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E-gov and Changing Policy Approach on the New Media: Kazakhstan's Policy on Islamic Content on the Internet

This article analyses the changing policy content in dealing with religious topics in the cyberspace using an example of Kazakhstan. First, it looks at the current trends in the new media and changing nature of the Internet services and discourses, focusing on the religious content. Second, it assesses the policy responses of the government and official Muslim establishment in Kazakhstan as they have lately begun developing their very own digital activities by creating websites such as <http://www.din.gov.kz/>, www.azan.kz, www.e-islam.kz and some others. Third, it summarizes the finding of the research and discusses some policy implications.

Key words: e-governance, public policy, Islamic content on the internet, new media.

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Е-gov және Жаңа медиаға саяси тәсілдердің өзгеруі: Интернеттегі исламдық мазмұнға Қазақстан саясаты

Мақалада Қазақстан мысалында киберкеңістіктегі діни тақырыптарға қатысты саясат мазмұнының өзгеруі талданады. Біріншіден, мақалада діни мазмұнды негізге ала отырып, жаңа бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарының ағымдағы үрдістері мен интернет-қызмет көрсету және дискурстардың өзгермелі сипаты қарастырылады. Екіншіден мақалада Қазақстандағы үкімет пен ресми мұсылмандық қауымдастығының стратегиялық шараларына баға беріледі. Соңғы кездері <http://www.din.gov.kz/>, www.azan.kz, www.e-islam.kz секілді дербес веб-сайттар ашылды. Үшіншіден, мақалада зерттеу нәтижелері қорытындыланып, кейбір саяси салдарлары талқыланады.

Түйін сөздер: электронды үкімет, мемлекеттік саясат, Интернеттегі Исламға қатысты мазмұн, жаңа бұқаралық ақпарат құралдары.

Абазов Р., Александрова И.
E-gov и изменение политического подхода к новым Медиа: политика Казахстана по исламскому контенту в Интернете

В статье анализируется меняющееся содержание политики в отношениях с религиозными темами в киберпространстве на примере Казахстана. Во-первых, статья рассматривает текущие тенденции в новых средствах массовой информации и меняющийся характер интернет-услуг и дискурсов, сосредоточив внимание на религиозном содержании. Во-вторых, статья оценивает стратегические меры правительства и официального мусульманского духовенства в Казахстане, то, как они в последнее время начали разрабатывать свою собственную деятельность путем создания веб-сайтов, таких как <http://www.din.gov.kz/>, www.azan.kz, www.e-islam.kz и некоторые другие. В-третьих, статья суммируется вывод исследования и обсуждаются некоторые политические последствия.

Ключевые слова: электронное правительство, государственная политика, исламское содержание в Интернете, новые средства массовой информации.

**E-GOV AND CHANGING
POLICY APPROACH
ON THE NEW MEDIA:
KAZAKHSTAN'S POLICY
ON ISLAMIC CONTENT
ON THE INTERNET****The Internet as a New Frontier**

A recent study *iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era* (Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos, 2012) suggests that changes in the traditional and new media environment would impact on the dynamics of domestic politics in many countries from around the world and these changes in the media environment would affect on how effectively «netroot» activism would organize competing political constituencies to achieve desirable public policy outcomes. In this context the governments reinvent itself as e-governments and citizens increasingly organize themselves as «e-netizens» [1]. One of the important constituencies in *iPolitics* is Muslim communities in different countries both in the West and in the East.

Muslim communities in Kazakhstan, like elsewhere in the Muslim world, have been quite active in exploring various religious issues in everyday life especially in the context of the latest waves of religious confrontation and radicalization in the Middle East. The battles between radical and liberal-minded Muslim groups in Egypt, Syria and Turkey have been at some distance and do not necessarily reflect religious discourse in Kazakh society. Yet, many members of the society of Kazakhstan have wanted to explore their own identities – different from those of the Middle East – and to uncover their own authoritative and adequate sources of religious interpretation of everyday life and issues.

There was a time when Muslim communities in Kazakhstan – as in many other countries in the Muslim world – viewed any religious content and discourses on the Internet with great suspicion, as this platform was paradoxically often dominated by radical conservative groups and views, rather than by modern mainstream religious intelligentsia. Hardliners who were denied access to the mainstream mass media, had already embraced the Internet as an unrestricted and almost unlimited channel for communicating their ideas since the late 1990s (Bunt, 2003). However, during the last decade the situation has radically changed and more mainstream groups and the religious establishment itself have embraced the Internet.

