

The Current Condition of the Religious Sphere in Kazakhstan: An Assessment of Trends, Risks, and Challenges

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Abstract

This article analyzes the current conditions and trends in the religious space of the Republic of Kazakhstan. It outlines the main challenges and threats in the religious sphere and evaluates the main tendencies. The article draws upon the state policy in the religious sphere as well as upon data gathered from sociological studies conducted in the territory of Kazakhstan. It also analyzes the normative and legal acts regulating the religious sphere of Kazakhstan. It studies the formation of state policy of secular Kazakhstan in the religious sphere, which has been shaped by three factors: the search for and determination of the national development strategy of the country; the challenges and threats of the modern globalizing world; and the rise of the processes of secularism in other states. The article attempts to analyze the results of sociological studies of recent years regarding the risks associated with the erosion of the secular foundations of the state, as well as the issues related to the self-identification of Kazakhstani citizens. In particular, the article provides comprehensive information on the confessional structure of Kazakhstan, as well as separate samples based on the results of sociological studies on religious issues carried out by government agencies.

Keywords

Kazakhstan, religion, security, religious situation, secularism.

Introduction

The fundamental transformations that took place in Kazakhstan and throughout the world at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century and the spiritual and ideological

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state of society, as well as the position of civil-society institutions associated with these processes, evoked a wide interest in the state policy in the religious sphere. The formation of the state policy in the religious sphere of secular Kazakhstan is based on three factors: 1) the search for and determination of the national development strategy of the country; 2) challenges and threats of the modern global world; and 3) increasing processes of secularism in various states. According to some leading foreign experts specializing in topical issues of religion, including Austrian theologian and sociologist Peter Ludwig Berger, today the modern world “is more religious than ever in its history.”¹ In connection with the processes of the global revival of religiosity, globalization, politicization, and internationalization of religious dogmas, the influence of religion as a social phenomenon on the religious and national security of the states has become especially relevant. The negative impact of certain religious movements on national security has become an inevitable problem that almost all states of the world,² including the Republic of Kazakhstan, are forced to face.

To analyze the current state of the religious sphere in Kazakhstan, it is essential to consider the key terms covered by this article.

National Security

Strictly speaking, the meaning of the term “national security” is still the subject of much debate among international and Kazakhstani experts. The issue of national security has its own characteristics, and everyone approaches it in their own ways, none of which are superfluous or redundant. This suggests that the issue of national security has not been exhausted, either at the level of the expert community or the level of the political class as a whole.

According to former US President Thomas Jefferson, a country’s national security is to protect or seek to promote its vital interests, because “it perceives it as bearing directly on its continued existence as an independent entity, its territorial integrity, or on the lives of its people.”³ A prominent American political scientist Arnold Wolfers holds that “objectively, national security is the absence of a threat to a

¹ Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), p.2

² X. U. Yihua, “Studies on Religion and China’s National Security in the Globalization Era,” *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 7, no. 3 (2013): 2.

³ Thomas F. Farr, *World of Faith and the International Freedom: International Religious Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 309.

particular value system, and, subjectively, it means that there is no fear that such values will be attacked.”⁴ Defining the essence of the term “national security,” famous political scientist Harold Dwight Lasswell argues that “national security means freedom from external dictatorship.”⁵ The Law “On the National Security of the Republic of Kazakhstan,” which considers international experience, defines the concept of “national security” as “the state of protection of the national interests of the Republic of Kazakhstan from real and potential threats, ensuring the dynamic development of man and citizen, society and the state.”⁶

Thus, national security is aimed at protecting individuals, society, and the state, their livelihoods and interests from external and internal threats. It is worth noting that in different historical periods the relative importance of various components of threats to national security was different. Today, the main threats to the vital interests of secular Kazakhstan come from radicalism, extremism, and terrorism.

The concept of “national security” accumulates certain types of security, including political, economic, informational, environmental, cybersecurity, and others. This classification includes “religious security” as a separate institution.

Religious Security

As part of national security, religious security plays a fundamental role in shaping a sustainable, stable, prosperous state.

