state acknowledges the threat of foreign ideologies and underlines the need to create state regulation that could protect the main principles and the national interests of the Kyrgyz state. To control this, the concept advises that the state should provide religious education on public schools, analyze and license education on foreign religious schools and provide education to clergy and civil servants (Esenamanova, 2015). During a speech at a gathering of teachers and state officials, Atambayev underlined the importance of education in the fight against radicalism and against the spread of foreign forms of Islam. He said:

'It is necessary to stop hurting your head while praying. You should focus on education instead. In that case you will no longer confuse religion with Arab culture: The Almighty is neither an Arab nor a Kyrgyz, this is universal conscience and energy' (As cited by Agenzia Fides, 2017).

Following policy mentioned in the Concept for State Policy in the Religious Sphere, the State Commission of Religious Affairs and the Muftiate are currently tasked to create and provide religious education to educational institutes to prevent religious extremism. By implementing the subject 'History of Religious Culture' at multiple public schools in Kyrgyzstan, the SRCA is aiming to provide students with basic knowledge about religion. According to the deputy director of the SRCA, Zakir Chotayev, 'this subject aims to present basic information to our young citizens so that they are prepared for the possible influence of religious movements and

destructive ideologies' (As cited by Sultanov, 2017b). Similar to the SCRA, the Muftiate is responsible for creating and monitoring Islamic knowledge that is compatible with government discourses. By giving religious classes and publishing material about Islamic rituals, the Muftiate is expected to 'foster the development of patriotic, nationalistic, political quietist and moderate Kyrgyz Muslims' (Artman, 2016b: 6). In addition to this, the Muftiate is also responsible for testing the religious knowledge of imams who want to work at Kyrgyz mosques. Emil Jeenbekov, a representative of the interior ministry, stated the government is 'trying to control the main mosques' in Kyrgyzstan because there are concerns that some imams have extremist views. To control the content that the imams are spreading, the imams are therefore required to send reports to the Muftiate on a regular basis to show the content of their sermons. According to Deputy Mufti Ravshan azhy Eratov, the Muftiate expects imams and other religious representatives in Kyrgyzstan to discourage extremism in their sermons (Toktonaliev, 2016). By providing correct knowledge about Islam and monitoring the spread of this knowledge, these institutions are able to identify Islamic discourses that differentiate from traditional Kyrgyz Islam, and are therefore useful tools to promote state discourse.

3.6 Conclusion

After reviewing both state policy and state narrative, this chapter demonstrates that the notion of 'traditional Kyrgyz Islam' is used by the state to promote Kyrgyz national ideology in order to support nation-building efforts but also as way to legitimize state control over religious affairs and practices of Islam. First, this is visible in the fact that the state is propagandizing the historical connection between Kyrgyz identity and the Hanafi school of Islam. The state promotes 'traditional Kyrgyz Islam' as an important part of the Kyrgyz ethno-national identity and instrumentalizes a notion of Islamic identity that is similar to the notion of Islamic identity that was promoted during the Soviet period. By strengthening the connection between ethno-national identity and Islam, the state can differentiate between a domestic form of Islam and foreign forms of Islam. Secondly, by emphasizing the moderate character of Kyrgyz Islam, the state can promote a kind of Islam that is compatible with state policies. According to state discourse, a moderate form of Islam should be tolerant towards Kyrgyz traditions and be apolitical and supportive towards state policies. With the help of the SCRA and the Muftiate, the government regulates religious education, the spread of Islamic knowledge and the activities of missionaries to control religious knowledge and protect Kyrgyz traditions. This shows that the state can act as an authority that ensures that Islam in Kyrgyzstan remains moderate and liberal. Thirdly, by using a 'discourse of danger' the state provides legitimization for its control of religious affairs and actions against religious organizations or forms of Islam that deviate from this government line or that promote religious traditions that are different then

Kyrgyz traditions. By using term as 'extremism' and 'radicalism', the state can portray both political and apolitical religious groups as potentially violent and condemn their activities as threats to Kyrgyz society. Given these points, the four main themes that are identified in state discourse all seem to be functioning as important arguments that can support state policy in the religious sphere. Based on this fact, the analysis of the results of the fieldwork will therefore also use the same four themes to assess if the arguments mentioned in state discourse are similar to the perceptions of respondents of Kyrgyz Islam.

4. Methodology

4.1 Situation of Research

Empirical research for this thesis was collected in the smallest republic in Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan. In July, 2017 Kyrgyzstan had a population of 5,789,122 inhabitants, where the Kyrgyz was the largest ethnic population (73,2%), followed by an Uzbek population (14,6%) and Russian population (5,8%). Other ethnic minorities constituted the remaining 6,4% of the population. (CIA Factbook, 2017). The research of this thesis was situated in the city of Bishkek, which is the capital of country. Bishkek is located in the north of Kyrgyzstan. The north of Kyrgyzstan is the most industrial part of the country with a large population of ethnic Russians. The south of Kyrgyzstan is traditionally seen as the more religious part of the country, due to the influence of the large Uzbek population (Heyat, 2004: 276). While the Russian population used to be the largest ethnic population in Bishkek during the Soviet period, this changed after the independence from the Soviet Union. Currently, the Kyrgyz population is the largest ethnic population in Bishkek, with the Russian population as the second largest ethnic population (Schröder, 2017: 9).

The city of Bishkek was located as the location for this research due to different reasons. The first reason was the possibility in Bishkek to find respondents from different parts of the country. Due to the high quality of universities and other student facilities, students from all over Kyrgyzstan come to Bishkek to study. Since the practice of Islam can differ from region to region, this city offers a good location to interview respondents with differing views about Islam. Second, as paragraph two will further explain, this research interviewed respondents from four different universities to broaden the range of diversity. Since Bishkek houses many universities with different religious and political orientations, the capital offered enough possibility to interview students that that are studying at universities that are significantly different from each other. Thirdly, as most of the field research on Islamization is carried out in south of country and in small cities and villages, this thesis is focused on an urban environment like Bishkek to analyze the developments there. Since both the urban environment as the north of Kyrgyzstan is considered as less religious than the countryside and the south of Kyrgyzstan, this research hopes to provide a different perspective than the research that is done in parts of the country that is considered as more religious.

4.2 Participant Selection

The original aim of this research was to analyze the experiences of twenty-four university students, who are studying at one of three universities in Bishkek and who are ethnic Kyrgyz. This paragraph will explain the motivation for these specific criteria. The decision for this number of respondents was based on the fact that it was manageable number of people to interview in the time period of this field research and because a small number of respondents could offer a more in-depth view of the respondent's view on the topic. Due to the fact that this research was focused on the personal experience and the personal view of the respondent, it was important to provide enough time and space for respondents to feel comfortable and to explain their viewpoint about a highly personal subject: their own Islamic identity. In this way, the sample size contributed to better communication and more in-depth knowledge.

This research specifically focused on university students due to three important reasons. First, the age of students in Kyrgyzstan range from 18 till 25. This age group can be defined as the generation that grew up after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As literature demonstrated and results of this research will show, there seem to be a considerable gap between the Soviet generation and the post-Soviet generation in the perception of Islamic practices, which makes it an interesting factor to investigate. Secondly, it is interesting to focus at Kyrgyz youth since they are increasingly using internet sources to reconstruct their cultural identity. A study by American researcher Hans Ibold, 'finds that Kyrgyz youth – catalysed by their ability to carry out searches and to maintain social connections online – are placing their cultural inheritance in a global context and questioning 'tradition' as few Kyrgyz have done before' (2010: 521). This means that there is a high potential for university students to influenced by external discourses and thus also construct a different religious identity then government discourse promotes. Thirdly, as Junisbai et al (2017) argue, there is a hypothesis that university students are not as likely to perform religious rituals due to their secular background. Still, as studies have shown, university students in Kyrgyzstan are also becoming more religious (Junisbai et al, 2017). This is thus also an interesting hypothesis to include in the research.

