

## PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

Religious governance in urbanizing  
Kazakhstan: State policy amid social changeZhanna Khamzina<sup>1</sup>, Nessibeli Kalkayeva<sup>1</sup>, Kuralay Turlykhankyzy<sup>1</sup>,  
Dias Shakenov<sup>2</sup>, and Yermek Buribayev<sup>3\*</sup><sup>1</sup>Department of Law, Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan<sup>2</sup>Department of Religious Studies, Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies, Almaty, Kazakhstan<sup>3</sup>Department of Law, Zhetysay University named after I. Zhansugurov, Taldy-Kurgan, Kazakhstan

## Abstract

This article examines the current state of relations between the State of Kazakhstan and religious organizations and explores the prospects for their future development. The authors conduct a comprehensive analysis of the legislative framework, state religious policy, and findings from sociological studies on the religiosity of the population to identify key trends and challenges facing the country. The study addresses key issues within state-confessional relations, including the influence of secular principles, the protection of freedom of conscience, and the state's approach to countering religious extremism. In addition, the article provides a comparative analysis of Kazakhstan's policies with those of neighboring countries, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, highlighting best practices and recommending potential improvements to enhance state-religious collaboration. The study concludes by proposing scenarios for the future of state-religion relations in Kazakhstan, emphasizing the need for balanced policies that safeguard religious freedom while addressing security concerns.

**Keywords:** State-confessional relations; Freedom of religion; Religious policy; Religious extremism; Secular principles

**\*Corresponding author:**Yermek Buribayev  
(yermek-a@mail.ru)

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## 1. Introduction

In the post-Soviet period, the Republic of Kazakhstan has undergone a complex process of shaping its state identity and formulating policies regarding religion (Burova *et al.*, 2023). As a multiethnic and multireligious country, Kazakhstan faced the challenge of harmonizing interfaith relations while ensuring national stability and security (Tolen, 2014). In the context of globalization and increasing religious mobility, the relationship between the state and religious organizations has become particularly significant (Szendrő, 2024).

Since the early 1990s, Kazakhstan has pursued a path of democratization and market reforms, which have led to significant changes in the country's religious landscape. Freedom of religion, enshrined in the Constitution, facilitated the growth in the number of religious organizations and increased religious activity among the population (Cornell *et al.*, 2017). However, these processes have also brought new challenges, such as the spread

of radical ideologies and the need to counter extremism (Zholdybaeva *et al.*, 2024). Modern realities require the state to develop effective policies in the religious sphere that consider the interests of all faiths while promoting the strengthening of civil society. The importance of studying the relationship between the state and religion in Kazakhstan is driven not only by internal factors but also by the influence of external geopolitical processes and the country's integration into the international community.

This article aims to analyze the current state of Kazakhstan's religious policy and predict possible scenarios for its development. The paper examines the social preconditions for the formation of religious policy, assesses its achievements and shortcomings, and identifies key trends and prospects. The relevance of the topic is determined by the need for a balanced and effective state policy capable of ensuring religious harmony and sustainable societal development. The conclusions and recommendations presented in the article may be useful to government officials, scholars, and all those interested in Kazakhstan's future.

As of the end of 2024, there were 3,980 registered religious entities representing 18 denominations in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The country also has 14 religious educational institutions (Committee on Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025). In recent years, several initiatives have been undertaken as part of Kazakhstan's state policy in the religious sphere: (1) streamlining the registration of religious organizations, resulting in a decrease in the number of organizations operating illegally; (2) improving legal acts in the religious sphere and aligning them with the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan and international human rights standards; (3) establishing and developing platforms for sustained dialog between government agencies and religious organizations; (4) providing support, in collaboration with the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK), to form a system of certification and professional development for clergy members; and (5) establishing the foundation for a functioning system of religious education by systematizing educational institutions, developing and approving requirements for curriculum content and material-technical provisions.

Despite these successes, several issues and risks remain that require scholarly reflection and practical solutions. Among the most pressing concerns are violations of the principle of state secularism. Inadequate normative legal regulation in the religious sphere, legal conflicts, and gaps in defining terms and concepts lead to inconsistent legal practices (Freedom House, 2024). There is also

a lack of systematic monitoring and assessment of the impact of legislation on processes in the religious sphere (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2022). The pace of regulatory processes lags behind the dynamics of ongoing changes. As society undergoes rapid transformation, existing regulatory frameworks are often unable to adapt quickly enough to new realities. This disconnection between legislative action and societal change contributes to persistent gaps in governance. The lack of an effective mechanism aimed at fostering civil identity has led to the predominance of other forms of identity, including religious identity (Burova *et al.*, 2023). Intolerance, calls for violence based on beliefs, the promotion of polygamy, early marriages, and other discriminatory practices are observed in public speeches, along with stereotypical statements by some public figures toward religious communities. A significant challenge remains the shortage of qualified specialists capable of translating the value-based content of religious teachings into contemporary, positive messages that promote tolerance and civic responsibility. This limitation is compounded by the insufficient level of interagency cooperation among government bodies, as well as inadequate coordination with civil society organizations – including religious groups – in efforts to harmonize actions aimed at upholding the secular character of the state while simultaneously safeguarding the right to freedom of religion and belief. The resulting fragmentation in policy and practice weakens the overall resilience of the regulatory system. Consequently, the country faces an elevated risk of infiltration by radical religious elements, which threatens to destabilize established state-confessional relations and undermine the constitutional order. The proliferation of extremist propaganda, religious intolerance, and the use of modern information and communication technologies for recruitment purposes further intensifies these risks.

