

ISLAM IN KAZAKHSTAN UNDER THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC CONDITIONS: “TESTING” WITH MEDIATIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the study of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the functioning of Islamic institutions in Kazakhstan. The COVID-19 gave a new impetus to the mediatization process of Islam in Kazakhstan, resulting in the transfer of most of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK) and its subdivisions' activities to the Internet and media space, excluding religious rituals. The authors argue that the use of new media technology had a substantial impact on the activities of official Islamic structures in Kazakhstan, becoming a “test” of mediatization, based on the concepts of “mediatisation” of religion by S. Hjarvard and ‘network religion’ by H. Campbell.

The authors identified the discourses produced by the SAMK under quarantine and broadcast on its media platforms and messengers based on a content analysis of the Muftiat's website and social media pages. This content demonstrated the intertextuality of state official discourse and the SAMK's discourses, legitimizing government decisions by appealing to Islamic values. Support for state-imposed emergency and quarantine restrictions, Islam as a religion of purity, call for Muslim unity, and the importance of charity were among the dominating discourses. Interviews with the mosque's imams and ministers made it possible to hear the voices of Muslim clergy who interacted with the local population (the benefits and drawbacks of new forms of work from their perspective were revealed), as well as show how they passed the ‘test’ of mediatization.

In a decentralized and competitive media space one of the consequences of mediatization was shift of religious authority from traditional Islamic structures to new influential religious actors, including both promoting SAMK discourses and expressing alternative positions based on their reading of Islam. The pluralization of religious authority in the discussion of the media shaped by the issues of Muslims in the context of the pandemic had caused a conflict of interpretations. Generally, the ‘test’ of mediatization resulted in strengthening the SAMK's activities to adapt media technology, in the production of new initiatives, such as the electronic muftiat.

Key words: Islam, Coronavirus Pandemic, Mediatization, “Network Religion”, Religious Actors, Shift in Religious Authority.

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Коронавирус сын-қатер алдындағы қазақстандағы ислам: медиатизациямен «сынау»

Аңдатпа. Мақала Қазақстандағы ислам институттарына коронавирустық пандемияның әсерін зерттеуіне арналған. Діни рәсімдерді қоспағанда, Қазақстан мұсылмандары діни басқармасы (ҚМДБ) мен оның бөлімшелерінің жұмысының басым бөлігінің интернет пен БАҚ-қа көшуіне ықпал тигізген COVID-19 қазақстандық контекстіндегі исламды медиациялау үдерісіне түрткі болған. С. Хьярвардтың (Hjarvard) дінді «медиатизациялау» және Х. Кэмпбеллдің «желілік діні» концепцияларына сүйене отырып, авторлар Қазақстандағы ресми ислам құрылымдарының қызметіне жаңа ақпараттық технологиялардың қолдануы айтарлықтай әсер етіп, медиатизация «сынағына» айналғанын дәлелдейді.

Мүфтият сайтының және оның әлеуметтік желілеріндегі парақшаларының контентталдау негізінде ҚМДБ-ның карантиндік жағдайда жасаған және оның медиа-платформалары мен мессенджерлерінде таралған баяндамалары анықталды. Аталған контент мемлекеттік институттардың ресми дискурсы мен ислам құндылықтарына үндеу арқылы үкімет шешімдерін заңдастыратын ҚМДБ дискурстары арасындағы интермәтінділігін ашды. Басым дискурстар арасында төтенше жағдай мен карантиндік шектеулерді енгізу бойынша мемлекеттік шараларды қолдау, ислам тазалық діні ретінде, мұсылмандарды бірлікке шақыру, қайырымдылықтың маңыздылығы туралы дискурстар ерекшеленеді. Мешіт имамдары мен қызметшілерімен жүргізілген сұхбат жергілікті халықпен жұмыс істейтін мұсылман дін қызметкерлерінің үнін естуге (олардың көзқарастары бойынша жұмыстың жаңа түрлерінің артықшылықтары мен кемшіліктері), сонымен қатар медиатизация «сынағынан» қалай өткенін көрсетуге мүмкіндік берді.

Медиатизацияның діни беделдің дәстүрлі ислам құрылымдарынан орталықсыздандырылған және бәсекелі медиакеңістіктегі жаңа ықпалды діни акторларға ауысуы сияқты салдарларына ерекше назар аударылды, олардың арасында ҚМДБ дискурстарын ілгерілететін, сондай-ақ исламды өз оқуы негізінде баламалы ұстанымдар білдіретін позициясы да бар. Індет кезіндегі мұсылмандардың сұрақтары бойынша қалыптасқан медиа күн тәртібін талқылау аясындағы діни беделінің плюрализациясы түсіндірушілік қайшылығын тудырды. Жалпы айтқанда, медиатизациялық «сынақ» ҚМДБ-ның жаңа ақпараттық технологияларды бейімдеу, электронды муфтият сияқты жаңа бастамашылық қызметін күшейтті.

