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- Author (s):** Arstan Satanov¹, Assel Myrzakhmetova², Igor D. Khlebnikov², Yevgeniya Matorina³, and Farida Kadirova⁴
- Affiliation (s):** ¹Astana IT University, Astana, Kazakhstan
²Karaganda Buketov National Research University, Karaganda, Kazakhstan
³Center of Pedagogical Excellence, Autonomous Educational Organisation “Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools”, Astana, Kazakhstan
⁴Academic and Methodological Department, Bilim-Innovation International Social Foundation, Astana, Kazakhstan
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Department of Islamic Thought and Civilization, School of Social Science and Humanities
University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

Secularism, Security, and Education Policy: Religious Studies and Civic Integration in Kazakhstan

Arstan Satanov 

School of General Education Disciplines,
Astana IT University,
Kazakhstan

Assel Myrzakhmetova 

Faculty of History,
Karaganda Buketov National Research University,
Kazakhstan

Igor D. Khlebnikov 

Faculty of History,
Karaganda Buketov National Research University,
Kazakhstan

Yevgeniya Matorina 

Center of pedagogical excellence,
Autonomous Education al Organization “Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools,”
Kazakhstan

Farida Kadirova 

Academic and Methodological Department,
Bilim-Innovation International Social Foundation,
Kazakhstan

Abstract

Studies of religion and education policies are well-developed in modern Kazakhstan. However, scholarship on the interrelation between these two fields remains somewhat insufficient. The current study attempted to fill this gap by showing how Religious Studies were introduced in secondary schools. Furthermore, this study also showed how Religious Studies developed into a full-scale government policy of profiling and neutralizing the radicalization of the youth as a main source of the growing challenge of religious extremism. In depicting the peculiarities of the state-centered approach in the implementation of social engineering, the current study also showed the shortcomings of a strictly administrative approach to complex societal problems. While administrative inertia is crucial in pushing a secularist agenda in curriculum and schooling instruction, the underdevelopment of textbooks, training of cadres, as well as the cold communal response to the governmental intervention into what is considered personal beliefs represent crucial factors undermining these policies. The study of the respective socially sensitive topic was conducted by examining the state legislation in archival documents, textbooks, curriculum, literature as well as media narratives' review and the original survey of teachers (N=675).

Keywords: civic integration, extremism prevention, Islam in Kazakhstan, Post-Soviet education reforms, religious literacy, secularism, state-centric relational model

*Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to Farida Kadirova, Researcher, Academic and Methodological Department, Bilim-Innovation International Social Foundation, Kazakhstan at f.kadirova@bil.edu.kz

Highlights

- The concept of state-centric model helps to explore the Kazakhstani case of introducing Religious Studies in the curriculum by focusing on state directives, shaping the secular image of the country.
- The concept of persuasive governance is crucial in governmental attempts to counter societal challenges, such as growing quasireligious radicalization and intolerance, through the dissemination of knowledge. This concept also shows that the state attempts to follow internationally promoted practices.
- Academically and legislatively shaped visions of reshaping society according to the aspirations of civil nation and secularism are hindered by practical shortcomings.

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan faced the challenge of re-legitimizing religious discourses after 70 years of state atheism while maintaining internal political stability. An atheist state marked inconsistent policies of back and forth purge and relapse regarding religion, ultimately aimed at eliminating religious discourses from public life.¹ Islam was excluded from the official national project but persisted as a significant component of Kazakh identity, especially in forming national culture.² Religion, though, was not entirely eradicated: studies conducted in the late 1980s documented a relatively high level of religiosity among the population in Kazakhstan.³ A gradual retreat from atheistic persecution began only during Perestroika, culminating in religious freedom in 1990, fundamentally transforming state-religion relationships.

Table 1. Implementation of Religious Studies in Kazakhstan

Period	Description
1992–2003	The course as such was absent; elements of Religious Studies were incorporated into the subjects <i>World History</i> and <i>History of Kazakhstan</i> .
2004–2008	An optional course, <i>Fundamentals of Religious Studies</i> (FRS), was introduced in several schools voluntarily.
2009–2011	FRS was expanded to include Grade 9 students.
2012–2016	The subject <i>Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies</i> (SFRS) was introduced, aligned with international recommendations developed by the OECD and UNESCO.

¹Zauresh Galimzhanovna Saktaganova et al., “State-Religious Relations during the Soviet Period: Periodization and Content,” *European Journal of Science and Theology* 14, no. 1 (2018): 103–114; Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (Columbia University Press, 2000); Dmitriy I. Sazonov, “Brezhnevskie goneniia na Tserkov' (po materialam Tsentral'noi Rossii) [Brezhnev-Era Persecution of the Church: Based on Materials from Central Russia],” *Vestnik Kostromskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta imeni N. A. Nekrasova* 21, no. 6 (2015): 46–50.

²Yerik Tungatarov, and Rustem Zholdybalin, “From Valikhanov to Tokayev: Islam in the Kazakh Nation-Building Agenda,” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 15, no. 2 (2025): 19–35, <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.152.02>; Rustem Zholdybalin, “Islam and the Nation: Debates on Religion in the Early 20th-Century Kazakh National Movement in Sources and Historiography,” *Gosudarstvo, religii, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom* 43, no. 2 (2025): 64–88.

³Didar B. Kassymova et al., “Some Aspects of the Religious Situation in the Kazakh SSR in the 1950s–1980s,” *Asian Journal “Steppe Panorama”* 12, no. 4 (2025): 1089–1108, https://doi.org/10.51943/2710-3994_2025_12_4_1089-1108.

Period	Description
2016–2018	SFRS became compulsory for Grade 9 students in secondary educational institutions, with an emphasis on strengthening the secular component.
2018–2020	The updated textbook <i>Society and Religion</i> was implemented in secondary educational institutions, reflecting a shift towards a competency-based approach to teaching.
Since 2021	The course has been integrated into the subject <i>Global Competencies</i> to enhance critical thinking skills.

