

According to experts, the programme of countering religious extremism and terrorism in Kazakhstan does not take into account the fact that the process of involvement into radical ideology across the country has some social and psychological origins.

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Countering and prevention of religious extremism have been declared by Kazakhstan as one of priority directions of the national policy. Legal framework is being improved, a lot of national programmes have been approved, various state and public bodies responsible for such issues are being created.

The national programme to counter religious extremism and terrorism in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2018-2022 was adopted with the total funding of 270 billion 148 million tenge (696.389 million dollars). This is more than the amount in the previous five-year period, 2013-2017. Countering extremism was 2.8 times cheaper back then and amounted to 103 billion 176 million tenge (over 1 billion dollars at the rate of 2013).

However, the expenses have decreased significantly in terms of devaluation.

According to the description, important government agencies are participating in the [programme](#) implementation - National Security Committee, the Prosecutor General's Office, the Presidential Security Service, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Defence. But what will expensive projects be remembered for by the common people?

Sky is the limit

In Kazakhstan, the central executive body dealing with religious issues is constantly changing or being renamed. At first, it was the Committee on Religious Affairs under the Ministry of Culture and Sports, then it became an independent Ministry of Religious Affairs and Civil Society Affairs. In mid-2018, it was renamed as the Ministry of Social Development.

In 2019, it was renamed as the Ministry of Information and Social Development, which, on behalf of the state, interacts with religious associations, ensures the rights of citizens to freedom of religion, etc. And also, together with a number of executive and law enforcement agencies, it counters and prevents religious extremism.

Also, every year the state improves the legislative framework to counter extremism. However, according to human rights activists, it is not uncommon for laws to be actually applied against civil society groups.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, at the May 2019 economic forum in Nur-Sultan was concerned about the persecution of civil activists under the slogan of national security.

“We are very concerned that the provision relating to the fight against terrorism and the fight against extremism has very broad and rights-restricting definitions. These provisions should theoretically apply to all citizens equally, but invariably and, unfortunately, purposefully they are used against certain minority groups, in particular, the infringement of religious freedoms really bothers me,” the expert said (as cited on kursiv.kz).

The goals of the anti-extremism programme include, among other things, the reduction of the number of people who “share extremist ideas aimed at inciting religious hatred or hatred.” Also, the programme plans to take measures to reduce the “influence of external factors on the radicalisation of the population”, in particular by “improving technical means” and ensuring and constant monitoring of the media, websites and social media.

Deputy Chairman of the National Security Committee, Major General Nurgali Bilisbekov, speaking at a government meeting in 2018, noted that the main goal of the new anti-terrorism programme would be to ensure the security of a man, society and the state.

“The programme provides for the execution of 80 activities, of which 35 will be of specific nature. The costs will be provided to equip special and law enforcement agencies with modern equipment and other latest developments,” Bilisbekov assured members of the government, adding that the organisation of preventive measures and professional development of law enforcement officers would be included in future expenses.

He also emphasises that since 2013 KNB has managed to prevent 38 terrorist attacks, and to return 380 young Kazakhstanis from dubious foreign educational institutions.

Tenders for the media

According to the approved action plan, a certain share of the huge budget is going to be spent on outreach work on the internet and social media, as well as on social procurement regarding countering terrorism and religious extremism.

According to available data, this is going to cost 246 million tenge (635.38 thousand dollars) in 5 years. The popularisation of the web portal Kazislam.kz is going to cost 212 million tenge (547.565 thousand dollars).

As the plan of actions is partially confidential, some information about the activities of the state bodies to counter extremism can be found on the state procurement website.

In August last year, the akimat of Almaty announced a tender for creating content to counter extremism and terrorism with the participation of popular viners. The amount allocated for the procurement was 8.9 million tenge (22.99 thousand dollars). The specifications for participants contained certain characteristics of popularity of bloggers in social media and a specific number of videos.

“Video products should be made in the comedy genre on a high artistic level and agreed with the customer, should be intended for a wide target audience without restrictions,” according to the terms of reference.

However, the announcement was available for one month only and then the customers refused to buy this service.

South Kazakhstan region has also held a series of tenders by government contract in the subject of “Implementation of activities to ensure stability in religious sphere.” The customer has been the state public utility service “Religious issues research centre” of the regional office for religious affairs.

