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**MEDIA**  
DIALOGUE

# Campaigning against the use of hate speech in Kyrgyzstan elections

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# Executive Summary

Under the EU Media Dialogue programme, WFD delivered a campaign against the use of hate speech in Kyrgyzstani elections. In the run up to the November 2021 parliamentary elections, WFD targeted political parties, candidates, activists, and the media, to raise awareness of the concept of hate speech, the legal implications of its use, and positive measures that could be taken to prevent or avoid it. Political parties demonstrated their agreement with the aims of the campaign, when they included points discussed at WFD activities in the cross-party memorandum on holding elections within the law.

## Context

Election campaigns provide particularly fertile ground for hate speech and incitement to hatred. Political parties, candidates, opinion makers, and members of civil society can be influential spreaders of hate speech in the tense atmosphere of political contestation. In Kyrgyzstan, civil society and media actors have reported an increase of hate speech in and around election periods.<sup>1</sup> Much of this abuse is sent and received online. Targets have included the media, especially investigative reporters, civil society, lawyers, and politicians. The key aspect of hate speech abuse is that targets are chosen because of who they are – their ethnicity, religion, gender or personal affiliations.

In 2020 and 2021, the Kyrgyzstani electoral calendar provided many opportunities for hate speech to surface. In October 2020, widespread political unrest followed the disputed parliamentary elections, resulting in the resignation of the president and prime minister.<sup>2</sup> Research conducted by Internews found clear evidence of extensive online hate speech, use of trolling and an “increase in linguistic intolerance in the election discourse”<sup>3</sup>. It found that people were targeted for their identities, with intolerance for ethnic minorities and targeting of women. In January 2021, snap-elections saw the election of a new president. In April, the country voted in local elections, and on a new constitution. Finally, in November 2021, rescheduled parliamentary elections were held.

Responding to this problem, the anti-hate speech campaign, run by WFD as part of the Media Dialogue programme funded by the EU, was delivered during this period. It aimed to raise awareness of the issue, relevant legislation and positive measures to identify and challenge hate speech.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.article19.org/campaigns/challenge-hate/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kyrgyzstan/freedom-world/2021>

<sup>3</sup> <https://internews.kg/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/superlegkii-11.pdf>

## What is hate speech?

There is no agreed definition for hate speech. According to [the UN](#), it is

*“Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”.*

This programme broadly understands hate speech to mean an expression of discriminatory hate towards people based on a particular aspect of their identity. Hate speech can include incitement to violence but can also come in less severe – but still harmful – forms. It is the former that is prohibited in international human rights law.

The topic is particularly complicated because it touches on issues of freedom of expression. Governments sometimes misuse the term hate speech to stifle criticism and to avoid being held accountable. Therefore, any restrictions against hate speech should be provided for by law, be clearly necessary to protect people from discrimination and discriminatory violence and be proportionate.

## What has changed?

As a result of the anti-hate speech campaign, awareness of the issue among politicians, political parties, and activists has increased. Demonstrating this, political parties standing in the November 2021 parliamentary election in Kyrgyzstan formally agreed to avoid using hate speech in their election campaigns.

During the first stage of the campaign, regional youth activists developed an [open statement](#) to political candidates, petitioning them to use more tolerant speech in local elections held on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2021. In the second phase, focus turned to the national parliamentary election on 28<sup>th</sup> November. The finalised open statement was presented to national election candidates and political parties during a roundtable about the new constitution and campaign rules,

including the avoidance of the use of hate speech. In Kyrgyzstani elections, it is common for political parties to sign a non-legally binding agreement on their conduct during the election. This year, we can see that political parties have increased their awareness of hate speech, because proposals from the open statement were added to the *memorandum on holding elections within the law* by the Central Election Commission (CEC), after WFD shared it in campaign activities.

Signing the memorandum is an important signal of intent that democratic elections will be held in accordance with international standards. It is an agreement to act within the framework of the law, to strictly comply with

the requirements of the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic and legislation on elections. Representatives of political parties signed it on 5<sup>th</sup> November 2021, on the platform of the CEC. In doing so, they agreed not to publish or distribute information and campaign materials which contain threats of social discord and hatred, slander, direct and indirect references to religious topics, as well as incitement to violence and disruption of public order. It covers both official and anonymous distribution.