The original plan was to interview students from three different universities. The reason for this was to interview students from different social backgrounds. As DeYoung argues, there are huge differences between the level of education and the costs of tuitions fees of private universities, intergovernmental universities and state universities (DeYoung, 2010). The aim was therefore to interview students who are studying at a public, state university (Kyrgyz National University), at an inter-governmental university (Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University) and a private university (American University of Central Asia) (DeYoung, 2010: 13). This research includes eight students from the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), eight

students from Kyrgyz National University (KNU) and seven students from the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University. Unfortunately, this research did not managed to interview eight students from Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University. Therefore, this research includes one respondent who studied at the Ala-too International University, which is a private university (DeYoung, 2010: 13).

Due to limited time and the sensitive topic of my research, a local research assistant contributed to this research in the process of selecting, approaching and interviewing students. By using the connections of this assistant and by using snowballing sampling, potential respondents were sought by asking interviewees if they could reach other potential subjects. In looking for respondents a few criteria were kept in mind: respondents had to be ethnic Kyrgyz, a student at a university in Bishkek and between the age of 18 and 25. They also had to identify themselves with their Muslim background. In this sense, the definition of Muslim is not understood as being a pious follower of the religion, but respondents had to distinguish that their Islamic identity was in any way an important part of who they are. The criteria for ethnic Kyrgyz was chosen, due to the fact that government discourse is often focused on the ethno-national identity which makes that an important component in the analysis. Although a balance in male and female respondents was sought in the selection, this factor did not prove to be an important criterion when looking at the research goals. Due to the limited time of the research, five male respondents were interviewed and nineteen female respondents. Still, the criteria mentioned above provide a clear focus yet also contribute to a diversity in viewpoint and perspectives.

4.3 Data Collection

The data-collection of this research is based on the results of semi-structured interviews. In total, the time period for this research constituted twenty days. Although this is a limited amount of time, it offered enough opportunity to interview twenty-four students and provide enough time to let them voice their opinion. Most of the interviews were done in English, and some interviews in Russian. The interviews in Russian were conducted with the help of an interpreter. All the interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the respondents and anonymized with the use of aliases. This anonymity was included to preserve confidentiality. A list of the respondents, alphabetically listed by their aliases, can be found in the Appendix. This list mentions the alias, age, and origin of the respondents and the name of the university and the programme that the respondents attend.

The semi-structured type of interview was suited best for this research, since it allowed the possibility to steer the conversation and to ask follow-up questions during the interviews. It also

provided the opportunity for the respondent to bring up new topics that might be interesting for this research. In this way, the respondent was treated as a source with a unique background that could provide a valuable viewpoint and provide an in-depth picture of his or her attitude on religion. This was considered necessary, since personal experiences and other stories could shed a different light on the topic than academic sources and government discourse alone could do and thus provide more understanding of the topic. Another advantage of the semi-structured structure is that it offers flexibility to engage with the respondents' willingness to share their stories. Sometimes, respondents are cautious to share personal experiences. In a semi-structured format, the interviewer can switch to more appropriate questions or ask questions about topics that have not been discussed yet. Taking all these things in consideration, qualitative interviews in a semi-structured format proves to be the best way to acquire in-depth information about the religious identity and personal views of students.

5. Students Perceptions and State Discourse

5.1 Introduction

As chapter three demonstrated, there are four main topics that can be identified in state discourse. These four topics are related to relationship between the government and Islam. Whether it is the increasing popularity of religious clothing, untraditional teachings of foreign groups or other extremist elements: the state can compare other forms of Islam with the Kyrgyz form of Islam and condemn the unwanted Islamic discourses. In this way, the state portrays itself as an actor that can guard Kyrgyzstani citizens against extremist influences. The four topics that are analyzed in chapter three represent the government's perspective towards the role of Islam in Kyrgyzstan and thus provides a good overview from the top-down perspective. However, although it is important to understand how the government is developing their religious policies, it is likewise important to see how the government approach towards Islam is perceived from a bottom-up perspective. This chapter will therefore look at how Kyrgyz citizens, in particular young Kyrgyz students, are experiencing the developments in the religious sphere and the approach of the government towards Islam. By using the structure of the four topics mentioned in state discourse, this chapter will look if students are using the same arguments as the government to explain religiosity in the public sphere and if the perspective of students on Islam align with the arguments that are mentioned in state discourse. This chapter ultimately demonstrates that the view of the students that were interviewed for this thesis is largely similar to state discourse on Islam and the religious sphere.

5.2 Traditional Kyrgyz Islam

The previous chapters demonstrated how government discourse is promoting the importance of a 'traditional form of Islam' in Kyrgyzstan. As official state policy and government narrative have shown, the state is using the historical connection to the Hanafi school to underline the tolerant and moderate nature of Islam and to show that Islam is closely tied to the ethnic and national identity of the Kyrgyz people. State discourse is often essentializing the connection between identity and religion by arguing that the Kyrgyz people are historically less religious due to their nomadic past. In this view, state discourse argues that Islam in Kyrgyzstan is composed of collective nomadic Kyrgyz traditions and thus more focused on morals and values than religiosity. 'Good' public manifestations of Islam in Kyrgyzstan should therefore, according to the state, not contradict secular laws but rather be non-political and supportive of state policy and national building projects.

Similar to state discourse, the great majority of respondents (18) would underline the strong connection between Kyrgyz national identity and Islam. In their answers, students explain that Islam is an important fundament of society. Many students acknowledge that most of the Kyrgyz traditions are interwoven with Islamic rituals and that many morals and values are inspired by Islamic knowledge. In addition to this, students would also emphasize the moderate nature of Kyrgyz Islam and explain that Kyrgyz Islam differs from forms of Islam in other countries. Some would claim that Kyrgyz Muslims are not as religious as Muslims in other countries. In their opinion, Islam in Kyrgyzstan stands for freedom and tolerance while forms of Islam in other countries are stricter and more rule-based. Aisulu, for example, identifies the fact that Islam in Kyrgyzstan is more free than in other Islamic countries and Jyrgyal argues that Kyrgyz Islam is a 'good Islam' in comparison with Islam in the Middle East. Although these students would not include the term Hanafi in their answers, they did emphasize the unique moderate nature of Kyrgyz Islam. According to Benoka, Kyrgyz Muslims practice Islam in their own way: 'they don't go to the mosque on Friday, they believe in God but they don't pray'. Bermet argues that Muslims in Kyrgyzstan have different 'Islamic standards'. She says:

'Kyrgyz Islam is connected to my identity. I don't pray, but I try to live according to Kyrgyz Islamic standards. I have a lot of friends from Turkey, who pray every day but I don't do that'.

While most of the students were quite positive about the tolerant and moderate nature of Kyrgyz Islam, a few students voiced their discontent about the hypocritical attitude of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan. In this way, they disagree with the 'traditional Islam' that the government promotes in their discourse. It is interesting to see that both students who define themselves as religious Muslims as students who define themselves as not religious at all voice the same criticism about Kyrgyz Islam. According to Sultan, who identifies himself more as an atheist with Islamic values, Islam in Kyrgyzstan is not 'real Islam'. According to him, the fact that his parents are drinking and practicing shamanistic traditions while also calling themselves Muslims shows that this 'typical Kyrgyz Islam' is a fake version of Islam. Fatima, a student who prays five times a day and wears a hijab, is also critical of the way that people in Kyrgyzstan decide to mix certain traditions in the way they practice Islam. According to her, 'if you choose on religion, you should follow this religion. Of course we should think about our traditions, but that does not say that our ancestors were right. We should choose our own way'. These statements of Sultan and Fatima are examples of how students are currently analyzing traditions that are practiced by the older generation. Results from the interviews show that many students are starting to question these traditions. This development will be further explained in chapter six.

