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## RELIGION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY IN THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

This article analyzes religion as an instrument of politics and ideology in the international relations of the five post-Soviet states of Central Asia. The study examines how Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are instrumentalizing the religious factor to achieve foreign policy goals, strengthen the ideological foundations of power and international positioning in the context of globalization and transnational religious influences. Theoretically, the work is based on the concepts of religious diplomacy, «soft power» and securitization, demonstrating the transformation of religion from a marginalized element of the Soviet era into a multifunctional political and ideological resource. Across the region, religion is mobilized to legitimize power, construct national identity, justify authoritarian governance through security-centered discourses, and enhance symbolic capital in the international arena. A comparative perspective reveals distinct national models of religious instrumentalization. Kazakhstan employs interfaith dialogue as a soft-power mechanism and a means of strengthening international reputation. Uzbekistan leverages Islamic cultural heritage for diplomatic and economic benefit. Tajikistan uses religious regulation as an ideological rationale for authoritarian consolidation. Kyrgyzstan illustrates competition among political actors for influence over religious discourse. Turkmenistan incorporates religion into a personalized ideology that underpins isolationism. The article argues that these patterns are shaped by each state's historical experience, regime type, ethno-religious composition, and geopolitical position.

**Keywords:** religion, politics, ideology, international relations, Central Asia, instrumentalization of religion, religious diplomacy, soft power, post-Soviet transformation.

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### Дін посткеңестік Орталық Азияның халықаралық қатынастарындағы саясат пен идеологияның құралы ретінде

Бұл мақала дінді Орталық Азияның посткеңестік бес мемлекетінің халықаралық қатынастарындағы саясат пен идеологияның құралы ретінде талдайды. Зерттеу Қазақстан, Өзбекстан, Қырғызстан, Тәжікстан және Түрікменстанның сыртқы саяси мақсаттарға жету, биліктің идеологиялық негіздерін нығайту және жаһандану мен трансұлттық діни ықпал жағдайында халықаралық позициялау үшін діни факторды қалай инструментализациялайтынын қарастырады. Теориялық тұрғыдан алғанда, жұмыс діни дипломатия, «жұмсақ күш» және зайырлылық тұжырымдамаларына сүйенеді, бұл діннің кеңестік дәуірдің маргиналды элементінен көпфункционалды саяси және идеологиялық ресурсқа айналуын көрсетеді. Дінді Орталық Азия режимдері билікті заңдастыру, ұлттық бірегейлікті құру, қауіпсіздік дискурсы арқылы авторитарлық бақылауды негіздеу және халықаралық аренада символдық капиталды құру үшін пайдаланады. Салыстырмалы талдау саясат пен идеологиядағы дінді инструментализациялаудың әртүрлі модельдерін анықтайды. Қазақстан конфессияаралық диалогты «жұмсақ күш» пен халықаралық беделдің құралы ретінде пайдаланады. Өзбекстан экономикалық және дипломатиялық пайда алу үшін Ислам мәдени мұрасын қамтамасыз етеді. Тәжікстан діни бақылауды авторитаризмнің идеологиялық негіздемесі ретінде қолданады. Қырғызстан діни дискурсты бақылау үшін әртүрлі саяси күштердің бәсекелестігін көрсетеді. Түркіменстан дінді оқшауланудың жеке идеологиясына біріктіреді. Зерттеу көрсеткендей, дінді саясат, идеология

ерекшелігі тарихи тәжірибемен, саяси режимнің сипатымен, қоғамның этно-діни құрылымымен және әр мемлекеттің геосаяси жағдайымен анықталады.

**Түйін сөздер:** дін, саясат, идеология, халықаралық қатынастар, Орталық Азия, дінді инструменталдау, діни дипломатия, жұмсақ күш, посткеңестік трансформация.