### Some of the requests made in the open statement

- Create conditions to prevent the provocation of conflicts, as well as not to use the “language of enmity and hatred” in media and social resources
- Avoid publication of false or defamatory accusations or intentionally unfounded statements against opponents throughout the entire electoral process
- Refrain from acts containing violence, whether physical or psychological, discrimination and hostility towards opponents in order to demonstrate the strength of a political party/candidate or prove its/his/her superiority, and avoid focusing on the ethnic, regional, gender, linguistic and other identification of candidates of political parties, both their own and the opposition

To raise awareness of this issue among the general public, WFD supported local experts, representatives of civil society (CSOs) and the CEC to take part in television talk shows on the [NTS](#) and [NEXT TV](#) channels. They answered questions about hate speech legislation, the implications of hate speech use, and positive measures that candidates and campaigns can take.

Finally, all materials used during the campaign have been made available on [an online education platform](#), shared with youth and political parties. This platform contains basic information on hate speech, an explanation of the international framework, as well as local regulations. At the time of writing, the platform has been visited by 334 people, and 102 have downloaded materials and registered for the study.

“Honesty and transparency of the electoral process will be the hallmark of these elections. And by signing the memorandum, political parties agree to multiply efforts to make elections fair and transparent. They also agree not to use social media to denigrate opponents, and not to use hate speech.”

*Head of Central Election Commission of Kyrgyzstan, Nurzhan Shaildabekova Karmabekovna*

## WFD/EU contribution

The anti-hate speech campaign was run by WFD in partnership with the Institute for Civic Development and PF “Civic Platform” and engagement with the CEC.

In the first phase of the programme, WFD engaged local youth activists. In March 2021, those activists crafted an open statement on the avoidance of use of hate speech, at a WFD capacity building event. WFD supported this by reviewing the draft statement. Following the publication of the statement, WFD held a roundtable with local experts to discuss and develop a common understanding of the definition of hate speech in the Kyrgyzstani context and recommendations to raise awareness among political candidates. These recommendations fed into the design of later activities.

From September 2021, the second phase of the programme focused on the national elections. Further sessions were held with over 180 youth and civic activists, university students, CSOs, media and bloggers. The training sessions were developed by PF “Civic Platform” and aimed to raise awareness and familiarise participants with international and national legal frameworks about the use of hate speech ahead of the elections. They were delivered by applying the laws to case studies, for example on the portrayal of women in the media. The participants gave very positive feedback, saying they found the training very interesting and helpful, and highlighted the practical benefits of the knowledge they gained.

In feedback, one participant said,

*“We often come across online hate speech, but it is often difficult to filter out what is hate speech and what is a person’s opinion. The training helped to determine what hate speech is and how to react to it. This knowledge will be useful to me personally – we, civic activists often face hate speech addressed towards us or our colleagues. Practical advice on how to respond is important and needed.”*

Similar sessions were then delivered to over 200 political party representatives and candidates. These were broader in scope, covering the whole electoral process and new campaign rules. This expanded framing helped to detoxify the discussion and make it more palatable for those who might have considered it a controversial subject. Some of these engagements were attended by UK MP Christian Wakeford, who shared his own experiences of combatting hate speech.

A final roundtable closed this part of the programme, and was attended by CEC members, representatives of political parties, experts, and representatives of media organisations. At the roundtable, CEC members shared recommendations on the new campaigning rules, WFD facilitated a discussion on the open statement, and a local expert delivered a training on Kyrgyzstani legislation relating to the use of hate speech. Our partner, the Institute for Civic Development, facilitated the participation of the parties and candidates and supported the logistics of the campaign.

WFD organised the national talk show events. We prepared the questions, invited experts, and participated in the recording and editing. Generally, TV channels in Kyrgyzstan do not have any tools to track the number viewers of their broadcasts. Yet, according to the [research done in 2017](#) on media preferences of the Kyrgyzstani population, NTS is the 5<sup>th</sup> most watched. Overall, NTS had 23% of the national audience, while Next TV had 6%. Therefore, as WFD's broadcasts were prime time talk shows, there is a good chance that they were widely viewed.