5.2 Religious Clothing

All of the students recognize the fact that more and more people are starting to wear religious clothing in Kyrgyzstan and are eager to share their opinion about this development. Due to the fact that religious clothing is a much-debated topic in Kyrgyzstan, students encounter different narratives about the correctness of religious clothing on a daily basis. It is therefore not surprising to see that the arguments that are mentioned in state narrative can also be identified in remarks that students give about religious clothing. As chapter three demonstrated, this state narrative warns against the popularity of foreign Islamic clothing, the disappearance of the Kyrgyz national dress and the potential risk that religious clothing could mean for the identity and safety of Kyrgyz people. But although these themes are visible in the remarks that students give, it is however surprising to see that an overwhelming majority of the students share this government narrative. Seventeen of twenty-four students are convinced that the hijab is not, and should not become, a part of Kyrgyz culture. Although not everyone necessarily thinks that the hijab should be banned, several comments show that students worry about the rising popularity of the hijab. Gulnara, for example, says: 'I don't think you should wear hijab. There are other and different ways to God'. Many respondents would underline this same sentiment. According to them, Islam does not force people to wear the hijab. They argue that Kyrgyzstan have their own traditional clothes that people can wear to cover their hair and be modest. Aisulu says:

'The hijab contradicts with Kyrgyz Islam. You can still wear modest dress. We have our own dresses that we can wear, for example the Kyrgyz headscarf. So I think you must wear Islamic clothes in the way that you don't lose your Kyrgyz identity'.

Similar to government narrative, students argue that the major reason that people are starting to wear the hijab is because they are influenced by sources from foreign countries. Especially sources from Turkish and Arabic countries are named as important factors that inspire people to change their attire. Jamiliya says, for example: 'during my childhood, there were not a lot of people in Islamic clothes, but now I see it more. It is because of the Turkish and Arabic people. It is more foreign Islam. Islam is not new, but we can see a different form of Islam'. This fear for an influx of foreign culture in Kyrgyzstan, encompasses the fear for the potential danger that these clothes could represent. While students express the fear that the rising popularity of religious clothing could lead to the disappearance of traditional Kyrgyz identity, some students also admit that they are actually afraid for the people themselves. According to Aziza, people in a *niqaab* or closed veil pose a real threat for her and her surroundings. She says:

'When I see people in hijab that is closing their eyes, I'm trying to avoid them. I see a lot of them in the bazaar. Inside I am afraid of them. I don't want to talk them. I always feel quite uncomfortable when I see them. Probably they have bombs in their backpack'.

5.2.1 Government Policy on Religious Clothing

Although Aziza's fear for a terrorist attack might not have been based on an imminent threat, it reflects the same sentiment that is also visible in the public remarks of Atambayev where he suggests that veiled women could potentially radicalize and turn in to terrorists. This same promotion of fear for foreign dress can also be identified in the case of the billboards that Atambayev's administration erected in 2016. The example of the billboards was mentioned by six of the students. Four students were quite positive about the effect of the billboards. According to them, the message of these billboards could protect people against the influence of foreign countries and provide information on how people should practice Kyrgyz Islam. Karina supported the billboards because they 'protect the Islam of Kyrgyzstan and are standing up against the Islam of Arab countries'. However, two other students were more critical of the way that the government used the posters to promote their own form of Islam. According to Nazgul, 'Atambayev made these posters about hijabs. I think government should not interfere with religion'. Mariam is also quite critical, since she knows that 'people are really easily influenced by these government initiatives'.

Among the respondents who are convinced that the hijab does not fit in Kyrgyz culture, there are different ideas about what state policy towards religious clothing should be. Some students think that the government should regulate more and exercise more control in the religious sphere. Baktigul is convinced that the government should have the right to ban the hijab and Aisulu thinks that the government should 'defend the national dress and clothes'. Others, like Kauhar, know that there are some legal restrictions to do this. She is therefore convinced that the government should look for other ways.

'Government can't ban hijabs, but we need some laws that could regulate and protect people from the bad influence from certain Islamic groups'.

Although some students are pleading for stricter legislation, most of the students are relatively tolerant towards people who are wearing the hijab. Many of them would emphasize that the hijab is not a part of Kyrgyz tradition, but that they still think that people should do whatever they want. Almost half of the respondents would tell stories about friends or relatives that decided to wear the hijab. For many of them, religious clothing is something that they would see on the street and on the social media pages of their friends and relatives and it thus becomes more 'normal' to them.

5.2.2 Hijab as Part of Kyrgyz Culture

Three respondents think radically different about the government policy on religious clothing than the rest of the respondents. Two of these respondents are wearing the hijab themselves and one is thinking about starting to wear the hijab. Both Anara and Fatima decided to start wearing the hijab when they were in their teenage years. Anara's choice inspired Anara's mother to also start wearing the hijab. Keres is still thinking about wearing the hijab, but she thinks that she is not religious enough to do it now and she is also afraid of what her parents would think of this. Both Anara and Fatima often experience that people are treating them differently because of their hijab. Anara decided to go to another high school because her teachers were only commenting on her hijab. When Fatima started wearing the hijab, she got a lot of comments from friends and strangers. Even now, people would often ask why she would wear long skirts and the hijab. She says: 'I sometimes feel discriminated when I sit on the bus, and see people staring at me. Sometimes, old women are asking me why I am wearing the hijab'. All three of the girls are convinced that the hijab can be an important part of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. Keres says that she thinks that the hijab can be a 'continuation of Kyrgyz Islam'. They are all convinced that the government should regulate religion in order to prevent extremism, but they also underline that the government should not control what clothes people are wearing. According to Anara,

'(...) the government should not interfere in what people are wearing. These are personal things. The government is promoting Kyrgyz national tradition dress, but they are so uncomfortable. The hijab is more comfortable, and it is also according to Islamic law, so that's why it is important that we keep wearing this'.

5.3 Religious Extremism

Although students are constructing their own Islamic identity in multiple different ways, what is interesting to see is that actually all the twenty-four students mention that Kyrgyz traditions are important elements of Kyrgyz culture and that they these traditions must be preserved. This is both the case for students who don't identify themselves as a believer as students who consider themselves as religious Muslims. As this thesis will show in chapter six, there are some disagreements among students about the question which Kyrgyz traditions are considered as elements of 'good' Islam and which traditions should be abandoned. Nevertheless, all of the students are convinced that Kyrgyz traditions are an important source of their morals and values and therefore need to keep on existing. According to Emil,

'We must protect our Kyrgyz culture. We are a secular country and we must therefore protect all our traditions'.

As mentioned before, a popular narrative that can be identified in state discourse is that foreign ideologies and practices could threaten Kyrgyz tradition and national identity. Previous examples have showed how politicians and other government representatives warned for the rising popularity of the Arabic language and practices that are foreign to Kyrgyz culture. Similar arguments are also visible in the examples that student provide, when they talk about how they see Islam in Kyrgyzstan changing and how Kyrgyz people should protect their own 'form of Islam'. Aibek, for example, explains:

'I can even see that in Kyrgyzstan, during prayer, people use different positions. We have our own positions in Islam, but I see now that different influences from foreigners influence our Islam. I think that we should stick to our form of Islam'.

Jamiliya identifies these foreign influences in the change of language in her immediate surroundings. To her regret, more and more people are using Arabic terms for religious holidays and use Arabic phrases instead of Kyrgyz sayings. According to Chingiz, a more purist form of Islam could eventually slow down the development of Kyrgyzstan. He therefore hopes that people who practice this kind of Islam 'will be modern and Islamic'. According to him, 'it is more about values and combining it with Kyrgyz tradition'. These examples clearly show how some students misunderstands religiousness as signs of radicalism and therefore perceive it as a negative development. When religious people are changing their habits, friends and family feel that they should protect them against forces that could influence them. This approach is similar to state discourse that condemns Islamization as a sign of a growing process of radicalization.

