

Educating for Tolerance in Kazakhstan

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Abstract: In their paper "Educating for Tolerance in Kazakhstan" Shamshiya Rysbekova, Ainura Kurmanaliyeva and Karlygash Borbassova consider the problem of education intolerance amidst young people in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The authors hope to unveil some of the controversies and problems encountered with regards to the prevention of terrorism and extremism and illuminate the efforts of Kazakhstan for international transparency and EU convergence. The paper begins with a revision of Kazakhstan law on the matter of religious freedom, registration of religious groups, and religious education. These topics have created great controversies in the international community, and the paper goes on to present some of the external reports on this matter, elaborated by various sources such as the United Nations, the European Community, and the United States, among others.

Shamshiya RYSBEKOVA, Ainura KURMANALIYEVA and Karlygash BORBASSOVA

Educating in Tolerance in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is a multiethnic nation with the largest territory in Central Asia, home to over one hundred ethnic groups. It occupies a strategic position, and educational institutions have an important role in the organization and development of tolerance skills. In this respect, a few years ago the Kazakh government introduced in the educational curricula the subject of "Religious Studies," which seeks to open people's minds to tolerance and illuminate the problem of religious extremism. These courses are aimed at helping young people estimate potentially dangerous situations associated with the appearance of intolerance and teach them how to behave when encountering manipulation. They also provide information on assistance to victims who fall under the influence of religious organizations and cults with totalitarian and extremist orientations. The lessons have a secular format and avoid imposing any particular belief on the young people. However, in many parts of the world, the introduction of these courses has been criticized.

Kazakhstan was populated first by tribes from Turkic origins - Argyns, Khazars, Qarluqs, and of the Wusuns, Kipchaks and Cumans. The Khanate of Abu'l-Khayr Khan also settled in the territory (1456-1465). Islamic Tatar missionaries were instrumental in the spread of cultural traditions and inter-ethnic relations across the steppes of Central Asia. In the seventeenth century, Russia gradually colonized the region, resulting in its total annexation by mid 1800s. The consolidation of Stalin's power in the Soviet era brought large numbers of Russians, dissidents, and minority groups (i.e. Germans, Chechens, Tatars, Kalmyks) from other Soviet territories. After independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has become home to disparate groups of migrants from Indo-Iranian, Koreans and Chechen origins (Akiner; Olcott).

Despite the fact that Kazakhstan is considered a Muslim country, its religious composition is complex. According to the 2010 *Report on International Religious Freedom* elaborated by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor of United States, approximately sixty-five percent of the population professes to be Muslim. Ethnic Kazakhs, who constitute almost sixty percent of the population, and ethnic Uzbeks, Uighurs, and Tatars, who collectively make up less than ten percent, are historically Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School. Other Islamic groups account for less than 1 percent of the population. Approximately one-third of the population, comprising ethnic Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, are Russian Orthodox by tradition. Members of a Roman Catholic (Ukrainians and Germans) account for 1 percent of the population. Other Christian religious groups include Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Pentecostals, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses. Smaller communities of Methodists, Mennonites, and Mormons are registered by in a special Kazakh registry for religious organizations. The Jewish community is estimated at less than one percent of the population. The report also mentions Buddhist groups, Hare Krishna movement, the Church of Scientology, Baha'is, Christian Scientists, and the Unification Church.

The principles of interrelations between religions and the Kazakh state were formulated in the "Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Associations" (*Vedomosti Verkhovnogo Soveta Respubliki*

Kazakhstan), in January 15 1992. The first Constitution of independent Kazakhstan was adopted in 1993, modified in 1995 after a national referendum. In his report on Kazakhstan for the IACL Congress (International Association of Comparative Law <<http://www.iacl-aidc.org/en/events/previous-events>>), Roman Podoprigora (2009) summarizes the main points included in the Constitution in relation to religious affairs: Article 5, point 3 prohibits the formation and functioning of public associations pursuing goals or actions directed toward inciting social, racial, national, *religious*, class, and tribal enmity; point 5 regulates activities of foreign religious associations, as well as appointment by foreign religious centers of heads of religious associations. Article 14, point 2 guarantees no discrimination for reasons of origin, social or property status, occupation, sex, race, nationality, language, attitude towards religion, convictions, place of residence, or any other circumstances. Article 20, point 3, states that propaganda of or agitation for social, racial, national, *religious*, class, or clannish superiority as well as the cult of cruelty and violence shall not be allowed. And Article 22, entirely devoted to religious issues, states in point 1 that everyone shall have the right to freedom of conscience; point 2, the right to freedom of conscience must not specify or limit universal human and civil rights and responsibilities before the state. (Podoprigora 460) As the author of this report points out, the government maintains strict control on the different types of religious activities. The Committee for National Security (KNB) is in charge of this fight against religious extremism, a top priority of the internal intelligence service.

