

## Protect to Prevent: Enabling Central Asians to Protect Religious Freedom as a Preventative Approach to Addressing Violent Extremism

### Overview

*Protect to Prevent: Enabling Central Asians to Protect Religious Freedom as a Preventative to Addressing Violent Extremism* project (October 2019 to December 2021) laid the foundation for both state and non-state actors, especially youth, to reduce discrimination on religious grounds in Central Asia and prevent radicalization that leads to violence. It took on a multi-layer approach to promote the freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) at regional, country, and community levels across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Search solicited the support of multiple partner organizations throughout Central Asia including International Debate Education Association Central Asia (IDEA CA) for activities targeting youth beneficiaries, the International Bureau of Human Rights (IBHR) in Kazakhstan, Marifatnoki Organization (Marifatnoki), and Tahlil va Mashvarat (Tahlil) in Tajikistan, and the Center for Studying Regional Threats (CSRT) in Uzbekistan.

**The project reached over 300 people and 164 youth (90 female and 74 male). 40 representatives of state bodies joined the multi-stakeholder working groups (MSWG) and 20 of them attended the meetings consistently and became permanent MSWG members. The [final evaluation](#) found the project had significant impact in establishing regional and national working groups for policy reform, increase in critical thinking of youth, and increased trust and collaboration at the institutional level.**



## Impact: Regional and National Working Groups for Legal and Policy Reform

The project had varying degrees of impact on stakeholders. In Kyrgyzstan, the project strengthened the existing cooperation between state bodies and civil society, though with still low participation of religious organizations. In Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan it laid the foundation for further cooperation, showing how effective such interaction can be based on equal partnership, trust, transparency and openness. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, experts, thanks to the project, are engaged in active interaction with governmental institutions, but officials consider religious organizations primarily as target groups rather than equal partners.

**One Regional Multi-Stakeholder Working Group (RMSWG) was established with over 20 regular members, while three National Working Groups (NWG) met regularly at the country-level.** The first of its kind in Central Asia, the RMSWG is composed of representatives from key government agencies (i.e., Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Interior, and State Committees on Religious Affairs of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), in addition to key members of the civil society. The RMSWG established general guidance on FoRB, while NWG in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan identified entry points to begin revising legislation pertinent to FoRB. Through these efforts, Search was able to ultimately influence freedom of religion and religious organizations in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.



Regional Multi-Stakeholder Working Group, November 17-18, 2021.

- Alongside its partner, the International Bureau for Human Rights (IBHR) in Kazakhstan, Search supported the **NWG in Kazakhstan** in developing **2 series of recommendations** mostly surrounding registration of religious groups and associations, regulations for religious services, and registration of missionaries **for 11 amendments to be made to Kazakhstan regulations and laws**.
- Search worked alongside Tahlil va Mashvarat, a local organization, in establishing **Tajikistan's NWG**. The NWG developed religious studies and **comprehensive forensic psycho-linguistic guidelines**.
- **The Uzbekistan NWG facilitated an endorsement by the State Commission of Religious Affairs** of its proposal to conduct regular expert meetings and religious roundtables, laying the foundation for future impact.
- Search supported reconvening the **Kyrgyzstan NWG to develop a new religion law that would reflect Kyrgyzstan's new constitution**.

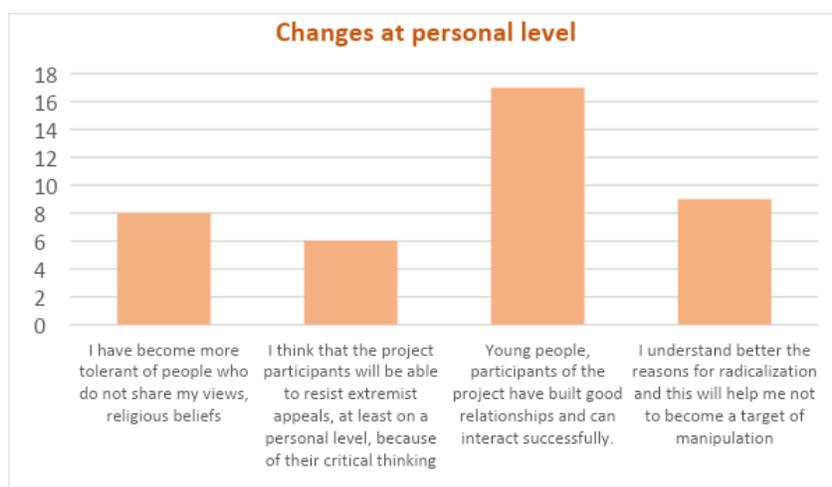
## Impact: Increased Critical Thinking among Youth

As for youth, all the project activities found a positive response from the participants, who developed skills in debating, searching for and critically understanding information, and constructive communication on both a personal and public level. During the implementation of the project participants had to interact with the authorities and educational institutions, which helped them to test their skills in practice.