An analysis of the sources shows that there is no single well-established religious and legal understanding of the term “religious security.” At the same time, in the narrow sense, religious security is “a system of conditions ensuring the preservation of a traditional religious system within the limits of a historically established norm.”⁷

In this article, the concept of “religious security” is considered in the context of the actualization of the religious situation in the country. Thus,

⁴ Prabhakaran Paleri, *National Security Imperatives and Challenges* (New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill, 2008).

⁵ Joseph Romm, *Defining National Security: The Nonmilitary Aspects* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1993), 122.

⁶ Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Information and Legal System of Normative Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan,” *Adilet*, <http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z1200000527>.

⁷ Vakha Yunusovich Gadaev, “Religious Safety in the Context of Spiritual Safety,” *Theory and Practice of Social Development* 10 (2014): 13, <http://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/religioznaya-bezopasnost-v-kontekste-duhovnoy-bezopasnosti>.

it seems appropriate to consider the term religious situation “a summary of the characteristics of the whole complex of religious manifestations on a specific object under study at a certain point in time in their relationship with each other and with social integrity (society, other spheres and sides of social life)” as shown in the study of a Russian scientist Remir Lopatkin.⁸

According to Kazakh political analyst Ruslan Zhanqazy, “Religious security is a state of protection of national interests in the state-confessional, interfaith and confessional-personal relations.”⁹ The protection of national interests in the following areas is worthy of interest: stable functioning, reproduction, and original development of the denominations—for the people of Kazakhstan—Sunni Islam of the Ḥanafī *madhhab* and Orthodox Christianity; preservation of confessional identity based on the stable system of moral and ethical value preferences; and prevention of excessive growth of the role of religious organizations in the ideological space of Kazakhstan.

The state should provide a possibility of lawful influence on religious associations at any stage (i.e., registration, functioning or change of the legal form). The concept of “religious security” should also be included in the content of the conceptual programme documents related to national security. In this regard, it is important to consider the general religious situation in sovereign Kazakhstan, which has been consistently changing over the past quarter of the century.

Religious Sphere in Kazakhstan

Before the independence of Kazakhstan, the relations between the state and religion were determined under the “Decree on the Separation of the Church from the State” of January 23, 1918.¹⁰

In the 1920s, the state’s attitude to religion was initially neutral, but any mentioning of a person’s religion was prohibited. Later, in the post-war years, an atheistic ideology was established in society, where religion was declared a relic of the past and prohibited. The attainment of sovereignty caused the growth of the national identity and the change of the spiritual guidelines in the country and society. The religious situation

⁸ Remir A. Lopatkin, “Religious Situation” (report presented at the International Conference on the Religious Situation in the North-West of Russia and the Baltic States, St. Petersburg, December 9-10, 2002), http://www.religare.ru/2_5803.html.

⁹ Ruslan Zhanqazy, “State-Confessional Relations: Reformatting God,” <https://yvision.kz/post/195702>.

¹⁰ “Decree on the Separation of the Church from the State,” <https://drevo-info.ru/articles/15402.html>.

fundamentally changed and the number of religious associations and believing citizens increased.¹¹

In 1992, the “Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations” was adopted, which complies with the international standards of the time. However, with the opening of borders and the operation of liberal religious legislation, the activity of various religious associations and cults began to intensify and expand in the country. The revival of religious traditions contributed to the mass influx of foreign religious missionaries and emissaries of numerous religious and pseudo-religious communities and organizations in the republic.

In the first years of independence, the young state was engaged in improving the country’s economy. Therefore, the religious sphere remained outside of the attention of the state and society. Thus, there was a steady increase in the interest of a significant part of the population in religion. This led to the fact that by 2011, 46 denominations were registered in the country which presented practically the entire spectrum of religious associations and movements. Monitoring of the religious situation during this period showed a steady increase in the religiosity of the population, and this tendency had the prerequisites to become a long-term factor in the public and political life of the republic.

In this situation, the sphere of religion and state-religion relations becomes the most important among all other pressing issues arising between the government and civil society. According to Kazakhstani experts N. Baitenova, A. G. Kosichenko, Y. Burova, and N. Seitakhmetova, the problematic aspects of the religious sphere accumulated over the years and were aggravated under the influence of the “external factors” and eventually spilt out in the form of military actions with elements of religious extremism and terrorism.