And there are many reasons for ordinary people in Kazakhstan, like believers in other parts of Central and South Asia, to turn to the

Internet in search of information. For example, these days Muslims get most of their updated information about everyday issues such as the time for daily prayers, Ramadan dates (fasting), and consultations on dietary issues during and beyond the Ramadan month. In addition, as the traditional conservative model of family has rapidly changed under the pressure of globalization and the changing social landscape, many young people have turned to the Internet in search for consultations on family and private relations issues such as sex before marriage, and lately to access various «Muslim-regulation compliant» dating websites (e.g., <http://nikah1.ru/>). Importantly many people – both young and old – turn to the Internet for consultations and alternative views on social and political issues, searching for political mainstream ideas against extreme radical thoughts that are very often popularized both on the Internet and in some mosques and religious gatherings. So-called «Fatwa shopping» (search for authoritative religious opinion) and «Imam shopping» [2] (search for appropriate theological opinions) is just emerging, but is also growing (Schanzer and Miller, 2012).

The growth of Islamic content and Islamic discourse and consultations has been boosted in Kazakhstan like in many other countries in Central and South Asia by two factors. First, during the last decade Kazakhstan has experienced one of the highest rates of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) growth in the region and the growth of information content in the Internet universe. The establishment of high quality and high speed Internet fiber optic lines and mobile Internet in 3G format significantly widened access to the Internet not only on the traditional PC but also on all kinds of mobile platforms and devices (Abazov, Alim, 2011) [3].

Today, the Internet in Kazakhstan – like in neighboring Central Asian republics and Xingjian Autonomous province of the PRC (which hosts a significant Kazakh community) – can supply discussions and religious opinions on practically any issue. Yet, until recently most of the content came from countries other than Kazakhstan. On the demand side, however, language has represented a significant barrier and amplifier for accessing information and discussing Internet content. For example, authoritative sources in Arabic are accessible to every person in the country almost without restriction, however only the religious establishment and Islamic scholars can easily read and understand materials in that language. There is a wealth of materials available in the Turkish language – one of the closest languages in the Turkic language group – which most Kazakhs can understand. Yet, the Turkish religious terminol-

ogy and literary language is sufficiently different enough (and comes in a different script: Latin for Turkish, while Kazakh is in Cyrillic) to limit the audience in Kazakhstan to those segments of educated professionals who are fluent in Turkish. Many people in the country understand the Russian language, and Muslim communities in the Russian Federation have been very active in creating a large number of websites and Internet services in Russian. Yet, most Kazakh netizens outside of the major metropolitan areas of Almaty and Astana prefer to use the Kazakh language to access information and services online.

Kazakhstan's Policy Response to Growing Islamic Content on the Internet

The growth of demand for indigenous religious content, growth of religious mainstream activism among young professionals, and support from the state and state institutions have led to the emergence of indigenous Kazakh religious content on the Internet, which has intensified since 2010 and 2011. As of February 2014 there were between 100 and 200 websites that are more or less regularly maintained and actively supported by various Kazakh groups, and that provide religious information, services and various forms of consultation. These sites are kept updated and attract traffic among followers.

The content providers can be divided into the three major groups. One group represents the government agencies and government-endorsed entities dealing with religious issues (e.g., www.din.gov.kz) [4]. The second division represents various religious establishment groups who are keen to promote social networking and discourse among like-minded communities and to serve as a platform for bringing together individuals and groups formed usually around mosques and religious educational institutions (e.g., www.azan.kz formerly www.meshit.kz). The third major group represents NGOs and some individual activists who would like to share information and increase awareness among fellow netizens on various religious issues (e.g., www.e-islam.kz) [5].

The website www.din.gov.kz of the Agency for Religious Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Қазақстан республикасы дін істері агенттігінің ресми – **in Kazakh**), which is the main Islamic authority in the country, is an illustrative example of an attempt by the main religious government institution in the country to establish its own presence within the global digital universe and reach out to a younger generation of believers in the country. It provides extensive information about the agency's

activities and outreach programs and lately has been discussing various religious topics.