Considering the above, there is an urgent need to develop and implement a new, more effective state policy in the religious sphere. Future state policy regarding religion should be based on scientifically grounded analysis of the current situation, historical experience, and contemporary challenges. The implementation of scientifically based measures will contribute to strengthening social stability, fostering civil society, and ensuring Kazakhstan's sustainable development in the long term.

The relationship between the state and religion in Kazakhstan is a complex and evolving area of inquiry that attracts the attention of scholars across legal, sociological, and political disciplines. In the post-Soviet era, Kazakhstan has experienced significant religious transformation, necessitating the development of new

state policies in the religious sphere. Multiple studies examine the historical and ideological underpinnings of current policy, highlighting the transition from Soviet-era religious control to greater religious diversity and the revival of spiritual practices (Aimukhambetov *et al.*, 2019; Sharipova, 2020; Yemelianova, 2014; Zhapekova *et al.*, 2018).

Legal research provides a detailed examination of Kazakhstan's legislative framework, including efforts to align national laws with international standards and to address gaps and contradictions that challenge effective state–religion relations (Buribayev *et al.*, 2024; Khamzina & Kalkayeva, 2024; Toilybekova *et al.*, 2024). These legislative issues are closely intertwined with sociological findings that underscore the growing significance of religion in shaping individual and collective identities, value orientations, and social dynamics (Elena & Aliya, 2020; Jamanbalayeva *et al.*, 2024; Junisbai *et al.*, 2017). At the same time, insufficient religious literacy and the proliferation of nontraditional religious movements are identified as factors that can generate social tension.

Security scholars further emphasize the risks posed by religious extremism, particularly among youth, and analyze state measures targeting radicalization through legal and preventive strategies, while highlighting the need for comprehensive socioeconomic integration of vulnerable groups (Beissembayev, 2016; Seitakhmetova *et al.*, 2024; Shaukenova & Zhandossova, 2012). In parallel, research on interfaith dialog and tolerance-building strategies explores Kazakhstan's unique experience as a multiethnic and multireligious state and the ongoing importance of educational, legal, and public initiatives for sustaining interreligious harmony (Podoprigora & Kassenova, 2022; Slovakova & Karstina, 2023).

Moreover, the impact of globalization – including the influx of foreign religious movements and the spread of digital technology – requires adaptive policy responses, such as monitoring online religious content and enhancing religious literacy across the population (Kulsaryieva *et al.*, 2013; Yerekesheva, 2004; Zhumasheva *et al.*, 2023). While significant progress has been achieved, persistent challenges remain, including bureaucratic barriers, insufficient dialog with religious organizations, and the need for greater transparency and modernization of the legal framework (Azilkanov & Zhalgas, 2022; Cornell *et al.*, 2017; Muratzhan *et al.*, 2021).

In sum, the literature demonstrates that effective management of state–religion relations in Kazakhstan requires a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach, responsive to both domestic developments and global trends. Persistent legislative gaps and practical difficulties

in policy implementation underscore the need for ongoing reform, enhanced interfaith dialog, and the incorporation of international best practices.

## 2. Data and methods

This study employs a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach, combining methods from political science, sociology, and law to thoroughly analyze the relationship between the State of Kazakhstan and religious organizations. Such a strategy is warranted by the complexity and multifaceted nature of the subject, which requires consideration of political, social, and legal aspects (Klein, 2007; Oviedo, 2019).

First, a detailed analysis of the legislative framework of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the field of religion was conducted, including the Constitution, the Law “On Religious Activities and Religious Associations,” and related regulatory acts. This analysis allowed for an assessment of the formal framework governing interaction between the state and religious organizations, as well as the identification of legislative trends. The study also examined international legal documents ratified by Kazakhstan, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Comparing national legislation with international standards enabled an assessment of compliance with global norms and facilitated the identification of potential discrepancies (Summers *et al.*, 2017).

Second, a content analysis of official statements, policy documents, and speeches by public officials regarding religious policy was performed. Content analysis is recognized as an effective method for uncovering underlying meanings and priorities in political rhetoric (Krippendorff, 2018). This approach provided a systematic means of identifying the strategic directions of state policy in the religious sphere and tracking changes in approaches to interactions with religious organizations.

Third, the study utilized data from sociological surveys and research conducted by national and international organizations between 2015 and 2023. Indicators of population religiosity, levels of trust in religious institutions, and citizens' attitudes toward state religious policy were analyzed. This method offered empirical insights into public opinion and social trends affecting the religious sphere, complementing both legal and qualitative analyses.

Fourth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts in the fields of religious studies, political science, and law. This interview format combined standardized questions with the flexibility to explore in-depth expert opinions. Participants included representatives from

academia, government bodies, and non-governmental organizations. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their ability to capture nuanced perspectives while maintaining comparability across respondents.

Fifth, a comparative method was used to evaluate Kazakhstan's religious policy in comparison with practices in other post-Soviet and developing countries, such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Comparative analysis serves as a key tool for identifying both unique characteristics and common trends across different contexts (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017). This method was selected to provide a broader context for evaluating Kazakhstan's policies and to identify best practices for future policy improvements.

Finally, based on the collected data and identified trends, a predictive analysis was carried out using the scenario method. The scenario method is widely recognized for its effectiveness in forecasting the development of complex social and political systems (Volkery & Ribeiro, 2009). This method enabled the formulation of multiple plausible scenarios, taking into account internal and external factors affecting state-religion relations in Kazakhstan over the next three to five years. Unlike linear forecasting, the scenario method is particularly well-suited for addressing uncertainty and complexity in political and social environments.