Kazakhstan is a laic state where religious associations are stated to be equal before the law and no religion enjoys any support or protection on the part of the government. Although the law says that the state does not interfere with the activity of religious associations and guarantees freedom of conscience in Article 22 of the Constitution, the functioning of non-registered associations is not allowed. Article 39 states that individual freedom may be limited by the law in order to protect the constitutional system and defend public order. Thus, although unregistered religious activity is not considered a threat under constitutional law, its functioning is not permitted.

Later provisions have established special administrative procedures. In 1999-2000, a law on the "Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations in the Republic" was drafted. In 2000, the government took steps to identify the potentially 'dangerous' religious groups through the establishment of a "Council for Contact with Religious Associations." Religious groups were required to register with these local councils to enable government supervision. Indeed, the most radical groups did not register with the Council. Other groups that could have otherwise fallen under the spell of the radical groups chose to register for the incentives provided by the government. The measures were aimed at the demonstration of the legitimate concern of the Kazakh government for the rise of uncontrollable radicalism as a possible result of spill-overs from other Central Asian conflict situations over disputed territories taking place during this time-span.

Another government resolution from December 30, 2005 established a special administrative agency, "The Committee on Religious Affairs," which is part of the Ministry of Justice. This Committee was created for protecting citizens' "rights to religious freedom, strengthening of common understanding, fostering tolerance among different religious associations, and encouraging religious

associations cooperation with the state" (Podoprigora 462). The Law has provisions regarding the allowable types of religious associations (local communities, religious centers, spiritual educational institutions, and religious monasteries), all of which are considered a type of non-profit organizations, but distinct from other non-profit associations. In 2008 there were more than 4000 registered religious associations (Podoprigora 458; see also Trofimov).

At the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe OSCE 2007 Madrid Meeting, Kazakhstan Foreign Minister Marat Tazhin affirmed that "It is commonly recognized that one of the most important achievements of Kazakhstan in the humanitarian sphere is securing the inter-ethnic and inter-religious accord. Additional emphasis on strengthening the dialogue between religions and people is the imperative demand of our time." (<<http://www.kazakhstan-osce.org/content/address-he-dr-marat-tazhin-minister-foreign-affairs-republic-kazakhstanosce-ministerial-mee>> Tazhin also claimed that Kazakhstan's experience in promoting religious tolerance and freedom of religions was "exemplary," adding that Kazakhstan had hosted two Congresses of the world and traditional religions, bringing together the spiritual leaders of the main confessions. The following year, in another public statement Tazhin stressed Kazakhstan commitment to cooperate with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the OSCE to strengthen interreligious and interethnic dialogue at all levels (<<http://www.kazakhembus.com/index.php?page=osce-chairmanship>>) However, his assertions were criticized as "prepared 'in Soviet style top-down fashion'" and "rhetoric that has not become reality" (Forum 18 News Service "Broken Promises" 13 & 33).

According to the US 2010 *Report on International Religious Freedom* the religion laws gave Kazakhstan government "broad latitude in identifying and designating a group as an extremist organization, banning a designated group's activities, and criminalizing membership in a banned organization" (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Report November 17, 2010). However, as the US 2010 indicates, the only group banned under the law was the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), "an extremist Islamist political organization motivated by a socio-religious ideology that is virulently anti-Semitic and anti-Western and calls for the overthrow of secular governments" (Ibid). The United States report also states that no other apolitical religious organizations in the country were outlawed as extremist at the time when this report was written in November 17, 2010.

In October 2011, new changes were introduced to "The Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations" (Religion Law) and "The Law on introducing Amendments and Additions to several legal acts questions of Religious Activity and Religious Associations" (Amending Law) amending nine other laws and legal provisions. The Religion Law regulated the registration system of all religious organizations, implementing bans for unregistered religious activity. Central and local government approval became necessary in order to build or open new places of worship. The Amendment to article 375 of the Administrative Law imposed restrictions in holding religious rites and ceremonies, as well as for importing, publishing or distributing religious literature and materials (Podoprigora 458).