For the first time, religious extremism demonstrated its destabilizing potential, which reached a threatening size. Objectively, extremism attacked the sensitive aspects of national security—the security of individuals, the security of society, and the security of the state. Under these conditions, the further maintenance of a rather liberal regime of functioning of religious associations, among which there were many with odious and ambiguous teachings, was not possible.

¹¹ Roman Podoprighora, “Legal Regulation in the Field of Religion in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Approaches and Consequences,” <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/pravovoe-regulirovanie-v-sfere-religii-v-postsovetskom-kazahstane-podhody-i-posledstviya/viewer>.

Taking into account the emerging difficult trends in a religious situation, the state has set a goal to restore law and order throughout the republic, to give a civilized and legal character to the mode of functioning of religious associations, to take symmetrical measures in response to an emergency, and to develop a system of measures and actions aimed at effective neutralization of threats. An important step in preventing threats in the religious sphere was the adoption of the Law on Religious Activities and Religious Associations in 2011, which became a powerful institutional legal barrier to the penetration of alien ideologies and pseudo-religious teachings into Kazakhstan.

The adoption of the new draft law made it possible to improve and regulate the religious situation in the country. One of the reasons for updating the legislation was the significant growth of the role of religion over the two decades after independence. The existing legal norms did not always meet the requirements of the time. The period from 1990 to the 2000s was characterized by rapid growth in the number of religious associations and the emergence of movements that were not previously represented in the country. Unfortunately, these were also accompanied by disturbing tendencies associated with attempts to use religion for destructive and extremist purposes. In this situation, the re-registration of religious associations under the requirements of the new law was a timely step. It was the first major step in improving the state's policy in the sphere of religion. Due to re-registration, the number of religious associations decreased from 4,551 to 3,088.¹²

It is important to emphasize that the tightened requirements for the registration, functioning, and activities of religious communities do not equal rejection of the principle of freedom of religion. The legislation imposes only such restrictions in the sphere of religious freedoms that are dictated by the need to protect the foundations of the constitutional order, morality, health, rights, and legitimate interests of a person and citizen, to ensure the security of the state and society.

The new law was developed through the prism of ensuring the stability of the state and was based on international experience, with a focus on further strengthening tolerance and harmony in Kazakhstani society. Legislative reforms resulted in the improvement of the regulatory framework in the sphere of religion, which made it possible to create all the necessary legal conditions for the free and effective functioning of religious associations. The timely adoption of a set of effective measures

¹² Y. F. Trofimov, "State-church Relations in Modern Kazakhstan," *Adilet Press* (Almaty), 1997, p. 4.

within the framework of the law also made it possible to create the necessary institutional basis for harmonious state-religion relations.

Overall, this law is aimed at maintaining a balance of public and religious interests. One should single out the three main principles of state policy in the field of religious freedom: neutrality, tolerance, and parity. The dominant place is given to the principle of state neutrality, which includes non-interference in the internal affairs of religious associations. The principle of tolerance means respect for religious beliefs. The principle of parity translates into equality before the law of all religious associations and representatives of various faiths. The state is taking concrete measures to preserve stability in the religious sphere, strengthen interfaith harmony and tolerance in society, and form the population's immunity to the ideology of religious extremism and radicalism in all forms and manifestations.

According to the official data, in the fourth quarter of 2021, there were 3,834 religious associations registered in the republic, representing 18 denominations. Of them, 2,695 are Islamic, 345 Orthodox, 88 Catholic, 592 Protestant, 60 Jehovah's Witnesses, 24 New Apostolic Church, 12 Krishna Consciousness Society, 7 Jewish, 6 Bahai, 2 Buddhist, 2 Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and 1 is Unification Church. In total, there are 3,603 religious buildings in Kazakhstan. Of these, 2,693 are mosques, 303 Orthodox churches, 108 Catholic churches, 407 Protestant prayer houses, 57 prayer houses of Jehovah's Witnesses, 24 prayer houses of the New Apostolic Church, 6 synagogues, 2 prayer houses of Bahaim, 2 prayer houses of Krishna Consciousness Society, and 1 Buddhist temple. Three hundred, forty-five missionaries are officially registered in the republic, of which 281 are foreigners. This data demonstrates that the Republic of Kazakhstan is a multi-confessional country.¹³