The use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods provided a comprehensive and multi-level approach to the study of state-religion relations in Kazakhstan. Each method was selected based on its specific advantages: legal analysis to establish a formal framework, content analysis to uncover implicit priorities, sociological surveys to provide empirical data, semi-structured interviews for in-depth insights, comparative analysis for contextual understanding, and the scenario method for addressing future uncertainties. This mixed methodological approach is recognized as effective in researching complex social phenomena. It contributes to obtaining objective and well-founded results, which can be used to develop practical recommendations for improving state religious policy.

All ethical norms and principles of scientific conduct were observed during the study. Interview participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave informed consent to participate. The confidentiality of the data obtained was guaranteed, consistent with the principles of ethics in social research. It should be noted that the study is limited by the availability of current data and reflects the situation at the time of analysis. Potential changes in the political or social environment may affect the relevance of the findings and forecasts. Such limitations are typical for research in social and political fields.

### 3. Results

According to the analyzed sociological research results, the population of Kazakhstan generally holds varying degrees of favorability toward both traditional and non-traditional religious communities.

The secular nature of the Kazakh state is widely perceived as an essential condition for the government to play an authoritative role in ensuring religious diversity. Kazakhstan's secularism does not indicate a negative attitude toward religions, as was the case during the Soviet regime; rather, it serves as a guarantee of the state's neutral stance toward the diverse religions that exist in the country. At the same time, the aim of preventing religions from exerting excessive influence over secular state institutions should not overshadow the government's duty to protect religious communities from excessive state control. The government of the Republic of Kazakhstan pursues a restrictive policy to prevent religion from permeating state institutions, such as public schools, government agencies, and military facilities. For instance, there are no military chaplains in the armed forces. However, the state takes a rather stringent position regarding control over religious organizations, particularly non-traditional communities. Our analysis indicates the demand for a less restrictive stance and the adoption of a more facilitative approach, whereby state institutions create an open and inclusive environment that ensures the diversity of religions and beliefs within the public sector as well.

Freedom of religion or belief is not merely the outcome of effective state policy in ensuring diversity; it holds the status of a universal right for all people. Every individual should have the opportunity to practice their religion or beliefs at both individual and collective levels, privately or publicly. Possession of this freedom is a right inherent to each person, which is granted before and ultimately independent of any form of administrative authorization. Furthermore, there are various ways in which people express their freedom of religion or belief. These include traditional and less traditional forms of worship, informational and communicative activities within and outside their religious community, family- and community-level education, organized charitable work, import and distribution of religious literature, and the establishment of appropriate religious infrastructure. Legislation and legislative practices primarily restrict these freedoms for members of so-called "non-traditional" communities.

Restrictions on freedom of religion or belief cannot be considered legitimate unless they meet all the criteria set forth in Article 18(3) of the ICCPR. Consequently, such restrictions must be established by law; they must be demonstrably necessary (that is, they should constitute an



extreme measure) to achieve a legitimate objective; and they must remain proportionate, meaning that they should involve the minimal interference required to achieve one of the legitimate objectives. In addition, restrictions should not be associated with any discriminatory intent or effect.

We find that in Kazakhstan, rather than assessing the degree of legitimacy of state-imposed restrictions on the recognized status of universal human rights, there appears to be a prevalent notion that the exercise of freedom of religion or belief, and even the core elements of this human right, require special permission from the state – a notion which one government representative compared to obtaining a driver's license. Instead of applying state-imposed restrictions only as an extreme measure with minimal interference, state authorities advocate for broad interference and control by the state. Such restrictive trends are also reflected in Kazakhstan's legislation, including the Law on Religious Activities and Religious Associations, which came into effect on October 11, 2011. The corresponding negative consequences for the full realization of freedom of religion or belief for each individual are reflected in numerous research findings.

By fully respecting human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, the state can, in fact, enhance its authority as a guarantor of peace based on "recognition of the inherent dignity of all members of the human family," as stated in the preamble of the first international human rights document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Furthermore, the full respect for human rights creates the best conditions for fostering trust in society and between state institutions and the population as a whole.

It appears that one of the objectives of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Religious Activities and Religious Associations (2011) was to establish clear oversight over the activities of religious confessions in Kazakhstan. However, in terms of freedom of religion or belief, there is primarily a need for an inclusive system that fosters a broad self-awareness of people as individuals and in relation to others within communities. The 2011 Law on Religious Activities and Religious Associations contains restrictive elements that conflict with international standards for freedom of religion or belief. The most obvious issue relates to the mandatory official registration of religious organizations. The absence of such status for a religious community renders it "illegal," which has far-reaching negative consequences for the exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Furthermore, even officially registered communities suffer from a degree of legal uncertainty, particularly due to official restrictions on permitted religious activities to specific topics and

geographical boundaries. Overall, the 2011 law is based on the assumption that the exercise of fundamental aspects of religious freedom depends on specific government approval, thereby inverting the typical relationship between freedom and restrictions as understood in the human rights context.

Although Kazakhstan generally supports religious pluralism, members of smaller, non-traditional religious communities, often referred to as sects, continue to face suspicion, mistrust, and discrimination within society. In addition, certain provisions of the current Criminal Code and Code of Administrative Offenses, aimed at combating religious hatred and religious extremism, contain vague definitions, thereby creating a climate of legal uncertainty, which is further exacerbated by deficiencies in criminal procedure, lengthy pretrial detention periods, and related issues. Similar problems characterize the 2005 Law on Countering Extremism.