The *State Program to Counter Religious Extremism and Terrorism for 2013-2017* raised new fears in the international community. Some foreign observers have claimed that religious freedom might suffer under this new program. The following causes of fear are listed: surveillance of public areas and

media monitoring, the introduction of "religious studies" (Point 36, Part 2) as "a compulsory subject for the nine classes of secondary school, as well as for the first years of middle/specialist and higher educational institutions" where a significant part of the course is "prevention of manifestations of extremism and terrorism"; control over the distribution of religious literature and materials of religious content (Point 70); control over illegal places of worship (Point 71); and also "the appointment of foreign scholars/theologians to Kazakhstan's educational institutions" (Point 37). Felix Corley writing on 06 May 2013 for Forum 18 News Service also complains that "the Implementation Plan does not explain of what faith these theologians would be, which institutions they would be appointed to, nor what tasks they would have once they arrive"(n.p.).

The *Universal Periodic Report on Freedom of Religion and Belief* (UPR) of March 14, 2014, indicated that from 46 recognized religious confessions, only 17 remained recognized by the Kazakh administration after the registration process, a decrease that may be explained because in order to get registration, local communities had to be composed of more than 50 adults, and their names and personal data were also registered. The UPR report is elaborated by a consortium of organizations that include Open Doors, a Christian organization founded in 1955 <www.opendoors.org>, the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) and the NGO World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), <www.worldevangelicals.org> The report provides research data on the violation of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration for Human Rights <www.iirf.eu>The UPR also indicates that personal data registration may have made individuals vulnerable to discrimination from certain public positions.

According to the same *Universal Periodic Report*, some of the religious groups of Kazakhstan's ethnic minorities were not willing re-register and their meetings for worship banned. Some, like Christian Baptists, adopted a policy of civil disobedience and refused to register. As a consequence, during the summer 2013, police raids led to 18 Baptists being fined for meeting for worship without state permission. In only one month, January 2014, 4 cases of jailing were reported. Similarly, the 2014 United Nations Human Rights Commission indicates that the number of registered religious organizations in Kazakhstan fell from 46 to 17 and registered faith-based civic groups fell from 4,551 to 3,088. Of the 666 previously-registered Protestant religious associations, only 462 were re-registered; of 48 "non-traditional" religious groups, only 16 were registered. The same report states that by 2013, only Muslim groups affiliated with the state-backed Muslim Board had been registered, and that Shi'a and Ahmadi Muslims were denied legal status, as were mosques attended mainly by particular ethnic groups. Catholic communities were exempt because of an agreement with the Holy See.

However, as negative as all these reports might be, the authors of this paper hope to show that Kazakhstan is continuously willing to cooperate in the external evaluations performed by the United Nations, the European Community and other international organizations, showing an effort to converge to international standards.

The 2014 *Universal Periodic Report* recommended taking the necessary measures to ensure that all religious communities are able to exercise their freedom of religion or belief and lift the ban of unregistered religious activity. It also recommended intensifying efforts towards further democratization in all governing structures, to protect freedom of expression, including the right to

share one's beliefs, in accordance with human rights standards, to protect the right to import, publish and distribute religious literature and informational materials of religious content, and encourage greater participation of minorities. In this regard, the 2014 report for the *Elimination of Racial Discrimination* CERD/C/KAZ/CO/6-7 also notes its concern with the number of ethnic minority students amounting to only 35%, that is, 7.8% of students in higher education institutions. Thus, the report recommends (see p. 6) to adopt special measures to ensure improved the access to education of these groups. However, the report also sees with appreciation the growing quality of education in the study of minority languages in Kazakhstan. After the reporting 2014 period, recommendations were made to invite the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, to visit Kazakhstan in order to assess the situation (see <<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14420&LangID=E>>).

The current Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov and the Chairman of the Agency for Religious Affairs Marat Azilkhanov spoke to diplomatic representatives on March 6, 2014 indicating that the visit was organized for the period March 25 to April 5, 2014. During this visit, Mr. Bielefeldt pointed out that registering religious communities leads to legal insecurity, violates freedom of religion or belief and may encourage tensions and conflict (see United Nations News Centre <<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47510#.VGSRP8INdMY>> Bielefeldt encouraged Kazakhstan government to follow United Nations regulations such as *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*. <<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/index.htm>> The NGO, *the Foundation for Tolerance International* (FTI) in Kyrgyzstan has also found that citizens think that repressive state measures encourage the growth of extremism (<<http://fti.org.kg/>>).