Historically a Muslim country, the Kazakh land became a culturally diverse dominion, and from 1991, experienced a public revival of religion, prompting the government to develop policies to regulate religious life. In addition to Islam and Orthodox Christianity (traditional for a significant part of the non-Kazakh population), the country witnessed an influx of missionaries. This necessitated the implementation of regulatory mechanisms, including the promotion of religious education and literacy.⁴ The state sought both to restore historically significant religious traditions and to create conditions fostering interfaith tolerance.⁵ A chosen path of creating a democratic secular state was heavily influenced by the internationally recognized norms of building a society tolerant of confessions and beliefs. These norms, later formulated as the Toledo Guiding Principles, strongly advocated to disseminate knowledge of various religions and traditions into the schooling curriculum.⁶ Inclusion of the Fundamentals of Religious Studies (FRS) in the secondary school curriculum was an initiative to equip students with civic, historical, and ethical knowledge necessary to study religion in a pluralistic society. Through a state-centric relational perspective, which views the state as a key actor in the governance of religion,⁷ the study dived into the hitherto unexplored territory of how Kazakhstan implemented a sensitive policy of studying religion in secondary school.

Of course, the road was not silky. Bumps on the road are mostly represented by both the novelty of the task, complicated by unawareness and inexperience of the political actors beyond reforms, and the objective and constant lack of resources. The transitional landscape has shifted away from more liberal approaches to religious freedom towards a more regulated framework for religious activity.⁸

⁴Burkutbay Ayagan, Maral Kaliyeva, and Arstan Satanov, “Islam v Kazakhstane: istoriia rasprostraneniia i sovremennost’ [Islam in Kazakhstan: The History of Its Spread and the Contemporary Situation],” *Istoriya* 12, no. 5 (2021): e103, <https://doi.org/10.18254/S207987840015887-4>; Nagima Baitenova, V. Meirbayev, and S. Baizhuma, “Trends in the Development of the Religious Situation in Post-Secular Society in Kazakhstan over the Years of Independence,” *Eurasian Journal of Religious Studies* 26, no. 2 (2021): 4–9, <https://doi.org/10.26577/EJRS.2021.v26.i2.r1>.

⁵Marina Onuchko et al., “Religioznaia identichnost’: opyt nezavisimogo Kazakhstana [Religious Identity: The Experience of Independent Kazakhstan],” *Adam alemi* 102, no. 4 (2024): 161–170, <https://doi.org/10.48010/aa.v102i4.654>.

⁶Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (Warsaw: Sungraf, 2007), 16, 51.

⁷Stephen Bell, and Andrew Hindmoor, *Rethinking Governance: The Centrality of the State in Modern Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511814617>; Tuula Helena Tuula Helena Sakaranaho, “The Governance of Religious Education in Finland: A State-Centric Relational Approach,” in *Contextualising Dialogue, Secularisation and Pluralism: Religion in Finnish Public Education*, ed. Martin Ubani, Inkeri Rissanen, and Salla Poulter (Münster: Waxmann, 2019), 17–37.

⁸A. I. Artemyev, “Religiia v realiiakh kazakhstanskogo obshchestva, ili k voprosu o duhovnom soglasii i svobode sovesti [Religion in the Realities of Kazakhstani Society, or On the Question of Spiritual Concord and Freedom of Conscience],” *Saiiasat*, no. 11–12 (1999): 74–76; E. U. Baidarov,

The state implemented a *modus operandi* of “religious protectionism,” offering sanctuary for “traditional” Islam and Orthodox Christianity as opposed to “foreign” religious movements (including reformist Islamic and Protestant Christian denominations, as well as “new-age” movements). The Spiritual Muslim Administration was created to represent the Muslim population but at the same time, operates as a provider of the secular state’s policy within the state-recognized framework in a hybrid model of governance.⁹ While interfaith dialogue receives official endorsement, scholars caution that excessive state interference may curtail individual liberties.¹⁰ The 2011 Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations reaffirmed secularism, acknowledged the historical significance of Islam and Orthodox Christianity, as well as imposed restrictions on unregistered religious activity and “non-traditional” groups¹¹ (such as Scientologists, Ahmadi, and various Islamic communities like Salafists and *Tabligh-e Jama’at*). “Traditional” Islam was widely formulated in universities and pamphlets as Sunni Islam of Maturidi *aqidah* and Hanafi *fiqh* schools. The triannual Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in Astana, with headquarters in the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation, is another state-sponsored effort to promote religious tolerance and interfaith harmony. This reinforces Kazakhstan’s diplomatic commitment to multilateral spiritual dialogue;¹² it speaks more, though, on legitimizing foreign aspirations of Kazakhstan as an internationally recognized actor than on academic inclination on matters of faith. The government’s domestic initiatives, such as *Rukhani Zhanghyru* (“Spiritual Revival”), further underscore its ongoing role in shaping the country’s religious landscape.¹³ Despite unreasonable faith in the administrative approach sometimes, the rational intent to gradually reform society instead of radical compliance is seen.

There is a rich historiographical, sociological, and general scholarly tradition of studying various separate themes related to this study. Report by Alma Sultangalieva (1999),¹⁴ performed for a state-funded survey in the Institute for the Strategic Studies (KISI), documented the resurgence of religious consciousness during the early years of independence, and illustrated the significant role of Islam in modern discourses. Burkitbay Ayagan et al. (2021) argued that historical legacies exert a profound influence on contemporary faith practices. Literature suggests that insufficient religious literacy among citizens constitutes a structural vulnerability, especially within the created

“Privatizirovannaia religiia (na primere gosudarstv Tsentral’noi Azii) [Privatized Religion: Case of Central Asian States],” *Izvestia NAN RK. Seriya obschestvennykh nauk*, no. 6 (2010): 32-34.

⁹Ayagan et al., “Islam v Kazakhstane.”

¹⁰Svante E. Cornell, S. Frederick Starr, and Julian Tucker, *Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan* (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2017), 64.

¹¹Republic of Kazakhstan, “Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan ot 11 oktiabria 2011 goda № 483-IV ‘O religioznoi deiatel’nosti i religioznykh ob’edineniiakh’ [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 483-IV of October 11, 2011, ‘On Religious Activity and Religious Associations’],” October 11, 2011, *Information and Legal System of Normative Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z1100000483>.

¹²Laura G. Yerekeshcheva, “Functions of Religion and Dynamics of Nation-Building in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan,” *The Muslim World* 110, no. 1 (2020): 75–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12319>.

¹³President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Course towards the Future: Modernization of Kazakhstan’s Identity,” *Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, April 12, 2017, https://www.akorda.kz/en/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/course-towards-the-future-modernization-of-kazakhstans-identity.