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### **Религия как инструмент политики и идеологии в международных отношениях постсоветской Центральной Азии**

Данная статья анализирует религию как инструмент политики и идеологии в международных отношениях пяти постсоветских государств Центральной Азии. Исследование рассматривает, каким образом Казахстан, Узбекистан, Кыргызстан, Таджикистан и Туркменистан инструментализируют религиозный фактор для достижения внешнеполитических целей, укрепления идеологических оснований власти и международного позиционирования в условиях глобализации и транснациональных религиозных влияний. Теоретически работа опирается на концепции религиозной дипломатии, «мягкой силы» и секьюритизации, демонстрируя трансформацию религии из маргинализованного элемента советской эпохи в многофункциональный политический и идеологический ресурс. Религия используется центральноазиатскими режимами для легитимации власти, конструирования национальной идентичности, обоснования авторитарного контроля через дискурс безопасности и наращивания символического капитала на международной арене. Сравнительный анализ выявляет различные модели инструментализации религии в политике и идеологии. Казахстан использует межконфессиональный диалог как инструмент «мягкой силы» и международной репутации. Узбекистан инструментализирует исламское культурное наследие для экономической и дипломатической выгоды. Таджикистан применяет религиозный контроль как идеологическое обоснование авторитаризма. Кыргызстан демонстрирует конкуренцию различных политических сил за контроль над религиозным дискурсом. Туркменистан интегрирует религию в персонализированную идеологию изоляционизма. Исследование показывает, что специфика использования религии как инструмента политики, идеологии и международных отношений детерминирована историческим опытом, характером политического режима, этнорелигиозной структурой общества и геополитическим положением каждого государства.

**Ключевые слова:** религия, политика, идеология, международные отношения, Центральная Азия, инструментализация религии, религиозная дипломатия, мягкая сила, постсоветская трансформация.

## **Introduction**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the beginning of profound political, economic, and socio-cultural transformations across the five newly independent states of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Among the most consequential, yet for a long time underestimated, dimensions of this transition were religious revival, which reshaped not only domestic social dynamics but also the character of the region's foreign-policy interactions.

During the Soviet period, religion was marginalized, subjected to systematic repression, and largely confined to the private sphere under the constraints of state atheism (Abashin, 2014). The collapse of communist ideology, however, produced an ideological and spiritual vacuum that religion to a significant extent came to fill, re-entering the

public domain as a legitimate component of social life. This return was not a simple restoration of pre-Soviet traditions. Rather, it unfolded through intensive engagement with global religious movements, competition among divergent interpretations of religious identity, and the emergence of new configurations of state–religion relations. These processes were shaped by distinct national trajectories while unfolding within broader patterns of post-Soviet globalization (Peyrouse, 2007).

Alongside these domestic shifts, religion gradually acquired greater salience within the foreign-policy strategies of Central Asian states. The attacks of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent «war on terror» fundamentally transformed international discourse on religion – especially the securitization of Islam in security-oriented narratives.

The study of religion in Central Asia's international relations is of substantial scholarly and practi-

cal relevance for several reasons. First, the region constitutes a distinctive geopolitical «laboratory» in which the interests of major powers intersect, and where religious narratives and networks may be mobilized as instruments of influence. Understanding the mechanisms of religious influence is critically important for analyzing regional power dynamics.

Secondly, the increasing role of transnational religious networks – including mainstream religious institutions and non-violent faith-based movements, as well as marginal radical groups operating under religious slogans- creates new challenges for regional security. Events in Afghanistan, including the return of the Taliban to power in 2021, have increased concerns about the possible spread of extremism in Central Asia.

Thirdly, differences in national approaches to religion and its role in foreign policy create both the potential for conflict and opportunities for cooperation. Comparative analysis allows us to identify the best practices and potential risks of various models.

Fourth, the growing importance of «soft power» in international relations makes religious diplomacy an important tool for foreign policy influence.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the mechanisms by which Central Asian states instrumentalize religion in the domain of international relations – specifically in external diplomacy, multilateral institutions, and cross-border religious networks – as distinct from the internal dimensions of religious ideology and domestic governance. The scope of the analysis is thus delimited: it encompasses foreign-policy initiatives conducted on a religious platform, institutional mechanisms of religious diplomacy, the use of religious heritage in cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy, normative regulation insofar as it shapes external positioning, threat-securitization discourses directed at international audiences, and channels of engagement with foreign religious structures. Questions pertaining exclusively to domestic religious regulation or intra-state ideological management fall outside the primary focus of the article, though they are addressed where they bear directly on foreign-policy orientations.