Түйін сөздер: ислам, коронавирус індеті, медиатизация, «желілік дін», діни акторлар, діни беделінің жылжуы.

Ислам в Казахстане перед вызовом коронавируса: «испытание» медиатизацией

Аннотация. Статья посвящена изучению влияния пандемии коронавируса на функционирование институтов ислама в Казахстане. COVID-19 придал новый импульс процессу медиатизации ислама в казахстанском контексте, что выразилось в переносе большинства сфер работы Духовного управления мусульман Казахстана (ДУМК) и его подразделений в Интернет- и медиапространство, исключая религиозные ритуалы. Основываясь на концепциях «медиатизации» религии С. Хьярварда (Hjarvard) и «сетевой религии» Х. Кэмпбелл (Campbell), авторы аргументируют, что использование новых информационных технологий оказало значительное влияние на деятельность официальных исламских структур в Казахстане, став «испытанием» медиатизацией.

На основе контент-анализа сайта муфтията, его страниц в социальных сетях, были выделены дискурсы, продуцируемые ДУМК в ситуации карантина и транслируемые на его медиаплатформах и мессенджерах. Указанный контент обнаруживает интертекстуальность официального дискурса государственных институтов и дискурсов ДУМК, легитимизирующих решения правительства апелляцией к ценностям ислама. Среди доминирующих дискурсов: поддержка государственных мер по введению чрезвычайного положения и карантинных ограничений, ислам как религия чистоты, призыв к единству мусульман, важность глобальной авторитетности. Интервью с имамами и служителями мечети позволили услышать голоса мусульманского духовенства, работающего с населением на местах (были выявлены достоинства и недостатки новых форм работы с их точки зрения), а также показать, как они прошли «испытание» медиатизацией.

В децентрализованном и конкурентном медиапространстве одним из последствий медиатизации стал сдвиг религиозного авторитета от традиционных исламских структур к новым влиятельным религиозным акторам, среди которых как продвигающие дискурсы ДУМК, так и высказывающие альтернативные позиции на основе своего прочтения ислама. Плюрализация религиозного авторитета в рамках обсуждения медиаповестки, сформированной вопросами мусульман в условиях пандемии, вызвала конфликт интерпретаций. В целом, «ис-

пытание» медиатизацией результировалось в усилении деятельности ДУМК по адаптации новых информационных технологий, в продуцировании новых инициатив, таких как электронный муфтият, выдвижении новых требований к компетенциям имамов.

Ключевые слова: ислам, пандемия коронавируса, медиатизация, «сетевая религия», религиозные акторы, сдвиг религиозного авторитета.

Introduction

Contemporaries will remember 2020 as the year of severe, sometimes unparalleled limitations imposed in response to the WHO-declared coronavirus pandemic that swept the globe. Prohibitions and restrictions affected all aspects of people's lives, including religious ones. Quarantine is still in place in many parts of the world, though with different degrees of relief. Kazakhstan also has quarantine restrictions, but the strictest period lasted from March 16 to May 11, 2020, when the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan K.-J. Tokayev declared a state of emergency (SE) by his decree. All religious structures in Kazakhstan, as well as shopping centres, cafes, non-food stores, parks, and squares were closed, and all public gatherings, including divine services and sermons, were prohibited.

Muslims constitute about 70% of Kazakhstan's population, with the majority adhering to the Hanafi madhhab, but the palette of Muslim movements is more diverse. As of January 1, 2017, Kazakhstan had 2,550 mosques registered, all of which are owned by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK) [1]. Muslims come to the mosque to perform religious rituals since the five-time namaz and group jumah-namaz at a mosque is fard for men or a mandatory ritual in Islam. Additionally, the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the fasting took course in emergency conditions, depriving Muslims of the opportunity to visit the mosque and jumah-namazes more frequently during this sacred time and to perform tarawih-namaz in the jamaat. The shutdown of mosques with conditions of emergency and quarantine influenced Kazakhstan's whole Muslim community, resulting in a variety of viewpoints, discourses, and narratives. Because a significant part of religious practices moved online, Muslim clergy had to learn new ways of communicating with the public, including new media

technology. That became somewhat the 'test' of mediatization.

According to a sociological survey conducted in Kazakhstan in the fall of 2019, that is, several months before the state of emergency and quarantine were declared, the SAMK imams mainly used traditional methods of working with parishioners. For example, in the field of countering religious extremism and terrorism, most of the work, namely individual explanatory meetings, lectures, and sermons, was carried out by the imams "face to face". Only 4% (2 out of 50 imams interviewed) indicated that they conducted information and communication work in the media space using new media technologies, such as recording videos, publishing information on websites, or working in social networks [2, p. 270-271].

