

**“THE PERSON WHO KNOWS ONLY ONE RELIGION DOES  
NOT KNOW ANY RELIGION”**

MAX MULLER



**RESEARCH CENTER  
FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

ANNUAL REPORT  
**2020-2021**





Participants of the youth educational camp “Unity in Diversity”  
Kyrgyzstan, Cholpon-Ata, “Rukh-Ordo”, 2021

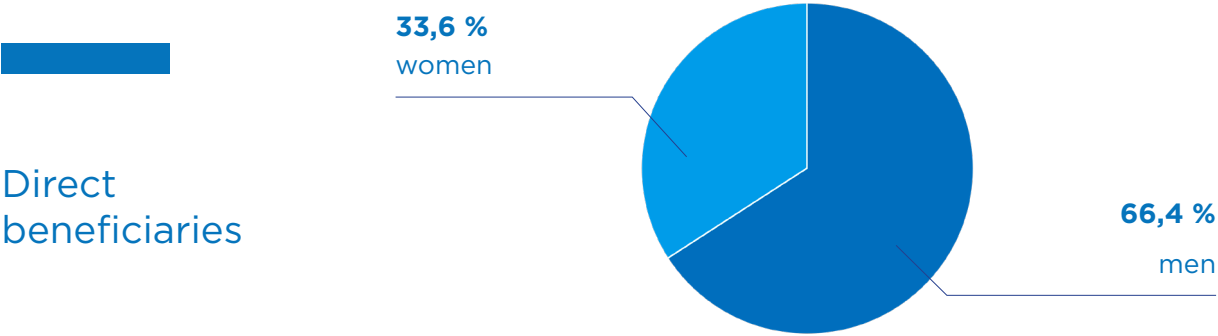
## ABOUT THE CENTER

The Research Center for Religious Studies is a research hub and a community of independent scholars, researchers, educators, and volunteers. Implementing educational, research and information projects, we generate unbiased knowledge about religion, enhance relationships between the government and religious communities, and facilitate inter-religious dialogue.

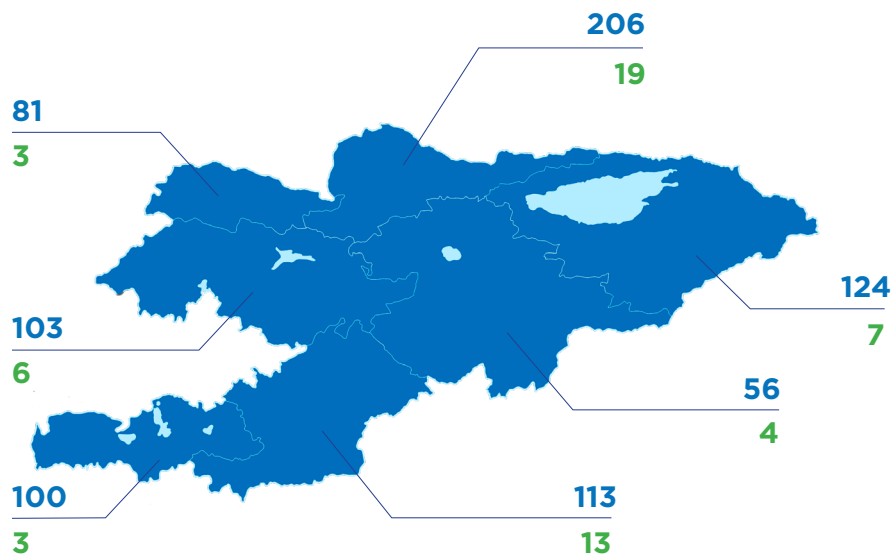
### Key objectives of the Center:

- Implement studies on the history of religion in the Kyrgyz Republic, on activities of religious organizations, and on inter-faith and inter-religious relations
- Monitor country's religious context and public opinion about religion-related matters
- Improve the relationships between the government and religious communities, facilitate inter-religious relations, support the government on religion-related matters

# ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE SECTOR



- Number of direct beneficiaries
- Number of activities held

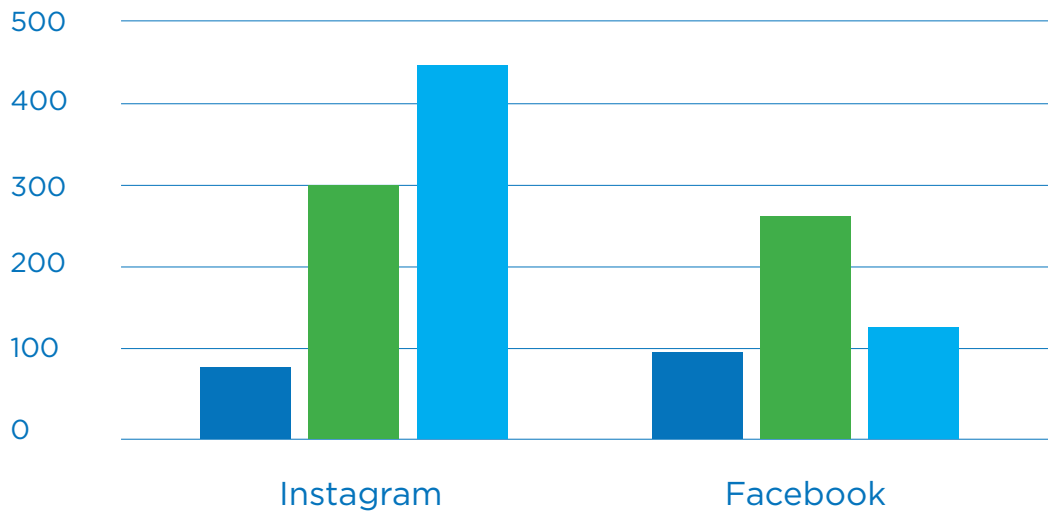


more than  
**50000**  
Indirect beneficiaries



## Media

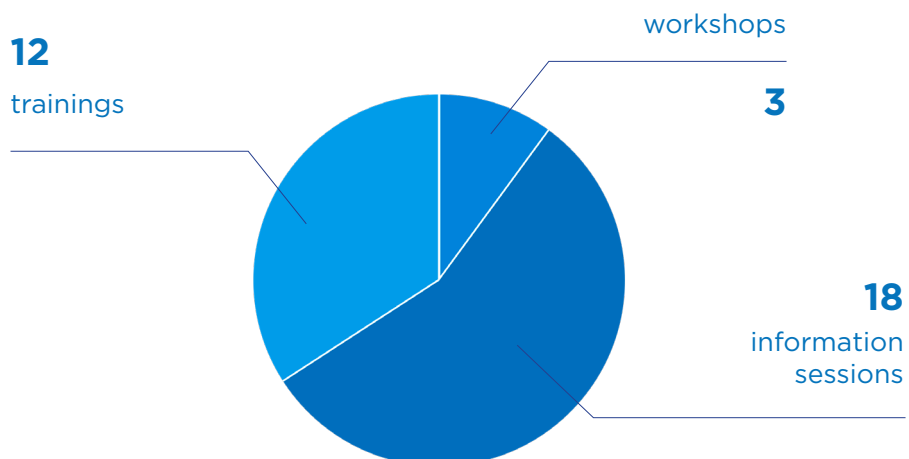
- Posts
- Stories
- Comments (feedback)



**1929776**  
views

**8640**  
likes

**8** youth  
initiatives



**12** public discussions

**5** expert assessments

**2** practical guides

**3** large-scale research

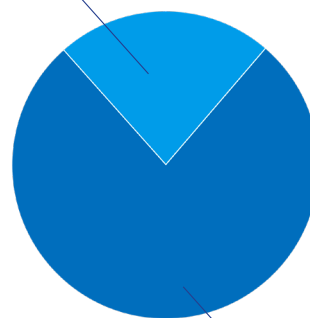
### Content-analysis

**1610164** posts

**4005** respondents

**58** in-depth interviews

**10** subject-oriented articles



**35** scholarly articles

## IN 2020-2021, THE CENTER CAME A LONG WAY

In particular, the Center:

- significantly expanded its team of specialists and the community of people who share our views
- created a youth branch to organize activities and help with research





- published its collection of scholarly articles using the contributions from the participants of “Secularism, Secularity, and Religion” International Applied Research Conference that brought together scholars from 14 countries (read more on page 8)



- completed and published 3 large-scale studies to investigate efforts in countering violent extremism and look into the implications of this phenomena (read more on pages 9-10)

- found new partners, such as the State Penitentiary Service of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Advocates Training Center under the Bar Association of the Kyrgyz Republic



- held an inter-faith youth camp for participants from all 7 oblasts of the country, which was the first activity of such kind in the history of Kyrgyzstan (read more on page 15).