**A total of 31 youth leaders across Central Asia implemented the #CentralAsiaTransformers social media advocacy campaign, integrating 1,129 voices from their own research.** After undergoing a variety of training sessions, youth leaders put their skills to practice through the design of a high-attention social media campaign, advocating for greater FoRB. The campaign was built on the needs and gaps identified through their youth-led participatory research, targeting hundreds of community respondents.

**Nearly 500 youths across Central Asia learned and practiced key principles in FoRB through a unique, multi-day online encounter.** Youth participated in two online trainings that presented engaging fictitious storylines revolving around two missing characters in need of the youth's help. The youth were required to conduct research and learn about FoRB, as well as human rights before they were able to find the missing individual and resolve the story at the training's end.

Youth to youth, youth to religious community leaders, and youth to law enforcement relationships were strengthened by studying the problems of the selected locations (as part of field research and presentation of their results during community talks), the creation of debate clubs, and the organization of debate tournaments. **55 young people (29 male and 26 female) were trained to lead participatory research, in-school and national debates, and local community talks.** The six community talks reached a collective number of 268 people (124 male, 144 female), including youth leaders.



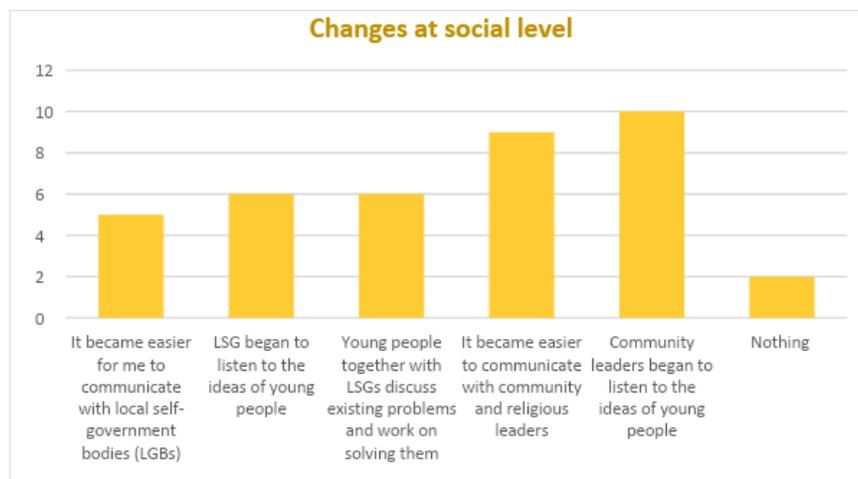
The project had an impact on the participants, especially the leadership group. **The final evaluation found that 89 percent of the online respondents indicated that they were able to build good relationships with others and become successful because of the project and 42 percent believe that they have become more tolerant of people professing a religion different from theirs.**

*"Now after the project I know that women also have rights. I used to think, according to Islamic concepts, a woman, a wife should stay at home. I believed that a woman cannot be without a man, she is weak and must be behind a man. Now I do not think so."*

- Participant from Kyrgyzstan

*"Before the project I despised LGBT people, I thought we Kazakhs had a different mentality. Now I understand that we live on the free side. I know I am tolerant, I didn't even expect it myself."*

- Participant from Kazakhstan



Regarding changes in interaction with others, 53 percent are convinced that community leaders began to listen to their ideas. It should be noted that during the implementation of the project participants had to interact with the authorities and educational institutions, which helped them to test their skills in practice.

And according to an online survey among the 19 youth 11 percent believe that "everyone should live strictly by the rules of my religion," 79 percent believe that "people should respect the differences between people," 68 percent "can comfortably get along with someone who holds norms and values different from their own," and 63 percent "respect the religious beliefs of people with beliefs quite different from theirs." Interviews also revealed an increased level of tolerance and non-discriminatory attitudes toward others, particularly in the area of **gender**, among the trained young leaders.