The coronavirus pandemic accelerated the mediatization of the SAMK's activities, forcing it to mobilize all resources to fill the media with relevant content, improve the structure of existing media niches, and create new platforms that allowed it to broadcast its interpretations and discourses about the pandemic to the public at large. In general, a new situation had emerged for Kazakhstan's Muslims, which required further research.

The study's theoretical basis was J. Habermas' concept of the public sphere and H. Campbell's "network religion". The development of new media technologies has expanded the public sphere, which J. Habermas wrote about in his famous work [3, p. 301]. This sphere is a communicative space for expressing the views of various groups in society, discussing problems, identifying contradictions, and reaching consensus based on a communicative mind. In the public sphere, the voices of believers should be heard and listened to, about which J. Habermas also wrote, pointing to the onset of a post-secular society [4, p. 69]. In the age of the Internet, social networks, and mobile phones, various religious actors – from institutional religions to ordinary believers – use media platforms to express

their views, social interactions, create various communities, perform religious practices [5, p. 9-33], expanding the range of social communications through a variety of media platforms and actively participating in the public now online space. The functioning of religion in the Internet and media space was conceptualized in terms of 'mediatization of religion' by S. Hjarvard [6, p. 9-26] and "network religion" by H. Campbell [7, p. 64-93]. These researchers conclude that the use of modern new technologies by religious organizations is not just a change in the channel of communication and broadcast of religious sermons from print media to digital ones, but has an impact on religion, since new media have their own logic of functioning, a decentralized spatial structure that is poorly controllable, constantly expanding opportunities for discussion and creation of alternative views, the assertion of new foundations of religious authority, undermining the traditional sources of its legitimation in the form of the continuity of knowledge. As a result, religion acquires the features of a "network religion", which is characterized by five features: a network community, a constructed identity, a shift in religious authority, the convergence of religious practices, and multidimensional reality [7, p. 69].

Methodology

The authors used content analysis of websites in the Kazakh and Russian languages, as well as social networks in the Kazakh language, because the language of comments was mostly Kazakh, as the study approach. It was crucial to the authors to express imams' views on new methods of working with the population during the quarantine. A semi-structured method of interviews with imams and mosque servants was used for this purpose. The quarantine was still in effect, which made collecting materials more difficult. Two mosque servants were interviewed in the format of a personal meeting: the imam and the main website specialist of one of the mosques, who also supervised the female jamaat. The remaining three imams were interviewed in a WhatsApp telephone conversation format. For

investigative ethics and confidentiality, the names of the imams were changed in the article. The authors also used the results of a published sociological survey conducted by the 'Rukhani zhangyru' [Spiritual Revival], the Kazakhstan Institute of Public Development, from September 19 to October 2, 2019, on the topic of "The situation and problems in the Muslim Umma, as well as in the activities of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan", with 6,800 people polled.

Main part

"Traditional Islam" during the COVID-19 Pandemic: between Mediation and Mediatization

As S. Abashin noted, the establishment of the nation in the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia after the USSR collapse was accomplished, among other things, by the formation of relations of the state with Islam, which is the ethnic religion of the titular nation of the region [8, p. 150-168]. The renationalization of Islam in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, namely its exit from the individual to the public space, took place with the active participation of the state as an actor. The scientists K. Hann and M. Pelkmans defined this process as the promotion of the "nationalization of religion", which manifested itself in the framing of the national forms of Islam, being not only considered as part of the cultural heritage but mobilized to strengthen the legitimacy of state power [9, p. 1517-1541]. These scholars also called this process regarding Islam a "etatization of religion" [9, p. 1519], considering a significant degree of state regulation. The "nationalization" and "etatization" of Islam turned into the concept of "traditional Islam", which is promoted by the SAMK and supported by the state. According to researchers R. Bekkin, V. Bobrovnikov, S.Ragozina, L. Almazova, A. Akhunov, and others, the concept of "traditional Islam", widespread in the post-Soviet space, became a significant tool of state control and regulation of the diverse discursive field of Islamic schools [10, p. 284].

The SAMK has been involved by the

state in both preventative and rehabilitative activities against religious extremism. In recent years, there has been a consistent tendency of attracting imams to state bodies as mediators, talking to people to cease social unrest, and, on the whole, establish public communication [2, p. 273].