Research objectives and operationalization:

- To analyze theoretical approaches to religion in international relations – specifically the concepts of religious diplomacy, soft power, and securitization – and to operationalize them for comparative application to the post-Soviet Central Asian context. «Instrumentalization of religion» is understood here as the deliberate deployment of religious symbols, discourses, institutions, and heritage by state actors

in pursuit of foreign-policy objectives, international recognition, or geopolitical positioning. Operationalization is carried out through the following indicators: (a) diplomatic initiatives conducted on a religious platform (summits, conferences, bilateral agreements with a religious dimension); (b) institutional mechanisms for religious diplomacy (state agencies, state-sanctioned religious bodies with international mandates); (c) use of religious heritage in cultural diplomacy and religious tourism promotion; (d) normative frameworks regulating external religious ties; (e) threat-securitization discourses directed at international partners; (f) channels of engagement with foreign religious structures and diaspora communities.

- To conduct a comparative analysis of national models of religious instrumentalization in the international relations of the five Central Asian states, distinguishing the external (foreign-policy) dimension from the internal (ideological and governance) dimension where relevant to cross-border dynamics.

- To examine the role of transnational religious networks in shaping the external religious engagements of Central Asian states, and the degree to which states manage, restrict, or co-opt such networks as instruments of or constraints upon foreign policy.

- To identify the specific mechanisms through which religion is deployed as soft power in Central Asian foreign-policy strategies, with reference to concrete diplomatic initiatives, institutional arrangements, and image-building episodes for each country under review.

This article does not treat Islam as a threat per se; it examines how state actors and international security agendas frame religious issues through securitization and how this shapes governance and foreign policy.

## Materials and methods

The methodological framework of this study is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach that integrates analytical tools from international relations theory, political sociology, religious studies, and comparative politics. Such a synthesis is required due to the complex nature of religion as a political factor, which cannot be adequately captured within any single disciplinary tradition.

The core research strategy is comparative analysis, used to systematically examine and contrast models of religious instrumentalization in foreign policy across the five Central Asian states. The temporal scope of the study covers the period from 1991

to 2024, encompassing the full arc of post-Soviet transformation. This comparative design is complemented by several methods.

Document analysis involves the systematic review of constitutions, laws on religion and freedom of conscience, national security strategies, foreign-policy concepts, ministerial decrees and official statements of foreign ministries, and international agreements with a religious or cultural dimension across the five countries. The corpus encompasses primary legal and policy documents issued between 1991 and 2024. The purpose of this review is to identify the formal institutional and legal frameworks governing state-religion relations in their external dimension, as well as official positions on religion-related issues in international affairs. Selection criteria prioritize official primary sources – constitutional provisions, statutory acts, and governmental strategic documents – over secondary or journalistic sources; where internet resources are cited, they are used solely to access official primary documents (e.g., legislation, census data, official statistics).

Content analysis combines qualitative and quantitative techniques to examine the public discourse of political leaders, state-affiliated media, and government publications. This approach is aligned with studies that treat religion–politics dynamics as an interactive field shaped by both state strategies and societal responses (Khamidov, 2022). The corpus for content analysis comprises official speeches, presidential addresses, foreign ministry communications, and state media materials pertaining to religion and international affairs, selected from each country over the 1991–2024 period. The unit of analysis is the occurrence and framing of religious themes (identity, security, diplomacy, heritage) in officially sanctioned public discourse. This method is used to identify how religious identity is articulated, how religious policy is legitimized, and how religion is positioned within narratives of national security, sovereignty, and international engagement.

Historical analysis traces the evolution of state–religion relations over time – from the Soviet period through post-Soviet transformation to the present – paying particular attention to critical junctures that reconfigured institutional arrangements, policy priorities, and dominant ideological narratives.