According to the results of a sociological survey conducted in the fourth quarter of 2021, a significant part of the Kazakhstani population considers itself to be "believers" (89.2%). Of these, 61.8% limit their religiosity to holidays and observance of certain formalities. 27.4% of respondents described themselves as practising believers who strictly observe religious prescriptions and rituals. 6.2% of the survey participants classified themselves as non-believers who do not participate in religious life but respect the religious feelings of other people. According to the results of the survey, 1.6% of respondents adhere to atheistic principles

¹³ The Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/qogam/activities/141?lang=ru>.

and 0.9% are agnostic. In terms of breakdown by regions, most survey participants who consider themselves practising believers are located in Akmola (45.8%), Mangistau (45.1%), and Atyrau (43.9%) regions. The main types of religious self-identification of citizens are associated with Islam and Christianity.

Currently, there is a Republican Islamic Religious Association in Kazakhstan, the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK), under the auspices of which mosques operate. The Development Concept of the SAMK until 2020, which envisages the qualitative, organizational, and ideological transformation of the potential of the leading Islamic organization, has been implemented. Work is underway to improve the system of training domestic religious workers, imams, and theologians. An institute for the retraining of theologians in the prevention of religious extremism has been established at Nur-Mubarak University.

The Orthodox Church of Kazakhstan is the second largest denomination in terms of the number of followers. There are 345 Orthodox associations in the country, including 1 Republican Religious Association (i.e., the Metropolitan District of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Republic of Kazakhstan), 10 dioceses, 1 vicariate, and 9 monasteries.¹⁴ The Armenian Apostolic Church, 2 Orthodox Churches Abroad, and 7 Old Believer Churches also function on the territory of the republic.

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in Kazakhstan is represented by 88 religious communities, of which 5 communities belong to the Greek Catholic Church.¹⁵ The centre of the RCC is the Archdiocese of St. Mary in Nur-Sultan. The RCC has been operating since 1998 based on the Relationship Agreement between Kazakhstan and the Holy See, approved by Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 141 dated May 19, 1999, and ratified on October 18, 2012.

There are about 592 Protestant religious organizations in Kazakhstan. The prominent Protestant communities are Pentecostal churches, Evangelical Christian Baptists, Presbyterians, Seventh Day Adventists, and Evangelical Lutherans.

According to official data, as of January 1, 2022, Kazakhstan has 13 religious educational organizations and 307 facilities for holding religious events outside religious buildings, including *namazhana*, prayer rooms, and chapels. All registered religious subjects carry out activities under the

¹⁴ The Metropolitan District, <https://mitropolia.kz/>.

¹⁵ The Catholic Church in Kazakhstan, <https://catholic-kazakhstan.org/>.

legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan and serve the cause of peace and harmony, the development of society, and the strengthening of the state. Leaders of religious associations are actively involved in the work of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan and the consultative and advisory bodies at the central and local levels. Religious holidays Kurban Ait and the Nativity of Christ are public holidays in the republic.

According to research,¹⁶ 88.0% of the population of Kazakhstan support the state policy in the religious sphere and display opposition to the destructive ideologies and activities of radical groups. All age groups of respondents have shown unity of views on the government's confessional policy, as well as awareness and loyalty to innovations in the field of religion.

Studies of the religious situation in the country made it possible to identify and clearly define several fundamental tendencies associated with challenges and threats to a secular state. These trends have become the foundations that predetermined the meaning and value of the Concept of the State Policy in the Religious Sphere of the Republic of Kazakhstan for the medium term, adopted by the Decree of the President of Kazakhstan in June 2017.¹⁷

The initiatives introduced in the Concept proved their effectiveness, and have therefore been continued and improved through the adoption of the Comprehensive Plan for the Implementation of State Policy in the Religious Sphere for 2021-2023.¹⁸ The characteristic trend of recent times has been the rapid and unprecedented pace of globalization and its influence on the development of the religious situation in the republic. Kazakhstan is a significant part of the world community, which, like all other countries of the world, is experiencing the risks of intrafaith and interfaith tensions and the growing activity of radical religious movements in Central Asia.

