# Online Discourses in Post-Soviet Media: The Threat of the Islamic State in Central Asia

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*Rano Turaeva* | orcid: 0000-0002-4657-3619 Dr.,
Ludwig-Maximilians- Institut für Ethnologie, München
Universität München, Germany *r.turaeva@gmail.com*

**Abstract**

This article contributes to the growing field of social media and internet research, focusing on questions of securitization and examining the internet politics of Central Asia with a specific focus on Turkmenistan. The article extends the brief analysis introduced by Tucker and Turaeva (2016) concerning Turkmen nationals joining IS (Islamic State). Here, I have contextualized those reported discussions into a wider geopolitical and sociological positioning of the participants (both individual and states) with the aim of uncovering the methods and principles that state and non-state actors use to construct discourses of threat and danger on social media and elsewhere on the internet. I argue that social media and the internet have moved beyond being a means for open communication and exchange; they have also come to be used by authoritarian states to suppress, control, and manipulate certain discourses. In the case of Turkmenistan, social media helps to control security discourse about the ISIS threat and the presence of Turkmenistani nationals in the group, even as it grants open access to information.

**Keywords**

online discourse – Turkmenistan – IS and security – Central Asia

## 1 Online Post-Soviet Security Discourse: Introduction

The geopolitical reconfigurations that accompanied the fall of the Soviet Union have taken place alongside accelerated globalization, internet penetration, and

opening of the virtual world. Social media platforms have transformed social relations, status systems, and power relations through flattening hierarchies and blurring boundaries (Tucker et al. 2017). Citizen journalism has opened novel opportunities and challenges, but in addition to the democratic progress and freedoms granted through the opening of virtual opportunities, there have been also growing security concerns about the misuse of open access to data. Authoritarian governments have certainly sought opportunities to exercise control through social media and the internet (Anceschi 2015; Baev 2006; Beissinger 2017).

A post-Soviet legacy in the relation of states and media across Central Asia is clear. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, power over information and power over discourse fully belonged to the state (Imamova 2015). Moreover, these powers were located geographically and politically in Moscow, and more generally in Russia. The new Russian state inherited much of the Soviet state's power after the latter's collapse in the early 1990s (Laruelle 2010; Freire 2009; Kuzio 2002). Thus, even in the new states of Central Asia, Russia exercises disproportionate authority and dominance in many domains (Laruelle 2015). In particular, its dominance is clear in local security discourses (Peyrouse, Boonstra and Laruelle 2012; Horsman 2005). In this article, I show how actors and authors within the Russian-language internet participate in the creation of what Foucault (2002: 30) would call a "discursive totality."[1] Online articles and informational sources, as well as social media platforms operating in Russian, link knowledge to power through the shared vector of language; this knowledge pertains to the presence and operation of IS (within and outside Turkmenistan). What is written and spoken in Russian has the power to make itself true beyond any constraints of evidence or data. By linking power to knowledge, according to Foucault, knowledge "not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to *make itself true*" (Hall 1997: 76).

Concerning the recruitment of Turkmen nationals to IS, Russian media and state-funded information operations have actively maintained the narrative that IS recruitment takes place within the territory of Turkmenistan. Indeed, they often claim that Turkmenistani citizens constitute the largest proportion of Central Asian militants fighting in IS in Syria and Afghanistan (Knyazev 2015; Dubnov 2013). The discussions around the article published by Knyazev (2015) and by Dubnov (2013) on the IS threat in Turkmenistan in public virtual spaces show how "facts" presented in "authoritative" Russian sources become very difficult to contest in any other regional language, even when it is clear that the original facts may be largely anecdotal, spurious, or impressionistic. Although Dubnov is only one among many authors to address this topic, his

1 I will explain the concepts and approaches of Foucault on discourse later in this paper.

article caused widespread discussion and critique. In his article, Dubnov criticized the Turkmen government and society for being incapable of establishing facts about – or fighting – terrorism at home.

More broadly, in this paper, I examine the processes of discourse formation at different levels – political, scholarly, and web-based – focusing on security and terrorism in and around Turkmenistan.[2] My analysis is drawn from various sources of information, discussions, and scholarly texts in many different formats: online publications including speeches of political leaders, briefs, blogs, academic and non-academic books and articles, and other analytical pieces; group discussions on YouTube, MoyMir, Odnoklassniki, Ertir.com, and Facebook (FB); and individual conversations that took place via messaging applications (Line and IMO in the period of 2016–2020). The conversations were in the Russian and Turkmen languages, both of which I speak. The forum discussions were open and public. For all non-public and private communications, research ethics were followed, and consent was secured informally.[3]

The paper is organized in the following manner. First, I briefly discuss the methodological issues concerning the online research. Then I introduce the media landscape of Runet (internet domains hosted in or by Russia as .Ru sites, typically also in the Russian language) in the post-Soviet online space. Furthermore, I outline the security discourses online in Central Asia focusing on Turkmenistan, in Russia and academic writings. The popular discourse around the same themes will be considered in a detailed manner. Finally, I directly apply Foucauldian understanding of discourse, power, and truth to highlight the links between "truth" and "knowledge" that have been developing around questions of security and IS in Turkmenistan since 2010.

