

**MONITORING THE STATE OF INTER-ETHNIC AND INTER-FAITH  
RELATIONS IN STUDENT CIRCLES AS AN EFFECTIVE POLICY  
INSTRUMENT OF CONTEMPORARY HIGHER EDUCATION  
ESTABLISHMENTS IN KAZAKHSTAN**

*What do we understand by national unity? It means being a community of cohesive ethnic, religious and other socio-cultural groups living in our country.*

From N.A. Nazarbayev's address at the XVth session of the Assembly of the  
People of Kazakhstan

Happily, people are allowed to take differing views of democracy, and looking on it fondly is in no way mandatory. As we all know, it has many shortcomings and one merit, namely that humankind has not yet come up with anything better in the way of a political model for society. For this system of governance to be viable, we need to form and consolidate citizens' democratic political culture, of which *tolerance* and a capacity for *dialogue* are integral components. It is precisely *institutionalised dialogue* between those who take binding decisions and those who implement the decisions and the presence of effective *feedback* machinery at different organisational levels of the *socium* that are the important characteristics distinguishing liberal democracy from the other forms of socio-political organisation of society.

It is important to bear in mind here that interaction in the system of dialogue on both personal and group levels within a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society is becoming substantially more complex as it is frequently conducted in different languages, both figuratively and literally.

It is a well-known fact that Kazakhstan is a homeland for representatives of many ethnic groups, and it is no coincidence that the country used to be called the "Planet of a hundred languages". At present its territory is home to representatives of 137 ethnic groups and religious organisations of 45 faiths. For that reason, the ethno-religious context in which Kazakhstan became a sovereign State and began to modernise its social structures was not altogether straightforward. While inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations between the people of Kazakhstan had been traditionally built on the dominant principles of peace and accord, the very fact of coexistence between different ethnic groups following different religions was actually creating a danger that social discontent and unrest stemming from acute socio-economic problems would take on an ethnic hue, as it had in a number of regions of the former USSR.

Kazakhstan's universally recognised achievement has been to ensure political stability in socio-economic conditions that are by no means simple, within a multi-ethnic and multilingual multi-faith society and, most importantly, *inter-ethnic and inter-religious accord*. This is down to a number of factors, and first and foremost factors such as the tolerance traditionally intrinsic to Kazakhstani mentality, the moderation practised by the people of Kazakhstan in the spheres of politics and religion and, of course, the level-headed political course steered by the country's President, N.A. Nazarbayev, which made it possible to fairly successfully implement a *national model for ethnic policy*. At

the basis of that model lies the recognition of *ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic diversity*, serving not merely as a positive factor but as the foundation for the psychological and ideological mindset of Kazakhstan's society and a key source for its development. In that process the model of inter-ethnic and inter-faith interaction was not implanted "from above" but formed "from below", quite naturally, and given the necessary support by the authorities, allowing it to come to the fore on the most different organisational levels (micro and macro) of the country's socium. So it is no coincidence that, today, the Republic of Kazakhstan is one of the international centres of intercultural and interfaith dialogue.

Nevertheless, the situation in such important and "rarefied" spheres as inter-ethnic relations, language and religion may suddenly undergo dramatic complications, and all the more so as ethnic nationalism and religious extremism can be taken up as arms by certain political forces trying to "shake up" the situation by any possible means in order to gain power. To avoid such complications we need information on the real situation in these spheres and the risks and tendencies within them. Accordingly, we must *monitor* them on a regular basis, using reliable sociological tools. That monitoring must be done not only on a pan-ethnic or regional scale but also on a smaller scale, at the level of different organisations, particularly those incorporating fairly large communities of young people.

It makes perfect sense to include *universities* among those organisations. We all know that the key social missions of the university cover not only the higher education of specialists but also passing on general cultural knowledge and values and socialising the representatives of the young generation. Young people studying at university strongly stand out in today's social sphere, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. They form a truly large social group playing a very important role as a source of regeneration of society's intellectual potential. In addition, this group remains a fairly specific community, with a "dual" socio-demographic and socio-professional nature, the vector of a distinct sub-culture. The age-specific psychological and social characteristics of students pave the way for their intensive political socialisation and provide the young people studying at universities with substantial political resources which may be swiftly activated. For that reason, monitoring the opinions and value judgements of students which characterise the state of inter-ethnic interaction in student circles, students' linguistic practices and attitudes towards religion and the state of religious relations appears particularly important in the current context.