Finally, another source of international discontent was the textbook that Kazakhstan Ministry of Education decided to use for these courses. Professor of philosophy and member of the Senate, Gari-fulla Esim, and a group colleagues (Aydar Abuov, Kalimash Begalinova and Esbosyn Smagulov) were authorized to work on *Introduction to Religious Studies*, a book that was published in 2010 by Bilim publishers - owned by the Culture Ministry - in Almaty, and that became the object of great controversy. The book presented general information about the main religions of the world, following religious freedom according to the Kazakhstan Constitution. It was introduced into schools in January 2010, and it was at the time the only textbook available to teach a Religious Studies course introduced for the ninth class (for children aged about 14). However, the book was accused of containing aggressive and sometimes insulting and offensive language to some Kazakh religious communities (see *Forum 18*). Another textbook was also published in 2010 by professor Dosai Kenjetaev, N. Askarov A. Sailybaev and O. Tuiakbaev and was also criticized for having inexact definitions of religions, mainly in what concerns Salafism (Wahabbism).

Kazakhs, Tatars, Uzbeks, Uighurs, and other Asian ethnic groups who make up the population of Kazakhstan are often automatically considered to be Muslims. However, many citizens of Kazakhstan do not in fact regard themselves as members of these religions nor take part in religious ceremonies. As in other countries (i.e. France, Spain, China), the secular character of education is one of the prin-

cipal tenets of state educational policy (Art. 3 of Law on Education, 27 July 2007), and the Law on Education prohibited the creation and operation of religious associations in educational institutions (Art. 3) (Podoprigora 466). As a laic state, the public education system in Kazakhstan was completely separated from religion for many years. However, in August 2009 the Ministry of Education made the decision to introduce "Religious Studies" two hours each week in the educational curriculum, with a total of 34 class hours per academic year. This change was introduced with the aim of maintaining a spirit of tolerance and peaceful co-existence in a territory that occupies a critical position in Central Asia. In particular, courses in "Religious Studies" were intended to protect the young generations from the influence of dangerous religious formations and prevent their participation in extremist religious activities (Shepiev). This paper is an attempt to justify the introduction of "Religious Studies" in the Kazakhstan curriculum despite all the international controversy generated.

One of the most important ways to fight against extremism, violence and aggressive interactions within social environments is prevention. Thus, it is especially important to conduct such preventive work among young people, one of the most vulnerable collectives in their exposure to a variety of anti-social and criminal groups. The social and physical vulnerability of youth often depends on their psychological immaturity, their dependence on the opinion of those within their social circle, and their maximalist assessment and judgment that leads them to see only one direction instead of viewing a plurality of options. These are just some of the reasons to talk about the possibility of easy dissemination of radical ideas among young people.

The world has struggled against the growth of forms of antisocial behavior for centuries. Certain political situations have encouraged radicalization patterns amid the youth, and the increase of forms of extremism, particularly among young people without access to appropriate formative education. The cause for youth participation in extremist activities is not always dissatisfaction with their financial situation. In the case of Kazakhstan, as in many other parts of the world, the gradual loss of moral values, the desire for monetary achievement enforced by consumer habits, and the marketing of culture and of cultural traditions, may be behind the growth of forms of cruelty, violence and radicalism, spread in a contradictory manner in television broadcasting and in other forms of mass media communication.

Extremism among young people is determined not only by its danger to public order, but also by the fact that this phenomenon tends to escalate into more serious crimes, such as public disorders and riots involving bodily harm, acts of murder, and terrorist attacks. The sociological profile of extreme groups comprehends people between the ages of 15 and 30. The psychological type involves characteristics such as emotional irritability, inability to restrain and control emotions, and lack of skills in solving simple conflict situations. These psychological profiles have a greater tendency to lead into committing acts of social deviation, violence and terrorism (Kubyakin 38-41). In order to eliminate the conditions that may give rise to youth extremism and promote deviant behavior the following causes have been identified with Kazakh society: the loss of family stability because of economic problems, marital distress, loss of parental authority and moral guidelines, the use of drugs, violent behavior within the family and close group, resentment among young groups, and so on.