## Impact: Trust and Collaboration on an Institutional level

### Kazakhstan

In general, the level of trust was assessed as *below medium* because government officials did not participate in all meetings, the representation of religious organizations was low, and there were few specialists, experts due to the fact that Kazakhstan has a shortage of experts on this topic. Thus, systematic and consistent work is needed to increase the level of trust. It is also conditioned by the fact that the political will and policies play a major role in the country, many issues (LGBT issues and religion, which includes religious freedom) could not be discussed openly.

### Kyrgyzstan

According to the assessments of experts, partners, and representatives of government agencies, the level of trust and cooperation was defined as *medium*. At the institutional level, there is some distrust of state bodies due to general political instability, private rotation of personnel, and changes in attitudes toward the non-governmental sector. It should be noted, however, that religious organizations are less included in the interaction. Their involvement requires coordination of time schedules, which they often do not have, due to the fact that this communication is not part of their functional part, as it is the case with the state bodies and experts. Religious organizations (DUMK, Russian Orthodox Church, Association of Evangelical Churches) were more involved in the final meetings. At the same time, religious organizations have low critical thinking about their activities, and there is a desire to strengthen only their positions instead of looking for compromise solutions in the "win-win" approach.

## Uzbekistan

As for the institutional level, trust was expressed in a deeper understanding by the participants of their roles and significance in the overall state system. Nevertheless, since there were only 2 round tables with the involvement of all stakeholders, the level of trust was assessed as approaching to **medium**, since it is still difficult to assess whether the established ties will remain for a long time without the continuation of the project. The informal atmosphere assisted all participants - religious leaders, government officials and experts - to freely express their opinions. The main confessions participated in the round table in Tashkent: the Armenian Gregorian Church, Judaism adherents, Christians, Orthodox, Catholics, and Muslims, which, according to experts, demonstrated a level of trust.

## Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, the project laid the foundation for a relationship of trust between the authorities and experts, although, as in other Central Asian countries, this trust is built more on personal communications than institutional relationships, therefore trust was assessed as **below medium**. Although religious organizations participated in the discussions, according to experts, they acted not so much as subjects of actions, but as objects, on which the changes were aimed. Nevertheless, there was a noticeable increase in trust between government agencies and experts.

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## GOOD PRACTICES

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1. In the **Kyrgyz Republic**, **cooperation and trust between the government agencies and the civil sector are being strengthened**. Both actors understand the benefits of cooperation. This is the result of the long-term work that began back in 2014. However, much at the institutional level depends on the personal factor (the personification of politics continues to hold firm). Nevertheless, platforms for communication and joint discussions of draft laws and policies on religious issues are positive of the growing cooperation and trust.
2. In **Kazakhstan**, there is an alienation of religious organizations, which, according to experts, say they have no problems. **Thanks to the project, experts were involved in communications with government agencies**.
3. In **Tajikistan and Uzbekistan**, the project constituted an **opportunity for government agencies to communicate with experts and civil society representatives**. Given the contexts in these two countries, this is a result in itself.
4. For the activities related to youth, the project faced challenges at the start regarding youth's motivation and readiness to participate in debates, mainly due to the fact that there was insufficient knowledge and understanding of FoRB. However, **motivation and readiness increased throughout the project, with youth becoming more familiar with FoRB and understanding the grievances of religious minorities through debates tournaments**.
5. The COVID-19 pandemic led to reframing the project and transferring all activities to an online format, which made it difficult to build trust and cooperation. Online events have revealed new creative ways to engage with the target audience and widen it, and in the future Search will be more prepared for such a format.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- **The compulsory registration of religious organizations is the most sensitive issue**. Discussions should first focus on other issues of FoRB that will ultimately help the state at least ease the registration process.
- **There needs to be more comprehensive approaches to mitigate FoRB sensitivities, especially in Uzbekistan**. Throughout the life of the project, Search and its partner encountered a number of sensitivities surrounding discussions and engagement pertinent to FoRB in

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Future interventions should therefore be more cognizant of the sensitivities surrounding FoRB in contexts similar to Uzbekistan. Programmatic approaches should seek to identify neutral entry points that would not pose a significant risk to project staff or the project's objectives.

- **'Online encounters' have proven to be a viable avenue for FoRB learning, understanding, and dialogue.** Future online youth activities should consider separating training into multiple sessions and facilitating a series of tasks among participants to encourage their commitment and interest in the activity.