¹⁴Alma Sultangalieva, “Evolutsiya islama v Kazakhstane [Evolution of Islam in Kazakhstan],” *Tsentral’naya Aziya i Kavkaz—Central Asia and the Caucasus* 5 (1999): 23–36.

ketchupeffekt of religious revival succeeding the long-time suppression of individual belief.¹⁵ Government-centric perspective on the uncontrolled revival, thus, enhances the optic of religion as a public factor rather than a private belief system, with a focus on issues of social stability and security. This positions religious education as a corrective mechanism capable of mitigating the ideological risks, and is usually supported by sociological data indicating a steady rise in self-reported religiosity since the early 2000s.¹⁶ Consequently, the presumed link between religious education and security outcomes is largely theoretical and lacks empirical validation, especially in the context of compulsory education in Kazakhstan.

Most studies do not differentiate between cultural, symbolic, and doctrinal dimensions of belief. Very little was spoken on how the societal vision of the state shaped the particular question of religious education. This made this study an attempt to fill the niche on the verge of religious, political, and educational studies of modern Kazakhstan. Some studies tackle the state regulation of religious education. A significant body of scholarship investigates the regulation of religion by Kazakhstan's secular state through formal educational institutions. Scholars characterize a centralized governance model that excludes confessional instruction in schools, while allowing religion to be taught as an academic subject under stringent state supervision. This model aligns with broader Post-Soviet strategies aimed at maintaining secularism and limiting religious influence. Institutional analyses also identify structural limitations. The limited availability of university programs in Religious Studies and the lack of a comprehensive school-level framework have led to a shortage of qualified specialists and to the restricted dissemination of religious knowledge outside elite academic circles.¹⁷ Notably, existing literature tends to emphasize institutional design over pedagogical practice. The survey of teachers in this study aimed to fill the gap in studying experience-based challenges of educational reforms.

Empirical studies reveal regional and demographic variation in religiosity. There is a statistical inconsistency compromising state-funded social studies as effective tools of state policies. While some surveys describe the overwhelming majority of the population as adherents of either Islam or Christianity, others report a greater number of non-believers or "secular" people throughout the country (mostly in major urban areas).¹⁸ This shows the contested nature of religiosity as a social indicator. From the perspective of educational science, this inconsistency raises awareness of how fragile state policy is towards implementing democratic principles of plurality and diversity. The inclusion of Religious Studies in secular education remains widely debated. While some argue that secularist education fosters principles of tolerance, intercultural understanding, and social cohesion by equipping students with analytical tools to engage with religious diversity,¹⁹ others call out the

¹⁵Ilyas Yerpay et al., "Religious Education in the Religion-State Relations after Independence of Kazakhstan," *Asian Social Science* 10, no. 9 (2014): 108–115, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v10n9p108>.

¹⁶Onuchko et al., "Religioznaia identichnost'."

¹⁷Mahmut Zengin, and Zhansaya Badagulova, "Religion and Religious Education in Kazakhstan," 53, *Karaelmas Eğitim Bilimleri Dergisi* 5, no. 1 (2017): 49–63.

¹⁸Committee on Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Religious Sphere," *Unified Portal of State Bodies of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://beta.egov.kz/memleket/entities/din/activities/141?lang=en>; United States Department of State, *Kazakhstan 2021 International Religious Freedom Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2022), accessed January 1, 2026, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kazakhstan/>.

¹⁹Hamid Yeganeh, "Religiosity, Socio-Economic Development, and Work Values: A Cross-National Study," *Journal of Management Development* 34, no. 5 (2015): 585–600, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-06-2014-0066>.

policy of incorporating religion into secular schools. This is because it may introduce ideological bias or privilege dominant traditions, potentially marginalizing students from secular or minority backgrounds.²⁰ Evidence is limited: many contributions are normative or conceptual, offering little data on student perceptions of Religious Studies or on the practical implementation of such courses in secular classrooms. Finally, there are historiographic perspectives: Studies of Religious Identity Formation in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan highlight the role of religion in reconstructing civic and ethno-cultural belonging following decades of enforced atheism.²¹

Scholars further observe a broader process of de-privatization, as religion re-emerges in public life and national discourse. However, much of this literature neglects education as a formative context in which religious meanings are negotiated during the adolescence. Schooling is often portrayed as a passive setting rather than an active site for identity mediation. Thereby, it limits the exploration of the civic implications of school-based Religious Studies. Collectively, current scholarship frames religious education in Kazakhstan mainly through macro-level perspectives of security, regulation, and identity. Although these approaches reveal key structural dynamics, they overlook empirical investigation of school-level Religious Studies as a means of civic integration. As a result, Kazakhstan is theoretically important but remains under-explored in comparative analyses of secularism, educational policy, and social regulation. Addressing this gap necessitated a systematic examination of the operation of Religious Studies in secular schools and their influence on students' civic orientations, which formed the basis for this study's research design.

2. Materials and Methods

The current research employed a mixed study methodology, integrating legal, archival documents, and secondary sources analysis with sociological data collection. The aim was to examine how Kazakhstan utilizes Religious Studies to promote social stability and support the youth, embedding it into a new society. The study analyzed Kazakhstan's religious education policies from 1991-2025. For this purpose, the study delved into the covert world of governmental regulations, institutional structures, and societal outcomes in establishing a technocratic utopia.

Three main types of data were used by this study. Furthermore, the study reviewed Kazakhstani laws about religious education in detail as well as analyzed the "Religious Studies" curriculum, textbooks, and other related documents to understand their content and structure. Interviews were conducted with experts and teachers, alongside the authors' firsthand teaching experiences, using a semi-structured format. This yielded valuable insights into educators' practical implementation of state policies and implemented a sociological survey among teachers of Religious Studies in schools.²² Afterwards, documents and curricula most pertinent to the research objectives were selected. Materials spanning 1991-2025 were analyzed to trace the longitudinal development of Kazakhstan's educational policies. Documents were sourced from both institutional repositories (e.g., government reports) and public platforms (e.g., online archives). Each document was verified for authenticity and accuracy before analysis. Data organizations employed taxonomic coding to systematically identify key themes and patterns. Additionally, the study employed a thematic analysis using MAXQDA 2022. This is a coding process which involves segmentation of documents into discrete units of analysis (each assigned a corresponding thematic code), aggregated into eight major categories representing the primary themes of the curriculum. A quantitative assessment of the FRS

²⁰Onuchko et al., "Religioznaiia identichnost'."