Official website of the Center:



## SCIENTIFIC AND ANALYTICAL RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

The published collection of scholarly articles based on the proceedings of the international conference



**During the three-day conference, scholars, legal practitioners, and government officials covered the following topics:**

- secularism as world outlook;
- correlation between freedom of conscience and secularism;
- secularization in the history of Western Europe and its role in the emergence of secular states;

- legal aspects of religious freedom in secular and religious states;
- contemporary experience in implementation of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion in states of various types;
- models of relationships between the government and religious communities, and mechanisms for regulating activities of religious organizations and much more.



In 2020, using the contributions from the conference's participants, the Center published a **collection of scholarly papers**.

The collection has 7 chapters:

- religion under scientific scrutiny;
- religion as political and ideological phenomena
- radicalism, extremism, religion
- religion and education
- the principle of secularism and its practical application in post-Soviet states
- application of legislation in the religious sphere
- modern understanding of secularity

The conference brought together specialists from **14 countries**: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, United Kingdom, Greece, Italy, Canada, USA, and Germany.

*The conference was organized by the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University (USA), and the Research Center for Religious Studies of Kyrgyzstan.*

**Link to the collection:**



## Radicalism Online: An Analysis of the Meanings, Ideas, and Values of Violent Extremism in Central Asia

The objective of the study was to analyze the spread of religion-based extremist content in the Internet environment of the countries of Central Asia.



### The study comprised:

- Desktop research
- Content analysis of **1 610 164** Internet posts
- Field research with **4,005** respondents

### The study provides insight into:

- meanings and ideas of the messages used by advocates of radical Islam;
- target audience of such messages;
- message distribution channels;
- impact of such ideas on the target audience.

## Brief results and interesting facts:

While religion-related extremist rhetoric is present in as few as **0.56%** of the total information content, this is sufficient to engage and recruit young people from Central Asia.

Radical groups' messages are not intended for casual Internet surfers. Such messages have very specific and hard-to-understand terminology that is usually too complicated for an unprepared audience, who gets exposed to such content for the first time. Therefore, the information environment created by extremist groups is not a place of primary radicalization. The groups develop their content to **reinforce existing commitment of their audience**.

By blocking the websites and communication channels, the governments fail to achieve the desired outcomes.

### Messages of any extremist group have something in common. They:

- advocate for purity of faith, assistance to fellow believers, fight against infidels and apostates, rejection of secular authorities, establishment of a caliphate, anti-Semitism;
  - allege the existence of global conspiracy, and encourage to counter such conspiracy;
  - reject cultural and other secular «pro-Western» values
- Advocates of radical ideology adapt their messages with due account for the socio-political context of each country in the region.
- They widely exploit such values as compassion, engagement, and sense of justice.



The study produced **analytical note** and **communication strategy** for each CA country: **Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan.**



#### Some recommendations:

- Local media should intensify their presence in social networks, as it can significantly reduce potential target audience for those who spread radical content.
- Strengthening communications between local self-governments and public organizations has critical role to play in preventing acceptance of radical ideas by young people.

*The study was conducted by the Research Center for Religious Studies with the financial support from the European Union and the assistance from Internews.*

**The full study, policy briefs and communication strategies are available here:**



## Why We Went to Fight and Why We Returned: Radicalization and Deradicalization - Learning from Foreign Terrorist Fighters

The Center's second large-scale study sought to investigate the causes that prompted Kyrgyz citizens to travel to Syria and Iraq to participate in armed conflicts, as well as the reasons for their return to the homeland.

The study builds on in-depth interviews with 38 foreign terrorist fighters who went to Syria to join the banned religious organizations, such as "Jabhat al-Nusra" and "ISIS", as well as interviews with close relatives and family members of those fighters.



**“When I was a child, my family was starving in the aftermath of the public unrest that occurred in 2010. I dropped out of school, and we promptly left for Kazakhstan.**

The study identified and investigated the **factors that pushed the respondents to join the insurgent groups:**

- psychological problems
- social problems
- education
- religious education
- family and economy
- personal motives

**“I saw some YouTube videos where people were shot during prayer ... I joined Jabhat al-Nusra because I wanted to help Muslims**

FTF.