An analytical report based on the results of the sociological research "Assessment of the State Policy in the Religious Sphere by the Population of Kazakhstan" (fourth quarter of 2021), prepared by the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, noted that 6.1% of Kazakhstanis could not answer the question "Are

¹⁶ "Assessment of the State Policy in the Religious Sphere by the Population of Kazakhstan" (4th quarter of 2021), <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/qogam/documents/details/291858?lang=ru>.

¹⁷ "Presidential Decree of the Republic of Kazakhstan of June 20, 2017 No. 500 about approval of the Concept of the State Policy in the Religious Sphere of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2017-2020," <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=98273>.

¹⁸ <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2000000953>.

Kazakhstanis concerned about the problem of extremism and terrorism and if yes, to what extent?” About 7.5% of respondents admitted that they had never thought about this topic. 38.4% of the surveyed Kazakhstanis do not worry about this at all. A tenth of the Kazakhstani population pays attention to this problem, but it does not bother him/her (10.7%). 17.8% of Kazakhstanis experience some fear and anxiety. 19.6% of respondents constantly experience anxiety and fear because of this problem. That is, a total of 37.4% of citizens are concerned about the problem of extremism and terrorism. Most concerned about this issue are residents of West Kazakhstan (the sum of the responses “Yes, I constantly experience anxiety and fear because of this problem” and “Yes, I experience some fear and anxiety” amounts to 61.1%), Kyzylorda (61.0%), Mangistau (56.3%), and Atyrau (56.1%) regions, as well as the two largest cities of the country—Almaty (52.4%) and Nur-Sultan (50.8%). 14.2% of Kazakhstanis are sure that there exists a real threat of terrorism, despite all the measures of protection taken by the state.

The main factors in the spread of religious extremism, from the point of view of Kazakhstanis, are low level of religious and legal literacy, low standard of living of the population, imperfection of the state policy in the field of religion, psychological characteristics of the individual, non-observance of human rights in society, and the work of local preachers who adhere to radical movements.¹⁹

According to leading experts, the need for the legal regulation of the religious sphere remains imperative. Based on the results of the analysis of the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the field of religion, leading experts A. Bizhanov, A. Derbisali, N. Baitenova, Y. Burova, N. Seidakhmetova, Y. Duisenov, R. Podoprighora, and B. Satershinov gave recommendations and proposals for its improvement within the framework of international obligations to further develop the legislative base in this area.²⁰

In this regard, it is necessary to revise and update the current legislation in the religious sphere, taking into account the dynamic processes and events occurring in the confessional space. Under Clause 1 of Article 1 of the Constitution, the Republic of Kazakhstan claims to be a democratic, secular, legal, and social state. However, a priori, if new social

¹⁹ “Assessment of the State Policy in the Religious Sphere by the Population of Kazakhstan,” <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/qogam/documents/details/291858?lang=ru>.

²⁰ Assem Almuhanbet, “Experts Discussed the Bill in the Religious Sphere in Almaty,” *Qamshy.kz*, September 11, 2017, <https://ru.qamshy.kz/article/29060-eksperty-obsudili-zakonoproekt-v-religioznoy-sfere-v-almaty>.

phenomena appear in the state, then, naturally, it becomes necessary to create legislation and mechanisms for settling these relations. Therefore, in connection with the transformation of the mechanisms of legal regulation of religious activities, it seems objective and necessary to bring them into line with global and regional trends that have a direct impact on the state and the development of the religious situation in the country. To this end, the need has emerged to develop new legal norms that prevent the spread of the ideology of religious radicalism and extremism in society.

Recent studies, conducted in the fourth quarter of 2021,²¹ have clearly shown the risks of erosion of the secular foundations of the state. It should be noted that the majority of Kazakhstanis are characterized by moderation in religious activities and an understanding of the principles of secularism. However, in recent years, an increase in the religiosity of the population has been observed in society. The surveys revealed that 66.9% of Kazakhstani people considered themselves to be adherents of traditional Islam (i.e., Sunnism of the *Ḥanafī madhhab*) (see Table 1).