The term youth subculture refers to the specific culture of the younger generation with a community lifestyle, behavior, group norms, values and stereotypes. It is at this level that the young generation may exhibit elements of countercultural behavior. Statistics indicate that most crimes are committed by minors who form part of extremist groups. Numerous youth gangs eventually turn to these groups. For instance, one of the most dangerous groups in Central Asia, *Adolat* (Justice), is a group that portrayed itself as reformist, fighting moral decay and encouraging Islamic Revolution. The group was set up in the 1990s supported with Sauri funds and by some 5000 young followers (Louw 24). Partisanship of adolescents to acts of antisocial orientation as well as other more serious crimes is made on the rationale that adolescents are particularly prone to suffer under peer influence, and that their aspirations to be recognized, appreciated and admired in a particular community environment often inflict them with a desire to act in a particular way at all costs (see Berkowitz 207; examples of such extremist behavior are listed for instance in Shalamova and Hovrin 114). In particular, we can mention the incident in Almaty main square when on 31 August 2013 disgruntled fans rioted in the territory of the shopping center "Prime Plaza" during a free concert of Kazakhstani singer Kairat Nurtas who left the stage without finishing one of his songs (this incident is not regarded specifically a religious issue; see <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqPcfPOP-h0>> and <<http://incident.zakon.kz/4573992-v-almaty-razgromili-tc-prajjm-plaza-foto.html>>).

In order to address this problem, the government of Kazakhstan put in motion a number of plans and infrastructures that sought to promote positive public awareness among the youth and minimize violence and extremist behavior. This paper has already listed the legal measures taken by the government. Other infrastructures are functioning as part of civil society, academia and welfare services within Kazakh communities, including educational structures and media distribution channels that might be appealing to young people. In particular, the education system is contemplated as fundamental in implementing government policy because of the social functions performed by schools, universities and other educational institutions. Their role is very important as education takes place during basic stages of the socialization process that involve the development of social and individual consciousness. As a consequence, the academic community has the opportunity to have positive effect on the formation of the psychological and sociological characteristics of individuals.

Therefore, in order to promote harmony and tolerance among schools and higher education institutions, and also to prevent the formation of extremism, Kazakhstan Government has been putting in practice the following measures (summary taken from Karenov 33-37): enhance the role of student associations and their influence on student life; organize elective courses to neutralize extremism and take positions against anti extremist orientations; organize the monitoring of training programs and manuals to identify material aimed at inciting inter-ethnic conflicts; place the criteria of quality within the educational system side by side with quantitative indicators, both in state accreditation and external evaluations (see below); encourage activities for inter-ethnic dialogue with minority and migrant groups, including international friendship clubs; include some degree of religious studies within the curricula at all levels and in all specialties; give training on conflict resolution and communication skills: make students aware of the social dangers that may hinder the development

and progress of society (in particular, protection from the encroachments of the sects that use forms of psychic control and mind manipulation); provide assistance to victims of these sects and cults.

With over eight thousand secondary schools in Kazakhstan, the need for religious specialists became very pressing after the introduction of the "Religious Studies" courses. Several universities started forming prospective teachers of religious studies. Of the 146 universities in Kazakhstan only five were authorized to open the field of "Religion Studies." Among the first universities to do so were Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and Eurasian University. Besides these two, the International University of Foreign Languages, Nur-Mubarak University and A. Yassawi Kazakh Turkish International University also provide formation in "Religion Studies" (for further information see Kuzembaeva).

Courses on "Religious Studies" are an important element for the social and moral training of students in Kazakh education. These courses are taught as part of the national curriculum and they do not teach any religious doctrine in particular. Instead, they make students acquainted with theory and history of religion in a multitude of religious creeds, including notions of moral and social behavior, conflict resolution. They also raise awareness on issues of safety by providing students with a typology of destructive religious organizations, identifying areas on anti-propaganda of religious extremism. The courses provide knowledge to recognize pseudo religious sects and their distinctive features and teach skills so that students are able to free themselves from potentially destructive extremist organizations. The program also includes legal protection of citizens, their peers and their families against encroachment of destructive religious organizations, and the development of the psychophysical, aesthetic and humanistic potential of students' minds, in general.