The study also analyzed:

- social networks, ideologies, and hotspots
- impact of corruption and violence in communities and other factors.

**The interviews give insight into the specifics of extremist organizations, and their recruitment methods and channels.**

The study also suggests the **future effects** and format of deradicalization and reintegration of foreign terrorist fighters.

**Brief results:**

- there are extremely few cases of self-radicalization. Nearly all FTFs have been radicalized and subsequently mobilized through contact with others;
- significant role in both radicalization and de-radicalization is played by families;
- efforts to propagate the revival of Caliphate were made in the communities covered by the study even before the uprising of ISIS;
- reinforced by Islamists, the apostasy notion has become the key element of radicalization narratives. This narrative has survived the Syrian conflict, and poses a potential threat to social cohesion and religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan, if unopposed;
- in the early years of the Syrian conflict, Kyrgyz citizens could freely move between Kyrgyzstan and Syria, thus creating FTF phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan. Secret networks were organized to recruit, radicalize, train and transport FTFs to Syria,

mainly from the countries where Kyrgyz citizens went to work as labor migrants;

- communities of Kyrgyz labor migrants had significant role to play in radicalization, both directly and indirectly;
- recruiters exploit two motives:
  - 1) sense of duty: all Muslims comprise a global family and, as such, must protect each other.
  - 2) clamor against those responsible for murders and rapes of women and children (the Shias, Assad's government).
- recruiters sparked the interest of young people by exploiting their thirst for new experiences and adventures, especially the desire to participate in a real war;
- joining the conflict was emotional decision rather than rational choice;
- the initial interest of potential recruits to the Syrian conflict was instigated by the media. This interest was successfully exploited by the radicals, who recruited young people by providing alternative information on the developments in the Middle East;
- under the hardships of war and facing the extensive corruption in Syria, most FTFs eventually lost illusions about their "sacred mission". This and other factors, as highlighted in the study, can provide effective counter-narratives if applied promptly and without delay.

**“ I believe that every returnee needs help from psychologist. Orphans can be placed in madrasah, but only after they receive psychological treatment. They should not be sent to madrasah immediately upon their return. My son will also need a psychologist after he is released [from prison].**

FTF's mother.

This study was conducted by the Research Center for Religious Studies and the Public Council under the State Penitentiary Service in cooperation with the University of Nottingham (UK) with the support of the Hedaya International Center of Excellence in Combating Violent Extremism.

**The full study is here:**



**Strengthening the Capacity of the Countries of Central Asia in Rehabilitation and Reintegration of their Citizens who Return from Conflict Zones**



The study focuses on rehabilitation and reintegration of family members of foreign fighters who return from the conflict zone in Syria to their countries of origin or citizenship

### Problem description:

By April 2019, about 850 Kyrgyz citizens left the country to travel to the Middle East<sup>1</sup>. The government brought charges against 111 such citizens, and 44 individuals were found guilty.

In 2018-2019, Kazakh authorities evacuated 357 Kazakh citizens, Uzbek authorities – 156 Uzbek citizens, Tajik authorities – 84 Tajik citizens. Syria and Iraq still have some citizens of Kyrgyzstan, and their potential return

evoked massive outcry in social networks and polarized public opinion and government views.

**Objective:** conduct a situational analysis in Kyrgyzstan for the purpose of designing, developing and implementing programs to support return of Kyrgyz citizens from conflict zones, as well as their reintegration and rehabilitation.

### The following specific tasks were implemented (preliminary results are promulgated below):

- analyze Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's capacity in designing, developing, and implementing programs to support rehabilitation and reintegration of citizens returning from conflict zones.

The study established that the countries of Central Asia require a rehabilitation and reintegration concept that builds on positive prevention (targeted assistance at the individual and group levels).

- identify challenges, risks, and limitations in implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returnees.

The most challenging issue is to build trust between government structures, civil society institutions, risk groups and vulnerable groups.

The current rehabilitation program has some shortcomings, as the return preparation stage requires additional efforts that are primarily related to situation analysis and development of necessary legislative

framework.