At present, the state is actively implementing the "Digital Kazakhstan" program on the Internet and social media, announcing tenders to promote 'traditional Islam' as a counter-attack on radical Islamic groups, and showing interest in religious information and digital products. In conditions of extensive interaction with the state and following the expectations of modern Muslims, the SAMK started creating websites in 2009, initiating its Facebook page in 2006 and an Instagram page in 2016, launching in this way the mediation process. In the media space, the SAMK is trying to create a network and cover the entire Kazakh Umma with a significant number of its official websites amounting to 22 today [11], with 18 having Instagram profiles. The average number of subscribers of all profiles as of June 22, 2020, is 33,022 people. We give the average number, as the general audience can include people subscribed to several pages. We have divided the websites and profiles into regional and 'central', managed directly from the capital Muftiat. These media platforms are intensely filled with content, and the central websites have a uniform and aesthetic design. At the same time, we should mark the incomplete regional representation – 15 regions out of 17, with 12 on Instagram, and not always regional centres. The western region is also represented incompletely – only Aktobe and Atyrau, although this region is known for its radical religious moods among the population.

The SAMK's "multidimensional reality" covers numerous directions, which should make finding information easier, but, in fact, it only complicates the search. Some websites or Instagram profiles, for example, are dedicated to the Sunnah, halal products, fatwas, the muftiat itself, zakat, etc. Anyone interested in at least one of the topics gets caught up in the control network of all profiles. Despite its presence, audience engagement averaged

1-1.1%¹ as of 22.06.2020. To some extent, this suggests that posts have not yet found a significant response and have not created a dynamic discursive field.

During the coronavirus pandemic, there was no proactive response from the SAMK: it did not form agenda in the media and the Umma public space but responded to it. The SAMK posted the first entry on its Instagram feed about the quarantine on March 7, 2020 [12]. It belonged to the "question-answer" content category, and, accordingly, contained an answer to the rumours spread among Kazakhstanis about the healing power of an eyelash from the Qur'an (information was sent in the WhatsApp messenger that the Prophet Muhammad, foreseeing the coronavirus, said that Muslims would be saved if they made a decoction from an eyelash found in the Qur'an and drank it).

The activation of the SAMK and its structures in the media space occurred after the country's President declared a state of emergency when it was necessary to carry out the function of an online mediator, explaining to the population the unpopular decision of the state to close mosques and the need to observe quarantine, which restricted freedom of movement, communications, and Islamic gatherings. The SAMK's media function determined the intertextuality between the official state and Islamic discourses, which can be traced in the media space.

The muftiat website (muftyat.kz) is an online institutional representation of "traditional Islam". On March 16, 2020, the SAMK's Ulema Council issued a "Fatwa regarding the Friday prayer and five-time prayer during the declaration of a state of emergency", stating that in the conditions of the declared emergency, five-time prayers (namazes) and collective Friday prayer (Jumah namaz – in Kazakh) in the mosque would not be temporarily performed, but believers had to do that at home, that dining rooms for funeral dinners at mosques were also closed, and that the funeral prayer had to be performed

¹ The sum of likes and comments of the last 18 posts is divided by the number of posts, and the resulting number is divided by the number of followers in the account. Trendhero.io is the service algorithm for checking accounts on Instagram.

only in the presence of close relatives [13]. In his speech on March 17, 2020, the SAMK's Supreme Mufti Nauryzbay-kazhy Taganuly addressed Muslims, explaining the coronavirus pandemic from the point of view of Islam as a test sent by Allah, during which one must turn to prayer and exercise patience (*sabr*) [14]. In conclusion, he quoted a verse from sura Baqara: 'O ye who believe! Seek help with patient perseverance and the prayer: for God is with those who patiently persevere. (Qur'an 2:153) [15].

On March 20, 2020, the Supreme Mufti delivered a Friday prayer on HIKMET TV, a religious and educational YouTube channel, dedicated to Islam as the religion of purity. This speech conveyed the dominant discourses, which evolved during the subsequent quarantine months and were broadcast in almost all materials posted on the SAMK's websites and profiles.

The first discourse was support and explanation from an Islamic point of view of state measures to introduce a state of emergency and the quarantine, a call to obey.

The second discourse and its variations were built around the thesis that Islam, as a religion of purity, contains tools to protect Muslims from the given dangerous disease. Unveiling the dominant theme of the sermon, the Supreme Mufti argued that Islam as a religion prescribes five types of purity: purity of body, clothing, food, home, and soul. Purifying of the soul is achieved through forgiveness, prayer, patience, good deeds, and charity. By adhering to these types of cleanliness, Muslims will stand the test of the coronavirus. At the same time, Islam is a broad religion open to advances in medicine if they correlate with Sharia law. In his addresses, interviews and speeches, the Supreme Mufti constantly notes the merits of the country's doctors in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. Subsequently, this discourse developed on the muftiat's official website in the imams' articles: "The Prophet's Medicine: ways to protect against the virus" (02.04.2020) by the chief imam of Almaty; "Medicine is for the body treatment, Sharia is for the soul treatment" (16.06.2020) by Nauryz Ubaev, naib-imam of the Central Mosque of Uralsk.