### Literature review

Scholarship on the role of religion in international relations and foreign policy has undergone substantial evolution over recent decades. During

the period when the realist paradigm dominated after World War II, religion was largely treated as a marginal – or even obsolete – variable. Since the late twentieth century, however, a «religious turn» in international relations theory has increasingly recognized the significance of religious identities, institutions, and actors in global politics.

In his foundational work *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice* (2018), Jonathan Fox distinguishes several theoretical perspectives on religion in politics: a primordialist approach (treating religion as a fundamental and relatively stable form of identity), an instrumentalist approach (analyzing the ways political elites employ religion to acquire or consolidate power), and a constructivist approach (examining the social construction of religious identities in specific political contexts). In the case of Central Asia, the most analytically productive position appears to be an integrative framework that acknowledges both the substantive social salience of religious identity for the region’s populations and the strategic instrumentalization of religion by state actors.

Jeffrey Haynes (2020), in *Religion and International Relations: Themes and Theories*, systematizes the key trajectories in the study of religion in international relations and highlights three principal dimensions: religion as a source of conflict, religion as a resource for peacebuilding, and religious diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy. All three dimensions are relevant to Central Asia: the region faces security challenges associated with religious extremism, while simultaneously developing institutions of interreligious dialogue and deploying religious diplomacy as part of international positioning.

In the article «Religion in the Public Sphere» Jürgen Habermas (2006), advances the concept of a «post-secular society», in which religion returns to the public domain after a period of secularization, yet on new grounds that require religious claims to be translated into a language accessible within a pluralist society. This conceptual lens is highly relevant for understanding post-Soviet Central Asia, where the collapse of atheist ideology precipitated religious revival under conditions of formally secular statehood and ethno-religious pluralism.

Joseph Nye’s *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* introduces the notion of «soft power» as a state’s ability to influence others through the attractiveness of its culture, political values, and foreign policy rather than through coercion or material inducements. Although Nye (2004) did not foreground religion as a component of soft power,

subsequent scholarship has demonstrated the importance of religious diplomacy as one of its meaningful dimensions. In Central Asia, Kazakhstan's experience is particularly illustrative: interreligious dialogue – most notably the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions – has been used as a mechanism for enhancing international credibility and accumulating symbolic capital.

In *Securitization of Religion in Central Asia*, Marina Omelicheva (2021) applies Copenhagen School securitization theory to the analysis of Central Asian religious policy. She shows how, in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, religion was increasingly framed through a security lens; within this framing, particular Islamic movements and practices were constructed as potential threats, thereby legitimizing extraordinary measures of state control, including restrictions on freedom of conscience, bans on religious organizations, and the prosecution of independent religious figures. This work is crucial for understanding a core paradox of post-Soviet Central Asia: simultaneous religious revival and the tightening of state regulation over religion.

Marlene Laruelle, in *Islam and Power in Central Asia* (2022), offers a comprehensive analysis of Islam's role in the region's political dynamics, examining interactions among state institutions, «official» Islam, vernacular and customary practices, and transnational Islamic movements. Laruelle demonstrates that Islam in Central Asia is not a monolithic phenomenon but rather a complex arena of contestation among multiple interpretations and practices, ranging from Hanafi Sunni traditions to Salafism and Sufism.

Recent scholarship also emphasizes the interaction between state strategies of managing Islam and societal responses across Central Asia, highlighting variation across national cases and policy cycles (Khamidov, 2022).

Vitaly Naumkin's study *Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia* analyzes the dynamics of radicalization in the region and identifies socio-economic, political, and ideological factors that facilitate the diffusion of extremist ideas. Naumkin (2020) cautions against reductive interpretations of Islamic radicalism as a purely imported phenomenon, emphasizing the importance of internal drivers, including authoritarian governance, corruption, social inequality, and the marginalization of youth.

In *Kazakhstan: Consolidating the Presidential Regime* (Dave, 2019), Bhavna Dave examines Kazakhstan's political transformation, including the religious dimension of nation-building. Dave shows

how Kazakhstan's leadership strategically mobilizes religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue to legitimize an authoritarian political order and to cultivate an international image of a «tolerant» and «multicultural» state.