The www.azan.kz is the website of the Central Mosque of Almaty, [6] and is tailored for the Muslim community of Kazakhstan's largest multi-ethnic city, financial center and transportation hub. It is a multi-level platform and one-stop information portal which covers all major aspects of religious life and lately has even been publishing fatwas (religious opinion on various issues). It is very dynamic, professionally maintained and updated, and has been ranked first in attracting traffic among religious websites in the country for three years in a row (see Figure 1). Very close behind is www.muftiyat.kz which represents the spiritual administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan. This site is also an online popular platform, ranking second among the 36 main religious websites in 2011 and 2012 though it was in third place in 2013 (see Figure 1).

The site www.e-islam.kz is a newcomer in the Kazakhstan Internet universe having been created in fall 2013. It was established with the support of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, Agency for Religious Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Central Communication. It is specifically oriented towards youth, educating them on various religious issues and providing consultations on the most pressing topics. It is built as a simple and slim communicative platform that provides space for questions and answers on a wide variety of religious issues, has a discussion page, electronic library and multimedia page, a section for comments from readers, etc.

The most popular topics on these portals usually cover a range of social, family and theological issues. Issues frequently discussed included those related to family matters such as marriage, divorce, polygamy, dating and relations between men and women before marriage, women and gender in Islam, and other related topics. In addition, people often ask about and discuss themes related to religious dietary restrictions, dress code and fasting during and outside Ramadan (month of fasting in the Islamic calendar). Quite regularly these webpages organize or report from various discussion meetings and roundtables on Islamic radicalism, radicalization of some segments of youth, and ways of dealing with the «spread of radical extremism» [7].

E-gov and Changing Policy Approach on the New Media: The Trends in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's policy-makers have begun changing their policy approaches to the Internet in general, [8] and to the religious content on the

New Media in response to the dynamics of the development of e-resources and Internet content on Islamic issues established by the Muslim communities in Kazakhstan. The policy-officials have begun understanding that after a slow start and some missteps the Muslim e-community is here to stay and will continue to grow.

These changes were evident in policy discourses on public responses in inner policy circles and in various think tank studies on the issue. The initial rejection of dealing with the Internet and New Media and suggestions for outright closure or blocking such websites was replaced by more nuanced approach of working on creating very own e-content (personal interviews with experts and government officials in Kazakhstan, 2014). Indeed, an increasing number of Kazakh citizens, especially young people, are embracing the Internet as a source of information, social networking and discussions on a variety of important issues. Empirical observations and studies of these websites and blogs suggest that all segments of Kazakh society are embracing these platforms for communicating ideas. Interviews and empirical studies also suggest that mainstream Muslim groups have significantly increased their presence in the digital universe and have replaced radical and extremist content in the digital universe with Kazakh Internet content.

An unexpected conclusion (which needs some additional and detailed empirical exploration) suggests that contrary to the expectations of local researchers and experts, the Muslim community in Kazakhstan are very active on the Internet and increasingly ready to use various e-platforms, including emerging applications for smartphones, for communication purposes and for with other communities and various institutions of the state and civil society in the country.

Notes

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1. For detailed review see Abazov, Rafis, and Gulsara Zhunusbekova (2013). *iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era*, by Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, December, 90: 820-822,

2. The trend emerged in some Western countries and in the Middle East, reflecting a search for religious allies and likeminded communities of believers.

3. For review of the Kazakhstan's government policy initiatives in the e-content see: Abazov, Rafis, and Elmira Alim. (2012). Observing the Global Financial Crisis from the Developing World: The Case of Kazakhstan. *Asian Politics and Policy*, 4. 276-278.

4. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan is a secular state where religion is separated from the state. The state deals with religious issues through the Agency for Religious Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan (<http://www.din.gov.kz/eng/index.php>).

5. There have been many attempts to establish websites with radical Islamic content; however

these efforts have been blocked by the Kazakh government.

6. According to the official statistics provided by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, there were 2,228 officially registered mosques in the country as of January 2013.

7. Retrieved from <http://e-islam.kz/ru/contents/view/1660> (accessed on March 15, 2014).

8. For review of the Kazakhstan's government policy on e-content see: Abazov, Rafis, and Elmira Alim. (2012). Observing the Global Financial Crisis from the Developing World: The Case of Kazakhstan. *Asian Politics and Policy*, 4. 276-278.

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6 Schanzer, Jonathan, and Steven Miller. *Facebook Fatwa: Saudi Clerics, Wahhabi Islam and Social Media*. – Washington, DC: Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2012.