## Other contributions

Alongside WFD's role in achieving the outcomes described in this case, there were of course other contributing factors:

- Since the 2020 parliamentary election, there has been increased public awareness of the high levels of hatred seen on social media around election campaigns. This meant that the topic was not entirely new to stakeholders – although most had not heard the terminology and concept of 'hate speech'
- WFD worked alongside the CEC as they were the only entry point to political parties and candidates. This helped to give credibility to the campaign's message, as the commission is a respected and trusted institution in Kyrgyzstan. The CEC itself was very willing to engage in this process. The programme provided it with an opportunity to reach regional participants of the electoral process and inform them about the new electoral amendments, as well as to introduce the topic of hate speech. Participants were impressed by the participation of the CEC Chairperson, and members of the CEC in the political party and candidates' trainings and appreciated their comprehensive answers to their questions
- WFD implemented this programme with local partners, Institute for Civic Development and PF "Civic Platform". These organisations had previously worked closely with the CEC and provided a vital entry point that would have been challenging for WFD to access alone. Both organisations are experts in the electoral process, political parties, and the parliament in Kyrgyzstan and provided important insights and knowledge that supported the programme
- As part of the Media Dialogue programme, Article 19 were also working on the campaign. Their work focused on raising awareness on social media, under the [#ChallengeHate](#) campaign
- The new election laws and campaign rules provided a context within which WFD could broach the topic of hate speech, and a demand from stakeholders as we were the only actor providing this training. Participants in the political party trainings had very limited prior information on the electoral process, especially the recent amendments to the election law. All participants found the sessions extremely useful and voiced their wishes for a peaceful election.

## Significance

Firstly, the programme has clearly raised awareness. It has interacted with 20 out of the 21 political parties standing for election in Kyrgyzstan and engaged in the complicated conversation of applying the hate speech concept to the local context. Political parties accepted the need to avoid using hate speech, as seen when they signed the memorandum. The programme has also increased local capacity and momentum which could see future work in this area. The local partners that WFD collaborated with are interested in continuing to work on the avoidance of using hate speech in electoral campaigns themselves. The electoral commission is also supportive of further work in this space.

More conceptually, the programme is a pioneer on this topic, one that is only going to grow in importance in this period of political polarisation and social media influence. It has learned important lessons about working on hate speech, which can be applied to other similar programmes in the future:

- hate speech is an extremely delicate topic in Kyrgyzstan. Partly because of the recent political turmoil but also because it does not translate well into Kyrgyz language. In order to navigate this sensitivity, when engaging candidates, WFD chose to discuss hate speech in the context of broader changes to the election laws and campaign rules<sup>4</sup>. This approach made it easier to open the discussion on the issues of hate speech, especially among political parties and candidates in the regions
- hate speech is a complicated and inexact concept. References to international standards<sup>5</sup> were not effective in building support, and so the programme focused on local references and explaining the candidates' responsibilities under Kyrgyzstani law. These are found under Article 313 of the Criminal Code.<sup>6</sup> Focusing on the legal aspects ensured the topic could not be dismissed, and the discussion did not get overly impassioned
- the programme worked with youth first, based on the assumption that they are active voters, campaigners, and engaged politically. This proved to be true, and the open statement that they crafted created momentum and bottom-up pressure that helped to drive the work with political parties and candidates
- delivering a campaign of this nature within the time frame of an election campaign, is challenging. There is a pinch point, as trainings need to be delivered before the start of the election campaign in order for to have the most impact. However, this presents a logistical challenge as the parties

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<sup>4</sup> <https://thediomat.com/2021/08/upcoming-parliament-elections-present-new-opportunities-and-challenges-for-kyrgyzstan/>

<sup>5</sup> ICCPR Articles 19/20, 20 (2) Rome Statute and Genocide Convention; CERD; Rabat Action Plan

<sup>6</sup> Stipulates that actions aimed at inciting racial, ethnic, national, religious or interregional hostility (hatred), humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens on the basis of their attitude to religion, national or race, committed publicly or using the mass media, as well as through the Internet, entails criminal liability in the form of a penalty of imprisonment of the III category

and candidates are still registering to stand. In this case, this was exacerbated by the recent changes in the electoral law in Kyrgyzstan

- this programme worked in a tense political environment, in a context with diverse backgrounds, ideologies and agendas. The programme managed this with skilled political sensitivity, but needed to pay careful attention to regional, ethnic, and political dynamics.

## Evidence

- The political parties signed the Memorandum of Understanding, which is captured in a [news report on the CEC website](#) and in a [news video](#)
- The open statement can be viewed on the [Media Dialogue programme website](#)
- WFD activity reports capture engagement and reflections from political parties and candidates on the open statement and the topic of hate speech
- WFD collected informal feedback from civic activists at training events
- All WFD activities are captured on our digital monitoring tool, and some were [announced](#) in press releases. The talk shows are available to view on YouTube ([NTS](#) and [NEXT TV](#)), and a regional TV station filmed a [segment on the trainings](#). The [first](#) and [last](#) events of the campaigns were also covered by two national television stations.

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