Amendments to the 2011 Law on Religious Activities and Religious Associations are needed, based on an understanding that registration should serve to uphold freedom of religion or belief, which, as a universal human right, belongs to every individual even before the enactment of any specific administrative approval and is independent of such approval. The most significant change is that registration should be optional rather than a mandatory requirement for religious communities to engage in activities. Unregistered communities should have the freedom to operate without discrimination or fear of intimidation.

The registration of religious communities that wish to obtain this status should be conducted in a manner that supports freedom of religion or belief. Procedures should be prompt, transparent, fair, and free of excessive bureaucratic hurdles. Decisions on issues concerning registration status should in no case reflect the views of competing religious groups. Threshold requirements for registration at various levels (local, regional, and national) should be established in such a way that minorities can fully exercise their activities across the entire country.

Overly broad definitions of offenses related to inciting religious hatred and extremism, which may adversely affect the exercise of freedom of religion or belief in conjunction with freedom of expression, should be replaced with clear definitions that do not allow for broad interpretation. This applies to both the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Offenses, as well as the 2005 Law on Countering Extremism.

Given the above factors, challenges, and recommendations, three key scenarios for the development of state-religion relations in Kazakhstan over the medium

term can be identified: stabilization, conflict, and adaptation. In the stabilization scenario, it is assumed that the state will continue its current policy of maintaining secularism and controlling religious activities. The state will intensify measures to ensure the secular nature of the education system, monitor religious organizations and their financial activities, and maintain dialog with officially recognized religious associations. Internal factors, such as strengthening social stability and promoting national unity policies, will contribute to the stabilization of state-religion relations. External factors, including regional security and active cooperation with international organizations, will help maintain a stable religious situation.

The conflict scenario is possible in the context of increasing radicalization and the growing influence of extremist ideologies. Internal factors such as social inequality, growing distrust in state institutions, and restrictions on civil liberties may create fertile ground for the rise of religious radicalism. External factors, such as the influence of geopolitical instability in neighboring countries, may also contribute to the spread of extremist sentiments. In this scenario, tensions between the state and certain religious groups may escalate, necessitating stricter control by state authorities, the introduction of new restrictions, and measures to counter radical movements.

The adaptive scenario envisions a more flexible approach to religious policy, based on dialog and cooperation with various religious groups. The state may focus on developing a legislative framework that protects the rights of believers while strengthening measures to prevent religious extremism. Internal factors, such as the public demand for increased tolerance and social cohesion, will support the adaptation of state policies toward religious associations. External factors, including the influence of international human rights standards and cooperation with international organizations, will also promote the adaptation of state policies. In this scenario, dialog platforms are expected to develop, where representatives of the state and religious organizations will work together to address current social issues, thereby minimizing potential conflicts and strengthening cooperation.

The development of state-religion relations in Kazakhstan over the next 3 – 5 years will largely depend on the internal policy of the state aimed at maintaining secularism and social harmony, as well as on the influence of external geopolitical factors. The most likely scenario is stabilization, in which the state will strive to balance secularism with the protection of religious rights while strengthening measures to prevent radicalization. However, for this scenario to succeed, it is essential to consider adaptive measures that can help avoid conflict

and promote more harmonious development of state-religion relations.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Legal regulation of religious activities in modern Kazakhstan: Strategies and their consequences

Kazakhstan's fundamental laws establish state policy on religion, emphasizing secularism and freedom of conscience, and aiming for a peaceful and cooperative religious sphere. According to government plans, priority measures include bolstering secular governance, improving cooperation with religious communities, enhancing religious education, preventing religious conflicts, and promoting secular principles, the rule of law, and tolerance, while also seeking to reduce religious intolerance and extremist incitement (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020). However, minority religious groups argue that, although these policies aim to maintain order and curb extremism, they can become restrictive if applied without regard for a community's size, resources, or culture.

Article 3 of the 2011 Law on Religious Activities and Religious Associations (amended 2021) affirms Kazakhstan's secular character and the equality of all religious associations under the law. It guarantees freedom of conscience and religious practice, stipulating that no one may refuse civic duties on religious grounds. The law also forbids coercing individuals to evade legal obligations, a clause broadly interpreted by authorities. Although these principles establish formal equality, minority groups often struggle with vague requirements and with proving that their practices conform to official guidelines.

By law, religious associations are prohibited from performing state functions, interfering in governmental affairs, or engaging in politics. Unregistered religious groups are banned, and coercion in religious matters – such as pressuring individuals about their faith, participation in worship, or donations – is prohibited. These provisions uphold secular governance and protect individuals, but they raise concerns for small denominations reliant upon personal networks and volunteers. In such groups, the distinction between voluntary support and coercion can become blurred, prompting close scrutiny by authorities.

After rising to more than 4200 by 2009, the number of registered religious associations declined by approximately one-third, falling to 3088 in 2012, when the 2011 law raised the minimum membership requirement from 10 to 50. In addition, the 2011 law reduced the number of religious educational institutions from 25 in 1995 to 15

by 2018 (Podoprigora, 2020). These stricter requirements disproportionately affected minority faiths, as many small communities were unable to meet the increased membership thresholds or fund religious education, complicating their efforts to gain or maintain legal recognition.

By the end of 2024, the number of registered associations rebounded to 3980, reflecting some recovery from the post-2011 decline. Since 2011, communities have had to adapt to stringent regulations, including mandatory registration, extensive theological vetting, designated worship locations requiring prior approval (a “notification” system), and restrictions on activities outside their registered regions. Smaller or non-traditional groups must allocate substantial resources to comply with these demands and risk penalties if they lack the necessary infrastructure or expertise. Their ability to operate frequently hinges on navigating complex procedures, inadvertently stifling religious expression.