5.3.1 Government Role in Safeguarding Kyrgyz Traditions

By instrumentalising the threat of extremism, the state promotes itself as the sole actor that could safeguard the secular state and Kyrgyz traditions against these extremist influences. A convincing majority, eighteen of twenty-four respondents, reflect this same narrative in their answers and agree that it is the responsibility of the government to regulate Islam and to promote traditions in order to prevent radicalization. There are, however, different reasons for students to support government regulation of Islam. Some students view the increasing religiousness as negative development that could threaten Kyrgyz culture. Kauhar and Emil, who both claim that Islam does not play an important role in their lives, think that the government must preserve Kyrgyz traditions and regulate Islam to stop the Islamization of Kyrgyzstan. Kauhar thinks that it is the task of the government to 'control the influence of Islam on people and create a kind of censorship'. According to Emil:

'The government needs to promote traditions. The country is not developing, Islam is growing and Islam will become more important. Kyrgyz traditions will disappear if

Kyrgyzstan would become more Islamic. Speaking as a lawyer, we should regulate everything. The government should be controlling more’.

Other students, who stand more positive towards foreign influences of Islam, are supporting government regulation of religion out of different reasons. These students are not opposed to the process of Islamization but try to differentiate between Islamization and radicalization. They underline the need for the government to provide qualified sources of Islam to educate people about the difference between these two processes. Fatima, for example, tries to devote her life to Islam and reads from different foreign sources but also supports government censorship of sources in order to battle extremism. Aibek often goes to lectures in the mosque and listens to foreign preachers, but understands government control of the mosques and imams to limit the influence of ‘bad forces’. He says:

‘The people are not becoming influenced by the bad forces. It is good that they control it. It is in accordance with the law. But it should not be against the rules of Islam. The government should not go against this’.

What is interesting is that, although most students are satisfied with government control or did not specifically comment on the performance of the government to fight radicalization, four students are convinced that the government is unable to provide security and that the government actually should be controlling more. These students plead for more government control of Islamic institutions and increased level of regulation to identify potential actors of radicalization. More interesting perhaps is that two of these students are girls who identify themselves as practicing Muslims who are highly influenced by foreign Islamic sources. Although one would presume that they prefer less government control, they actually argue that government should invest more in regulating Islam. Keres, for example, argues:

‘I can see that there is no authority that can help and that can monitor the radicalization. The government is too weak, I think. They should control more mosques and madrassas’.

Anara is also critical of the role of the government when it comes to control of Islam. Although she first argues that the government should ‘not interfere in what people are wearing’, she also thinks that the government is responsible for the information that is flooding in the country and should therefore regulate more. She says:

‘The government has a low influence on religion on Kyrgyzstan currently. (...) The government is doing a poor job on this. They do not care about Islam. The government

must regulate Islam, in the way that they provide a basic knowledge about Islam. The government must regulate the information that is coming in'.

5.4 Religious Education

As is visible in both state policy as government narrative, the state defines religious education as an important tool against radicalization. According to the state, the poor quality of religious education and the lack of proper religious knowledge are factors that could eventually lead to radicalism. State discourse therefore underlines the need of creating state-organized religious education that can provide people basic knowledge about Islam and about Kyrgyz traditions. Similar to other three themes mentioned in this chapter, student perceptions of religious education more or less align with state discourse about religious education. According to a majority of students, religious education can be an important tool to teach people about Kyrgyz Islam and to discourage radicalism. In their answers, students mention that the lack of knowledge about Islamic practices and the lack of qualified religious education are important causes for radicalization. Furthermore, half of the students (12) suggested that the government must implement religious education as a tool to protect Kyrgyz traditions and Kyrgyz Islam. This shows that students attach great importance to the role of the government in providing knowledge about Islam.

An argument that was often mentioned by students is that people radicalize because they lack basic knowledge about Islam. Some would argue that religious education in madrassas could promote the wrong kind of Islam and that religious institutions therefore should be controlled by the government. Others would blame the lack of sources that could teach people about Islam. Some students argue that uneducated people from the southern, rural parts of Kyrgyzstan are the most susceptible to radicalization. Nazgul, for example, thinks that the 'uneducated and poor part of our society are getting radicalized more sooner'. Providing basic knowledge about Islamic rules and Islamic practices to young and uneducated people is, according to them, therefore currently the best way to fight radicalization.

Similar to the way that state discourse promotes itself as a neutral actor that can provide basic knowledge about religion, students also argue that the state is responsible for providing education that could teach about the basic values of Islam. In total, half of the students mention that that the government should provide religious education to students. They are convinced that government-controlled religious education can be an important tool to discourage extremism. According to Fatima, the lack of 'qualified sources of Islam' can eventually lead to radicalization. She argues that teaching religion to young people in schools is a good way to prevent this. She says:

‘Most people in Kyrgyzstan are Muslim, that’s why we need qualified education. Maybe courses and lectures. (...) I think that government should promote religion in schools, and provide basic knowledge about Islam’.

Students think that the government is able to provide a more tolerant, liberal version of Islam than foreign actors and therefore support state attempts to create a religious curriculum. Aziza argues that the ‘government should provide information on what is good Islam and what is bad Islam’. Even students who are cautious of government control of religion, favour religious education provided by the government since it can stimulate basic knowledge about religion. Kauhar, for example, thinks that the government should not necessarily restrict religion, but reduce the influence of radical Islam by ‘providing more real knowledge about Islam’. Ultimately, remarks by students thus show that they see the lack of religious knowledge as an important cause for radicalization. Out of their conviction that basic knowledge about Islam could stop this development, they are therefore supporting government-organized religious education. In line with the way how state discourse promote itself, the students therefore also support the role of the government as an actor that could decide which religious education is acceptable in order to prevent people from radicalizing.

5.5 Conclusion

First, this chapter demonstrated that the majority of the students acknowledge that Islam is an important part of Kyrgyz society. According to students, Islam constitutes an important part of their upbringing and culture. In their interpretation of Islam, students define aspects of local Islam that, according to them, are typical Kyrgyz. They argue, for example, that Kyrgyz Muslims are less religious than Muslims in other countries and that Kyrgyz Islam is a tolerant and moderate form of Islam. Although there are students who do not fully identify with this kind of Islam, most of the students agree that these elements of Kyrgyz Islam are important parts of their national identity. In this way, a majority of the students are voicing the same arguments as the state does and supporting a form of Islam that is similar to the form of Kyrgyz Islam that the state is promoting in state discourse. According to state discourse, this Kyrgyz Islam must be protected against foreign influences. Whether it is the increasing popularity of religious clothing, untraditional teachings or extremist elements: the state can compare other forms of Islam with the Kyrgyz form of Islam and condemn the unwanted Islamic discourses. In this way, the state portrays itself as important actor that can guard Kyrgyzstani citizens against extremist influences.

What is interesting is that the state ‘discourse of danger’ proves to be effective in convincing students about the need to have more government control of Islam. Concluding from the

remarks that students gave, a few interesting points can be identified. First, it is interesting to see that Arana and Keres, two girls who identify themselves as religious Muslims and who are convinced that the hijab can be a part of Kyrgyz culture, are actually also the only students who are pleading for more government control of religion. Although two students are not representative for the whole group, this seems an interesting factor that can be further explored. By comparing it with information in the literature review, this example contradicts the government's narrative that public piety automatically leads to more radicalization and to political forms of Islam. In line what McGlinchey (2009) and Junisbai et al (2017) have argued, this example shows that an increased level of religiosity does not challenge the government but actually increases support for the political system. Second, the overwhelming fear for the influences of foreign forms of Islam and the fear for losing their Kyrgyz identity is a clear sign that students in this research are receptive for a 'discourse of danger'. Many students are using the same arguments as the government to note the increased popularity of Islamic dress and religious ideas. It is interesting to see that many students often mention the importance of the 'secular state' and 'secular laws', which shows that they attach great importance to the role of the government to act as a neutral actor in the religious sphere. They perceive foreign forms of Islam as unwanted influences and are therefore also convinced that the government should exercise control over the religious sphere. This is important to consider, since this demonstrates that most of the students are convinced that government should regulate religious groups and provide religious knowledge to prevent radicalization. Given these points, this chapter demonstrates that the perception of students aligns with the major arguments that can be identified in state discourse and that the majority of students are thus supportive of government policy on religion.