Galina Yemelianova's (2018) *Islam, Nationalism and State in the Muslim Caucasus* explores the relationship between Islam, nationalism, and the state in Muslim regions of the post-Soviet space. Although the empirical focus is on the North Caucasus, several conclusions are applicable to Central Asia – particularly regarding the role of Islam in constructing national identity and legitimizing state authority.

## Results and discussion

### *Ideology and politics in Central Asia's religious sphere*

Relations among religion, ideology, and politics in Central Asia constitute a complex and dynamic system of interactions shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary challenges. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the five newly independent states faced the dual task of constructing new political orders and formulating ideological foundations of legitimacy – within which religion assumed a growing role.

The breakdown of communist ideology generated an acute demand for new sources of collective identity and political legitimacy. As Irving Goffman's theory of impression management suggests (Goffman, 1963), political actors require symbolic resources to cultivate a favorable public image and to legitimize authority. In the post-Soviet context, religion became one of the most consequential resources, offering a ready repertoire of symbols, narratives, and institutions through which the ideological vacuum could be filled. Importantly, these resources were embedded in social environments reshaped by Soviet modernization – processes that reconfigured local authority and everyday norms and thus provide a critical backdrop for understanding post-Soviet instrumentalization (Abashin, 2014).

Yet the elevation of religion as a potential ideological foundation produced a fundamental tension: all five states constitutionally affirmed secularism – partly inheriting the Soviet model of separating religion from the state – while simultaneously recognizing religion as a salient element of national identity and cultural heritage. This tension is negotiated differently across national contexts, producing distinct models of interaction between religion, ideology, and politics.

In Kazakhstan, official ideology has been articulated around the notion of a «Kazakhstani path», combining economic pragmatism, political stability, and cultural diversity. Religious pluralism is framed as an asset, signaling the country's capacity to integrate multiple confessional communities within a shared civic project. The First President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, actively mobilized religious rhetoric to bolster political legitimacy, portraying himself as a guarantor of interfaith harmony and the nation's spiritual renewal. The initiative to convene the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions from 2003 onward (*Pervyi Syezd liderov mirovykh i traditsionnykh religii*, 2003) became a central element of Kazakhstan's soft-power strategy, positioning the country as a global mediator and a «bridge» between civilizations.

Uzbekistan, under President Islam Karimov (1991-2016), promoted an ideology of an «Uzbek model» grounded in gradual reform, a strong state, and national distinctiveness. Within this framework, Islam was acknowledged as a key component of national heritage, yet it remained subject to strict state supervision. Karimov repeatedly invoked the threat of religious extremism (including Islamist extremism) to legitimize authoritarian governance and suppress opposition. Following Shavkat Mirziyoyev's rise to power in 2016, a degree of ideological liberalization emerged, including in the religious sphere. The revised ideological narrative increasingly emphasizes Uzbekistan's rich Islamic legacy and presents the country as a regional center of «enlightened Islam», reflecting an effort to deploy religion for international prestige and economic development – particularly through religious tourism (Laruelle, 2022).

Kyrgyzstan exhibits the most fragmented ideological landscape, mirroring the country's chronic political instability (including three revolutions within two decades). The absence of a dominant state ideology has created space for competition among divergent projects, including secular nationalism, Islamism, and liberal democracy. Religion is instrumentalized by different political forces: secular elites draw on it as a component of national identity; Islamist actors frame it as the basis for an alternative political project; and external stakeholders (including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran) use religious engagement as a channel of influence (Naumkin, 2020).

Tajikistan has developed the most stringent ideological framework of state control over religion. The traumatic experience of the 1992-1997

civil war – in which the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan played a significant role – generated a durable perception of unsanctioned (unregulated) religious activity as a threat to national security and territorial integrity. President Emomali Rahmon's ideology is rooted in secular nationalism that foregrounds pre-Islamic Persian heritage (including the promotion of Nowruz and the symbolic elevation of ancient rulers) while marginalizing Arab-Islamic influences. This ideological orientation legitimizes comprehensive state regulation of religion, including controls over dress, restrictions on religious education for minors, and the suppression of independent religious organizations (Omelicheva, 2021).