²¹Zhibek S. Syzdykova, "Key Aspects of the Kazakh Religious Identity," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 13, no. 4 (2017): 95–109.

²²Authors' original online survey conducted among respondents from multiple regions of Kazakhstan (n = 675), consisting of closed, semi-open, and open-ended questions; data analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 27.0.

textbook by Kenzhetaev et al. (2023) classified its semantic units within eight thematic categories. This precipitated the synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data to analyze Religious Studies as a tool of civic integration.

Syntactic program framework,²³ suited to analyze complex social phenomena, facilitated data organization and categorization, enabling the identification of central themes and patterns in participants' perspectives.

3. Hierarchical Governance in the Introduction of Religious Studies in Kazakhstan

The introduction of FRS in Kazakhstan is a result of the ideological and institutional shifts following the USSR's collapse in 1991. Reevaluation of Soviet-era dogmas, emphasizing concepts, such as "rule of law" and "civil society," facilitated the inclusion of religion in academic discourse.²⁴ The development of Religious Studies responded to the ideological vacuum left by Soviet atheism and the need for frameworks to understand spirituality in a pluralistic society.²⁵ Despite state control over educational priorities, increased academic freedoms allowed religious education to flourish.²⁶ This is a classic example of persuasive governance, which seeks educational reforms to foster civic values and religious literacy without endorsing any specific doctrine.²⁷

First introduction of the FRS course in secondary schools (2004) was a response to the new anti-terrorist agenda, actualized within the global context of a War on Terrorism, declared by the USA, and approved by President N. Nazarbayev's decree.²⁸ It had a poorly conducted curriculum consisting of very generalized information on various confessions. Next, a mandatory elective FRS course for Grade 9 students was issued on a lower level – Ministry of Education (2008).²⁹ This showed that the gradual implementation of the policy was also hierarchical, with every next step commissioned by a lower bureaucratic institution. The same level of bureaucracy commissioned the renewed version of the course, called Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies (SFRS), on August 23rd, 2012. This time, however, they needed approval from the government, since the anti-

²³On the framework, see: Andrew D. Abbott, *Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 162.

²⁴Arstan Satanov, and Burkitbay G. Ayagan, "School Textbooks on History: A Case of Representing the Great Patriotic War in the Soviet Era and the Period of Independence of Kazakhstan," *Historia Social y de la Educación* 12, no. 1 (2023): 35–59, <https://doi.org/10.17583/hse.11072>; Arstan Satanov et al., "Kazakhstani History Education Considered via Textbooks' War Narratives, with a Focus on the 'Great Patriotic War,'" *Asian Review of World Histories* 11, no. 2 (2023): 229–262, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22879811-12340127>.

²⁵Baitenova et al., "Trends in the Development."

²⁶Yerpay et al., "Religious Education."

²⁷Bell and Andrew Hindmoor, *Rethinking Governance*.

²⁸Republic of Kazakhstan, "Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan ot 10 fevralia 2000 goda № 332 'O merakh po preduprezhdeniiu i presecheniiu proiavlennii terrorizma i ekstremizma' [Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 332 of February 10, 2000, 'On Measures to Prevent and Suppress Manifestations of Terrorism and Extremism']," February 10, 2000, *Information and Legal System of Normative Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/U000000332>.

²⁹Meruert Seidumanova, *Vnedrenie religiovedeniia v shkolkh Kazakhstana: neobkhodimost' ili izlishestvo?* [Implementation of Religious Studies in Schools of Kazakhstan: Necessity or Excess?] (Almaty: Soros Kazakhstan, 2020), 7.

terrorist agenda, hitherto irrelevant, peaked around after the terrorist attacks of 2011.³⁰ The word Secularism showed that the cultural capital, as well as the claim of power through institutionalizing knowledge, was now at stake, unofficially seen as challenged not only by marginalized movements, but the mainstream religious communities as well.. SFRS is aimed at promoting critical thinking and respect for diversity. Furthermore, it is integrated into compulsory secondary education standards to treat religion as a neutral object of academic inquiry, governed by civic, legal, and cultural principles. This aligns with both international recommendations from the OECD and UNESCO, emphasizing the role of education in fostering social cohesion through knowledge, critical understanding, and respect for diversity,³¹ as well as the secular state agenda. This way, secularism can be introduced as a moderating discourse for ensuring neutrality in the discussion of religion, operating in a paradigm of human rights and freedom of conscience. Moreover, it views religion not as a dogmatic set of beliefs (further enforcing one privileged confession above others) but as a part of commonly shared history and culture. Added to law regulation, this view serves the goal of building up a secular citizenship; education, thus, becomes an agent of civil socialization. Toledo Principles insist that this socialization must ensure that the studying process is based on impartiality and sensitivity to diversity, and from the practical side, it must include evidence-based learning.³²

The Kazakhstani curriculum demonstrates an awareness of local manifestations of religious and secular plurality. By incorporating contextualized examples that reflect the country's unique diversity – including Soviet atheism, Islamic revival, and global religious flows – the curriculum strengthens its legitimacy and aims to correspond with international recommendations³³ for responsive educational content.

The problem here is the pedagogical practice. While the government draws a colorful picture of following international templates by enforcing administrative will, the reality on land is that the troops are not quite ready. Teachers weren't provided with a working curriculum and were under instructed on how to implement these recommendations. In most cases, the teachers of History of Kazakhstan and World History (often burdened with additional classes like "Human. Law. Society" or other social courses) were put off by the fact that they now have to teach Religion as well. Most experienced teachers taught in the era of "scientific atheism," while younger generation of educators were victims of the decay of educational system due to crisis of 1990s. People who were indoctrinated that the "religion is an opium for the masses," as per Marx now had to teach students on the differences between Karmic and Abrahamic faiths, or why some Muslim denominations are "good" or "bad" (although it was an already well-known pattern of indoctrinating state agenda). This led to a massive crisis of implementation and years of a chaotic educational process. Guesswork, patchwork, and self-study in the process became common patterns. No methodology provided, textbooks undercooked, further expanding the epistemological limbo. But what was the rush?