The third discourse became a call against unrest and division in the face of common danger, as well as a call for Muslim unity in Kazakhstan and around the world. This discussion manifested itself through initiatives and actions. Simultaneous general prayers of imams with the reading of the Qur'an were held in the country without the presence of parishioners. On Friday, April 10, 2020, at namaz, the Supreme Mufti appealed to the Islamic world's religious leaders, as well as the entire Muslim umma, to pray for all people simultaneously under the motto 'We are together, we have a common goal for prayer'. This initiative was supported by Islamic leaders from various regions of the Russian Federation, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkey.

The fourth widespread discourse was about mutual aid and charity. Mosques, foundations, and volunteers affiliated with the SAMK actively participated in the republican "Biz birgemiz" [We are together] charity campaign, announced at the state level, delivering food packages to low-income families. Charitable actions were held in all cities of Kazakhstan, with reports published on the muftiat's website. In addition, the SAMK, on its own initiative, announced a week of charity "Jürek jyluy" [Warmth of the heart], which was also aimed at helping needy families, orphanages, and nursing homes.

As part of the religion networkization, a large-scale process of the SAMK activities' mediatization, some key aspects of the muftiat's activities, such as religious and educational public relations, were transferred to the online format. In particular, the mufti conducted weekly Friday online prayer (*namaz*) on the HIKMET TV YouTube channel; the SAMK departments' heads, the most educated imams and theologians, read sermons on the theology and history of Islam, as well as on its moral aspects. During Ramadan, the mufti announced the "30 days – 30 sermons action". As a rule, during this period, people have a lot of questions, so online questions-answers sessions were organized in the SAMK building and broadcast both on the HIKMET TV channel and on the muftiat's Instagram and Facebook pages. Moreover,

the forced digitalization made it possible to pay fitr-sadaqa through the Kaspi bank mobile application [16]. Around-the-clock call-centre was also organized to answer questions from the population in Kazakh and Russian. It was the initiative of the Supreme Mufti, who argued for the opening of this centre by referring to the idea of a 'hearing state' put forward by the President of Kazakhstan K.-J. Tokayev. Accordingly, the "hearing state" had to correspond to the "hearing muftiat", which had feedback with ordinary Muslims. The ongoing digital e-government project (e.gov server) should correspond to the launch of the e-muftiyat system initiated by the Supreme Mufti. Thus, "traditional Islam" in the online dimension today reproduces its characteristic features in offline reality.

The transition of Kazakhstani "traditional Islam" to the online space was not accompanied by the mediatization of the ritual under the quarantine. According to the muftiat's fatwa, believers had to perform all prayers at home, namely the five-time prayer, the midday prayer (zuhr namaz) instead of the Friday prayer (jumah namaz), and the evening prayer (tarawih namaz) during Ramadan. The online broadcast of the Friday prayer in Moscow's Central Mosque (Russian Federation) sparked debate and questions among ordinary Muslims in Kazakhstan, to whom a spokesperson of the SAMK's fatwa and sharia department responded by explaining why online namaz was ineligible under Islamic law [17].

We decided to find out the reaction of local imams and mosque workers, that is, those who interact with people directly, to the accelerated process of mediatization of the SAMK structures' activities, as well as to get to know what advantages and disadvantages they saw in the new online format. During the interview, we learned that the imams were unfamiliar with this format of communication, as they were used to traditional offline format sermons and live engagement with believers, but they adapted quickly. The work was carried out in several directions on WhatsApp: firstly, sermons were read and news about the muftiat's activities was shared through links in general groups. Secondly, there were

lessons on Tajweed (reading the Qur'an), which are in demand among Kazakh Muslims and are now offered at practically every mosque. Thirdly, consultations were held and answers were given to the questions of believers, and this was the largest layer of work. The imams replied that there was a long list of questions about what was allowed and what was not allowed during the fast. The second set of questions concerned the practice of namaz at home. Imam Erken commented on the situation with the young man who addressed him.

Everyone is used to standing behind the imam in the mosque and repeating after him. Now the young man started to pray alone, now he has to read himself, he needs to read certain prayers. He was confused, poor. Yes, indeed, the pandemic will be a lesson, people did not even know how to perform namaz. Now people have learned a few surahs, the most needed ones. And before, people did not pay attention, they stood behind the imam¹.

On the other hand, all the imams noted that it was still better to perform obligatory namazes in the mosque, together with the jamaat. Imam Amanjol commented:

The value of the word is manifested in the mosque, in the community, in close communication. People are energized. It's valuable when it's eye to eye².

The online format has proved its merits in educational courses, according to all of the imams and the website's female specialist, who was also an ustaz (teacher) for the female jamaat. A person could not always make it to the mosque for twice-weekly classes, and remote learning did not depend on his location, so he could no longer make excuses for skipping classes. However, the following drawbacks were also mentioned:

The disadvantages, for example, are that according to Sharia, the teacher and the learner must see each other, and this is better than from a distance. The learner sees the teacher, and more responsibility appears³.