Turkmenistan represents a distinctive case of personalized ideology, in which religion is fully subordinated to the leader-centered political order. Under President Saparmurat Niyazov (1991-2006), a syncretic doctrine centered on the *Ruhnama* («Book of the Soul») was institutionalized (Niyazov, 2002), combining elements of Islam, Turkmen tradition, and the president's personal philosophical claims. This framework elevated the leader above religious authorities, producing what amounted to a quasi-religious cult of personality. Niyazov's successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, moderated some of the most conspicuous excesses of the personality cult, yet retained a model of rigid state oversight of religion within an isolationist «Turkmen model» of governance.

Across the region, political regimes employ religion as a multifunctional instrument for a range of political objectives. Political leaders strategically mobilize religious symbols and rhetoric to strengthen legitimacy. This pragmatic use of religion as a legitimizing instrument is a recurrent feature of post-Soviet political practice (Malashenko, 2016). Participation in religious holidays, the construction of mosques and churches, and patronage of religious institutions function as elements of performative politics, signaling the alignment of state authority with the population's moral and spiritual values. As Edward Schatz notes in his work on political ethnography (Schatz, 2017), rituals and symbolic practices play a central role in constructing and sustaining power relations in Central Asia.

All five states have established mechanisms to regulate religious organizations, oversee the appointment of religious leaders, and control religious education. This reflects the broader inclination of authoritarian regimes to monopolize the public sphere and to prevent the emergence of independent sites of social mobilization. This interaction

between state strategies of governing religion and societal responses (ranging from accommodation to contestation) has been emphasized in recent scholarship on Central Asia (Khamidov, 2022). The tendency is particularly pronounced in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, where state control over religion is most extensive.

In ethnically and culturally heterogeneous post-Soviet societies, religion also serves as a resource for constructing national identity. This process, however, is marked by internal contradictions. Efforts to elevate Islam as a marker of national identity in multi-confessional Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan can produce alienation among Christian minorities, while excessive secularization risks distancing religiously oriented constituencies.

The events of 11 September 2001 and the ensuing «war on terror» created a favorable international environment for tightening state control over religion under the banner of countering extremism. As Omelicheva (2021) demonstrates, Central Asian regimes actively participated in the securitization of religion, using the discourse of religious extremism to legitimize repressive measures and, in some cases, to secure external support.

Finally, religion is used as an instrument of soft power and diplomatic influence. Kazakhstan, through the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, projects itself as a global actor and mediator in intercivilizational dialogue. Uzbekistan leverages its Islamic heritage to strengthen cultural ties with Muslim-majority countries and to attract religious tourism. Even isolationist Turkmenistan deploys carefully managed religious symbolism to cultivate an image of a «stable» and «spiritual» state.

Overall, the interplay of ideology, politics, and religion in Central Asia is best understood as a dynamic and internally contradictory system in which states seek to mobilize religion as a resource of legitimacy and control, while also confronting constraints and unintended consequences generated by such instrumentalization. The effectiveness of different national models remains contested, and the marked variation across cases underscores the absence of a single, uniform «Central Asian» approach to religion in politics.

### *Comparative analysis of national models*

Kazakhstan displays the most ambitious approach to employing the religious factor in foreign policy among the Central Asian states. The 1995 Constitution affirms the secular character of the state while guaranteeing freedom of religion.

A defining feature of Kazakhstan's approach is the active use of religious diplomacy as an instrument of soft power and international positioning. Since 2003, Kazakhstan has hosted the regular Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, bringing together representatives of multiple faith traditions from dozens of countries. Three concrete episodes illustrate this mechanism. First, the VII Congress held in Nur-Sultan in September 2022 brought together delegations from 50 countries and adopted the Declaration of the VII Congress, calling for dialogue and the non-instrumentalization of religion for political violence – a document that carried particular significance against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Second, in 2016, Kazakhstan initiated the establishment of the International Centre for the Culture of Peace under the auspices of the Congress, providing an institutional mechanism for ongoing interreligious engagement between forum sessions. Third, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs systematically incorporates the Congress into bilateral diplomatic interactions: during the 2019 session, specific protocols on interreligious cooperation were signed with representatives of the Holy See and Al-Azhar, demonstrating the conversion of symbolic religious diplomacy into concrete bilateral agreements.