The M. Utemisov West Kazakhstan state university, which is one of Kazakhstan's oldest higher education establishments, has traditionally been a place of study for representatives of different ethnic groups. Of the students currently studying on-site, 68% are ethnic Kazakhs, 28% are ethnic Russians and 4% belong to other ethnic groups. 55% of them study in groups taught in the Kazakh language and 45% in groups taught in Russian. As far as the religious affiliations of the students are concerned, 71% of the university's students profess a faith, according to sociological study data. Of those, 70% are Muslims, 20% are Orthodox Christians and 10% adhere to other faiths. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the West Kazakhstan state university *policy on quality* states that the university's fundamental objective is "*European ideas of intercultural dialogue and inter-ethnic accord*". To ensure that this

policy was implemented as effectively as possible and that educative events aimed at students had a strong impact, work began in 2008 on the regular *sociological monitoring of the state of inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations in student circles*. (It was at this time that the rhetoric of some of Kazakhstan's political protagonists having previously positioned themselves as representatives of the democratic opposition began to show marked ethno-nationalistic tendencies).

Within that monitoring process, using a representative sample of 10%, a survey was carried out of the views, opinions, leanings and mindsets of the university's students characterising their socio-political make-up, the state of inter-ethnic relations in student circles, the students' linguistic practices, their attitudes towards religion and the situation in the sphere of religious relations.

The data obtained in this way show, among other things, that the overwhelming majority of the university's students (78% in 2006, 86% in 2008, 81% in 2009) have a clear wish to live in a country where *all citizens enjoy equal rights and opportunities regardless of their ethnic background*. Regarding the question of *how many state languages there should be in such a country*, while there was less of a clear consensus, an absolute majority of the students surveyed were in favour of having *several/two state languages* (61% in 2006, 71% in 2008, 53% in 2009). On the subject of *the place of religion in the life of the country*, the overwhelming majority of students (58% in 2008, 74% in 2009) agreed that *the influence of religion must be limited and it is inadmissible for religious organisations to interfere in the activities of state organisations*.

The *state of inter-ethnic relations* in the Republic of Kazakhstan as a whole and in specific places of students' residence, as well as the M. Utemisov West Kazakhstan state university itself, was considered fairly good by what was once again an overwhelming majority of students surveyed (72%, 73% and 75% respectively in 2008, and 83%, 84% and 85% in 2009). Regarding *possible changes* in that situation in the coming 2 to 3 years, the majority of the university's students kept an *optimistic view*, supposing that there would be either *changes for the better* or *no change at all*. They saw the *socio-economic situation in society* and the *ethnic policy pursued by the State* as the fundamental factors shaping trends in inter-ethnic relations.

The state of *inter-faith relations* in the Republic of Kazakhstan as a whole and in specific urban areas, as well as the M. Utemisov West Kazakhstan state university itself, was also seen as *fairly satisfactory* by an absolute majority of the students surveyed (61-65%), who assessed it as *good* or *very good*. Concerning the likely *trends* in those relations, a significant proportion of those surveyed (40%) were undecided. Among the students who did have a firm view on this, the majority thought that the state of relations would *not change* (ie remain fairly favourable, a viewpoint expressed by 28% of respondents) or *change for the better* (ie become more favourable - 22%). For most of the students surveyed, the factors that might have a *negative* impact on inter-faith relations in Kazakhstan society included the *growing activity of religious sects and cults*, a *worsening of the socio-economic situation in society* and *conflicts within the clergy*.

An important indicator of the state of inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations in student circles is whether or not they *feel uneasy* when interacting with teachers, colleagues and other students at the university owing to their

*ethnic, linguistic or religious affiliation.* The information gathered in the course of the monitoring exercise shows that the bulk of the students surveyed, all told around two-thirds of them, feel virtually *no discomfort* when interacting owing to their ethnic, linguistic or religious affiliation.

So the aforementioned data (while obviously relative and incomplete) show that the state of inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations within Kazakhstan society is fairly good but could become substantially more difficult in certain circumstances. The objective cause of this would be the very fact that different ethnic and linguistic groups do interact, together with a distinct escalation of religious, and predominantly Muslim, attitudes, above all among young people. A sharp decline in the socio-economic situation, the rupture of political stability, ill-judged actions in the sphere of inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations, the deliberate exploitation of ethnological and religious themes by opposition forces and also increased activity of religious sects and cults are all factors, of which any one but especially a combination of all of them could undermine inter-ethnic accord in Kazakhstan. One way of preventing such a turn of events and minimising these risks is to *receive timely information* on the true state of inter-ethnic relations and the trends and problems in this area. Having information like this is very important for the successful forming of a *civic political culture*, which must incorporate the instilling of *tolerance* as one of its components, above all in relations with representatives of other ethnic, linguistic and religious groups.