Religion	Percentage
Traditional Islam (Sunnism of the <i>Ḥanafī madhhab</i>)	66.9
Other forms of Islam (Shiism)	4.3
Orthodox Christianity	18.8
Catholicism	0.9
Protestantism (Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, Baptism, Pentecostalism, Adventism)	0.6
Judaism	0.2
Buddhism	0.2
Paganism	0.0
Tengrianism	0.4
I believe in God, but do not adhere to any religious movement	4.6
Others	0.1
Hard to answer	3.3

Table 1: Demographics of religions in Kazakhstan

Traditional Islam is the dominant denomination in almost all regions of the country. In the regional context, followers of Islam of the *Ḥanafī*

²¹ The Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/qogam/documents/details/291858?lang=ru>.

madhhab make up the vast majority in Turkestan (98.4%), Atyrau (90.9%), Mangistau (90.1%), Kyzylorda (87.8%), and Almaty (75.8%) regions and in the city of Shymkent (87.0%). Followers of this branch of Islam constitute less than half of the population in the North Kazakhstan (45.9%), Kostanay (41.0%), and West Kazakhstan (37.5%) regions.

Orthodox Christianity is in second place in terms of prevalence. Almost a fifth of the country's population identifies itself as Orthodox Christians. At least one-third of the populace profess Orthodoxy in North Kazakhstan (42.6%), Kostanay (42.0%), Pavlodar (40.5%), Karaganda (37.3%) and East Kazakhstan (34.4%) regions, and almost one-third in the Akmola region. Adherents of Catholicism are concentrated in Kostanay (5.0%) and Karaganda (3.3%) regions.

In general, the population of the country is informed of the state of the religious situation in the country.

Although in certain regions of the country there is a concentration of potential hotbeds of religious extremism, the population of the country assesses the religious situation in the republic as positive.

Answers	In my city/town/village	In the country
The religious situation is good/relations are friendly/there are no problems.	54.9	54.0
The religious situation is rather good/relations are neutral/interests do not overlap.	33.8	24.0
The religious situation is rather bad/relations are quite strained/there are hidden tensions.	2.4	8.5
The religious situation is bad/relations are strained/conflicts often arise.	0.6	3.3
Hard to answer	8.4	10.3

Table 2: Views on the religious situation in Kazakhstan

The study revealed that many religious traditions are turning into a modern fashion trend. A certain part of the population is characterized by external manifestations of piety and an interest in the publicity of religious life. There is a part of the population that mistakenly interprets secularism as atheism. There is a risk of radicalization of young people

who turn to religion but are ignorant of religious teachings, and for this reason, are easily subject to destructive influence. Some Kazakhstani citizens refuse to perform constitutional and civic duties to society. There have been frequent cases of disrespect towards laws, state symbols of the country, national cultural traditions of the people, and generally accepted standards of ethics and behaviour. There are cases of violations of the requirements to refrain from wearing religious paraphernalia in educational institutions, non-attendance of classes on Saturdays, as well as the refusal of students to study certain subjects under the influence of parents (legal representatives) who adhere to conservative religious views. There are cases of refusal of parents from medical vaccination of children for religious reasons.

The cases of concluding a marriage union of men and women under religious rites and ceremonies without registration with the relevant state bodies have become more frequent. Traditional family values are being promoted, contradicting the current situation of women in the family, their social activity and employment, and gender equality.

A high degree of conflict is characteristic of followers of destructive religious movements, bearers of alien values for Kazakhstan, dangerous to society, damaging mental and material well-being of citizens and opposing their religious preferences, the secular principles of the state, and traditional spiritual values. The cultivation of fundamentalism and radicalism is a real threat to the stability of Kazakhstani society and state, leading to a shaking of the unity of the people of Kazakhstan and their traditional culture and identity and to the violation of the rights of representatives of other faiths.