Kazakhstan’s 1999 Counter-Terrorism Law requires religious organizations to secure their places of worship against potential terrorist attacks or face penalties. While intended to protect public safety, this requirement imposes a significant financial burden on smaller groups lacking sufficient resources for such security measures.

Kazakh law prohibits religious activities that threaten the constitutional order, sovereignty, or territorial integrity and penalizes unauthorized religious activities, including operating unregistered groups, holding unsanctioned worship services, conducting unlicensed religious education, or distributing religious literature without authorization, and proselytizing without official registration. These measures reflect the state’s determination to control religious practice; however, minority groups with limited membership and financial resources frequently struggle to meet all requirements, rendering them particularly vulnerable to punishment.

The Law “On Countering Extremism” empowers authorities to designate any group as an “extremist organization,” ban its activities, and prosecute its members. Extremism is broadly defined, encompassing violent attempts to overthrow the government, incitement of ethnic or religious hatred (especially involving calls for violence), or even religious practices deemed dangerous to public safety or health. Under this law, courts can outlaw groups within 72 h. Due to this expansive scope, minority faiths fear that their distinct doctrines or gatherings could be misinterpreted as extremism, highlighting their vulnerability.

Kazakh law sets high membership thresholds for religious organizations to register: at least 50 members for local associations, 500 for regional associations, and

5000 for national status (with additional broad geographic distribution requirements). For many small communities, these thresholds are unattainable; furthermore, since only regional or national organizations can establish clergy-training institutions, smaller groups often cannot train clergy or sustain theological education, thus undermining their continuity.

Kazakhstan has committed internationally to uphold religious freedom and avoid excessive restrictions by ratifying the ICCPR, supporting the organization for security and co-operation in Europe commitments, and endorsing the 1981 UN Declaration on religious tolerance. Nevertheless, its domestic laws, justified by concerns about extremism, impose stringent controls on religious activity. Bans on unregistered gatherings, unlicensed religious education, and unauthorized missionary work aim to prevent radicalization; however, indiscriminate application of these regulations risks exceeding international norms. In addition, restrictions such as prohibiting worship outside a group’s registered area, despite official claims of equal treatment for all faiths, disproportionately disadvantage minority communities by subjecting even modest gatherings to bureaucratic hurdles.

International observers caution that Kazakhstan’s broad authority to outlaw religious organizations on vague grounds should be tempered by clear standards and judicial oversight. Without such safeguards, unconventional faiths remain vulnerable to misinterpretation, calling into question whether Kazakhstan’s approach aligns with international best practices, which require strong protections and clear evidence before restricting religious groups.

Kazakhstan’s legal framework does provide certain protections. The Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and religion, and the law explicitly prohibits compelling individuals either to participate in or abstain from religious practices. Officials also promote interfaith dialog – for example, through the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions – to demonstrate a commitment to tolerance and peaceful coexistence among religious communities.

Overall, Kazakhstan’s approach to regulating religion is motivated by legitimate security concerns; nonetheless, stringent requirements impose disproportionate burdens on minority communities. To align more closely with its international commitments, Kazakhstan could streamline the registration process, clarify ambiguous provisions, and ensure proportional enforcement. Such reforms would help prevent unintended discrimination against smaller faiths, align domestic laws with the principle of minimal necessary restrictions, and reaffirm Kazakhstan’s

commitment to protecting religious freedom in accordance with global norms.

## 4.2. International and domestic agreements with religious entities: A deeper inquiry

Formal agreements between the state and religious groups influence religious freedom, secular principles, and religious communities' rights and responsibilities. A prime example is the 1998 Kazakhstan–Holy See agreement (ratified in 2012 by Law No. 42-V), which outlines the Catholic Church's operations and grants it autonomy in governance, education, and cultural initiatives while requiring adherence to national laws, thereby streamlining bureaucracy, providing legal clarity, and reflecting a commitment to religious diversity within a secular framework. However, the agreement raises questions about supranational obligations versus domestic law. Issues like property rights, foreign clergy residency, or religious education prompt disputes over whether treaty obligations override national law, highlighting the balance between international commitments and constitutional principles.

Beyond the Holy See treaty, Kazakhstan relies on informal instruments like memoranda or protocols rather than treaties with other religious groups. For instance, the SAMK relies on multiple agreements addressing mosque registration, imam training, and religious publications rather than one comprehensive treaty. Similarly, the Russian Orthodox Church has agreements on property use and religious festivals. Though these agreements lack the weight of treaties, they still shape the regulatory environment for religious practice, potentially facilitating or restricting it. Without a unified legal framework, interpretations vary, and enforcement is uneven across regions. Less established religious groups face greater legal uncertainty than established ones with clear agreements.

These agreements illustrate Kazakhstan's effort to accommodate pluralism within a secular framework. The Holy See treaty gives the Catholic Church a stable legal foundation and streamlined administration. In contrast, no similar agreements exist for other religious communities, raising concerns about equality, transparency, and fairness. These dynamics highlight issues of regulatory consistency and the rule of law. Policymakers must harmonize domestic laws, constitutional principles, and international obligations to prevent disputes or perceptions of preferential treatment.

State–religion agreements, like the Holy See treaty, are pivotal to how secular governance intersects with religious pluralism in Kazakhstan. They establish frameworks, clarify rights and obligations, and influence interpretations of religious freedom and state oversight. As the religious

landscape evolves, further research should evaluate new agreements and their implications for majority and minority communities, as well as how effectively and equitably secular law is integrated with diverse traditions.