There is a certain chance that returnees may end up in the same social environment that was conducive to their original radicalization.

Other weaknesses include lack of political will, lack of institutional and financial capabilities, and lack of qualified staff.

- analyze the public perception of citizens returning from the conflict zone (which includes identification of the key public opinion makers, and the main information circulation channels)

The society has negative attitude towards repatriates (local community members are afraid and are not ready to accept returnees): "It was their choice, you can't change them, they should not return."

In many ways, public opinion is formed by the media, which often "demonizes" extremists and terrorists, and everything related thereto.

As the study has not been published yet, this Report shares only a limited list of its findings.

*The analytical work was conducted by experts from the Research Center for Religious Studies within the framework of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Program for the Countries of Central Asia.*

## RELATIONS BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

### Eradicating Religion-Related Persecution and Discrimination in the Kyrgyz Republic

**For 2 years**, the Center was working to promote freedom of religion or belief and to prevent religion-related discrimination and persecution by supporting lawyers and other persons who provide legal assistance to victims of violations.

#### Key tasks:

1. Improve access to justice for victims of religion-related discrimination
2. Address the lawyers' knowledge gaps as it pertains to religion-related discrimination and prosecution.

#### Outputs:

1. 11 articles on protection of victims of religion-related discrimination and persecution have been developed. Each article contains comments and legislative

references and provides overview of local practices in applying the legislation. All articles (in Russian, Kyrgyz, and English) are available on the designated website at [defendingforb.org](https://defendingforb.org).

#### Link to the website:





2. 4 trainings were held in different parts of the country, including:

a. «Freedom of Religious and Other Beliefs: Protecting Victims of Religion-Related Discrimination and Persecution» for 18 local court judges;

b. 3 trainings on the “Mechanisms and Tools for Protecting Victims of Religion-Related Discrimination and Persecution” for 64 lawyers from regional advocacy offices in all 7 oblasts of the country.



3. Two lawyers received legal advice.

4. Necessary assistance was provided to the attorneys and lawyers engaged in the 3 cases of discrimination on religious grounds (discrimination against Christian Baptists; the case of the schoolgirl who was prohibited to wear a headscarf; the ban to attend swimming pool in burkini)

5. With the support from 5 experts, a new draft law on freedom of religion and religious associations in the Kyrgyz Republic was developed. The draft law successfully passed 5 types of expert assessment (expert assessment related to gender issues, legal matters, human rights, anti-corruption safeguards and conflict sensitivity). All documents were translated into Kyrgyz.

6. The State Commission for Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic received expert assistance with inventory of the legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic.

7. Presentation and discussion of the assessment of the current Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic” (adopted in 2008) and of the new draft of this Law was organized for the stakeholders including experts from the Ministry of Justice, Interdepartmental Expert Group for Legislative Inventory, Public Council of the Ministry of Justice, civil society organizations and UN bodies.

*This work was a part of a global initiative to promote religious freedom around the world and was supported by the Stefanus Alliance (SAI) from Norway.*

**” I will transfer the knowledge that I get here to my students. The topic of today’s session was “Freedom of Religious and Other Beliefs: Protecting Victims of Religion-Related Discrimination and Persecution”. This is a very hot topic in our difficult times, and we are very grateful to the Center for organizing trainings that reflect current context and trends. Thanks a lot.**

Nurgul Mukambetova, training participant, lawyer, faculty member of J. Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University



## Supporting the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic in Developing “2021-2026 Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in Religious Sphere”

From August 2020 to March 2021, as a part of its cooperation with the State Commission for Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Center held a series of activities to develop a draft “2021-2026 Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in Religious Sphere.”

*The Concept seeks to improve the mechanisms of cooperation between the government and religious communities, strengthen the secular foundations of the state, and increase the efficiency of state regulation of religious and public institutions.*

Public hearings were held in the regions of the country to present the Concept and the respective Action Plan to government agencies, local self-governments, religious organizations, local civil society institutions, religious educational institutions, and media. The public discussions brought together **500 participants**, including 370 men and 130 women.