A dangerous tendency is the spread of the ideology of religious radicalism and extremism in society, especially among young people. The ideology of religious radicalism and extremism penetrates the public consciousness through massive information and psychological impact through global information and communication networks, including the Internet space and modern electronic software applications. A targeted impact on society, especially on young people, goes through social networks, illegal replication, and popularization of videos and literature, in which extremist and terrorist ideas are strongly promoted. Under the influence of the massive destructive informational impact of the radical religious ideology, the consciousness of individual members of society is deformed, the level of social trust of citizens in the state is reduced, feelings of patriotism and solidarity are levelled, value orientations and ethical standards change, families are destroyed, and society is split. Systematic informational injection of radical religious ideas into society

creates favourable conditions for recruiting new members to the ranks of terrorists and extremists.

Attempts by the ideologues of religious extremism to undermine the principles of a secular state and civic identity are fraught with an increase in conflict potential in society, an increase in the number of followers of radical religious movements, including those seeking to illegally travel abroad to join the ranks of international terrorist organizations. Denial of the system of moral, ethical values and traditional dogmatic foundations of society, coupled with aggressive propaganda of ideological aspects that contradict traditional universal values, aims at discrediting the secular foundations of the state, the existing social system, the laws and norms, in particular, those regulating state-religion relations.

In this sense, the propagandized views act as a religious motivation or religious ideological formulation of political, nationalist extremism. Slogans, appeals, and ideological actions of extremist religious organizations are usually addressed not to the mind, but to the feelings and prejudices of people, and are designed for uncritical, emotional perception and blind adherence to customs and traditions. Those who strongly disagree with the state policy in the religious sphere sometimes resort to extremely cruel actions—e.g., organization and perpetration of violent acts against citizens, society, and the state. In some cases, for example in 2012-2015, recruited Kazakhstanis left for Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. It is impossible to calculate the exact number of those who left; people, often without documents, left the country and after crossing three or four borders joined extremists.

As factors of the vulnerability of young people to the ideology of destructive trends, it is important to highlight socio-economic problems, nihilism and apathy, lack of life experience, and low critical perception.

According to an analytical report of the ministry of information and social development,²² young people aged 18 to 30 can increasingly be seen in prayer houses and places of worship. The growth of the level of religiosity can be characterized by an increased interest in religion on the part of young people. The dominant majority—i.e., three-quarters of those surveyed—represent the Ḥanafī *madhhab* of Islam. In the territorial context, the respondents of the following regions to a greater extent assess the level of religiosity of young people as similar to the adult population: Aktobe (23.9%), West Kazakhstan (23.5%), Karaganda (23.4%),

²² “Assessment of the State Policy in the Religious Sphere by the Population of Kazakhstan” (4th quarter of 2021), <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/qogam/documents/details/291858?lang=ru>.

and East Kazakhstan (29.4%) regions, and the cities of Almaty (23.3%) and Shymkent (24.9%).

The issue of involving young people in the ranks of believers is one of the most urgent. How do Kazakhstanis feel about the fact that more and more young people are turning to religion? According to the latest research, about 73.3% of the surveyed Kazakhstanis approve of this trend. Almost every fifth Kazakhstani (22.4%) is completely positive about this and every second Kazakhstani (50.9%) is rather positive. There are regions where the level of approval is extremely high. These are traditionally Muslim regions with a high proportion of believers—i.e., Shymkent city (96.3%) and Turkestan (94.7%) and Kyzylorda (89.0%) regions. Analysis of the results of the respondents' answers reveals the frequent occurrence (55.1%) of the opinion that the level of religiosity of young people is higher compared to that of the adult population.

The opinions of Kazakhstanis about the factors that impact young people's turn to religion are divided. Most often, respondents note the influence of propaganda on the Internet - 43.2%, followed by the return to sincere faith (32.3%) and family upbringing (29.0%).²³ More than 20% of respondents also point to the factor of filling the spiritual void. 18.9% of respondents believe that one of the reasons young people turn to religion is their tendency to imitate their peers. 16.2% attribute this to the restoration of folk traditions. 13.5% of Kazakhstanis believe that the influence of foreign preachers plays a role here. 8.1% of respondents point to religion as a "vogue." More than 70% of the surveyed Kazakhstanis approve of the fact that young people are increasingly involved in the ranks of believers.