## 4.3. Freedom of conscience and the state: An analysis of the implementation of citizens' constitutional rights

Kazakhstan's Constitution, echoing international human rights standards (UDHR, ICCPR), guarantees freedom of religion or belief (including the right to have no religion) and states these freedoms can only be limited by law for reasons such as protecting public order, health, or morals. It affirms each person's right to hold and disseminate beliefs and to engage in religious activities. In practice, however, the realization of this right has been uneven. It primarily benefits registered religious communities, especially those deemed "traditional." The Law "On Religious Activity and Religious Associations" does not define "traditional," but other laws list Hanafi Sunni Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, Roman and Greek Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Judaism in this category (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2017, 2020).

Since a restrictive law on religious activities was adopted in 2011, state control of religion has increased, with stricter registration criteria for religious groups and new limits on missionary work. Intended to bolster security and fight extremism, these measures have also narrowed religious freedom, especially for smaller communities. Enforcement has led to violations: individuals have been fined or prosecuted for attending unregistered worship or distributing religious literature without permission (US Embassy and Consulate in Kazakhstan, 2024) – actions that arguably violate the right to practice and share one's faith.

Government favoritism toward "traditional" faiths (e.g., Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy) marginalizes other religions. Such preferential treatment violates the equality of all religions before the law and can inflame interfaith tensions (Norton, 2016).

Kazakh law allows government intervention in a child's religious upbringing only if a court deems it harmful to the child, but it also stipulates that if one parent objects, organizations must bar that minor from participating in religious activities. In addition, all religious activity (including proselytizing) is banned in children's institutions and events (such as camps or health facilities). The law gives no clear guidance on enforcing these rules, leaving them ambiguous.

Kazakh law also bans religious education in all state schools and prohibits homeschooling for religious purposes; only registered religious organizations may



offer supplemental religious instruction. School uniform policies reinforce secularism by forbidding attire that overtly signifies religious affiliation (for example, Islamic headscarves are not allowed in schools).

Kazakhstan also bars religion-based political parties. The Criminal Code criminalizes leading or participating in any religious group that engages in violence, incites refusal of civic duties, or seeks to form a religious political party.

Foreigners wishing to do missionary work in Kazakhstan must obtain a special religious visa, typically valid for up to six months (extendable once). More broadly, experts warn that Kazakhstan's religious laws use vague terms that can suppress freedom of conscience – terms like “religious extremism” and “sectarianism” are undefined and thus arbitrarily applied (Grishaev & Kaliyeva, 2021). International observers urge the government to clarify the definition of “extremism” to meet international standards and to review extremism-related convictions, ending the persecution of peaceful opposition groups labeled “extremist” (Human Rights Watch, 2024; US Embassy and Consulate in Kazakhstan, 2024).

A 2020 UN Special Rapporteur report found that Kazakhstan's anti-terrorism and extremism laws contain vague provisions that infringe fundamental rights, including freedoms of expression, movement, family life, and religion or belief (Ní Aoláin, 2020). The Special Rapporteur noted that unclear terms like “extremism,” “incitement to social or class hatred,” and “religious hatred or hostility” are used to unjustifiably restrict freedom of religion, expression, assembly, and association. He expressed concern that such measures impinge on the absolute right to hold any belief – a right needing no state approval – and emphasized that any limits on manifesting religion or belief (per ICCPR Article 18(3)) must be lawful, necessary, proportionate, and non-discriminatory (A/HRC/28/66/Add.1, paragraphs 19 and 26). The report further observed that efforts to uphold secularism and promote “religious moderation” translate into tight control of religious activities, directly encroaching on religious freedom. It highlighted burdensome registration requirements for religious groups (CCPR/C/125/D/2312/2013, paragraph 7.6) and strict limits on importing or distributing religious literature – measures that disproportionately affect certain faith communities and believers.

Freedom of conscience is fundamental to democracy and a key human rights indicator. Despite constitutional guarantees, Kazakhstan struggles to realize this freedom in practice. Addressing these challenges requires significant legal reforms, better enforcement of laws, and greater public awareness of the importance of freedom of conscience.

#### 4.4. A sociological survey of religiosity and trust in religious institutions

This study utilized sociological surveys and research conducted by national and international organizations from 2015 to 2023, providing empirical insights into public attitudes and social trends influencing Kazakhstan's religious landscape. Primary sources included data from Kazakhstan's Bureau of National Statistics, the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science, and Religious Studies, the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies (KISI), and international bodies such as the Pew Research Center, Gallup International, Forum 18 News Service, and the U.S. Embassy's religious freedom reports. These data sets enriched the study by detailing trends and forecasting developments in state–religion relationships based on public opinion.

Regional monitoring by KISI in 2022 indicated that approximately 71.1% of respondents viewed their local populations as religious; among these, 26.5% noted increasing religiosity, particularly in West Kazakhstan (42.9%) and Mangystau (40.7%) regions (Abdiraïymova & Saimassayeva, 2023). Survey data showed 84.5% identifying as believers: 8.2% regularly adhered to religious norms and attended worship consistently; 34.9% strove to observe norms but rarely attended services; and 42.2% followed selected norms according to personal interpretations. Conversely, 8.1% expressed indifference and 1.9% opposed religion. Females (86.1%) were slightly more religiously inclined than males (82.9%), and ethnic Kazakhs showed the highest religious identification rate (85.9%).