## 2 Conducting Research on the Internet and Social Media: Methodology

To collect the data for this article, I mainly used qualitative methods of online research, and followed a hermeneutical approach to the analysis of the collected texts, applying discourse analysis. Online ethnography was the leading

2 For a similar discourse analysis of Tajik citizens joining IS, see Lemon (2015).

3 Informal consent was given verbally at the beginning of any private conversations and those chats were not saved due to the respondents' wishes. We agreed with all informants that our conversations would contribute to my general knowledge without reference to individual talk. For the public forums, all discussions were anonymous, participation was open, and I did not announce myself but rather participated anonymously like all other participants. All the estimations, numbers, and group names with their descriptions are the result of online research. Unless a source for an estimate is given, I have compiled it myself.

method of data collection. I followed Foucauldian discourse analysis as a method in my analysis of the data I collected online.

For Foucault, discourse is "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment" (Hall 1992: 291). Foucault (2002: 30) argues that discourse influences how ideas are put into practice as well as being powerful to govern "the conduct of others"; Foucault (ibid: 31) draws attention to the importance of considering the "discursive totality" when analyzing any discursive events. Foucault defines discursive totality as a system of thought which is "beyond the statements themselves the intention of the speaking subject, his conscious activity, what he meant, or, again, the unconscious activity that took place, despite himself, in what he said or in the almost imperceptible fracture of his actual words". Furthermore, he (Foucault ibid: 31) states: "in any case, we must reconstitute another discourse, rediscover the silent murmuring, the inexhaustible speech that animates from within the voice that one hears, reestablish the tiny, invisible text that runs between and sometimes collides with them. The analysis of thought is always allegorical in relation to the discourse that it employs." The concept of discursive totality is central to the understanding of discourse and its power. Discursive totality explains not only how discourses are formed but also what discourses do, taking both the said and the unsaid into consideration when analyzing any discourse (Foucault 2002: 31). Foucault explains discursive totality a long process where "the analysis of discourse operates between the twin poles of totality and plethora" furthermore stating that "the different texts" "refer to one another, organize themselves into a single figure, converge with institutions and practices, and carry meanings that may be common to a whole period" (Foucault 2002: 133–134). Explaining elements of the totality he states that "[e]ach element considered is taken as the expression of the totality to which it belongs and whose limits it exceeds." The elements take diverse forms such as spoken, unspoken, written unwritten, as well as practices and institutions beyond what we would consider as narrative (Foucault 2002: 133–134).

Social media research is a growing field (Vatrapu et al. 2014; Hewson et al. 2003; Cantijoch, Gibson and Ward 2014; Chadwick and Howard 2009). I made use of practical recommendations from methodologies of online research (Chadwick and Howard 2009; Compaine 2001) as well as ethnographic methods for studying so-called 'online communities' (Markham 2005; Androutsopoulos 2008). The combination of online research methods with some follow-up meetings offline with contacts from previous field research enabled me to achieve greater depth on certain questions such unsaid parts of

the same discourse. I also pursued follow-up discussions via mobile messaging applications such as Line, Telegram, and WhatsApp.

Although there is some literature on new methods of doing online ethnography and qualitative research online, there are still unanswered questions about how researchers perceive a person without the benefit of physical presence; physical presence allows one to gauge the authenticity of responses and interpret their context with physical referents (James and Busher 2006; Hine 2000). Interactive discussions are even more challenging than one-on-one exchanges when it comes to questions of trust, reliability, and bias, even though they offer advantages (particularly on sensitive topics) to both the researcher and the interlocutors in terms of anonymity, flexibility, and access. To some degree, various media address these issues with their requirements for registration, and combining several platforms to conduct research overcomes the weaknesses inherent to any one particular platform. Ertir.com allows one to enter any discussions without prior registration, whereas VKontakte, MoyMir, FB, and Line do not allow this. That is why I have used several of these platforms. It is also why my analysis includes texts, video, and audio material as supplementary data.

Digital divides are a crucial aspect of online research. The lack of infrastructure is an important factor for internet access, particularly in rural areas. "Free" access to the internet is hardly universal. In Turkmenistan, it is very clear that some individuals have more access to the internet and social media than others. Such factors as internet price (which was very high in Turkmenistan until 2019),[4] filtering of information and blocking by security officials, pressure from officials towards internet users, language barriers, knowledge about internet architecture, and the ability to distinguish informational sources on the internet affect access, as well as choice and content of discourse online.

In addition to combining several methodologies, my research benefitted from a longstanding familiarity with Turkmenistan since I have relatives and friends living there. I spent considerable time in Turkmenistan during the years 1974–2006. In 2005–2006, I conducted interview-based research on other topics, and I have continued to visit relatives as well as remaining in contact with friends in Turkmenistan.

4 Turkmentelekom (state agency providing communication services nationwide) made a new offer for internet use of 512Kbit/s for 250 Turkmen Manat (58 Euro) and 2Mbit/s for 350 Turkmen Manat (about 81 Euro). GDP per capita for 2018 was 6,967 USD. See Telekom price list: https://telecom.tm/ru/internet [accessed on December 11, 2020].