The Faculty of Philosophy and Political Science at Al Farabi Kazakh National University carries out this professional training at several levels: Bachelor, Master and PhD doctoral studies. "Religious Studies" are taught within the Bachelor courses that include Philosophy, Cultural Studies, Religious studies, Pedagogical science and psychology, Psychology, Sociology, Social work, Political science, and Social pedagogic and self-knowledge. "Religious Studies" are also offered at Master and PhD levels, and is one of the new and demanded specialties. Education can take place full-time, part-time (second degree) or distance education. The training is conducted in the Kazakh, Russian and English languages.

The Graduate (Bachelor) programs includes full-time four-year courses that provide instruction based on the combination of theory and practice. Masters are full-time two-year programs that offer opportunities for higher level jobs in the public, private and non-governmental sectors, in particular, junior teaching positions at higher education and research institutions, leading to PhD programs. These are three-year full-time study programs delivered in three languages (Kazakh, Russian and one foreign language). Candidates have two supervisors, one local and one international supervisor, and choose the optional language according to their internship inclinations. Candidates spend two months each year at the country of residence of their international supervisor. This provides them with an excellent opportunity to learn not just the language but also the culture of their country of choice, all under Kazakh government funding. To learn more about the courses, please check the Website of the university.

Al Farabi KazNU is currently adapting its programs to European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) regulations, although it does not fully implement its principles. The Austrian *Agentur für Qualitätssicherung und Akkreditierung* evaluated several programs in July 2013 and found that admission requirements are clear and suitable; there is an excellent student-faculty ratio, matching elite universities in Europe, although the learning outcomes of the courses offered need to be harmonized in a better way. The report indicates that other forms of evaluation (beside the two hours final exam) should be implemented, and that the workload for some programs (PhD in particular) is too heavy. They also found that the student-faculty relations are very good in terms of accessibility of professors for supervision and advice.

Courses on "Religious Studies" are taught by Kazakh Professors specialized on the subject matter. Independent and external experts and foreign consultants specialized in inter-religious and inter-confessional relations are also invited as visiting professors. The university has a number of institutional partners where students can study abroad on an internship basis funded by the Government of Kazakhstan (see <http://www.kaznu.kz/en/3783/page>). Students graduating in "Religious Studies" can become teachers in higher and secondary special educational institutions. They can also work at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at National Security Committee, and at the Committee on Religious Affairs.

Courses on "Religious Studies" in the Republic of Kazakhstan include topics such as "Religious aspects related to security issues," "The psychology of religious sects," "Religious extremism: its nature and forms," "Types of religious sects" "World religions" and so on. Syllabus for these courses follow OSCE *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (http://www.osce.org/odihr/item_11_28314.html) as well as the 2008 manual on Religious Symbols and international human rights published by *The Council of Europe* (http://www.coe.int/t/DC/Files/Source/FS_religsymbols_en.doc).

All the courses are guided under practical competences and skills that include the following modules: The *Program-Target Module* and the *Assessment and Correction Module*. The *Program-Target Module* defines curriculum development, objectives and methods of activity depending on the level of the detected abilities of students. It has three sub-components: motivational, informational and operational, is implemented through three stages: preliminary, current and retrospective.

1.1. Motivational-value reflects the positive emotional relation between knowledge, interests, motives and beliefs, organizing and directing the efforts of a volitional personality as well as cognitive and practical skills. In Kazakhstan, the educational process is designed in a way that encourages students' motivation to succeed in the process of learning and to overcome setbacks. If a student is not active and seems bored, it is important to understand the reasons why.

Pedagogical conditions for the formation of motivational skills include shifting the role of students from objects of education and training to being the subjects and self-manager of their educational experiences. Group work among peers also encourages individual motivation and self-development. Finally, the teacher's readiness to implement the subject is also a positive factor.

In terms of program organization, level differentiation of knowledge and the development of topics close to real life situations and employability are seen to encourage motivation among students.

1.2. *Informational-cognitive* allows the solution of problems on students' mastery of knowledge in what concerns specific aspects of religious studies such as security issues. It also defines the students' cognitive needs in relations to the courses on religious studies.

In the Republic of Kazakhstan, the basic criteria for selecting the content of teaching materials for students in liberal arts colleges involved in religious studies courses follow the principle of the scientific and practical significance and real possibilities of the educational material. In particular, we pay attention to the field of anti-propaganda against religious extremism and focus on material that follows humanistic principles.