### The Center completed the following tasks:

- provided the SCRA with expert support to finalize the Concept;
- organized expert assessment of the Concept and the respective Action Plan (expert assessment concerning legal matters, human rights, conflict sensitivity); held public discussions in Bishkek, Osh, and regions of Kyrgyzstan (12 discussions);
- organized 12 online and offline Working Group meetings;
- organized 4 meetings to present intermediate and final drafts of the Concept and the Action Plan;
- initiated on-site trainings on Concept implementation for the staff of the State Commission for Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic;
- helped develop the 2021-2026 Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Religious Sphere, the respective Action Plan, as well as a guide to explain the key activities under the Concept.



### Feedback from the SCRA staff, who participated in the Concept implementation training:



**As a Regional Representative with many years of experience, originally, I was very skeptical about the training, as I did not expect it would teach me anything new. The sessions, however, proved to be well-chosen and provided answers to the questions that we regularly deal with in our professional activities. I was especially impressed by Gulshaiyr Abdirasulova’s session on the legal framework and principles of government policy in the religious sphere. The session helped us realize that we had gaps in our understanding of these principles, and that each principle entailed several more.**

SCRA’s Regional Representative



”

Being executive officer, I was especially impressed by the session on management delivered by Asylbek Chekirov. I took a fresh look at the management of the Concept's Action Plan. I realized that the implementation approach had to be changed, that we needed to move from bureaucratic administration and turn to managerial decisions, set correct goals, and focus on results rather than on formal implementation of activities. The session also helped our employees to look at our government agency not only as a supervisory body, but also as a body that ensures the rights to freedom of religion.

SCRA's Deputy Director

The work was carried out with the support from Search for Common Ground, OSCE Program Office, and UNDP.

The guide is available or downloading at:



## EDUCATION

“Unity in Diversity”  
Educational Camp for Youth



From mid-2020 to mid-2021, the Center implemented a pilot project to organize an educational space for young people from all over Kyrgyzstan who represented different religions and had different worldviews.

The idea behind the project was proposed by the Center's volunteers. It builds on “peer-to-peer” approach that engages young people to project development and communication under experienced mentors' guidance.

”

“Kyrgyzstan is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. Like others, we are concerned about the increased level of radicalization in our society, especially among young people from other regions. We thought it would be great to organize an inter-ethnic and inter-religious educational camp to bring together participants from all Oblasts. Such environment would give everyone a first-hand experience, so the participants can see that there is nothing wrong with people, who exercise other religions and have different worldviews!

- Project volunteers



An important task of the project was to enable the participants to implement social projects in their communities through mini grants.

”

**Working together on common points of concern provides great opportunity to connect with others and to start a dialogue.**

The objective of the project was to promote inter-religious dialogue and improve young people's skills of positive interaction in multi-religious environment of Kyrgyzstan.

#### We identified two pillars to achieve our goal:

**1. Raise awareness of young people have different worldviews and religious identity about the religious sphere of Kyrgyzstan**

**2. Promote pluralism and respect for different religions and cultures among young people.**

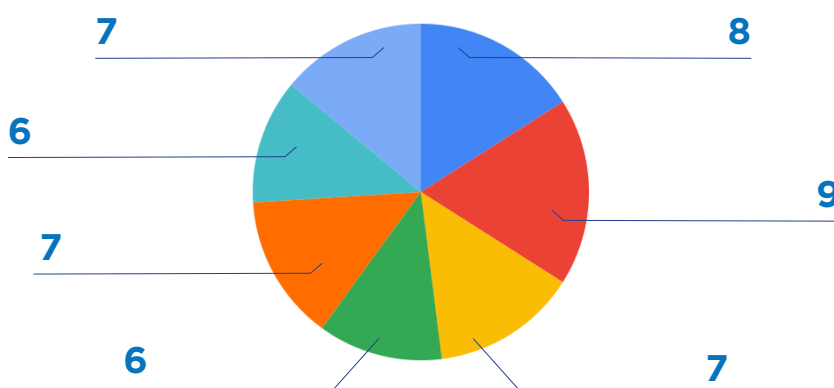
To implement these tasks, the work was organized in several stages.

Online sessions for 50 participants from different regions of Kyrgyzstan. The main topics of this course included media literacy, identification of social problems and ways to solve such problems, and development of project proposal.

Following the month-long sessions, **40 beneficiaries** were selected for the second stage that included a **6-day youth camp in Bishkek**.

We made sure that the selected participant equally presented all 7 oblasts of Kyrgyzstan, different religious and non-religious beliefs, worldview positions and principles.