Socioeconomic disparities significantly influenced Kazakhstan's social structure transformation. Financial satisfaction was reported by 69.0% of respondents, while 16.2% expressed dissatisfaction; 77.9% identified as middle class. Analysis suggested that religious citizens (87.7%) reported a stronger sense of national belonging compared to non-believers (82.8%), implying religion's role in reinforcing national identity. Believers also exhibited stronger ethnic identification (84.2%) compared to non-believers (74.1%).

A 2021 study documented a notable presence of non-denominational believers and latent atheism: 12.5% actively participated in religious community life; 36.1% identified as religious but rarely attended services, mostly during holidays; and 34.7% were believers without community involvement, observing norms privately (Burova *et al.*, 2022). Monitoring in 2021 found that although 87.7% identified as believers, only 26.7% actively practiced religion (Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022).

Public trust in religious institutions, a crucial indicator of social stability, declined slightly from 60% in 2015 to 52% in 2021 (Abdiraiymova & Saimassayeva, 2023), a change experts attributed to corruption scandals, insufficient transparency, and inadequate social responsiveness (Bottan & Perez-Truglia, 2015). Nevertheless, religious institutions remained important in social support and charitable roles.

A 2023 survey highlighted limited public awareness of state religious policies: 60.9% had superficial knowledge, 29.3% showed no interest, and only 7.4% actively followed policy developments. Despite low awareness, public support for these policies was high, with 55.2% generally supportive and 33.6% fully approving. However, consistent dissatisfaction among approximately 40% indicated areas needing improvement, particularly legislative effectiveness, with 10.6% rating religious laws as ineffective (Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024).

Expert interviews conducted between January and March 2024 emphasized enhancing cooperation between state and religious organizations and refining legal frameworks to address religious freedom, interfaith dialog, globalization impacts, and challenges from radical ideologies and technology (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Van de Wiel, 2017).

Overall, sociological analysis reveals evolving dynamics in Kazakhstan's religiosity and institutional trust, highlighting the necessity for improved informational campaigns, responsive legislative adjustments, civil society engagement, and interfaith dialog to sustain religious freedom, societal stability, and harmony.

#### **4.5. Demographic and developmental dimensions of religion in Kazakhstan**

Kazakhstan is a rapidly growing Central Asian nation with a population exceeding 20 million. Urbanization is significant: more than 12.7 million people (around 63% of the population) now live in cities. The population continues to expand through both natural increase and migration. For example, in early 2024, there were approximately 278,700 births and 99,500 deaths (a natural increase of roughly 179,200), plus a positive net migration of 16,550 (primarily involving migration between Kazakhstan and other Commonwealth of Independent States countries).

Ethnically, about 70% of the population is Kazakh. Most ethnic Kazakhs practice Sunni Islam (Hanafi school), while most of the roughly one-quarter who are ethnic Russian follow Russian Orthodoxy. According to

the 2021 census, 69.3% of the population identified as Muslim (primarily Hanafi Sunni) and 17.2% as Christian (predominantly Russian Orthodox). Smaller religious minorities include Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Buddhists, and others. The government's policy of repatriating ethnic Kazakhs (Oralmans) from countries like China, Mongolia, and other neighboring states has further reinforced the Muslim majority in society.

Rapid economic development has significantly stimulated internal migration and urban growth. Government programs (e.g., the Nurly Zhol infrastructure initiative) have accelerated urban expansion, drawing many rural residents to cities for jobs and education. In 2024, internal migration was heavily oriented toward the largest cities: Astana's population grew by 73,238 through net migration, and Almaty's by 36,061.

Urban life tends to correlate with more secular attitudes; surveys indicate that younger urban Kazakhs are less likely to engage in traditional religious practices than their rural counterparts. At the same time, labor migrants from neighboring Muslim-majority countries (such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), along with returning Kazakh citizens from abroad, have revitalized Islamic communities in urban areas. These demographic shifts have diversified religious expression – blending traditional and emerging communities – and made cities focal points for state-regulated religious life.

Kazakhstan's government explicitly incorporates these demographic realities into its development and religious policy frameworks. The state ideology promotes moderate Hanafi Islam as a pillar of national identity while maintaining a secular state structure. New or “nontraditional” religious movements are viewed with suspicion, and only state-approved religious organizations receive formal support. For example, the government endorses institutions affiliated with the SAMK and regards Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, and Judaism as “traditional,” and therefore legitimate. In contrast, Protestant denominations and foreign religious influences face stricter regulatory oversight.

This approach aligns with broader nation-building goals. Former President Nursultan Nazarbayev's Rukhani Zhangyru (“Spiritual Revival”) program exemplified this effort to foster a modern civic identity that harmonizes Islamic heritage with national development objectives. In conclusion, Kazakhstan's demographic transformation and economic modernization continue to shape the country's religious landscape, even as the state steers religious practices into officially sanctioned channels to promote social cohesion and national progress.

## 4.6. Comparative analysis of religious policy in Kazakhstan and neighboring Central Asian countries

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan share a Sunni Muslim majority, but their religious policies differ greatly, offering lessons for Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan, which began easing its strict religious policy in 2018 (Rodriguez, 2023), had until 2021 required 100 founders for local religious groups and 500 for national ones – far more onerous than Kazakhstan's 50-founder requirement and theological review. These measures were intended to curb extremism but also severely limited religious freedom. By mid-2022, Uzbekistan had 2,333 registered religious organizations across 16 denominations (Answer, 2022).