Content selection is also guided by the criteria of a holistic reflection of the tasks involved in forming a fully developed personality. Another important criterion is that of the scientific and practical significance of educational content. Content is also adapted to the learning opportunities of students of a particular age, and in relation to the amount of time available for the study of the particular subject matter.

1.3. *Operational-activity* consists in the creation and development of the necessary knowledge and skills, as well as organizational infrastructures in relation to courses on religious studies in Kazakhstan schools and universities. The practical implementation of the curriculum in Kazakhstan allows the following forms of traditional academic organization: lectures, seminars and workshops. There is also a supervising system for students' doing independent research. This includes a flexible combination of independent learning as well as various sources of additional information. Operational and systematic engagement with forms of in-class learning and group work are also available to students doing independent research.

The *Assessment and Correction Module* defines the evaluation and self-evaluation of results, as well as a correction plan of actions on the basis of the obtained results. The evaluation and self-evaluation of the results serves to identify shortcomings and eliminate the first threats. Self-analysis is conducted by teachers and professors, while assessment is also done by school and university administrators (Kuznetsov 380-382).

One of Al Farabi KazNU major goals is to converge towards international standards by means of developing the students' willingness and ability to learn throughout their lives, systemically replenishing and enriching professional knowledge and skills obtained in high education. Thus, training at Graduate, Masters and PhD. levels is aimed at increasing the degree of independent research and critical abilities so that students are able to confront professional activity from an applied pragmatic perspective that makes use of up to date technology (Yakimanskaya 176). This student-centered methodology allows participants to develop a comprehensive humanistic formation, both spiritual and practical. It trains students not to seek for help, but to face and solve problems by themselves, awakening their own critical subjectivity, freedom of choice, and responsibility for the decisions made (Grigoreva 2012). In the particular case of religious studies, the student-centered approach helps

them think for themselves and put in motion diagnostic tools and skills in the face of extremist propaganda (Kuznetsov 380-382). Ideal learning situations in Al Farabi KazNU include contents that allow multilevel personality-oriented tasks within a particular didactic and communicative environment oriented towards interpersonal and critical communication and reflection. The simulation of real environments and the implementation of decision-making and problem-solving is also introduced in the classroom (Usheva 2010). A close dialogue between teachers and students are an important pedagogical condition at Al Farabi KazNU, praised in external evaluations of the "Religious Studies" Program.

This dialogue scenario does not occur spontaneously, being the result of elements of formal institutional organization of Al Farabi KazNU. Such elements include a readiness on the part of faculty and staff at the department of Religious Studies to be open to discussion and to other points of view, as well as a desire to help students with their questions and problems, helping them also to shape their own sense of the material under study. Within the classroom, interaction is carefully planned with a distribution of roles that allows students to see different positions and process educational materials in relation to real problem issues that applied to the world outside. Discussions are planned so as to encourage thinking through options for the development of plot lines of dialogue, minimizing collisions and confrontations. Hypothetical detection zones are also improvised with regards to coming into contact with forms of social and religious extremism.

In their final year of Graduate study, for instance, as well as in the Master and PhD. programs, students are encouraged to do independent research by choosing a topic that might appeal to them in a particular way. Cognitive actions within the context of personal and social significance of the research situation add motivation and semantic structure to the students' learning process. Through group work they also learn cooperation and methodological reflection.

Al Farabi KazNU has institutionalized a regular internal evaluation of its study programs and teachers' performance via the Center of Accreditation, Ranking and Quality Management and via student surveys, in its efforts to conform to international standards. External evaluation of the "Religious and Cultural Study Programs" are carried out on a systematic basis (see for instance <https://www.aq.ac.at/de/akkreditierte-hochschulen-studien/dokumente-entscheidungen-au/Ergebnisbericht_Cluster-E.pdf> The main problem found was that there is too much content matter that leads to poor development of critical thinking. In the case of the Religious Studies, interviews with the students showed an "impressive input of reflected thoughts."(Report *Agentur für Qualitätssicherung* 4) The report also indicates that the zero-drop-out rate is a very good indicator of the success of the program, which produces highly motivated students and excellent cooperation between students and faculty members.

This paper has sought to clarify some of the recent controversies on the role of Religious Studies in the National Schools and High Education centers in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The authors were deeply concerned about some of the international reports on this topic, and hope that all the information presented in the paper contributes to clarify matters and promote a more transparent image of education in Kazakhstan.

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