According to the state procurement website of Kazakhstan, in April 2018, a tender was held for two lots - TV programme “Dindegi dasturdin mangyzy” (“The importance of rites in religion”) for 10 million tenge (25.83 thousand dollars) and the issue of analytical methodologies for 57.5 million tenge (148.51 thousand dollars).

Back in 2017, a government contract for 20 lots in the total amount of 155 million 854 thousand tenge (402.55 dollars) was announced. In fact, 12 procurement lots were never completed due to the lack of bidders compliant with the government contract requirements. However, eight lots were completed.

A cycle of religious and cognitive programmes “Dindegi dasturdin mangyzy”, “Memleket. Kogam. Din” (“The state. The society. The religion”) that cost over 10 million tenge (25.83 thousand dollars) per every cycle was created by the local television. A video that was viewed 428 times is available on YouTube.

Meetings with inmates in penal institutions were held for 7 million 300 thousand tenge (18.86 thousand dollars). The contractor was the winner of the tender, private fund “KAZANAT-MIRAS”.

The largest lot in the list, “issue of information and guidance materials for analytic work in the religious area in the region”, to the amount of 42 million 971 thousand tenge (110.99 thousand dollars), drew public response. The lot was awarded to public association [“Halkyma tagzym”](#), which offered its services for 39 million tenge (100.73 thousand dollars). Many national figures and journalists doubted then if specialists of the public organisation were competent enough to perform this contract.

Financial police were searching for these guidance materials for a long time afterwards.

However, according to customers, materials were distributed to various organisations and among citizens concerned. The contractor had all records confirming the issue of such materials. So, there were no questions about the legal part.

However, it should be emphasised that according to the website of the public revenue committee of the ministry of finance, this organisation was established in 2012, and it paid taxes only once, in 2016. The organisation doesn’t have any debts on compulsory payments to the budget. Therefore, this organisation didn’t perform any funded projects before and after the issue of guides.

As to government contracts in Turkestan region in 2018, tenders were announced and then cancelled many times due to the changes in the administration.

In order to protect users of the internet and social media from the influence of the propaganda of terrorism, the information space is being monitored for compliance with the laws of Kazakhstan. 1.7 billion tenge (4.39 million dollars) were allocated to the Ministry of Information and Communications for development of a monitoring system for the national information space.

According to the agency, so far monitoring system covers republican and regional television and radio channels, printed media, news agencies and network resources registered with

the authorised body. About 930 media outlets, in total.

Social media and the foreign segment of the Internet are reportedly being monitored to identify materials that violate the Kazakhstan law (propaganda of terrorism, extremism, suicide).

“The new global reality”

Public figures are reluctant to comment on the state’s countering extremism and terrorism to journalists. Even despite the questions over the huge project budget, many articles from the action plan are classified, while the update of the physical infrastructure is costly for the state.

In 2016, **Anastasia Reshetnyak**, a researcher at the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, published a monograph on terrorism and religious extremism in Central Asia, in particular in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

[Content analysis](#) of the speeches of Nursultan Nazarbayev, who was the president of Kazakhstan back then, showed that 72 per cent of them contained words “terrorism” or “extremism”. The threat of terrorism, according to the text of the Message to the people of Kazakhstan in 2015, is one of the characteristics of the “new global reality”. She also noted that the threat of terrorism was the most relevant topic in the media.

While the majority of respondents are loyal to both the religious policy of the state and its antiterrorist activities, more than 60 per cent of respondents indicate that they are afraid of terrorist acts in Kazakhstan. Moreover, the main portion of respondents sees the solution of the problem in toughening the national policy both in the field of law making and in strengthening control and prohibitive measures against religious organisations.

According to sociologist **Serik Beisembaev**, preventive activity is the propaganda. He believes that over-emphasising the theological side of radicalisation and ignoring the social context are the main drawbacks of preventive measures.

“There are various approaches, while the most part of work is based on the perception that radicalisation is the result of the low level of religious literacy among people. However, it was not taken into account that the process of involvement into radical ideology across the country has some social and psychological origins,” he said (as cited on Vlast.kz).

Danil Shemratov, a Shymkent-based journalist, Kazakhstan, contributed to this material.

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