Religious revival was not consistent. Society was not balanced. Ramming poverty together with common religious illiteracy compounded the rise of radicalizing movements, actualizing the concerns for security in the face of potential insurgency. While there is little documented evidence behind these concerns, it has already become a widely spread media narrative. Furthermore, the events of 2011 strengthened the public discourse that the state did quite little to counter the rising

³⁰Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. "Prikaz Ministra obrazovaniia i nauki Respubliki Kazahstan ot 15 iuliia 2014 goda № 281 [Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 281 of July 15, 2014]." July 15, 2014. *Information and Legal System of Normative Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan*. Accessed January 1, 2026. <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/V1400009691>.

³¹Jacques Delors and Inam Al Mufti, *Learning: The Treasure within* (Paris: UNESCO, 1996).

³²OSCE, *Toledo Guiding Principles*, 21.

³³*Ibid.*, 76.

danger of insurgency. Several terrorist attacks in Almaty, Taraz, and Aktobe, by Islamists, mobilized public opinion and enforced the pro-action voices in the government.³⁴ The state responded by policy revisions, strengthening the anti-extremist rhetoric. This was used as a leverage to introduce several reforms in security, the spiritual sphere, and schooling. The government could not adopt the Orientalist take of Western countries towards Islam, since it already played a crucial role in forming local identity. Instead, it claimed an irretrievable difference between “legitimate” Islam governed by the Muftiate, and the disloyal insurgents. “Legitimate” Islam was now portrayed as a religion of peace, tolerance, and dialogue, marginalizing the militantly proselytizing and exclusivist discourses. At the same time, this juxtaposition served to adopt a deeper, academically nuanced understanding of religion as a historical and cultural domain that is socially cohesive. By incorporating a critical perspective on extremist ideologies into its curriculum, the government aims to empower students with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate complex social issues and promote inclusive, tolerant communities.³⁵

In response to terrorist acts within the country, the Government of Kazakhstan approved a set of measures to combat religious extremism and terrorism in the Republic of Kazakhstan for the period 2013-2017.³⁶ The State Program aimed to achieve full participation of secondary school students in classes of Religious Studies and provide them with essential knowledge about religion. Beginning in the academic year of 2016, Kazakhstani schools introduced a mandatory SFRS subject for 9th-grade students. In 2018, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Civil Society introduced the textbook “Society and Religion”, which was an attempt to promote secularism as a core value for national stability. It also aimed to provide knowledge about freedom of conscience, to inform on the legal stance on the status of various religions and denominations, to discourage extremist ideologies, as well as to foster tolerance and a humanist values-based worldview.³⁷ Significant funding supported the implementation of this subject, including training 7,400 Religious Studies’ teachers and developing teaching materials.³⁸ SFRS course is delivered for one hour per week, totaling 34 hours per academic year.³⁹

4. Market-based Instruments in Textbook Development

Scrutinies with inadequate instructions and curricular materials sparked criticism of FRS. For instance, one respondent pointed to the confusion among educators’ community upon introduction of the course as: “*No textbooks were available, no methodological resources... not even the Ministry provided us with clear directives.*”⁴⁰ The government sought universities for help. The plan was to

³⁴Onuchko et al., “Religioznaia identichnost’.”

³⁵Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Prikaz Ministra obrazovaniia i nauki Respubliki Kazahstan ot 15 iuliia 2014 goda № 281 [Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 281 of July 15, 2014],” July 15, 2014, *Information and Legal System of Normative Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/V1400009691>.

³⁶Republic of Kazakhstan, “Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Kazahstan ot 24 sentiabria 2013 goda № 648 ‘O Gosudarstvennoi programme po protivodeistviu religioznomu ekstremizmu i terrorizmu v Respublike Kazahstan na 2013–2017 gody’ [Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan of September 24, 2013, No. 648 ‘On the State Program on Combating Religious Extremism and Terrorism in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2013–2017’],” September 24, 2013, *Information and Legal System of Normative Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/U1300000648>.

³⁷Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan, “Order No. 281.”

³⁸Seidumanova, *Vnedrenie religiovedeniia*, 4.

³⁹Republic of Kazakhstan, “Decree No. 648.”

⁴⁰Authors’ survey (n = 675), teacher D.

retrain teachers in academic facilities, “recode” them as a Religious Studies’ teachers, as well as launching new training programs for Religious Studies’ specialists. Universities, however, could not fully respond to the call – most of them lacked capacities and training programs. On the other hand, most of profile facilities were based in major academic centers, such as Astana, Almaty or Karaganda. Not many teachers, therefore, could converge the job with attending requalification courses, since the remote education system was not a widespread thing back then. Another problem was admission of the textbook production: state-affiliated institutions lacked either religious or pedagogical expertise. So, the state contacted independent publishing agencies, which solved the formal requirements in a short-term but further worsened the issue with the inconsistency of the curriculum with a variety of produced textbooks.⁴¹ What is important, though, is the bizarre convergence of the administrative approach with the market-based governance approach. Where the administrative capacities proved to be insufficient, the money talked for filling the gap in education policy. Neither educators nor students, as expected, were not fans of the result. The engagement levels with the inconsistent materials and half-prepared instructors contributed to lowering the student engagement.

A wide criticism was raised pertaining to such underprepared reforms. On paper, the goal was to foster tolerance through getting knowledge about various denominations, beliefs, and cultural heritage of the world. Whereas, on practice, concerns were raised that the textbooks, basically agitating in favor of “traditional” Islam and Orthodox Christianity, were creating a hierarchy of privileged confessions, thus becoming propagandist tools. The curriculum, the critics concluded, strongly favored the state agenda and the authors’ bias.⁴² Another point of critique was the fragmentation of provided material: the textbooks were basically a patchwork of incoherent texts, creating a disjointed learning experience, further worsened by the diversity of such textbooks.⁴³ This situation was surely a deviation from the international standards, which the state sought to rigorously follow, and which claim that the guarantee for the textbooks’ quality and effectiveness, leading to eventual level-up in educational collaboration and innovation, should not rely on administrative approach only. Instead, the curricular development policy should prioritize the professional standards and peer-reviewing during designing the textbooks.⁴⁴

To examine the complex relationship between the state as a curriculum commissioner and the autonomous education actors, the study analyzed the first unilateral textbook for the Grade 9 course SFRS for its content and keywords. The textbook by D. T. Kenzhetayev et al. (2023) aimed to foster secular values, ethics, and principles, upon explaining the roots of world religions. While its main focus is the history of religious systems, with a focus on traditional beliefs and customs in Kazakhstan, the textbook covered questions of interaction of society and individuals within religious domains, how the religious institutions function, as well as how the secular state has arrived. Thus, it states that the current secular state with the privileged role of two “traditional” denominations is a

⁴¹Garifolla Yessim, *Nauka sovesti* [Study of Conscience] (Almaty: Öner, 1994).