This initiative frames Kazakhstan as a platform for intercivilizational and interreligious dialogue; a mediator between East and West; an example of harmonious interfaith coexistence; and a global actor in the field of spiritual diplomacy.

According to the 2021 census, 69.3% of the population identify as Muslim and 17.2% as Christian (predominantly Orthodox), providing an objective social basis for interfaith dialogue (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023). As of 2024, Kazakhstan had 3,980 registered religious associations representing 18 confessions (KAZISLAM.KZ, 2024).

Uzbekistan demonstrates the most dramatic evolution in approaches to religion across the region. Under President Islam Karimov (1991-2016), religious policy was characterized by strict state control and repression of independent religious figures (Naumkin, 2020). Following Shavkat Mirziyoyev's rise to power in 2016, however, the country initiated a liberalization of religious policy as part of broader reforms.

In the post-liberalization period, Uzbekistan has actively leveraged its rich Islamic heritage for international positioning (Laruelle, 2022). Official narratives emphasize the contribution of Central Asian scholars to Islamic civilization, including Imam al-

Bukhari, al-Tirmidhi, al-Khwarizmi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and al-Biruni.

Since 2017, Uzbekistan has hosted international conferences on diverse aspects of Islam – Islamic education, women’s roles in Islam, Islam and science, and countering extremism. Tashkent has sought to present itself as a regional hub of «enlightened Islam». Three episodes illustrate this trajectory with clarity. First, the international conference «Islamic Civilization in Central Asia» held in Samarkand in 2017 gathered scholars from 40 countries and resulted in the Samarkand Declaration, positioning Uzbekistan as a custodian of historical Islamic scholarship and moderate Islamic tradition. Second, in 2018 the Centre of Islamic Civilization was established in Tashkent – a state institution responsible for coordinating international scholarly exchanges and promoting Uzbekistan’s Islamic heritage internationally. Third, the launch of the «Pilgrimage Route of the Great Scholars» tourism program in 2019, linking the mausoleums of Imam al-Bukhari, Bahauddin Naqshband, and other historical figures, represents the conversion of religious heritage into an instrument of economic diplomacy and cultural soft power. Uzbekistan also possesses a substantial Islamic historical heritage (Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva), which is increasingly used in cultural diplomacy and the development of religious tourism.

Kyrgyzstan is traditionally viewed as the most democratic and liberal state in Central Asia, a profile that is also reflected in the religious sphere. The Law «On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations» (O svobode veroispovedaniia i religioznykh ob’edineniiakh, 2025) provides a comparatively liberal regulatory regime.

Kyrgyzstan exhibits the highest degree of confessional diversity in the region in terms of the practical presence and activity of religious groups. Its relatively permissive legal environment enables the active engagement of international religious organizations, including Turkish religious institutions, Saudi charitable foundations, Iranian cultural centers, American evangelical groups, and South Korean Presbyterian communities. Three episodes are instructive. First, the Diyanet (Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs) established and operates the largest mosque complex in Bishkek – the Imam Sarahsi Mosque, opened in 2018 – reflecting Turkey’s use of mosque-building as an instrument of religious soft power in Kyrgyzstan. Second, the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in January 2025 represents a significant

institutional episode: compared to previous legislation, the new law tightened re-registration requirements for foreign religious organizations while maintaining a broadly liberal regulatory framework, reflecting the ongoing tension between openness and sovereignty in Kyrgyz religious policy. Third, the activities of Saudi-funded charitable foundations, including the distribution of Quran translations and the financing of mosque construction across rural areas throughout the 2010s, constitute a well-documented channel of external religious influence that Kyrgyz state authorities have periodically sought to regulate. At the same time, this openness generates concerns regarding external influence and potential radicalization. Kyrgyzstan thus continues to search for a workable balance between maintaining a liberal model and addressing the imperatives of countering extremism.