## 3 Post-Soviet Online Communities: A Virtual World

The Russian language serves as a main medium for communication across the post-Soviet space (and well beyond). The online space includes prominent social networking platforms (in addition to Facebook and LinkedIn) such as MoyMir ("my world"), Odnoklassniki ("classmates"), VKontakte, and Line. The most popular search platforms (similar to Google or MSN) are Yandex and Mail.ru. Yandex has even expanded to the global transportation infrastructure such as taxi services, food services and the like available in Russian. These social networking platforms offer space for Russian-speaking users to connect with wider networks, share information, meet new people online, communicate, play games, and do business. Depending on the national identity, education, and age of users, they find some topics more interesting than others.

Political engagement and active information-sharing on such topics as terrorism, ongoing conflicts, and security are not necessarily the most common activities among users from Turkmenistan or other Central Asian countries. Rather, engaging around topics such as beauty, health, entertainment, holidays, and dating tends to be more prominent. Indeed, most users turn to the internet to connect with family members abroad in Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Europe, and the USA (Urinboyev 2017). The following applications are the most popular for transnational connections: Line, Imo, Telegram, Chaton, Viber, and WhatsApp. Line and Imo are the most popular platforms, because they offer messaging and voice calls as well as a social networking platform similar to FB on which one can post pictures and status updates and receive comments.

The fear of being involved in current politics or openly discussing domestic problems manifests offline and still exists online. Such a lack of political participation in the post-Soviet space characterizes not only Turkmenistan, but also other Central Asian countries such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Freedman, Shafer and Antonova 2010; Kendzior 2015; Bowe, Freedman and Blom 2012; The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights 2014). In online research, the avoidance of the "political" can be observed even in users' reluctance to answer very basic questions about the prices of food items, the content of newspapers and TV programs, or means of transportation connecting cities. Unless one comes to these questions in another "natural" conversation, these topics – like any direct question concerning very basic functions of everyday life – are treated with caution. More often than not, citizens assume they are being surveilled and self-censor accordingly. In the times of pandemic where Turkmenistan still has not recognized the presence of the virus in the country (2021) my own relatives would not use the word corona and describe their sickness to the family as something "unusually heavy flu lasting longer than usual

flu". To our questions about how it is with virus there would be no real answers even within the private family conversations. Only Turkmens living outside of Turkmenistan would report about the conditions in Turkmenistan within private discussions face to face.

Turkmenistan rates very low on the freedoms of speech and the press, and those who dare to speak against the regime are harshly punished. In the Committee to Protect Journalists' most recent list of the ten most-censored countries, Turkmenistan ranks third after North Korea (The Committee to Protect Journalists 2019).

Strict censorship policies are openly announced in the form of warnings in schools, at internet cafes, and to mobile phone users before SIM card purchases. To obtain a SIM card, a customer has to provide a passport and other personal details and to sign documents agreeing to follow the rules of using the internet "safely." This means that mobile users in Turkmenistan have to go through a complete identity check and provide all kinds of personal information, including local address registration. As the majority of users from Turkmenistan access the internet with their smartphones or tablets from their registered SIM cards, they receive a clear message from the outset about the possibilities for surveillance: "we have all your information, so watch what you do with your smartphone on the internet."

Some social media sites provide further messages about the possibility of surveillance. The popular Moymir, Odnoklassniki, and VKontakte sites are similar to FB in their terms of use and registration rules, and until recently, their main distinction was that they are Russian-language services. Recently, however, these sites have begun to require a telephone number to confirm the account unlike FB, which does not require a phone number for registration. Moreover, Ertir.com – a public platform for Turkmen speakers – did not require registration. That website was blocked in 2017, and it is hard for users to believe that there is no connection between the site's relative freedom and its closure.[5]

### 3.1 *Internet Penetration and Social Media in Turkmenistan*

All of this is to say that although social media has become a very strong tool for communication, networking, maintaining social status at home, financial transactions, and entertainment, it is not a particularly strong locus for political activity. Users self-censor, and they are also censored. Still, the state (as well

5 Ertir was active from 2009–2017, so I made use of it in my research. One could enter this forum anonymously, and discussion occurred in a public domain. There was also an option for private chats, which I used to introduce myself and my work.

as members of society) finds justification in censorship from the sheer growth in internet-based communication. The potentially "uncontrollable" nature of online space motivates the pre-emptive control over it.

In Turkmenistan, as in other authoritarian states, media is monopolized by the government, and the internet serves as a means to exercise even more control over citizens outside national boundaries (Bohr 2016; Beissinger 2017). As Tucker and Turaeva state: "[t]he flattening or democratizing effect of social media can be effectively countered when a powerful actor uses the medium to flood the information environment with distorted or deliberately falsified information to advance its own political ends" (Tucker and Turaeva 2016: 7).