⁴²Anna Ozhiganova, “Prepodavanie religii v shkole: poiski neutral’nosti i “kul’turnye voyny.” Vvodnaia stat’ia [Teaching about Religion in School: The Pursuit of Neutrality and the “Culture Wars.” Introduction],” *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov’ v Rossii i za rubezhom* 35, no. 4 (2017): 7-29, <https://doi.org/10.22394/2073-7203-2017-35-4-7-29>; D. Dilbegim Mavloniy, “Uchebnik “Osnovy religiovedeniia” stal predmetom spora o svobode religii [‘Fundamentals of Religious Studies’ textbook became the subject of a debate over freedom of religion],” *Radio Azattyq*, July 1, 2010. https://rus.azattyq.org/a/religion_textbook_kazakhstan/2087396.html.

⁴³Yerpay et al., “Religious Education,” 112–113; Zengin and Badagulova, “Religion and Religious Education”; Seidumanova, *Vnedrenie religiovedeniia*, 5.

⁴⁴Sonia Nieto, “Solidarity, Courage and Heart: What Teacher Educators Can Learn from a New Generation of Teachers,” *Intercultural Education* 17, no. 5 (2006): 457–473, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980601060443>.

peak formation, requiring civilians to be loyal subjects, because they would not find a better functioning system. A quantitative analysis of the textbook's content using MAXQDA 2022 software revealed that several key themes were emphasized throughout the book. These included secularism, various religions, and the Kazakhstani context. The most frequently occurring concepts related to these topics were identified, along with their frequencies and distributions across pages. The primary finding from the current analysis highlights the juxtaposition between terms "religious" and "secular" in describing social phenomena and not individual matters (of course, favoring the latter in this regard). This creates a bizarre situation where the Religious Studies, aimed as a course to teach tolerance and dialogue, undermine religious domains. It is not surprising, though, bearing in mind the still-dominating Marxist-Leninist epistemological backgrounds of the Humanities in Kazakhstan.

Another major feature of analysis is the frequency statistics. Islam, of course, is the most prominent theme, featuring a record appearance of 278 times, as well as frequent mentions of "Muslim" and "Qur'an." Secular motives appear twice as rare (143 mentions), mostly referring to state policies and laws on religion. On the other hand, these motives can be combined with humanist themes (221 mentions). These establish an anthropocentric approach to study of religion as a personal experience, speaking of morality and values, behaviors, as well as individual choices. At the same time, together these categories put religion in domains of human culture. Secularism is tied to the scientific approach, thus elevating its cultural capital as a domain of academic knowledge, emphasized through 111 mentions of Religious Studies and 38 mentions of various phrases containing the word "scientific". Most of the features of academic knowledge are historical. A significant bulk of discussion is focused on Christianity, mostly the followers of the Russian Orthodox Church, widely represented in Kazakhstan as the second most influential denomination after Sunni Islam. It was discovered that the references to Kazakhstan's history, society, and state are appearing in the majority of the textbook's contents (23 out of 30 segments). These embedded the contextualization in local terms as a tool of elevating accessibility and relevance for the reader.

The analysis also highlighted the need for youth to engage in critical thinking about religion, as well as the potential risks posed by biased or propagandistic content. Furthermore, the lack of qualified teachers and inadequate resources may exacerbate existing issues. The government's failure to address these concerns has led to public criticism and calls for reform.⁴⁵ While the textbook has a viable structure, raising from principles of secular state to the contextualization of world religions within Kazakhstani reality, it also serves the state agenda of promoting secularism as a domain of knowledge, and therefore, power. Recency of its issuance reclaims time to assess its potential success.

5. Relational Governance in Religious Education

The principle of relational governance claims that the implementation of governmental policy requires coordination of state actions with academia and civil society, creating a co-operational network. It sees education as a mediator in coercive relationship between state and civil society, acting through diverse providers (including religious institutions, academicians, and lawmakers) of positioning religion within frameworks of citizenship, secularism, and human rights during implementation of Religious Studies in the schools.⁴⁶ Relational governance aims to enhance both educational and security tasks: state tries to tackle the growing insurgency through advocating its main potential manpower – the youth, whose orientations are still blurry. The emphasis on educating the youth about religion is supported by the demographic data that correlates religious education (both formal in school and informal in families and extracurricular activities) with the growing

⁴⁵Seidumanova, *Vnedrenie religiovedeniia*, 8–10.

⁴⁶On the theory, see: OSCE, *Toledo Guiding Principles*, 112.

religious self-identification of young people.⁴⁷ The administrative approach had to evolve from hierarchical direction towards soaking elements of the relational governance to establish persuasion, best defined as principle of the soft governance. This emphasizes the role of involvement and co-operational trust between various actors as principal source of legitimacy. These actors, including parents, activists, confessional representatives, and non-governmental organizations, should participate in the creation of curriculum. This curriculum should be balanced and its acceptance should be enhanced in society. This might make it a space of cognitive engagement.

A case study from Almaty suggested that administrative approach was used during the implementation of SFRS courses in secondary schools.⁴⁸ However, this was not a usual case due to the diversity of educational facilities across Kazakhstan. Therefore, reliance on an administrative approach is still predominant. To achieve relational governance, local branches of education administrations aspired to promote communal engagement and associative governance. This led to work with representatives of religious administrations (Muftiate and Russian Orthodox Church) and call clergy to host meetings and lectures in schools. Resultantly, this helped downsize the levels of pro-secularist bias of teachers, but at the same time, created countering gravitational pull of denominational bias. As per the Minister of Education's decree, local branches of the Ministry aimed to partner with spiritual administrations to promote tolerance and inter-communal dialogue within the secular framework.⁴⁹ The engagement with archival documents revealed that Ministry's directives promoted meetings, as well as exhibitions and discussion clubs, mostly on the topic of spiritual life regulation. Examples were roundtables captioned "No to terrorism!" and "Religion and modernity," organized in schools, where discussion was not reduced to mere counter-terrorist concerns. However, instead, it enhanced widened topics of significance of religion in cultural life, development of civil society, their cohesion with democratization process as well as shaping identity.⁵⁰ Discussions among students on religious freedom also addressed issues of legislation on religion. Furthermore, they talked about spiritual involvement within families and local communities. Besides discussions, another important initiative was requalifying programs for a wide spectrum of specialists, from security to cultural sphere, in religious expertise, organized at local universities.⁵¹ Again, the state's agenda was not limited to the dialogue for the sake of its own but the soft reinforcement of secular discourse of religion and engagement of broader community into discussion.