6. Student Perceptions and External Discourses

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated that the vast majority of respondents agree with the four main elements in government discourse that promote a Kyrgyz form of Islam and the authoritative role of the government in protecting this form of Islam. In line with government discourse, students believe that the Kyrgyz national identity is closely connected with Islamic traditions and symbols. However, as several scholars argue, there are also different external sources that are contradicting government discourse and are influencing the young generation in their reconstruction of their Islamic identity (Borbieva, 2009; Montgomery, 2016; McBrien, 2017). It is important to underline that external discourse in this thesis is understood as sources that are different than sources that are distributed or promoted by the government. Instead of showing only the similarities between government discourse and student discourse, it is necessary to analyze elements in student remarks that deviate from government discourse. By looking at results from the interviews, this thesis identified three important topics that are different from official government line in state discourse. Namely, contrary to what government discourse promotes, students are learning about Islam from foreign and 'extremist' sources and are reevaluating their view on the linkage between ethno-national identity and Islamic identity and the role of pre-Islamic rituals in Kyrgyz society. To show the difference between state discourse and the elements in student discourse, this chapter will first explain the role of the internet and social media in the process of gaining new information about Islam, and will then further explain how external sources on internet increasingly influence student's perspective on Islamic identity and Kyrgyz traditions.

6.2 New Interest in Islam

Almost all of the twenty-four respondents recognize the fact that people in Kyrgyzstan are becoming more religious and that the role of Islam is becoming more important in society. Both students that grew up in Bishkek, as well as students who grew up in other parts of Kyrgyzstan, argue that an increasing number of their friends and relatives are going to the mosque and are praying every day. According to several students, this renewed interest in Islam is particularly visible among the younger generation. In his own immediate surrounding in Bishkek, Chingiz notices that more of his friends became interested in Islam and started to follow Islamic principles. He argues that young people have access to more resources than the previous generation. Since most young people in Kyrgyzstan are actively using social media, this development is also visible in messages on Facebook, Instagram and other social media

platforms. According to respondents, many young people are currently portraying themselves as faithful Muslims on social media. In posts on Facebook and Instagram, people show that they are participating with Islamic holidays or attending Friday prayer. In the last couple of years, Baktigul started to receive more Whatsapp messages from people who wished her a 'Happy Friday' and Islamic greetings during Islamic holidays. She also noticed that more of her friends posted pictures when they are going to the mosque or when they are fasting during Ramadan. According to her, this is not only the case in her group of friends but part of bigger trend among Kyrgyz youth. Kauhar, Aisulu and Saikal argue that it is currently 'trendy' to post pictures of yourself with a hijab and to share quotes from the Quran or the Hadith.

By reading messages from friends related to Islam on social media, some students claim that social media platforms influence their view on Islam. Alima, for example, says that she actually never searched for information about Islam on internet, but that messages on the Russian social media website Odnoklassniki have sparked her interests to learn more about Islam. Jyrgyal learned about Islam through 'Instagram-stories' of her friends and Anara argues that messages on Facebook and Instagram have had an 'enormous influence on how people think about Islam'. Similar to Anara, students mention that there is a growing curiosity among their friends and family to search for basic knowledge of Islam. Many of them mention the fact that young people are not fully satisfied with their own Islamic identity and they are therefore eager to search for new sources on the internet. Kauhar explains that: 'Young people are now searching for Islam on the internet. They want to search for real Islam. To search for questions like: do I get to heaven?' By searching for authoritative sources on Islamic topics on internet, students express the desire to look further than the Islamic knowledge that their parents provided them. Several students say that they learned about Kyrgyz Islamic traditions from their parents, but that they only gained real knowledge about Islam by learning it from external discourses. This is, for example, visible in the case of Aisulu. She learned all the basics of Islam from her parents, but she explains that she learned 'the most important things' of Islam from internet sources and friends. These new insights have led to tensions between her and her parents. She says: 'My mother was very shocked that I knew these things about Islam, and became very worried. She would ask me why I would become more religious'. According to her, her parents have no real knowledge about Islam and are therefore not able to properly explain things about Islam to her.

6.3 External Discourses

In their attempt to search for knowledge, a large number of the students would mention that they learn the most from sermons by Islamic preachers on internet. In total, twelve out of twenty-four students mention that they regularly watch videos from local and foreign Islamic

preachers on Youtube or other media platforms. According to students, these videos are becoming gradually more popular. Many of them mention that friends and family members are also watching these videos. A few students would name the Russian imam Shamil Alyautdinov as a big influence. This Moscow-based imam is popular among Muslims in the Russian-speaking world and known for its liberal and modern approach of Islam (Ragozin, 2005). The name of Nouman Ali Khan, a young Islamic scholar from the United States who has published several books on the Quran, was also mentioned a couple of times. Anara, Chingiz and Keres explain that they are big fans of Shamil Alyautdinov because he is a modern person who covers modern topics. Keres, for example, emphasizes that she likes Alyautdinov because he is 'really Muslim but also really open' and because he is promoting woman's rights and sport. Other than the ability of preachers to explain things in a modern way, one student also appreciated the fact that foreign speakers discuss topics that are more advanced than the topics that Islamic clergy in Kyrgyzstan cover. According to Anara,

'There is a big difference between what the things that these foreign preachers are saying and what I see that preachers in Kyrgyzstan are talking about. For me, the issues that people in Kyrgyzstan are discussing are very simple. They present Islamic ideas in a very simplistic way. I really prefer to listen to Nouman Ali Khan'.

It is understandable that Anara, who studies at the Theology faculty of the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, is looking for knowledge that is more challenging. The other students, however, actually express their fondness of sermons of Kyrgyz preachers due to their ability to explain things in an understandable way. The sermons of ex-Mufti Chubak azhy Zhalilov are for example quite popular among students. The majority of the students would listen to the videos that his organization, Nasaat Media, posts on YouTube and Facebook, but some also listen to his sermons on the 'Nasaat Media' smartphone app. According to local religious experts and scholars, Chubak azhy Zhalilov is currently the most influential religious authority in Kyrgyzstan. He is very popular on Facebook and his YouTube account has more than 100.000 subscribers (Toktonaliev, 2017). Many students express their admiration of his ability to give answers to difficult Islamic topics. According to Timurbek, Zhalilov provides answers in language that everybody can understand. This, according to Jyrgal, is different from the official Islamic clergy in Kyrgyzstan:

'I don't listen to other Islamic preachers. I do not understand them. They are talking in Arabic, you don't get the sense. But with the ex-mufti, he really understands things very well'.

As the example in chapter three showed, Chubak azhy Zhalilov is often mentioned in news media due to these controversial remarks on Islamic topics. In November 2017, Zhalilov

announced that he married a second wife, which is technically not allowed by Kyrgyzstan's secular laws. This led to a public debate about the legalization of polygamy (Ryder and Siddikov, 2017; Djanibekova, 2017). Zhalilov also condemned the public celebration of Nooruz, the Persian New Year, and said that people should not celebrate since 'it is a holiday for non-believers' (24.kg, 2018). Some students voice their disapproval of Zhalilov's choice to marry a second wife and have therefore decided to stop listening to his sermons. Chingiz, for example, listened to Zhalilov but now he thinks that Zhalilov is 'corrupted' and a 'radical'. Fatima thinks that Zhalilov is too manipulating and that he should stop dictating things to people in his sermons. Other students, like Jyrgyal and Timurbek, also do not agree with some of Zhalilov's remarks but are still listening to his sermons. For them, the fact that Zhalilov can explain things in a way that they can understand is a great benefit.