Annette Bohr (2016: 53) argued that internet and media is totally controlled, often through "old-fashioned censorship of state media to cyber-attacks" as well as using "internet and text message surveillance and filtering"; she noted that "servers registered to the Ministry of Communications operated software that allowed it to record Voice over Internet Protocol conversations, turn on cameras and microphones and log keystrokes" (Bohr 2016: 53). OpenNet research on the degree of filtration of the internet and communication found that Central Asia has the highest degree of filtration of the internet and communications. Turkmenistan itself has been assessed as substantially filtrated (Bowe, Freedman and Blom 2012: 150).

According to World Stats, Turkmenistan users of fixed internet access points (e.g., computers) increased from 0.1% to 14.9% of the population between 2000–2016. Internet penetration statistics from 2020 report 1,562,794 internet users in December 2020, a 25.5% penetration rate, and 140,000 Facebook subscribers in December 2020, which accounts for 2.3% penetration. This is a large number of total users (6.1 million in 2020) (World Internet Penetration 2021), and in global terms, it is a comparatively large increase during these years. Moreover, according to the International Telecommunication Union, there are 146 users of mobile phones per 100 inhabitants.[6] Thus, potential internet access significantly exceeds the number of physical users in the country.

Still, the thorough normalization of surveillance in Turkmenistan, rooted in government fears of the potential for online activism, seems hard to explain based on trends in online usage when Turkmenistan is considered in regional perspective. People do use the internet, and in large numbers.

As indicated above, the main driver for internet-based applications across Central Asia is the desire for a less expensive way to communicate with family members abroad, in Russia and elsewhere, who are primarily working as labor

6 Internet Live Stats, www.InternetLiveStats.com. Elaboration of data by International Telecommunication Union (ITU), World Bank, and United Nations Population Division.

migrants. Compared to other Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan sends few labor migrants to Russia – only 185,620 people reported in 2020 which is considerable for Turkmenistan taking into account its small population size (Diaspora Engagement Mapping Turkmenistan 2020). Majority of Turkmen labour migrants are in Turkey. Still, the use of social networking (and the internet more broadly) as an extended social space is relatively low.

Even though well over 5 million people access the internet in Turkmenistan, none of the social media platforms come close to attracting even half a million users. The most popular social networking platform among Russian speakers is VK (VKontakte). Across Russian-language space, the network boasts more than 100 million active users.[7] In Turkmenistan, it records only 262,832 people (48,371 are from Ashgabad); 103,083 are women (who would normally be presumed to be less politically active than men). There are 9,467 groups created in VKontakte that are based in Turkmenistan. The next most popular group is the one which is actively promoting Islam with some political/ideological elements often anti-western but with the group name 'Lovers,' where most of the postings are in Russian and only some in Turkmen; next is also a "love" group that discusses relationships and romance but not in religious terms like the previous group, and also in Russian with modern pictures of couples. All the other remotely popular groups center on sport, art (film media), jokes, and relationships and romance; there is also the pro-Turkmenistan news agency which "shows only the best news from Turkmenistan," as well as a Turkmenistan country promotion group.[8]

Ertir.com, which was founded in 2009 and shut down in 2017,[9] had 8,000 reading members (statistics on the number of reads) with an average of 120–140 actively posting members. The majority of the population of this platform was based in Turkmenistan, judging from the content of their postings and conversations. Blogs and discussions were divided into topics such as general conversations, love, literature, news, technology, education, sport, jokes, interesting information, support needed, health, religious believers, online tasks, conversations, travel, business, expressions of congratulations, and history. For Ertir's size, the topics were very well followed and widely discussed – for example, "Religion" had more than 1,400 entries between 2009–2016, with an

7 The Russian language stopped being an official state language in May 1990, but it is still popular among urban populations and generations who used it before 1990. For an analysis of the importance of the Russian language in Turkmenistan, see Cabar.Asia (2019).

8 The group can be found at http://vk.com/club1168601.

9 Although the original website Ertir.com is blocked, its pages on VK and FB remain open; the VK page has 11,767 members, with last entrance is made in 2016 and in FB in 2014. www.ertir.com.

annual entry of 150–200 new posts, and each entry was read by several thousand members. The most discussed topics were "religion" and "health." Health carried similar statistics as religion, but all other topics had only 15 to 25 postings per year, though these too were widely read.

MoyMir, and with it, Mail.ru, provides a free email service, news, and other services including a Facebook-like social networking platform. MoyMir has a total of more than 2 million users according to the RUnet statistics,[10] but it is not clear how many are in Turkmenistan. Some indication might come from its groups: there are groups such as "Turkmens abroad" with 11,064 members, Znakomstva/Dating (3,006 members), WorldTurkmen (1,909 members), Turkmenia turkmens in Turkmenistan (573 members), another group for Turkmens abroad (1,370 members), as well as others such as Halqabad okuvchi ("pupils of a school in Halqabad"), and the like. As with the other sites, the overall number of users is far lower than the number of people accessing the internet in Turkmenistan. Moreover, the groups formed by Turkmens tend to be passive, with random comments and questions but few extended discussions.