Communal reception of these initiatives was mixed. Some felt that the state rudely interrogated the very personal issue, enhancing a sense of mistrust towards the administration (which was constantly present in the first place due to weak identification of people with the state, and perceived state as an enforcer).⁵² This is a common pattern for the post-Soviet space: independent states after 1991 inherited a complicated past of state-society relationship, bordering on totalitarian practices and

⁴⁷Bureau of National Statistics, Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Biuro natsional'noi statistiki opublikovalo tematicheskii sbornik po natsional'nomu sostavu naseleniia [Bureau of National Statistics Published a Thematic Compilation on the National Composition of the Population]," November 2, 2023, <https://stat.gov.kz/ru/news/byuro-natsionalnoy-statistiki-opublikovalo-tematicheskiiy-sbornik-po-natsionalnomu-sostavu-naseleniya/>.

⁴⁸Ulzhan Tungatova, Nurlykhan Aljanova, Dinara Utebayeva, and Toirshik Yuldashev, "Integrating 'Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies' into the Mandatory Curriculum of Secondary Education in Almaty, Kazakhstan: A Case Study," *Eurasian Journal of Religious Studies* 36, no. 4 (2023): 3–13, <https://doi.org/10.26577/EJRS.2023.v36.i4.r1>.

⁴⁹Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan, "Order No. 281."

⁵⁰National Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (NARK), record group 91, inventory 1, file 594, vol. 80, sheets 187-189.

⁵¹Zengin and Badagulova, "Religion and Religious Education."

⁵²Seidumanova, *Vnedrenie religiovedeniia*, 9.

a commonly shared atmosphere of mistrust. Studies suggest that religiosity was perceived as a shelter of personal belonging, an intimate sphere to which even the atheist state was usually reluctant to interfere with barring official rhetoric. An interference per se was a danger zone, stimulating anxieties about personal space in a society where everything was shared with the state.⁵³ Societal transgressions affected implementation of the reforms: anxieties of self and belonging were bigger than any concrete criticisms of curriculum. This made its implementation a sociologically advanced challenge for the policymakers. As per Toledo Principles, the key factor is building up trust between all the actors of the educational process through cultivation of understanding and feedback.⁵⁴ However, very little was done to secure parents' trust in the effectiveness and integrity of such a course, remaining skeptical about the declared principle of secular neutrality and state's capacity to tackle highly sensitive topics, which is a commonly shared concern in several OECD countries.⁵⁵ As one experienced teacher noted: "*Reactions from parents regarding this educational initiative were mixed; while some appreciated the school's efforts, others viewed the involvement in personal faith matters as interference.*"⁵⁶ What strikingly undermines the reform is the teachers' skepticism: as per our survey, educators' perception regarding the necessity of the FRS course in the schools remains mixed. On a range of answers from "definitely necessary" to "not at all necessary", the responses spread evenly on both wings (20% strongly pro and 10% strongly contra), with a half of respondents claiming an overall optimistic yet skeptical view. The survey, however, took place retrospectively, shortly after the removal of the subject from the curriculum.⁵⁷

Reliance on administrative will with a considerable support from spiritual and social institutions did cover the main practical challenge. The course had to be implemented within an hour per week (34 hours per academic year), in circumstances where conceptual framework or clear guidelines were yet to be forged. This heavily undermined the effectiveness of the studying process.⁵⁸ Moreover, the influx of cadres was overestimated: lack of classes curtailed opportunities to newly trained specialists to secure full-time jobs, harshly discouraging new attendees of training programs to enter the jobs. The state replied by doubling down on administrative approach by throwing money in the hole. This increased the number of full scholarships for the Religious Studies' teachers from 65 in 2012 to 82 in 2016, with little effect.⁵⁹ Lacking fresh blood further undermined the manpower's shortage, where very few trainees became actually qualified pros.⁶⁰ Cadre crisis made school administrations double down on mobilizing teachers from the adjacent subjects (historians mostly), due to which the course usually became an irrelevant, low-priority burden.⁶¹ Due to remoteness from the university centers, southern and central regions faced even harsher cadre crisis.⁶² Teachers still lacked instructions in pedagogy and organization of creating a required environment of tolerance and dialogue within class.

⁵³Yerpay et al., "Religious Education," 113.

⁵⁴OSCE, *Toledo Guiding Principles*, 25.

⁵⁵Thomas D. Snyder, and Charlene M. Hoffman, *Digest of Education Statistics, 2001*, Report no. NCES 2002-130 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2002), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002130.pdf>.

⁵⁶Authors' survey (n = 675), teacher A.

⁵⁷Authors' survey (n = 675).

⁵⁸Tungatova et al., "Integrating 'Secularism'," 6.

⁵⁹Seidumanova, *Vnedrenie religiovedeniia*, 14.

⁶⁰Ilyas Yerpay and Zikiriya Jandarbek, "A Problem of Religion Study Teaching in an Independent Kazakhstan," *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 141 (2014): 352–356, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.05.062>.

⁶¹Zengin and Badagulova, "Religion and Religious Education," 57-58; Daniyar Sabitov, "Religiia i shkola [Religion and school]," *Tsentri Azii* 88, no. 6 (January 21, 2014), <https://www.asiakz.com/religiya-i-shkola>.

⁶²Yerpay et al., "Religious Education," 112.