Of particular importance in the religious situation are the processes taking place in the confessional segment: the activities of religious associations and their relationship with each other, society, and state authorities. The country has adherents of radical religious movements, as well as terrorist and extremist organizations prohibited by the court in Kazakhstan. There are cases of provocations by representatives of radical religious movements of conflicts with the official clergy. Sometimes, certain believers express reproaches and accusations against those who do not share their religious views.

Some religious associations and unregistered religious movements conduct illegal preaching and missionary activities, including through the creation of various organizations, educational centres, and training courses and seminars.

²³ Ibid.

On the part of individual representatives of religious associations, there are facts of violations of the requirements established by the legislation on holding religious events, circulation of religious literature, other informational materials of religious content, as well as requirements for the involvement and participation of minors in religious events and activities of religious associations.

In several regions of the republic, local authorities initiated the prosecution of initiators and clergy for organizing summer outdoor camps for schoolchildren (outside religious buildings), which goes contrary to the requirements of the law. The most resonant case happened in 2017 when the rector of the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the village of Merke (Zhambyl region) Hieromonk Jacob (Vladimir Vorontsov) was charged with an administrative offence: praying in an unspecified place during a camp for schoolchildren in the mountains. While the court of the Merkensky district did not view Vorontsov's actions as an administrative offence under Art. 490 of the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Republic of Kazakhstan, it pointed out that he violated several requirements of the legislation on the organization of mass leisure for children and the fact that religious events cannot be held on the territory of health-improving and other similar facilities for children. There are many other similar cases where the defendants were representatives of other faiths, but for them, the outcome of the initiated cases was not as favourable.²⁴

There are also cases when religious communities refuse to undergo state registration on principle. In particular, this applies to some communities of the "Church of Evangelical Christian Baptists."²⁵

The unregulated receipt of religious education abroad by citizens of the country leads to their involvement in extremist movements. As of January 1, 2022, 284 citizens of the country were studying in foreign theological educational institutions, 176 of them in unofficial ones, where Kazakhstanis often fall under the influence of extremist and radical ideologists. Subsequently, after arriving in Kazakhstan, they often become propagators of these ideologies.

To address this issue, government agencies undertake appropriate awareness-raising measures aimed at preventing young people from travelling abroad to study in dubious theological schools, as well as at

²⁴ http://vteme.kz/news/sojuz_pravoslavnykh_grazhdan_kazahstana_zastupilsja_za_iereja_vladimira_voroncova/2017-08-17-196.

²⁵ "The State of the Religious Sphere in the Republic of Kazakhstan: Problems and Prospects" (Sociological Resource Center, Nur-Sultan), 78-82.

returning those already studying there. In this regard, the procedure for citizens to receive theological education in foreign religious educational organizations requires regulation. There is also an urgent need to ensure that citizens can receive religious education in their own country.

Results and Recommendations

In general, the state of the religious sphere in Kazakhstan is determined by various factors related to ethnic, social, geopolitical, and economic issues. It must be recognized that despite the secularity of the state and the long Soviet period of atheism in the society, today Kazakhstan is a country where the majority of the population in all regions affiliates themselves with Islam to varying degrees of intensity.

In this regard, one needs a broader view of the prospects for the development of the religious situation in the country, which cannot be imagined apart from the general development of statehood and political institutions, the development of demographic processes, changes in the socio-demographic structure of society, namely, the entry into an active social life of a new generation of young people, not only ordinary believers but also young clergy and other charismatic leaders.

One must admit that, while being secular, the state nevertheless has to deal with a rather active Muslim majority of the population, which can significantly influence state policy and public opinion, whereas other confessional groups, even the large ones such as the Orthodox church, do not have the same political potential. The number of believers in such religious communities is likely to gradually decrease, which is mainly due to intensive migration processes and strong migratory sentiments.

Therefore, it is rather difficult to predict how the democratic values and principles that are legally laid down in the existing norms of the republic will be able to develop and whether they will be able to gain a foothold. However, in general, nowadays the religious situation in the republic can be characterized as stable due to the constructive and effective interaction of state bodies and civil society institutions, a balanced state policy in the religious sphere, and a tolerant attitude between representatives of various faiths.

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