## 4 Security Discourse and IS Threat in Central Asia

Discourse about the possible radicalization of youth and the IS threat is not only relevant to Turkmenistan. It is also a *localized* one, present at the forefront of a global political agenda in general and a hotly debated issue particularly with respect to social media and online communication platforms (Conway and McInerney 2008; Omotoyinbo 2014). Islam (religious practice) and political Islam (religious ideology) are generally major concerns for Central Asian governments and those of states neighboring the post-Soviet region. Governments in Russia or in Central Asia (more in Central Asia do not differentiate between Islam as practiced religion and political Islam where extremist political formations use Islam as basis for their political activities. The growing discontent of Central Asians (at home and as migrants), coupled with conflicts in the Middle East, has further pushed the question of Islamic radicalization to the forefront of everyday and political discussions. The IS threat is deemed to be not only next door, but also at home. Yet, as I have shown above, online *discussion* of such threats is quite restricted as a consequence of censorship, self-censorship, and a lack of interest. Nevertheless, the perception of threat is created through, among other avenues, online media – as I will show below.

10 Ratings on the runet statistics can be found at http://www.liveinternet.ru/rating/ru/.

Before I proceed, it is important to draw attention to the degree to which discourses of "security" and "securitization" convincingly construct the perception of threat, often with little recourse to facts or figures. As other authors have shown (Balzacq 2010; Buzan 1991; Dalby 1997; Nyman and Burke 2016), "security" is invoked as a blanket term to summarize complex situations connected with threats, but the term is so widely used that its actual meanings and parameters are easy to contest. Furthermore, the invocation of "security" raises ethical issues, if only because the term carries such a strong negative connotation that it can be misused both by politicians and scholars without having any analytical potential (Nyman and Burke 2016). Security discourses can also create new problems: Aradau (2008), alongside the other authors who offer negative interpretations of securitizing discourse (Nyman and Burke 2016), has argued that security implies exclusion and produces a negative outcome for those who are targeted as a source of threat. Thus, when security discourses become omnipresent, one must take care to distinguish *real* threats from those that are only *perceived* (Horsman 2005).

In Turkmenistan, there are various actors who participate in discourse formation. Alongside "security," "threat" is one of the most popular catchwords. It is invoked to describe war, escalating environmental disasters, and many manifestations of uncertainty. In Central Asia, there are many such "threats." The relevant actors participating in the formation of the mainstream discourses are international organizations, local and national governments (notably, Russia and China), and people (as individuals and as organized groups). All these actors have their own agendas and interests behind their formulations to advance political agendas, gain influence, preserve authority and power, and raise concerns about a safe future (Simons 2006; Omelicheva 2016; Wilson 2005).

This article also assumes divisions between different levels of discourses. Two levels are most important: political discourse (i.e., a level of discourse where such actors as experts, journalists, scholars, and politicians play a leading role) and public discourse (which takes place on the ground among lay people). Drawing a distinction between academic discourse and political discourse is difficult in this case. Public and political discourses are linked through the initiatives of more educated and politically conscious members of the normal forums, as I will establish in a moment in the context of discourse around Turkmens joining IS.

Local scholars and experts in Central Asia have expressed concerns about Russia's and others' role in manipulating or creating the discourse of threat to the region with strategic interest (Bogatyrev 2016; Ibragimova 2016). Within this spectrum of interests and agendas, it is difficult to distinguish between

real and perceived threats. Therefore, I will not go into much detail about individual political agendas and interests; in any case, this has been done by others (Azami 2016; Karagiannis 2016; Lipovsky 2016; Tatari and Shaykhutdinov 2016; Megoran 2011; Lewis 2016).

Nevertheless, the result of such linking of political and public discourses is that online *discourse* on the topic of threats from the Islamic State in the region is enormous. Prior to any in-depth analysis of the existing texts, I will present a numeric picture of the presence of the topic on the net. The most widely used search engine for the Russian-language internet platform is Yandex.ru; the key word combination 'угроза центральной азии' (from the Russian, "threat to Central Asia") yielded six million results (December 2021). It is interesting to note that the same key word combination in Google (also typed in Cyrillic) gave only 1,190,000 results. The comparison helps to underscore the intensity of the local, rather than localized, discourse. Similar results – several million search hits – also appear on Yandex for the keywords 'региональная безопасность центральная азия' ("regional security Central Asia") as well as 'безопасность центральная азия' ("Security Central Asia"). Worth noting is that the key word combination 'игил центральная азия' ("IS Central Asia") gave 665,000 in 2013 and five million in 2021 results in Yandex, whereas Google gave 454,000 results in 2013 and 144,000 in 2021. Here, the local and localized discourses might be considered to be more closely aligned.