¹ An interview with Imam Yerkin-kazhy dated 23.06.2020 (In Russian).

² An interview with Imam Amanjol dated 06.06.2020 (In Russian).

³ An interview with Imam Amanjol dated 06.06.2020 (In Russian).

The transition of religious and educational courses into an online format in Kazakhstan revealed some limitations associated with the specifics of religious texts study, when the interaction of a teacher and a learner is important, during which the teacher monitors correct pronunciation, understanding, and immediately corrects mistakes, and also contributes to the moral formation of the learner, acting as a spiritual mentor [18, p. 362-363].

In the course of an interview with the aforementioned female ustaz of the women's jamaat, the gender aspect of the pandemic was clearly highlighted, which requires separate research and reflection. Aisha, the respondent, noted that she received a lot of questions from women on WhatsApp. The questions ranged from halal food preparation to family relationships, which had become tense over the period of self-isolation. Aisha believed that, despite the advantages of online mode, such as translocalization and speed, a woman still needed warmth, personal communication, and support. Here are her words:

Women feed on emotions, they need support. A woman may not get that at home, but come to the mosque and talk. A person needs to be taken by the hands and said: "I am with you now". This is now lacking in the pandemic¹.

The words of the imams and the mosque's ustaz lead to the conclusion that online communication should not be seen as a substitute for traditional interpersonal communication and interaction, but rather as an addition to traditional forms of participation in religious service, at least at this stage. At the same time, the pandemic triggered the process of individualization among Islam followers, which is due to the very logic of the media space and self-isolation, since under the restrictions, believers who previously followed the paternalistic type of behaviour, now had to make their own choice, become religious seekers. The pandemic had actualized existentially significant intentions and

meanings of human existence, which serve as the ultimate foundation of religion [19, p. 624-635]. At the end of the interview, Imam Yerken, speaking about the lessons of the pandemic, illustrated well the above tendency, expressing it in a religious form:

Islam leaves a choice for a person so that people do not complain in the next world. Allah Almighty gave us the opportunity and time – if you use them improperly, you will answer yourself².

Another imam also outlined this tendency, noting that it depends on a person whether an illness becomes a test for him, drawing closer to Allah, or a punishment that moves him away from God. The pandemic had actualized existential meanings.

Thus, the coronavirus pandemic had significantly accelerated the launched process of the mediatization of traditional Islam in the online space and its movement towards a networked religion. As H. Campbell notes, for institutional religion, entering the media space, on the one hand, can strengthen its authority and expand its sphere of influence, which is what the SAMK is striving for. On the other hand, the inclusion of religion in social networks stimulates religious experiments and creates new dynamic opportunities for constructing religious identity, forms of expression of faith, and changes in religious practices. It challenges traditional sources of religious authority, which leads to new forms of religious authority and influence, the destruction of the existing hierarchy, and the emergence of religious intellectuals competing with representatives of official Islamic structures.

"The Doors of the Mosque were Closed, but ..." [20]: Pluralization of Knowledge and a Conflict of Interpretations in the Context of the Coronavirus Pandemic

The words of Nauryzbay-kazhy Taganuly, the SAMK's Supreme Mufti, saying that the doors of the mosque were closed during the pandemic, but the doors of charity and reward were open, became key in the SAMK's media positioning

¹ An interview with Aisha, the chief specialist of the mosque's website on 10.06.2020 (In Russian).

² An interview with Imam Yerkin on 06.06.2020.

during the pandemic in Kazakhstan. There was a temporary polarization around this thesis concerning the perception of the closure of mosques and the peculiarities of collective ritual practice.

As H. Campbell notes, the logic of the online space leads to a shift in religious authority from traditional structures to charismatic leaders who occupy influential positions and serve as a source of religious knowledge for believers [7, p. 74].

This trend can be clearly seen in the process of mediatization of so-called “traditional” Islam in Kazakhstan, and it was especially clearly manifested during the pandemic, which put key issues for Muslims on the agenda. We should note the activity of the SAMK’s imams, who already in January started talking about the coronavirus [21]. In addition, some imams called *ustazes* (teacher, mentor (kaz.)) were quite active on social networks.

Among them are Abdugappar Smanov (died on 01.07.2020 from coronavirus), Arman Kuanyshbaev, Ersin Amre, Kabylbek Alipbayuly, and others. Based on the number of their subscribers, we can assume that the audience is more interested in personalized broadcast of religious knowledge. The number of Instagram subscribers of only five imams (1,004,863) is 1.5 times more than the number of subscribers of all 18 SAMK profiles (627,436). Not all of them maintain their own pages – the profile’s initial page usually indicates that the page was opened with the permission of the ustaz. They occupy different hierarchical positions in the mosques of Kazakhstan. At the same time, it is obvious that they are influencers of the Kazakhstani umma, which corresponds to the peculiarities of online reality, when it is easier to build interaction with an individual than with an entire organization.