Despite repealing the 100-founder rule in 2021 and simplifying registration, Uzbekistan still has only about half as many registered religious organizations as Kazakhstan. The reforms did not spark a surge of new groups, but Uzbekistan earned international recognition: it was removed from religious-freedom watch lists and even spearheaded a UN resolution on religious tolerance. Nonetheless, religious minorities in Uzbekistan still face restrictions that cause social tensions (Raimovna, 2024). Uzbekistan's earlier heavy-handed approach ensured state control at the cost of freedom and drew global criticism; its recent reforms acknowledge the need for change, though their full effects remain uncertain. Kazakhstan, in contrast, tries to balance religious freedom with security through laws and interfaith dialog, but its strict registration rules and bureaucracy also need reform.

Uzbekistan's experience shows that extremely high registration barriers are counterproductive. Kazakhstan should consider lowering founder thresholds to ease registration for small denominations and broaden religious freedom. Similarly, investing in religious literacy programs and training for clergy could help prevent radicalization. Strengthening interfaith dialog – domestically and regionally – would foster social cohesion. Furthermore, cutting bureaucratic red tape and enforcing laws consistently would build trust between faith communities and the state. Uzbekistan's case warns that relaxing control too abruptly without oversight can undermine anti-extremism efforts; any expansion of religious freedom must be paired with adequate oversight. Overall, Uzbekistan shows that national security must be balanced with human rights, since excessive control marginalizes groups and fuels tension.

Kyrgyzstan's religious policy is more liberal than Kazakhstan's. The Kyrgyz Law on Freedom of Religion (2025) offers a simple registration process with minimal state interference; an initial requirement of 200 founding

signatures was abolished in 2019. Unregistered groups can also operate freely, encouraging pluralism (Borbieva, 2023). This permissive approach better protects minority religious rights in Kyrgyzstan than in Kazakhstan. The state remains neutral in religious affairs, though rising conservatism and weak oversight have allowed some radical ideologies to spread (Aitkulova, 2024; Beyer, 2024). Unlike Kazakhstan's tactic of banning certain groups, controlling religious literature, and promoting state ideology, Kyrgyzstan combats extremism through education programs and dialog with religious leaders (Bakiev & Kozhombierdiev, 2024).

Kyrgyzstan's experience suggests useful measures for Kazakhstan. Simplifying registration and reducing bureaucracy, as Kyrgyzstan did, would encourage legal religious activity and reduce underground worship. Publicly engaging religious leaders can build trust between faith communities and the government. Emphasizing education over repression is crucial: investing in youth programs to promote religious literacy and tolerance can help preempt radicalization. Ensuring equal rights and non-discrimination for all faiths would improve Kazakhstan's international image and social stability. However, Kyrgyzstan's leniency under weak oversight shows that insufficient control can let extremism take root. Thus, Kazakhstan should adopt Kyrgyzstan's openness – like easier registration and greater civic engagement – cautiously, without neglecting security oversight.

Kazakhstan's stringent approach has bolstered national security but also risks alienating communities, eroding trust, and pushing religious practice underground. Kyrgyzstan's openness, by contrast, has not increased extremism; instead, it strengthened civil society, public trust, and a culture of tolerance. Kazakhstan aims for a middle path between Uzbekistan's former rigidity and Kyrgyzstan's leniency. It promotes interfaith harmony similar to Kyrgyzstan's civil society efforts while striving to balance freedom with security. To improve its framework, Kazakhstan should make religious legislation more transparent and predictable and involve civil society more in policy-making. Counter-extremism efforts need to integrate enforcement with education and tolerance promotion. Adopting Uzbekistan's simplified registration and Kyrgyzstan's civil society engagement can reduce marginalization of small groups and deter underground activity.

In conclusion, a balanced religious policy – steering between Uzbekistan's past over-restriction and Kyrgyzstan's over-permissiveness – would enable Kazakhstan to safeguard both national security and religious freedom. Achieving this balance requires continuous legal refinement, active engagement with religious communities,

and sustained interfaith dialog. By carefully emulating the successful practices of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan while avoiding their pitfalls, Kazakhstan can significantly strengthen its religious policy framework.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper finds that while approximately 88% of Kazakhstan's population identify as religious, only about one-quarter actively practices their faith, reflecting a predominance of cultural or traditional religiosity. Religiosity is particularly pronounced among women and ethnic Kazakhs, contributing to the consolidation of both national and civic identity. However, trust in religious organizations has declined – from 60% in 2015 to 52% in 2021 – due to factors such as corruption scandals, a lack of transparency, and limited effectiveness in addressing social issues. Public awareness of state religious policy remains low, with fewer than 10% of citizens regularly following policy developments, thereby constraining opportunities for civic engagement. The regulatory framework is perceived as overly complex, and the bureaucratic procedures for registering religious organizations remain a significant source of dissatisfaction. Additional concerns include low levels of religious literacy, the proliferation of new religious movements, and growing risks of radicalization.

To enhance the effectiveness of religious policy, the state should prioritize public education and foster structured dialog. Improving religious literacy and increasing transparency in policy implementation could help build public trust. Simplifying registration procedures and promoting inclusive regulation may reduce administrative barriers. Encouraging interfaith cooperation and cultivating a culture of tolerance – particularly through youth-focused educational initiatives aimed at preventing extremism – would contribute to long-term social cohesion. A balanced policy approach that safeguards both national security and freedom of religion is essential for ensuring stability and religious harmony in Kazakhstan's evolving society.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## Author contributions

*Conceptualization:* Zhanna Khamzina, Yermek Buribayev  
*Writing–original draft:* Kuralay Turlykhankyzy  
*Writing–review & editing:* Dias Shakenov, Nessibeli Kalkayeva

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