- Osh Oblast
- Chui Oblast
- Batken Oblast
- Talas Oblast
- Jalal-Abad Oblast
- Issyk-Kul Oblast
- Naryn Oblast





**The Camp offered multiple activities:**

- tour to three sacred sites (Holy Resurrection Cathedral, Imam Sarakhsi Central Mosque, and St. Archangel Michael Church) and meetings with the clergy of different religions.



- workshops and seminars with top experts in media literacy, establishing intercultural and interreligious dialogue, human rights, psychology and mediation





- lectures on the history of religions and their profile in Kyrgyzstan; studies of the social dimension of religious activities.



- direct communication with representatives of the State Commission for Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic and the clergy, who gave answers to all questions that concerned the Camp's participants



- intellectual games related to religious culture and its diversity in the local context; team games to facilitate unity and prevent stigmatization







- educational and entertainment theater, sketches, and performances



- educational and entertainment theater, sketches, and performances.
- art therapy and music nights





In the final days, 7 teams were asked to prepare and defend their projects. Therefore, at the third stage **the participants received assistance in implementation of their social initiatives.**

From the end of February to June 2021, our teams successfully completed their projects. Their creative and positive activities are described below.

1. «WOW» team conducted a series of activities to reduce bullying and the level of aggression among young people.

2. «Picasso» team (that consisted of school students from Kochkor Rayon of Naryn Oblast) created street art on inter-religious and inter-ethnic harmony and friendship in the downtown area of Jalal-Abad.

3. «Arturdulukko» team prepared 15 awareness-raising videos about religion in Kyrgyzstan in TikTok format.

4. «Michurin» team organized a series of intellectual games for school students from Suzak Rayon aimed at solving social problems, increasing media literacy, building awareness about religious processes in Kyrgyzstan, establishing cooperation between youth

from different regions of the country, and preventing tribalism.

5. «Sunrise» team held a drawing contest on religious and ethnic diversity for 6-10 grade students from Kochkor Rayon of Naryn Oblast and organized an open exhibition of the drawings in Seyil Park for the contestants and all residents of Kochkor Rayon.

6. «Peace» team held sessions aimed at promoting human rights, religious freedom, and awareness about religious diversity in Kyrgyzstan, which included preparation of video content and a trip to «Rukh Ordo» Cultural Complex.

7. «Time Travel» team held a photo and drawing contest dedicated to religious and ethnic diversity in Kyrgyzstan. The pictures were displayed in the museum of Osh for all residents of the city.

On 24-25 June 2021, when all social initiatives were completed, the Project organized the final meeting, where the participants examined the work done, shared their experiences, discussed challenges and other nuances of their projects.

#### Project's quantitative indicators:

more than

10000000

views on online platforms

more than

10000

beneficiary

more than

200

publications on platforms

more than

150

drawings, videos, and photos about friendship between peoples and religions

more than

**50** educational lectures  
and seminars

**50** 50 individuals  
completed the online course

**37** individuals completed  
the full course offered  
by the Project

**4** references in the  
media

**2** “Unity in Diversity” online  
platforms organized  
on Instagram and Facebook

**1** 1 manual “How to start  
Inter-Religious  
Dialogue?”

*The program was organized by the Research Center for Religious Studies with the support of the US State Department in Kyrgyzstan and UNDP.*



## Intellectual games for Youth

The Center regularly conducts team-based intellectual games for students from Kyrgyz universities. All questions are related to religion one way or another: history, culture, inter-religious dialogue, right to religion, religion, and cinema, etc.

**On 23 February 2021**, the game was held as part of the «Unity in Diversity» Youth Camp and brought together 40 participants.

**On 9 December 2021**, to commemorate the Human Rights Month, a quiz was organized for students from Bishkek universities on legislation that governs religious sphere. The activity brought together 9 full teams.

**On 19 February 2022**, students of religious studies had an intellectual competition on multiple topics related to their academic field. The contestants included students of all four course-years, as well as alumni of the department.



The Research Center for Religious Studies engages students in the Center's activities to enhance the younger generation's capacity in the scientific and educational fields. Our youth branch participates in various activities as interns, assistants, or project managers.





RESEARCH CENTER  
OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

BISHKEK 2022