Table 1 – Popular SAMK’s imams on social media (26.06.2020)

No.	The imam	Subscribers	Hashtags ¹
1	Arman Kuanyshbaev	510,394	42,032
2	Kabylbek Alipbayuly	221,993	45,903
3	Yersin Amre	183,832	75,541
4	Abdugappar Smanov	81,524	68,398
5	Yerkinbek Shokay	7,120	33,420

In addition to these imams, among the frequently mentioned names on Kazakhstani pages with Islamic content, we can find another one – Israfil Begey ², who was previously involved in the SAMK’s activities. It is noteworthy that a significant part of the hashtags with his name (more than 11,000 as of June 22, 2020) does not

contain his ideas and sermons, however, the use of these hashtags demonstrates the desire to attract an audience interested in his sermons, which may indicate a certain demand for them.

Israfil Begey is notable for becoming the bearer of an alternative discourse during the pandemic that differed from the official SAMK’s position, although his sermons fit into the SAMK course³ before the pandemic. The closing of mosques was the turning point: “After facing pressure from the authorities, I decided to study this issue” [22].

Before analyzing the argumentation, let us take a closer look at the Instagram followers of the SAMK and Israfil Begey. We used Trendhero, an Instagram content

¹ Total value of hashtags with different spellings of the names of imams in Kazakh and Russian.

² Israfil Begey was an imam-trainee in the mosque of Zhanaozen, Mangistau region from November 2014 to January 2017. It is known from the open sources that he is not the imam of the SAMK mosque at the moment. I. Begey (Bagi) is a Kazakh repatriate from Iran. [Meşit imamy ekstremist pe? [Is the mosque’s imam an extremist?]] [https://qamshy.kz/article/23507-meshit-imamy-ekstremist-pevideo], 27.06.2020 (In Kazakh). It is unclear today whether he received Kazakh citizenship after appealing to the court on the issue of disagreement with the decision of the migration authorities about his expulsion from the country. [The repatriate proves in court that he is ‘not an extremist’] [https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-grazhdanstvo-israfil-bagi-oralman-iz-irana/28546161.html], 27.06.2020 (In Russian).

³ In 2017, the Muftiat issued a characteristic of I. Begey where, among other things, it indicates the Hanafi orientation of his preaching.

analysis service that tracks the page's activity and subscribers, to get statistics. The disposition of the main audience for both profiles is the same: the megacities of Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent. Considering that most of Begey's posts contain video content, it is quite expected that they are intended for a male audience. Accordingly, the male audience prevails in Begey's profile (65.4%), while in the SAMK's it is 50.5%. Comparison by the number of subscribers is impractical since it is incommensurable – 38.8 thousand for Begey and more than 221 thousand for the SAMK as of June 22, 2020. We proceeded from the need to measure the activity of subscribers and their 'reality'. The activity on Begey's page was twice as high as the

activity of the SAMK subscribers – 2.6% and 1.1%, respectively.

As mentioned above, the SAMK, like most religious organizations, supported quarantine measures, arguing its position with theological and fiqh postulates and frequent Qur'an and Sunnah quotations.

Begey preached similarly, referring to the hadiths and ayats of Islamic scholars. Under his posts, a heated debate unfolded over the closure of mosques. He stood in as an actor in an unofficial discourse, offering an alternative viewpoint on the closure of mosques that met the needs of some part of Muslims in Kazakhstan.

Begey's key argument is the providentialism of Islam, according to which "you can get sick even without

Table 2 – Arguments of the SAMK and Israfil Begey

The issue	The SAMK	Israfil Begey
The virus	is the test sent by Allah.	is the executor of the will of God.
The quarantine	is justified.	has no sense without faith in God.
The authorities	are doing the right thing.	are pressing.
A Muslim	must remember about good deeds and God's mercy even outside the walls of the mosque.	must experience the virus in other way, because he believes in Allah, unlike the unbelievers. He never stops the godly performance of religious rites.
A mosque	is temporarily closed, which complies with Sharia.	should be open. The closure of mosques contradicts Sharia. Only kafirs close cult buildings.
The Jumah-namaz (Friday namaz)	is allowed at home, as a family community.	is not allowed outside the walls of mosques. It is more and more demanded in difficult times.
The state and society	must be united, the people must be in agreement.	must not follow the example of the kafir countries, must build their own complex of events in accordance with Islamic principles.
The imams	are an indispensable condition for Friday namazes which are unavailable online.	Talking about the necessity and value of prayer in the mosque Israfil Begey does not mention the imams.
The salvation	is possible when observing quarantine measures with faith in God.	is possible by strengthening prayers with the Divine Providence.
A prayer	is necessary. At home.	is necessary in a mosque to enforce prayers in a collective form.

leaving your home if Allah has prepared it for you" [22]. Accordingly, he draws a dichotomy of two worlds: the world of the infidels, with their quarantine measures and faith in the power of aids, and the world of Muslims, with their faith in Allah. Following the position of providentialism, he considers the nature of the virus and concludes that the virus cannot have its own will in a world entirely ruled by one master – Allah. He sees the virus as an

instrument of Allah's will.