As mentioned before, half of the students currently look for external sources on internet to provide them with new knowledge about Islam and give them a better understanding of the rules of the Islam. From these twelve students, only Aibek, Anara and Fatima would voice that they learn from local Islamic clergy in their attempt to construct their identity. The rest of the twelve students would argue that foreign Islamic preachers and preachers like Chubak azhy Zhalilov are currently the most important sources for them to gain knowledge about Islam. This is important to point out, because these sources show that students are constructing their Islamic identity in a way that is different than government discourse promotes. Not only do students search for other sources than the government-controlled clergy of the Muftiate, they also get inspired by 'foreign ideologies' from foreign preachers and are learning from a Kyrgyz preacher that is considered an 'extremist' by government representatives. In this way, these external sources can provide them with ideas that contradict the form of Islam that the government promotes and are thus sources that are not fully compatible with government discourse. This point is therefore the first important discrepancy between government discourse and the view of students towards Islam.

6.4 Reconstructing Islamic Identity

The second discrepancy between government discourse and student discourse is visible in the process where external discourses are weakening the connection between the ethno-national identity and Muslimness. As was mentioned chapter two and three, government discourse ties Muslimness to Kyrgyz national identity and promotes it as an integral part of every Kyrgyz citizen. Students are, however, starting to redefine their Islamic identity in a different way than government discourse does. Instead of tying their Islamic identity to their Kyrgyz identity, a majority of students is convinced that that they have to make a choice if they want say that they are Muslim. In this way, their Islamic identity becomes a signifier for a

personal religious identity rather than for an ethno-national identity. This process is visible in the remark of Nazgul, who explains that she still feels guilty to call herself a Muslim, even though she is Kyrgyz, was raised by religious parents and practice Islamic traditions. Before Nazgul start questioning her Islamic identity, she was an atheist. Now, after she researched Islam more on the internet, she is still not sure if she can call herself a Muslim. She says:

'I cannot say that I am a Muslim, without first studying it in details. (...) I feel guilty when I say that I am full Muslim. Maybe there are things that I haven't fully explored'.

This shift in the interpretation of Islamic identity was discussed in the literature review, where Borbieva (2009) argues that external discourses influence the local interpretations of Islam and provide new ideas about the issue of identity. As Borbieva writes, these discourses challenge 'the notion of Muslim-by-birth, asserting that 'Muslimness' is not primordial, inborn quality but a state of being that is constructed (and reconstructed) through action' (Borbieva, 2009: 20-21). Although it is not sure which discourses have influence on students, it is interesting to see that a convincing majority of students (14) are actually questioning the notion of 'Muslim-by-birth'. These students argue in their own way that it is not possible to call yourself a full Muslim if you are not practicing Islamic rituals or if you do not believe in God. Some students are quite disappointed in Kyrgyz Islam and think that Muslims should live according to Islamic law to claim their Islamic identity. Sultan, for example, thinks that Islam in Kyrgyzstan is not how it supposed to be. He no longer believes in the strong connection between his ethno-national identity and Islam and believes that you have to follow the rules to call yourself Muslim. He says:

'People believe that if you are born in Kyrgyz family, you would also automatically become a Muslim. I don't believe this anymore. (...) If you are a Muslim, you have to do everything. You have to follow the rules'.

What is interesting though, is that a majority of students emphasize in the beginning of the interview that they are not practicing Muslims who fully commit to the Islamic lifestyle. Students value Islam as an important part of their upbringing and of their culture, but in their answers they also underline that they cannot consider themselves fully Muslim since they are not religious enough. This shows that they follow a standard that dictates when someone can identify themselves as be a Muslim. Although some, like Emil, Aziza, Bermet and Mariam argue that they are automatically Muslims because they are Kyrgyz, many of the students differentiate between the concept of 'ethnic Muslims' and 'true' or 'real' Muslims. Fatima, for example, explained that she was brought up in a family where everyone was not religious and thus 'ethnic Muslim' but where eventually everyone started practicing Islam and thus became 'practicing Muslims'. Mariam believes that she is Muslim because her family is Muslim but she

also thinks that if you are a 'true Muslim' you have to do pray every day and read the Quran. Aibek, who tries to devote himself to an Islamic lifestyle, believes that he should practice more Islamic rituals to call himself a 'real' Muslim. According to him:

'Five years ago I could pray in my hometown, I was practicing every day, I was following all the traditions. Now, I am not a real Muslim, because of my lifestyle in Bishkek. (...) If you believe Islam you start practicing it. If you don't practice it, you don't believe in Islam'.

By differentiating between definitions of Muslimness, students try to show that there is a difference between a notion of Islamic identity that is connected to their ethno-national identity and a notion of Islamic identity that is more focused on believing and practice. In their own way of constructing their Islamic identity, students no longer draw solely on the discourses of the previous generation but are influenced by new ideas about Islam and about new prerequisites that are needed to call yourself a Muslim. In this way, the concept of believing and belonging that was constructed by McBrien (2017) is very much visible in the discourse that students voice. As mentioned before, McBrien identifies that new definitions of Islam define Islam as something that is based on believing instead of an ethno-national belonging. In her book, McBrien argues that the notion of believing is contradicting the notion of ethno-national belonging, which is an important part of the form of the Islam that Kyrgyz government is promoting. This is interesting to point out, since this means that a majority of respondents are starting to view Islam as a 'faith-oriented identity'. This does not necessarily mean that students are fully rejecting the notion of ethno-national belonging that the government promotes, but it does show that students are adapting new ideas about Islam that are contradicting state discourse

6.5 Tolerance towards Pre-Islamic Traditions

Chapter five showed that all twenty-four respondents are supportive of government attempts to protect Kyrgyz traditions against foreign influences. They are convinced that Kyrgyz traditions are part of their national identity and are therefore in favor of more government control. However, results from the interviews show that in their support of Kyrgyz traditions, some students are starting to differentiate between traditions that are compatible with Islam and traditions that contradict Islam. In reflecting on their traditions, these students are starting to reevaluate their opinion about Kyrgyz traditions and argue that the traditions that are based on pre-Islamic beliefs should not be practiced anymore by Kyrgyz people. This intolerance towards pre-Islamic traditions can thus be seen as the third important theme in student discourse that is different than what government discourse is promoting. Namely, a high

tolerance towards pre-Islamic traditions in Kyrgyz society. Several presidents have made it clear in public remarks that Islam in Kyrgyzstan is composed of different religious traditions and that Kyrgyz Muslims therefore should not criticize local customs. Former president Atambayev stressed the fact that Islam was adapted by the Kyrgyz people because it did not contradict 'local customs and traditions' and 'the worldview of the nomads'. In this way, the government differentiate between versions of 'good Islam' that tolerate pre-Islamic, nomadic customs and versions of 'bad Islam' that is propagating against these customs.

Almost all of the twenty-four students mention the important role that pre-Islamic traditions play in the religious life of their family members and friends. Although there are a lot of pre-Islamic rituals in Kyrgyz Islam, there were four important rituals that were mentioned by almost all of the students. This included; burning a juniper branch to cleanse oneself from bad luck (*archa*), tying a ribbon at a tree at holy sites (*mazars*) to receive luck or to pray to God, baking seven breads (*borsok*) to remember the deceased and to scare away evil spirits and the celebration of the Persian New Year (*nooruz*). Apart from that, some students also mention that their family members would visit fortune tellers and shamanistic healers. Due to the fact that these pre-Islamic rituals are important elements of Kyrgyz Islam, some students also mention that they often participate with these rituals themselves. Students would, for example, explain that their mothers bake seven breads or burn the juniper tree for them after an important event or that they visit a *mazar* with their family member to tie a ribbon at a tree. Aisulu, for example, says:

'We go there [mazar, MK] and ask something good from God. When we, for example, make a wish from the tree, there is nothing bad in this, it actually helps us. It is God's miracle. We have to do this, for comfort and for the benefit of us. (...) Our family is also going to these healers. This is typically Kyrgyz Islam, everything is so mixed'.

