

«To achieve the goals set by the authorities of Kazakhstan, religious studies in schools should not become an ordinary school subject for the sole purpose of acquiring new knowledge, but should lead to an increase in tolerance among the youth and unity through diversity», - notes an independent researcher Meruert Seidumanova in her article written specifically for analytical platform CABAR.asia.

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Summary of the article:

- Since the 2016 school year the compulsory subject “Secularity and Basics of Religious Studies” was introduced in Kazakh schools from the 9th grade;
- More than 70 countries of the world recognized the need for a religion lesson in public schools, while the nature of the subject matter and the appropriateness of different approaches are being debated;
- Due to the large amount of work, Kazakh teachers do not have enough time for detailed study of the material and preparation for the subject;
- There are still an insufficient number of universities offering a religious studies course in Kazakhstan;
- Textbooks on religion studies do not correspond to the main objective of the introduction of religious studies in schools - the formation of a tolerant consciousness, but on the contrary, they contribute to a decrease in tolerance level.

Since 2016, a mandatory subject “religious studies” has been introduced in Kazakh schools. In order to introduce this subject, significant funds were allocated for the training of more than 7,400 religion scholars and writing training aids. Nevertheless, there are wide discussions about the school lessons of religious studies about the effectiveness and necessity of introducing this subject.



A number of weaknesses in the teaching of religious studies at schools were revealed during the interview of religious representatives and parents of schoolchildren. Photo: Turar Kazangapov / Tengrinews.kz

In connection with the overall coverage of schools in the course of religious studies, there is much concern about the current personnel, training and methodological equipment for this lesson in Kazakhstan. Today, the lessons of religious studies are not fully provided with high-quality training and methodological basis and qualified training staff yet. The world experience shows that the introduction of religious studies in schools is relevant, and can bring significant use, but only with quality and highly qualified instruction.

The current situation with the teaching of religious studies in Kazakh schools

Within the framework of implementation of the presidential decree “On measures to prevent and suppress emergence of terrorism and extremism” an elective course “Basics of Religious Studies” was introduced in Kazakh schools in 2004^[1]. The introduction of this subject is one of the state measures necessary for the formation of a tolerant consciousness among youth, not accepting the idea of extremism and terrorism, increasing the general level of knowledge about religion, assessing and understanding the contemporary religious situation^[2].

In 2013, the state program on Countering Religious Extremism and Terrorism was adopted, under which it was planned to cover 100% of schoolchildren until 2017 with a lesson in religious studies in secondary education organizations^[3]. Thus, in order to achieve this goal, in 2016 a compulsory subject “Secularity and Basics of Religious Studies” was introduced in Kazakh schools from 9th grade, which replaces the elective course “Basics of

Religious Studies". One of the reasons for introducing the subject since the 9th grade is that, according to the data of the Central Asian representative office of the international NGO "Penal Reform International", people aged 14-29 are mostly subject to recruitment into terrorist fighters[4].

Infographics: Scientific Research and Analytical Center for Religious Affairs of Religious Affairs Committee Ministry of Religious Affairs and Civil Society of the Republic of Kazakhstan

The world experience of teaching religious studies at schools

The course towards republican coverage of raising the level of knowledge about religion in Kazakhstan fully corresponds to the current world trends.

Until the end of the 1990s, the developed countries underwent a process of secularization in education, religions being ousted from curricula. However, after the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 in the United States and the growing threats of religious extremism, there was a revision of state educational programs[5].

The map shows the countries in which study religious studies in public schools in different extents and with different training methodologies.

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More than 70 countries of the world recognized the need for a religion lesson in public schools, while the nature of the subject matter and the appropriateness of different approaches are being debated. Nevertheless, all countries agree in one thing - it is necessary to have qualified instruction with a quality training material for the development of tolerance and the ability of students to understand religions.

Qualification of teachers

Meanwhile, the lack of qualified personnel is obvious in Kazakhstan; it is due to the low number of teachers of religious studies, ethically trained teachers to teach religious studies and teachers who graduated from the religious studies departments.

According to the Statistics Committee of the Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan, 7432 general education schools operate as of 2015-2016[6]. To introduce the religious studies in schools, at least one specialist in religious studies is required for each school.