For the Central Asian states and others concerned with the region's security, the numbers of citizens recruited from each country to the Islamic State is a significant issue (Tucker and Turaeva 2016). Though the question is very sensitive, critical, and hotly debated, what seems clear is that Central Asians are most likely to be recruited to IS from outside the region. Strict security provisions within the Central Asian countries deter truly local recruitment. However, labor migrants working outside of Central Asia can be vulnerable to the false promises of IS recruiters that might free them from the slave-like conditions they face outside their home country. The number of Turkmen nationals living in Russia is estimated to be 185,620 people as of 2020 (Diaspora Engagement Mapping Turkmenistan 2020). RFERL reported in May 2019 that 1,879,413 people left Turkmenistan "between 2008 and 2018 either for permanent residency abroad or for permanent work outside the country" (Najibullah 2019). According to Prague Process on Turkmenistan, there were an estimated 500,000 Turkmenistan nationals living in Turkey as of 2014. Turkey's official statistics from 2016 state that 60,000 nationals of Turkmenistan held various types of residence permits in Turkey, although one should keep in mind that visa-free entrance to Turkey allows many to remain without official permits (Diaspora Engagement Mapping Turkmenistan 2020). As this number is very

high – the official Turkmen population in Turkmenistan is 6.2 million, but that estimate is not reliable – the numbers themselves, which appear in diverse sources of information, are hotly debated. Here, I will not attempt to arrive at a "correct" figure, but instead I will detail *how* the questions of IS recruitment are discussed.

### 4.1 *Russian Discourses of IS Threat*

There are various "experts" who are regionally and/or thematically oriented professionals in Russia. Certain established authors' names are recognized whose words then have a certain weight and authority for creating powerful discourses within geopolitical boundaries relevant for the region. In post-Soviet space, as I have already outlined, Russian (and Russian-speaking) experts remain dominant players whose discourse is taken seriously by the political regimes in Central Asia.

I will consider here an example of the role Arkadiy Dubnov played in the discourse formation about the IS threat in Central Asia. Dubnov writes for the Moscow paper *Vremya Novostey* and many other major Russian newspapers. In a landmark 2013 article, he wrote about the wide circulation of a YouTube video of Turkmenistani citizens being arrested in Syria (also transmitted in Russian media several times) and discussed the reactions of the Turkmen side to the TV transmissions of the same video in Turkmenistan via satellite TV.[11]

Dubnov (2013) assumed that the recruitment of Turkmenistani nationals takes place within the country through considerable influence of Arab scheikhs and graduates/followers of Salafi thinking formations throughout Turkmenistan. Regnum published an article at the same time around the discussions of Russian journalists about the Turkmen nationals in Syria where it stated: "Distinguished guests from Arab countries come to Turkmenistan with personal permission from President Gurbanguly Berdumukhamedov" citing a retired officer of the Ministry of National Security (Regnum News Agency 2013). Furthermore, the same source stated that "airplanes on which the 'sheikh-hunters' fly, their private cars, luggage and equipment, their large entourages and servants" were not controlled when entering Turkmenistan (Regnum News Agency 2013). Dubnov (2013) also claimed that the arrested jihadist Gazzakov was trained within the territory of Turkmenistan.

Dubnov's article generated an intense back-and-forth exchange of information, statements, and messaging. Official political and diplomatic statements, scholarly exchanges, and discussions among "average" online users

11 YouTube video of unknown source and discussion thread can be found under the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0SqJ6QGIvY.

of both nationalities (Russian and Turkmen) raged over the internet (Tucker and Turaeva 2016). Notably, Arkady Dubnov's article was met with harsh criticism from a local pro-Turkmenistan female journalist, Janna Poveltzyna, who is an educated historian and a former university teacher.[12] Povelitzyna (2013) questioned each paragraph of Dubnov's opinion, arguing that he had insufficient facts and had relied only on a "citation of unknown authorities without concrete names."[13] Povelitzina's assessment of the situation went beyond Dubnov's article:

> Runet is full of nonsense about Turkmenistan. It seems that the authors of this nonsense sincerely believe that we will never read, and cannot answer in Russian, due to our nomadism in Karakum. [They think we] do not understand Russian and do not have access to the Internet. How much can you tolerate this state of affairs? As the proverb says: "silence is a sign of consent": if we do not actively object to – it means we silently accept these absurd accusations.

The local historian speaking in the name of Turkmenistan tellingly reflects the general frustration of Turkmen *inteligenzia* (a locally used Russian word for educated and middle-class people) with the persistence of Russia's (and Russians') orientalization towards Central Asia. It seems that knowledge about the region is still meant to help the (Tsarist) administration to conquer it, as in the late nineteenth century (compare Semenov-Tyan-Shanskiy 1913).

### 4.2 *Popular Reactions to the IS Threat in Turkmenistan*

In this section I will paste some discussions which were largely a reaction to the above discourse authored by Russian journalists discussed earlier as well as the discussions to the YouTube video which was discussed by the same Russian Authors. To remind the YouTube video (widely discussed and central to this paper) was about the arrest and interrogation of IS followers whose citizenship

12 Janna Povelitzyna, is a former teacher at the university and trained historian. She works for Infoabad as a journalist and posts pro-government or mainly positive reports about Turkmenistan. For more details see Povelitzyan (2013) and her articles in Infoabad in Russian under: https://www.infoabad.com/search?q=%D0%96%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%B0+%D0%9F%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%86%D1%8B%D0%BD%D0%B0&type=words&date=all [Accessed on December 23, 2021].