Similar to Aisulu, many students acknowledge that these rituals are an important part of their Kyrgyz tradition. Although many of them voice that they actually don't believe that these rituals work, thirteen of twenty-four students still argue that Kyrgyz people should keep celebrating these rituals and that they should protect these rituals from people who want to eradicate them. It also interesting to see that many of the students that support the pre-Islamic traditions would admit that they know that they are not Islamic traditions and that Islamic texts are actually prohibiting this. The fact that these rituals have a shamanistic or Tengriist nature is not a problem for them. As many of them argue, the fact that they are part of Kyrgyz tradition is an important reason to keep practicing them. Mariam and Azia, for example, admit that they know that Nooruz is not an Islamic holiday, but they both believe that Nooruz is a celebration that unifies the nation and that function as an event to remember Kyrgyz tradition. According to Ainura:

'I think that our traditions are not really Islamic. The burning of the juniper is not Islamic. My grandmother is going to mazars and to healers and fortune tellers, but this not Islamic. Still I think that we should not change I, but keep it. These rituals are important parts of our tradition'.

At the same time, while two respondents did not mention pre-Islamic rituals in their answers, nine of the twenty-four respondents believed that these pre-Islamic rituals are wrong and that they therefore should not be practiced by Muslims in Kyrgyzstan. Although the examples mentioned above show that the majority of the students share the government's perspective on pre-Islamic rituals, this shows that there is still a significant number of students who deviate from government discourse on the topic of pre-Islamic rituals. According to them, these rituals have shamanistic origins and they therefore argue Islam prohibits the practice of these ritual. Sultan, for example, voices that:

'I see that some people are combining traditions, but I don't think that you can combine these traditions with Islam. You must choose between the two. Or follow Islam, or choose the traditions'.

According to students, the fact that people practice these rituals is that they don't have enough knowledge about Islam or because they misunderstand the rules of Islam. Keres, Anara, Chingiz and Jyrgyal all argue that people should learn more about Islam in order to know which practices people can do according to Islamic rules. For Jyrgyal, the fact that she learned more about Islam from external sources led her to think differently about her own traditions. This also led to a situation where she differentiates herself from the form of Islam that her parents practice. She says:

'My mother goes to these fortune tellers, and she also does this stuff to me. I say to my mother: I don't like this stuff. You have to stick to one God and not go to these other places to worship other things'.

While some students are, similar to Jyrgal, willing to confront their family members and friends on things that they consider as contradicting Islam, other students have been outspoken against pre-Islamic rituals but are still also quite acceptive of practices that their friends and family members do. According to them, it is a personal choice to reject the traditions and to choose for a cleaner form of Islam. Chingiz rejects pre-Islamic rituals but also argues that it 'if people want to celebrate it, it is their own choice'. Anara believes that it is not wrong to visit *mazars* as long as it is not contradicting Islam. In this, both students make a clear distinction between traditions and shamanistic rituals, but also try to balance between the two sides.

6.6 Conclusion

Concluding from the points that were discussed in this chapter, there are few important observations that can be made. First, it is very interesting to see that half of the students express the desire to learn more about Islam through external sources. Although some of these students portray themselves as Muslims that are not religious, they still express the desire to learn more about Islam and to search for more knowledge. It is also interesting to see that Chubak azhy Zhalilov was mentioned by a large number of students as one of the most important sources. Although he made some controversial remarks, students are apparently still willing to listen to him, which shows that he has considerable influence among different parts of the society. In this way, both foreign as domestic preachers can thus pose threat to the form of Islam that the government promotes. Second, the fact the majority of students are questioning the linkage between ethno-national identity and Muslimness means that the majority of students are reconstructing their Islamic identity as a 'faith-oriented identity'. Similar to what Borbieva (2009) and McBrien (2017) argue, these students are no longer convinced that they are Muslim-by-birth but they argue that Muslimness is a personal choice, which is based on believing and practice. In this process, a deviation from government discourse can be identified but also a difference with the perception of Muslimness by the older generation. The examples in this chapter therefore show how external sources can contribute to a generational difference. Third, although a majority of the students argue that pre-Islamic rituals should be protected, a significant number of students are convinced that this is contradicting Islam. Although it is difficult to analyze the influence of external sources, this shows that the discourse of foreign groups and other interpretations of Islam are visible in the remarks by students. Although this does not mean that students are fully rejecting the notion of Islam that the government promotes, it does show that students are influenced by new ideas about Islam that are contradicting state discourse. In this way, by using the concepts of Borbieva and McBrien, this chapter demonstrates that Kyrgyz students are not only influenced by government discourse but also by external discourses. In this process, they are balancing between their Kyrgyz identity and Islamic identity and constantly reconstructing their Islamic identity on the basis of multiple interpretations.

7. Conclusion

This thesis focused on the central question: *do the perceptions of students align with arguments in state discourse regarding the role of Islam in contemporary Kyrgyzstan?* Based on analysis of government discourse from a top-down perspective and a bottom-up perspective, this thesis concludes that perceptions of the majority of students that are interviewed in this research are aligning with major themes in government discourse. In this way, most students are perceiving the role of Islam and the role of the government in a similar manner as government discourse portrays it to be. However, as this final chapter will conclude, students are also influenced by ideas that are promoted by external discourses, which influences them to reconstruct their Islamic identity in a different way that government discourse does.

Similar to the approach of other Central Asian states, Islam has been the dominant religion in Kyrgyzstan for many centuries which makes it easier for the state to use it as part of their policy to promote an ethno-national identity. For many Kyrgyz, their Islamic identity is inseparably connected with their Kyrgyz identity due to the fact that local norms and values are incorporated in Islamic tradition. As analysis of state discourse has shown, the Kyrgyz state is using these 'folkloristic' parts of the Islamic tradition in Kyrgyzstan to promote a typically 'Kyrgyz' form of Islam. By emphasizing the traditional and historical connection between Kyrgyz traditions and Islam, the state instrumentalizes Islam as a tool in national-building project and boosts the role of the Kyrgyz state in safeguarding Islam against foreign threats. The four themes that are identified in state policy and state narrative clearly support this goal by propagandizing 'traditional Kyrgyz Islam', by condemning foreign forms of Islam and legitimizing government policies in the religious sphere. Moreover, by closer looking at the way that state discourse promotes Kyrgyz Islam and applies a 'discourse of danger', it can additionally also be argued that the state decides which practices are 'correct' and which practices should be abandoned. By offering 'correct' religious knowledge and monitoring Islamic clergy and Islamic organization, the state tries to protect moderate, apolitical forms of Islam from the influences from 'extremist', foreign forms of Islam. In this way, analysis of state discourse shows that the secular Kyrgyz Republic is not only promoting Islam but actually positioning itself as a religious authority that can protect Kyrgyz Islam that is based on the Hanafi school of Islam.

This same process of the instrumentalization of Islam is also visible in the approach of religion in other Central Asian states. What is unique for Kyrgyzstan however is that it is always been quite tolerant towards new religious movements and to the influx of new religious ideas. By

stimulating a 'marketplace of ideas', Kyrgyzstan was historically a place where there was opportunity for new religious ideas to be introduced. External discourses from transnational Islamic movements have led to more Islamic knowledge and a renewed interest in Islam among the Kyrgyzstani population and influences from foreign forms of Islam have contributed to the rise in popularity of Islamic clothing and Islamic practices. As several scholars argue, there is currently a revival of Islamic practices and ideas, which also leads to discussions about Islamic ideas in the public sphere (Montgomery, 2016; McBrien, 2017). In this process, multiple sources and religious authorities are voicing contradicting discourses that relate to topics around Kyrgyz traditions, religious identity and national identity. Local traditions are, in this way, questioned about their compatibility with Islamic rules and Kyrgyz Muslims are challenged to rethink their Islamic identity and the way that they practice religious traditions. This means that the notion of Islam in state discourse is also being challenged by external discourses and thus also pose threat to the state in their position as religious authority. For Kyrgyzstani citizens, these new ideas can be disorienting since they not only introduce new ideas about Islam but also introduce new demands for the construction of an Islamic identity.