Meanwhile, even the directors of schools in Almaty and Astana are puzzled by the staff issue in religious studies, and in the regions the situation is even more pressing.

Today, the majority of religion instructors are teachers of history, geography and world artistic culture, who received qualification after completing refresher courses[7]. Despite the fact that the subject of religious studies is relevant to their specialization (for example, history) the qualification of teachers is questionable; professional staff who could teach religious studies at proper level are sorely lacking. The prosecutor of the department of the Prosecutor General Department of Kazakhstan S. Nysanbayev asserts that in many schools the subject of religious studies is taught by teachers who are completely distant from this topic[8]. This situation is associated with the absence of specific requirements for the qualification of religion instructors. Thus, according to the General Prosecutor's Office representative, a religious studies education course is not an effective mechanism to combat the spread of radical religious ideology among the youth[9].

First of all, the problem with the qualification of personnel is related to the lack of hours allocated for retraining. According to A. Abdirasilkyzy, director of the Scientific Research and Analytical Center for Religious Issues, retraining courses for teachers range from 24 hour to 3 day seminars[10]. Thus, teachers have to independently improve their knowledge in their spare time, since they fail to grasp all the material within 2-3 day seminars. According to D. Sabitov, an analyst of "Center of Asia" magazine, due to the large amount of work (preparation for two subjects, paperwork, social work, etc.) teachers do not have enough time for detailed study of the material and preparation for the subject[11]. In addition, since the teachers were primarily trained in the main discipline of history/geography, etc., they will pay more attention and interest to their main subject. The situation with the lack of teachers, who have graduated a university in the "Religious studies" discipline, is explained by the difficulty of providing full-time employment for qualified religion scholars in schools[12]. Only 34 hours per year or one academic hour per week are allocated for the religious studies course, while a full-time employment is 40 hours per week.

There are still an insufficient number of universities offering a religious studies course in Kazakhstan. According to the Scientific Research and Analytical Center for Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Sport, 6 universities in the country train specialists in religious studies at the level of Bachelor's programme, 5 - on Master's programme and 3 - on doctorate.

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Half of the universities offering courses in religious studies are located in Almaty, and the rest are in Astana, Karaganda and Turkestan. There is a problem of concentrating educational institutions in four cities, while the population of other cities in the country remains without the possibility of obtaining the appropriate education staying at their place of residence. It should be noted that 14% of all schools in Kazakhstan are located in Turkestan, 9.5% in East Kazakhstan, 8% in Aktobe regions[13].

According to the statement of the former Minister of Religious Affairs and Civil Society of Kazakhstan N. Ermekbayev, there is an existing risk of the spread of destructive currents in some regions of Kazakhstan. The issue of introduction the "Religious studies" discipline in one of the western regions as well as in Zhambyl, Kyzylorda and East Kazakhstan regions is under negotiations[14]. According to the statement of the regional NGO director Penal Reform International (PRI), western and southern regions of Kazakhstan are more prone to recruitment into terrorist organizations[15].

The school teachers, in addition to qualification in the field of religion, should also be trained in the principles and culture of teaching this lesson. A religion lesson should be neutral and impartial according to Toledo Guiding Principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools prepared by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Advisory Council and a group of experts on freedom of religion or belief in 2007[16]. The neutrality of teaching religion in Kazakhstan remains doubtful.

This situation can be noted not only in Kazakh schools. It is difficult for the teachers of religion lessons in public schools of Canada and several European countries to be impartial. The study of religion teachers in Canada has shown that "a program can be neutral, but not a teacher's identity; a teacher can only offer impartial content and present different points of view"[17]. However, the respondents also questioned the neutrality of textbooks in Kazakh schools.

The quality of textbooks

The textbooks on religious studies have changed five times since 2003 and their name changed four times. It should be noted that all textbooks were heavily criticized by experts, the public and government agencies.

It is possible to identify the main positions that are criticized in all presented textbooks. First of all, a number of media outlets, experts and international organizations pointed out that these textbooks do not correspond to the formation of a tolerant consciousness which is the main objective of introducing religious studies in schools, but on the contrary, they contribute to a decrease of tolerance level. According to the statement of “Forum 18” – an international human rights organization, the textbook “contains aggressive and even offensive tone towards some religious communities”[\[18\]](#). Not all comments from interested parties (religious scholars, public, religious ministers, civil servants) were taken into account when deciding on the introduction of textbooks.