13 In the meantime (2021) the article of the same author cited here is taken off the internet and there is another similar kind of reply to Dubnov written by another author who cannot be found in the internet at all. See similar official response to Dubnov by a Turkmen author: http://gundogar-news.com/index.php?category_id=4&news_id=369 [accessed on December 23, 2021].

as Turkmens had been contested. The following are some comments following the YouTube video showing the interview with Gazzakov:[14]

> Muammet MM: I don't think these are turkmens they don't look like turkmens [sic]
>
> Arif Rahmanov: Yeah fucking hell, these are our people, they I guess are those who came to work in Turkey [The user is also a Turkmen working in Turkey and is speaking from firsthand experience] and they were forced and sent there I guess, if this were not like this why the fuck they would go to war?! Do you understand what you talking about you think they enjoy to fight in/for a foreign country?! I would like to see you if you were to be forced and then how you will talk [very bad word used to mean talk].
>
> Shemsat han: brain washed, it's obvious!!! Olun beydirip yoraninizden! Millet masgaralary ……./Them instead of living like this! National shame….'

Though it is hard to discern, this exchange contains some of the more widely shared opinion that people join IS and the war in Syria out of economic interest, perceiving it as a "good paying job." That perspective is brought up in a summary of the video published by Kislov (2013), and it was traced in discourses about Tajik fighters by Lemon (2015). The above excerpt reveals contradictory but cautious (patriotic-to be on the safe side) opinions online. Necessary patriotic representations is differently expressed though frustration, hopelessness, and critic. Willingness to understand the evil decision to join IS is largely visible in frustrating tone of a Turkmen migrant in Turkey.

Reactions can also be found on Ertir.com. There are at least two entries where direct attention was given to Arkady Dubnov. The first entry (397 reads, 17 comments) starts with the discussion of the article written by Alexandr Knyazev (a Russian author writing on Central Asia for *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and editor of Regnum). The posting cites an article by Knyazev (2015) in which Knyazev states that the Turkmens who join IS are trained in camps located within Turkmenistan stating that "increasing number of non-traditional interpretations of Islam" (Kynazev 2015) enable more support for the ideological background necessary to create a pro-IS attitude within Turkmenistan.

However, the discussion was unsustained, and rather than supporting Knyazev's (2015) interpretations, other commentators quickly turned to a wider critique of Russia's dominance of the post-Soviet space – not unlike

14 YouTube video see Footnote 11.

Povelitsina's initial response to Dubnov. The next posting (7,662 reads, 180 comments) discusses and criticizes Russia's diplomacy with reference to the occupation of Crimea, Ukraine. In this context, the author cites a Turkmen saying: "*Gun guychlininki gowurga dishlininki boldy bu dowur*" [The times are for the strongest and the food is for those with teeth]. Here are some comments and replies to the posting cited above:

> Kommunist (nickname): it is true, I cannot do much but I am angry at the things happening. In other words they say: "fire forms from the burning ash." It is important that burning ash should stay red and not burn out. That is life. In many places Russians behave like "if we don't live then others also should not." I hope that I can continue this topic if I will find time. In other words as mnVsn said one should also keep distance from America.

To summarize the discussion of the above posting, negative attitudes towards Russia and its politics are expressed, and, of course, there is praise for Turkmenistan's president for his politics of being open to other partners. Although the comments are usually very short (such as "thanks for posting," "very good," etc.), there are a number of longer and more engaged back-and-forth comments.

### 4.3 *Academic Discourse on IS Threat*

Scholarly and non-scholarly analyses and observations are published and posted online. They range from ideologically driven agitations to more or less rational analyses of the process of recruiting Central Asians to IS (Bogatryev 2016b; Ermakov 2015; Nourzhanov 2009; Masaulov 2013).

Furthermore, Russian journalists Anton Morozov (2015), citing political analysts – especially Andrei Kazantsev (Doctor of Political Sciences and Director of the Analytical Center of Moscow State University of International Relations) and Alexander Knyazev (Doctor of Historical Sciences and Expert in Central Asia and the Middle East) – report on what they call "project IGIL" ("IS project") as something led by the West. Central Asian governments mainly agree with the version of "the Islamic threat" offered to them by Russian state-sponsored information sources and accept them as ready-made analyses for their Central Asian counterparts to republish (Tucker and Turaeva 2016). In turn, some government-employed political analysts, in order to keep their jobs and positions within the system of state think tank institutions, try to support the state discourse on radicalization and support or justify the governments'

authoritarian methods to restrict freedom and democratic development.[15] The means used to control populations are found to be necessary in order to prevent foreign Islamic influence, among other things.

Some of the threats for Central Asia described above also are dealt with in a more detailed manner in the Russian state's strategic planning documents. These are published as working papers on the websites of state agencies. One such document is prepared by the Russian Committee for International Relations (2016) on "Prospects of Cooperation Between Russia and China in Central Asia".

Both Russian and local scholars nevertheless seem to recognize that the security discourse is inherently colonial project. Nourzhanov (2009: 85), for example, observes that "Security thinking in the region has been dominated by a focus on regime survival in individual countries on the one hand, and on the forceful imposition of the global security agenda on the other". He argues that Central Asia and security have been viewed from the prism of imperialist views from above, concluding, "it is fair to say that the themes of great power intervention and internal political development dominate narratives of threat generated by Central Asian governments" (Nourzhanov 2009: 90). Such opinions are numerous and common across research and policy papers, despite other differences (Esenov 2001: Burnashev 2002). The differences include both perceptions and interpretation of risks as well as agendas behind those interpretations and use of those the same discourses for geopolitical and political games. Below I will try to explain these discursive realities in their totality to use Foucauldian approach to discourse and power.