Practically all of the students that are interviewed in this research identify the influence of foreign Islam on the religious sphere and the Islamization that is taking place in Kyrgyzstan. They acknowledge the fact that the role Islam has rapidly grown in the last five years. Many of them underline the fact that especially the young generation is becoming more interested in Islam and that an Islamic identity is promoted as 'trendy'. Although there could be several factors that could explain this observation, this acknowledgement lines up with what the argument of scholars that write that the young generation is becoming increasingly religious (Myrzabekova, 2014; Montgomery, 2016, McBrien, 2017). This also confirms the importance to interview the young generation about their view of the role of Islam in Kyrgyz society and their opinion about contemporary developments in the religious sphere.

By comparing the four themes that were mentioned in state discourse with the arguments that respondents provided during interviews, this thesis identified two major perspectives in the students' view of the role of Islam in contemporary society. The first perspective aligns with the arguments that are mentioned in government discourse and show how a majority of students are acknowledging the importance of a 'traditional Kyrgyz Islam' and unique position of the secular state to safeguard this particular form of Islam. In this perspective, the majority of students align with the government discourse on the topic of traditional Kyrgyz Islam, religious clothing, religious extremism and religious education. Similar to state discourse, the majority of students view the influences of foreign Islam as potential threats that could only be contained by government control of religious affairs. This is important to recognize, since it shows that students rely on the government to control and police public Islam in Kyrgyzstan.

In their view on contemporary religious affairs, students use the same arguments as the 'discourse of danger' that the government promotes in state discourse. Although this thesis cannot prove that respondents are directly or indirectly influenced by state discourse, the points that are mentioned above show that a majority of the respondents reflect the main arguments in government approach towards Islam. This means that the students' perceptions of Islam for the most part echo state discourse.

The second perspective of respondents, however, reflect that students are reconstructing their Islamic identity and are adapting interpretations of Islam that are different than the form Islam that state discourse promotes. It is interesting to see that half of the students are expressing the desire to learn more about Islam and that a large number of students are learning from sources that are deemed unfit by government discourse. This means that there is a potential that students are influenced by external sources in their adaptation of new interpretations of Islam, which is also a development that is voiced by scholars (Borbieva, 2009; Montgomery, 2016). New interpretations of Islam have led to discussions between Kyrgyz Muslims about the question on what 'right Islam' is. Using the framework of McBrien (2017), this thesis shows that the majority of respondents are gradually viewing their Islamic identity as a 'faith oriented identity' that is based on believing instead of building their identity on the ethno-national belonging. As previously argued, this does not mean that students are rejecting the strong connection between Kyrgyz national tradition and Islam, as is promoted in state discourse, but it does show that students are starting to believe that an Islamic lifestyle involves a personal choice and commitment. This same factor is also visible in the fact that a number of students are questioning the compatibility between Islamic rules and Kyrgyz traditions. Students consider Kyrgyz traditions as important parts of their national identity, as long as they do not contradict Islamic rules.

To conclude, this thesis shows that the importance of Islam is not going to diminish in the next few years. In contrary, the influence of external discourses and the instrumentalization of Islam by the government demonstrates that the number of discussions about Islam will only increase. This thesis argues that a majority of students are concerned about the fact that a growing number of people is starting to radicalize, and they therefore support the government in controlling and policing religious practices. The notion of 'traditional Kyrgyz Islam' and the topic of radicalism and extremism therefore proves to be valuable tools for the Kyrgyzstani government to justify their actions against religious groups to protect Kyrgyz Islam. However, external discourses promote different interpretations of Islam which leads to students constantly balancing between different perceptions about the significance of their Islamic identity and the notion of Kyrgyz Islam. Therefore, the theory of 'balanced existence' that Maria Louw (2013) proposes in her work about Islamic identity in Kyrgyzstan, applies to this specific

case. At the one hand, students echo the narrative of 'Islam as a threat' that is dominant in state discourse but at the other hand they also acknowledge their desire to learn more from external discourse and their process of reconstructing their Islamic identity. Only time can tell if the Kyrgyz government can continue to successfully mobilize Islam to strengthen a Kyrgyz identity and national unity, or if external discourse will eventually break down the authoritative position of the Kyrgyz government.

The research for this thesis only focused on state discourse and field research among students in Bishkek. Further research must therefore be conducted to provide more understanding and different insights. First, it would be interesting to further research the influence of external discourses and to provide a better understanding of the ideas that these discourses spread. In this way, better comparisons between state discourse and external discourses can be made. Secondly, since all field research was conducted in Bishkek, further research should be done in other parts of Kyrgyzstan. Respondents in the south of Kyrgyzstan could provide different examples than respondents in the north. Moreover, since Bishkek represents an urban environment, it is also recommended to interview respondents from smaller villages. Thirdly, this research only focused on ethnic Kyrgyz students that are Muslim. Another interesting factor could be to include representatives from different ethnic groups, such as the Uzbeks, Uyguys or Dungans and other religious groups, such as Christians, Buddhists etc. Finally, since this thesis only focused on students, it would be valuable to include the older generation in the research and to compare between the perceptions of the older generation and the younger generation to provide a better picture of the role of Islam in Kyrgyzstan.

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Appendix

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Alias</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Place of origin</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Programme</i>
1.	Aibek	Male	18	Jalal-Abad region	Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University	Academy of music
2.	Bermet	Female	18	Bishkek region	Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University	International Relations
3.	Gulnara	Female	19	Issyk-Kul region	Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University	Translation Studies
4.	Anara	Female	22	Bishkek region	Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University	Islamic Theology
5.	Aziza	Female	18	Jalal-Abad region	Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University	English Language and Literature.
6.	Kauhar	Female	18	Osh region	Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University	English Language and Literature.
7.	Karina	Female	19	Bishkek region	Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University	International Relations
8.	Jyrgal	Female	18	Bishkek region	Ala-too International University	Finance and Credit
9.	Nazgul	Female	22	Talas region	American University of Central Asia	Journalism and Mass Communication
10.	Chingiz	Male	18	Osh region	American University of Central Asia	Software Engineering
11.	Jamiliya	Female	20	Bishkek region	American University of Central Asia	International Business Law
12.	Saikal	Female	22	Issyk-Kul region	American University of Central Asia	Journalism and Mass Communication
13.	Emil	Male	22	Talas region	American University of Central Asia	International Business Law

14.	Baktigul	Female	21	Talas region	American University of Central Asia	International Business Law
15.	Keres	Female	21	Jalal-Abad region	American University of Central Asia	International and Comparative Politics
16.	Fatima	Female	21	Osh region	American University of Central Asia	International and Comparative Politics
17.	Aisulu	Female	20	Batken region	Kyrgyz National University	German Linguistics
18.	Sultan	Male	19	Bishkek region	Kyrgyz National University	International Relations
19.	Alima	Female	19	Bishkek region	Kyrgyz National University	International Relations
20.	Benoka	Female	19	Jalal-Abad region	Kyrgyz National University	International Relations
21.	Macha	Female	20	Batken region	Kyrgyz National University	Marketing
22.	Mairam	Female	20	Bishkek region	Kyrgyz National University	International Relations
23.	Ainura	Female	19	Bishkek region	Kyrgyz National University	Journalism
24.	Timurbek	Male	19	Talas region	Kyrgyz National University	Computer programming