Tajikistan represents the most restrictive model of state control over religion in Central Asia, shaped by the traumatic legacy of the 1992-1997 civil war, in which religion played a significant role (Omeliicheva, 2021).

The legal framework establishes comprehensive state oversight of the religious sphere, including mandatory registration of all religious organizations, restrictions on religious activities for persons under 18, control over sermon content, licensing requirements for religious personnel, and restrictions on wearing the hijab in state institutions.

Unlike other Central Asian states, Tajikistan minimizes international religious cooperation, treating external religious influence as a threat to stability. Three episodes illustrate this model concretely. First, the formal banning of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan in August 2015, followed by the prosecution of its leadership on terrorism charges, eliminated the country’s only legal opposition party and constituted the most consequential institutional act of religiously framed securitization in the region’s post-Soviet history. Second, the 2015 amendments to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations introduced mandatory state examination of all religious literature and prohibited the wearing of religiously motivated clothing in public institutions, measures that were subsequently cited by Tajikistan’s diplomatic missions as evidence of the country’s commitment to countering radicalization in its communications with international partners, including the SCO and CSTO. Third, Tajikistan’s promotion of Nowruz as an internationally recognized cultural holiday (UNESCO intangible heritage status was secured in

2016) serves as a diplomatic resource, positioning the pre-Islamic Persian heritage of the country as its primary contribution to world culture and thereby marginalizing Islamic frameworks in external communication. However, intensive regulation also produces tensions by pushing religiosity into informal spaces and potentially contributing to the appeal of radical ideas among segments of the youth.

Turkmenistan constitutes a distinctive case in the region, combining rigid authoritarianism, isolationism, and a personalized leadership cult with the instrumentalization of religion.

Only two confessions are officially registered: Sunni Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church. Other religious groups either operate informally or are not permitted. Turkmenistan maintains extremely limited religious ties with the outside world, and the presence of foreign religious organizations is virtually absent. Three institutional episodes illuminate this model. First, the institutionalization of the *Ruhnama* (2001-2006) as a quasi-sacred text required in state examinations, school curricula, and court proceedings constituted the most explicit case of personalized religious syncretism in the post-Soviet space: the *Ruhnama* was officially placed alongside the Quran in mosques, making state ideology inseparable from Islamic practice. Second, President Niyazov's renaming of months and days of the week after himself and family members (2002) displaced Islamic temporal frameworks with a personalized cosmology, reflecting the subordination of religion to the cult of personality. Third, under President Berdimuhamedow, the consolidation of the Turkmen horse (*ahalteke*) and national nature imagery as quasi-sacred national symbols – formalized in the 2016 Law on the Protection of the *Ahalteke Horse* – extended the logic of personalized ideological instrumentalization, though with less direct religious content. This isolationist posture constrains both constructive forms of international religious exchange and the diffusion of radical transnational currents.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study allow for several theoretical and practical conclusions regarding the role of religion in shaping foreign-policy strategies and patterns of international cooperation in post-Soviet Central Asia.

Religion has evolved from a marginalized element of the Soviet period into a significant component of foreign-policy identity and a tool of international positioning among Central Asian states. This shift reflects broader global dynamics associated with the «return of religion» to the public sphere and international politics, as discussed in the work of Habermas, Haynes, and other theorists of post-secularity.

Despite shared post-Soviet conditions conducive to religious revival, as well as similar external pressures (globalization, transnational religious networks, and the threat of extremism), each of the five Central Asian countries has developed a distinctive model for incorporating religion into domestic governance and foreign policy.

All five states confront a fundamental tension between constitutional secularism and the practical instrumentalization of religion. Efforts to simultaneously regulate religion, mobilize it for legitimacy and international image-building, and preserve the formal secular character of the state generate structural strains and unintended consequences. Particularly difficult is the balance between security and freedom of conscience: extensive state control may push religious life into informal or underground arenas and, in some cases, inadvertently contribute to radicalization.

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