## 5 Whose Truth for Whom: Foucauldian Knowledge and Power Paradigm

When looking at self-expression, knowledge generation, and political communication occurring through web platforms, it is crucial to consider whether hierarchies matter or whether such relations become horizontal. The opinions regarding this question are not uniform. Some conclude that hierarchies matter a lot (Weber 2004), while others think they do not matter much (Weinberger

15 Justification for government methods of suppressing Islam or using threat discourse as a tool also for suppressing any opposition is a popular method in the post-Soviet space (Russia, Central Asia).

2007). Still others conclude that there is a democratizing effect as existing hierarchies are flattened (Washbourne 2001).

Within Central Asia and other parts of the former USSR, the general scholarly consensus is that the internet has shown some promise but has also been heavily co-opted by the state (Friedmann, Shafer and Antonova (2010); Bowe, Freedman and Blom 2012; Kendzior 2006; Junisbai, Junisbai and Fry 2015; Kerr 2018; Lewis 2016; Rollberg and Laruelle 2015; Shafiev and Miles 2015).

From the above assessment of online discourse, it is possible to conclude that the discourse about Islamic threats in and for Central Asia has been created predominantly through Russian media. That Russian is a "common language" across post-Soviet space and is thus used by governments, experts, and ordinary people, complicates the possibility of discerning the origins of the discourse. Still, so many sources and discussions also point to the widespread feeling and perception of the narrative through locally available media that the discourse is meant to retain Russia's southern neighbors as dependent partners (Tucker and Turaeva 2016). The operations of this discourse are reminiscent of dynamics described by Foucault (2002). By linking power to knowledge, according to Foucault, knowledge "not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to *make itself true*" (Hall 1997: 76). In other words, truth is never far from the power and influence of the actors defining the same truth; truth is produced, always, under the conditions, constraints, and direct influence of power.

It is clear that the Russian-language version of truth fits its own political agenda, and this version of truth about the security situation in Central Asia is then advanced as part of Russia's "regime of truth" for Central Asia. Turkmenistan also has its own regime of truth whereby Turkmen government discourse about security is promoted according to the political agenda which is largely forced into the public opinion. Public and academic discourse, as components of these truth regimes, are also formed under the conditions of constraints and limited freedom – a situation which largely serves the dominant discourses led by Russians and largely agreed upon by Central Asian governments.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

In this piece, I have detailed the debate about the numbers of Turkmens joining IS and more generally about the IS threat to the region. Because the numbers vary so much and are so hotly discussed on online platforms, the question asked in this article did not concern the truth about the IS threat or how many

fighters in IS are from Turkmenistan, but rather, how these questions are discussed and what the shape of the discourse itself shows about the construction of "threat" and "security."

I have shown that the power and influence of the Russian government over Central Asian governments is not restricted to official diplomatic relations, nor to direct forms of propaganda or media infiltration. Russian construction of the truth about the existing Islamic threat and about the participation of Central Asian citizens in Islamic State on the one hand and maintenance of the same discourse by Central Asian politicians to use it also as a tool to control the political behaviour of their citizens on the other hand are the two sides of the same coin of manipulation of risk narratives.

The analysis of online discussions by Turkmens revealed that political topics are either not welcome or avoided by Turkmenistani residents who mainly reside in the country or reside abroad but plan to return. But the discourse is useful to states: namely, Russia, and the Central Asian governments as well. Russia keeps its influence in Central Asia, while Central Asian governments use the same discourse to keep an iron and authoritarian hand over their citizens. The need to maintain "security" justifies authoritarian regimes to advance zero tolerance of many expressions of freedom. This dynamic incentivizes average users to avoid all political topics, including extremely relevant themes like the radical Islamic threat in the region. Thus, while censorship of a narrow range of topics is acceptable internationally as compatible with democracy, in fact, a wide range of democratic possibilities are effectively foreclosed.

Thus, systematic online research conducted on online communities of Central Asians, and particularly focused on the presumably "sensitive" topics of internet usage, is most useful. Contradictory representations are found online. Though the Russian-dominated and pseudo-scholarly supported discourse on the revival of religion in Central Asia and Islamization of daily life portrays the internet as an all-consuming threat, the themes discussed by average online users and their postings contradict this dominant discourse. Average users are instead consumed by the popularity of romance and style, depicted with images of ideal sexy people having a good life with restaurants, luxury cars, and beautiful houses.

If the level of "threat" is to be accurately gauged, then more systematic research certainly needs to be done in the field of online communities and social networking to uncover the diversity of themes that residents in the region actually engage with. As people become more and more active in the online world, they may discover that it is not as restricted as their offline lives, and it will be important to see what draws their attention and engagement. Online discussions such as those observed in Ertir.com can serve as ideal

platforms where one can conduct in-depth studies using combined online and offline methods.

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