Teachers are left by themselves to solve the issues appearing in the classroom based on divisive course contents. Training programs lack the exchange opportunities to provide teachers with broader multicultural experiences. The work in this dimension should be aimed at preparing teachers for a multireligious class environment without privileging chosen denominations, and broadening a variety of cultural perspectives via comparative analysis. This would serve an implementation of the competence-based approach in teaching.⁶³

In 2021, a new course *Civic Education and Fundamentals of Religious Studies*, shortly known as *Global Perspectives*, was introduced; unlike SFRS, its span prolonged throughout the secondary school curriculum.⁶⁴ As expected, the new course quickly became contested too: skeptics (30% of respondents according to our survey) questioned its necessity due to crossing other courses' domains – not only SFRS but other Humanities and Social Sciences classes as well. Its demands for teachers were viewed as excessive. These concerns were supported by the expert evaluations, which highlighted the formalized attitude to the reforms, combined with the recurring issues of methodological weaknesses and unpreparedness of teachers.⁶⁵

What is remarkable is that responses demonstrate division based on specialization: teachers of Social Sciences tended to support it more, because it was a useful curricular addition to their scant class load. It shows that educators' perspectives heavily rely on their benefits: what is a burden for overloaded teachers appears as a blessing for the underemployed ones, marking another discrepancy in the curricular policy. Another relative division is found in the age/experience of the respondents: while junior teachers tend to be more enthusiastic about reforms, old-timers question the relevance of the novelty as another glimpse of the reformist zeal. Optimists (half of respondents) believe that the course has great potential in widening the knowledge of the world, improving critical thinking and open-minded worldview of students.⁶⁶ As usual with sociological data in the state-affiliated social strata, the answers have to be dealt with a pinch of salt: even anonymity of surveys does not guarantee full disclosure and overcoming the affirmative habits.

Administrative approach continues to dominate. Government insists on centralization and the “revolution from above” model, which fairly gave some of the fruits. Religious Studies, framed in secular terms and historical-cultural descriptive style of teaching religion, ensured neutrality and complied its status with the legislative frameworks. Students at least were provided with basic knowledge of diverse religious systems and mechanisms of how the religion works within a society.

⁶³Nieto, “Solidarity, Courage and Heart,” 458.

⁶⁴Ministry of Enlightenment of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Prikaz Ministra prosveshcheniia Respubliki Kazakhstan ot 16 sentiabria 2022 goda № 399 ‘Ob utverzhdenii tipovykh uchebnykh programm po obshcheobrazovatel’nym predmetam i kursam po vyboru urovnei nachal’nogo, osnovnogo srednego i obshchego srednego obrazovaniia’ [Order of the Minister of Enlightenment of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 399 of September 16, 2022 ‘On Approval of Model Curricula for General Education Subjects and Elective Courses at the Elementary, Basic, and General Secondary Education Levels’],” September 16, 2022, *Information and Legal System of Normative Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/V2200029767>.

⁶⁵L. Karatayeva, “Draivery nasil’stvennogo ekstremizma i problemy protivodeistviia вовлечениiu grazhdan v ekstremistskie i terroristeskie seti [Drivers of Violent Extremism and Challenges in Countering the Recruitment of Citizens into Extremist and Terrorist Networks],” in *Profilaktika ekstremizma. Uspekhi i trudnosti: materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii* [Prevention of Extremism: Achievements and Challenges: Proceedings of the International Scientific and Practical Conference], ed. Z. K. Shaukenova (Nur-Sultan: Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019), 14–28; Zengin and Badagulova, “Religion and Religious Education”; Tungatarov and Zholdybalin, “From Valikhanov to Tokayev.”

⁶⁶Authors’ survey (n = 675).

However, neglect of inclusive curricular development sabotaged the state's intent to turn towards a relational governance model. Diversity without inclusion proved to increase bias, curtailing minor or "non-traditional" denominations to be represented, as per administrative inertia of religious legislation, and undermined principle of participation, marking departure from the Toledo Principles.⁶⁷

6. Conclusion

The Republic of Kazakhstan is a secular state with a predominantly religious population that has lived through a period of turmoil coinciding with a rapid growth of spiritual awakening. Applying an administrative approach, the state took an initiative of building a religiously tolerant and knowledgeable society, focusing on educating the youth as a key demographic of risk. To achieve this purpose, the government tried to follow internationally recognized rules, best formulated in Toledo Principles. Additionally, the government also gradually implemented principles of participation, representation, and market in creating curriculum for the new courses on Religious Studies. The curriculum aimed to provide students with nuanced and culturally diverse knowledge of religion, within the strict framework of a secular state. The state's administrative approach, inherited from the totalitarian past, attempted to engage with diverse actors in order to legitimize the secular discourse of religion and promote the courses in society.

Kazakhstan did not fully release the relational governance just yet, caught between the intents and capacities. Curriculum on Religious Education is an object of mistrust due to insufficient peer reviews and public discussions, while textbooks did not have societal feedback. Lack of cadres, their lacking expertise, and specific pedagogical skills add to the risks of a very sensitive topic. The state aims to provide schools with a preventive tool against growing extremism but neglects the very nature of extremism as an individualized phenomenon. The relational governance model shows that secular states can successfully engage with religion in public spaces, such as a secondary school, aiming to enhance civil society and citizenship. In theory and in practice, it has to deal with a myriad of issues, not necessarily limited to material resources.

This case shows how the secular state tries to balance between administrative legislation and communal participation, drawing a bizarre picture of simultaneous cases of engagement and marginalization. Future research in this field could benefit from comparing various secular countries' practices in combining hierarchical administration of religion, law, and education with the participation of a broader community of experts, communal leaders, and informal networks.

6.1. Limitations and Implications

This study was based on the survey of educators comprising two years after the termination of the SFRS course from the school curriculum, and was limited to major urban centers. Furthermore, the study was mostly historical, for which the methods of quantitative analysis from MAXQDA 2022 or the surveys hardly apply. This complicated topic was, however, presented through a mixed framework of interdisciplinary study on the intersection of Social Sciences and Humanities; engaging with many. Thus, it did not guarantee satisfactory answers within the standardized framework of any of them. Perspectives and opinions were limited to experts and teachers but overlooked the experiences of the students.

Author Contribution

Arstan Satanov: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, validation, writing – original draft. **Assel Myrzakhmetova:** data curation, investigation, project administration, funding acquisition, supervision. **Igor D. Khlebnikov:** data curation, formal analysis, investigation. **Yevgeniya**

⁶⁷OSCE, *Toledo Guiding Principles*, 39, 51, 61.

Matorina: data curation, investigation. **Farida Kadirova:** investigation, writing- review & editing

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest regarding the subject matter or material discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The corresponding author, upon request, will provide the data associated with this study.

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