Nevertheless, the authors of textbooks, in particular a religious scholar, Ph.D., member of the Kazakh National Academy of Sciences G. Yesim, rejects criticism and states that textbooks meet high standards and promote tolerance[\[19\]](#).

Meantime, the existing methodological and staffing provision of religion lessons at schools can lead to:

- Segregation of schoolchildren by national identity;
- Low education quality of children due to errors and omissions in textbooks and low qualification of teachers;
- A decrease of tolerance level in Kazakh society, related to the interests infringement of some religious denominations at religious studies lessons;
- Problems in the formation and development of a youth’s critical view on religions;
- Failure to achieve the goals outlined in the program on countering religious extremism;
- Waste of the state budget allocated for the preparation of relevant literature and retraining of teachers.

Despite the negative assessments of experts and public opinion, the school subject of religious studies changed from elective to compulsory and scaled from pilot schools to all schools of the republic.

Conclusions and recommendations

To achieve the goals set by the authorities of Kazakhstan, religious studies in schools should not become an ordinary school subject for the sole purpose of acquiring new knowledge, but should lead to an increase in tolerance among the youth and unity through diversity. A number of weaknesses in teaching of religious studies at schools were revealed by religious

representatives, parents of schoolchildren and media data during the interview. They are: low-quality textbooks, unskilled and poorly trained teachers. It is necessary to consider recommendations to improve the existing situation in the field of teaching religion. The following measures are recommended:

1. The use of textbooks of foreign countries and the introduction of additional study guides, adapted to the Kazakh realities. The world experience and studies made by religious scholars groups, based on long-term joint projects in cooperation with religious leaders, representatives of humanistic organizations, institutional partners and other interested parties can be taken as a basis for changing existing textbooks. Such works are: “Road Signs - Policies and Practices of Teaching Religions and Non-Religious mindset in Intercultural Education” (2014) and materials from major international projects such as REDCo (European Research Project on Religion in Education) and TRES (Network on Teaching Religion in a Multicultural European Society). Perhaps the compilation of training materials joint with foreign religious scholars or preview and evaluation of textbooks by these experts before distributing books to schools would be rational;
2. Involvement of religious studies teachers, religious studies graduates and provision of motivations for teaching in several schools at the same time. Introduction of additional incentives for teachers, for example, the provision of grants for studies at religious studies department, provided that they will work at schools for 2-3 years;
3. Teacher training in retraining centers for a longer period and with detailed approach. Personnel re-qualification should not only include training in religious studies, but also training in critical pedagogy;
4. Expansion of religious studies departments at the universities of the country, opening of new departments in densely populated areas such as Turkestan, East Kazakhstan Aktobe regions. To include a mandatory training in critical pedagogy into curriculum of religious studies departments;
5. The introduction of innovative approaches to attract students’ interest in religious studies using for example, YouTube video channels, social videos, and so on;
6. Create network projects providing horizontal interaction of teachers, theologians and religious scholars to exchange experience and discuss problems using experience of European countries (“European Forum of Religious Studies Teachers”, “Coordination Group for Religious Studies in Europe” and “Teaching Religion in Multicultural European society”). Use the US experience, where such webinars on religious issues in schools as “Religion, Social Studies and You” are held. In the short term, holding cross-country and intercity webinars for teachers could be a less expensive option;
7. Provide religious scholars with opportunities to receive training on freedom of religion

or belief and security within the framework of an OSCE / ODIHR project. Attract other foreign experts of religious studies to hold high-quality trainings and expand cross-country cooperation in the field of education.

Despite a number of risks and difficulties in implementing the presented recommendations, they are the most effective for achieving the set goals. It is expected that not all the proposed recommendations will be implemented due to high financial costs, administrative difficulties and low technical capabilities (highly qualified book authors and high-quality teacher training will be needed). Nevertheless, these measures are necessary to achieve the goal in the formation of tolerant consciousness, prevention of terrorist threats on a religious basis and freedom of religion.

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