"It is not the virus that decides who will get sick; Allah sends the virus to whomever He wishes" [22].

In general, we can conclude that the SAMK speaks more about illness and personal responsibility for the lives of others, while Begey builds his rhetoric around Allah and the collective efforts of Muslims in joint prayer. Undoubtedly, the thesis about Allah looks weightier, and

collective responsibility is perceived better than individual responsibility. Below is a table comparing the arguments of the SAMK and Israfil Begey.

The analysis of media platforms with Islamic content makes it possible to highlight the following acute issues on the agenda of the Muslim Umma of Kazakhstan: mosque, prayer, challenge, purity in Islam, assessment of quarantine and the SAMK's actions, ethnic aspects, and protection of Islam.

Kazakhstanis paid special attention to the nature and understanding of the mosque in Islamic discourses in the media. There was, in particular, a sacralization of the mosque's space as a pure place, a territory protected by Allah, where Muslims are protected, as in Allah's house. However, this issue was not considered by the SAMK.

People had questions about prayer again after the opening of mosques and the emergence of new rules for staying in mosques during the ongoing quarantine, despite the fact that the SAMK almost completely exhausted this topic by expressing a clear position on the prohibition of the Friday namaz online. So, on social media, the subject of whether group prayer will be regarded as a reward if people are separated from each other was raised. During Ramadan, the theme of getting rewards and God's grace became increasingly prominent, with charges that the SAMK "deliberately left" people without rewards and God's favours.

The traditional life and habits of the Kazakh people acquired a new colour in the context of the sanitary peculiarities of the quarantine period. Thus, the taboo inherent in Kazakhs on the use of chopped dishes to any extent previously had a clear Islamic context – it was believed that the shaitan used it. During the pandemic, the information was sent via messengers with theological interpretations from three years ago. Theologians rationalized the unwanted food intake from such dishes by claiming that microorganisms could accumulate in their chips [23]. That is, there occurred a dialectical shift in contexts: ethno-everyday – religious – ethno religious pandemic.

The concept of the "test" has

repeatedly manifested itself in the discussions of Kazakh Muslims. Moreover, many comments sounded positive about what was happening, meaning that the pandemic would lead people to Allah. In the same way, the aforementioned narrative about the healing power of the eyelash from the Qur'an was assessed as a sign from Allah to read the holy book of Muslims.

It is worth noting that there was very little eschatological rhetoric about Muhammad's prediction that "the mosques would be empty and the end of the world would come" in the online Islamic discourses during the quarantine period, which testifies to the positive attitude of Kazakhstani Muslims.

Thus, new discourses emerged in the online space in response to the demands of the Kazakh umma during the pandemic. Also, everyday practices, political, social, and communicative concepts of religion were actualized and acquired additional meanings. The quarantine became a catalyst for online discussions initiated by new religious influencers. There are attempts by institutional religion to cover the entire field of religious knowledge generation, which is complicated by the decentralization and dynamism of the virtual space, where everyone can form his own media niche and become an authoritative source of knowledge.

Conclusion

For Islam in Kazakhstan, the COVID-19 pandemic has become not only a test sent by Allah but also a 'test' of mediatization. The process of institutionalizing 'traditional Islam' in the media space, which was expressed in the creation of the SAMK and mosques websites, maintaining pages on Facebook, Instagram, HIKMET TV channel on YouTube, expanding the use of various instant messengers to interact with the Umma, has accelerated significantly as almost all spheres of life have moved to an online format. During the pandemic, the Khazret Sultan Mosque in Astana became, in fact, an Islamic media centre, where imams came to record sermons, educational lectures, and question-and-

answer sessions. The Supreme Mufti is now initiating the electronic muftiat's information system. The usual forms of work of imams and ustazes in the field have changed, media platforms and messengers have been adapted for conducting educational courses and answering questions of ordinary Muslims. Rituals, such as the performance of namaz, remained outside the processes of mediatization in Kazakhstan. As it was shown, the SAMK, represented by structures and people affiliated with it, reproduced its attitudes, structures, and functions characteristic of it in offline reality. In particular, the SAMK was a mediator, explaining the state measures to the population from an Islamic perspective, which was also reflected in the intertextuality of the discourses of state institutions and the SAMK. In a pandemic situation, people seeking answers to disturbing questions in the media turned to charismatic Islamic leaders, among whom were imams and ustazes promoting the SAMK discourses and religious actors with alternative positions.

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