

Islam in Contemporary Russia

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Euro-Islam is a new phenomenon for Europe. Historically, European contact with Muslims was mainly of an external nature. The term “Euro-Islam” appeared only in the first half of the 1990s. In 1991 it was not even mentioned in such a profound study of Islam as Gilles Kepel’s *Les Banlieues de l’Islam*.

As for Russian Islam, we can consider it as an old and traditional phenomenon for Russia. In fact, the Eastern Slavonic tribes had met with Muslims long before the former had any forms of state system and before they adopted Orthodox Christianity in 988. And since the second half of the XVI century (the conquest of Kazan, Astrakhan and Siberian khanates) when Muslims of those areas became subjects of the Russian Tsar, Islam has become an integral part of the Russian state system and culture. That is why Islam in Russia has never been perceived as something alien, it was rather perceived as our own alien entity being deprived of any principal cultural difference and significance. Orthodox mentality could be very hostile to “pagan busurmans”, but that hostility was completely superficial, based on everyday life differences. The situation looked very similar to the one that we can observe in contemporary Europe.

Demographic Situation

There are no exact figures of the Muslim population living on Russian Federation territory. The spread in estimates is very significant. According to the State Statistical Office of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic (RSFSR) during the 1989 census, 12 million Muslims lived in Russia. According to the most cautious estimates, in 1997 the number of Russian Muslims amounted to more than 15 million people (significant difference in estimates was mainly caused by the inaccuracy in defining the share of believers in the RF population. The figures vary from 20% to 80%) According to the unofficial data in 2010 the number was 17 million (12.5%). It should be taken into consideration that the demographic situation for the Muslim population is much better than for other groups.

Indirectly the number of Muslim believers is witnessed by the increase in the number of mosques. By October 1917 30,000 mosques were active in the Russian Empire. From the middle of the 1920s, the suppression of Islamic religious life and culture began. About 12,000 mosques were either closed or demolished. During Stalin’s Terror practically all the Islamic elite was extinguished – from 30 to 50,000 people. In 1948 there were only 416 officially registered mosques in the RSFSR and in 1968 – a mere 311. At the beginning of 1991 Russia registered 870 mosques; in 1995 – 5,000 and in 2000 – over 7,000. According to the RF Ministry of Justice data, in January 2000 in Russia there were 51 religious Islamic centres, 2,933 parishes and communes and 114 educational institutions. More than 800 students were studying at Islamic universities and colleges in the Arab countries.

Nowadays Islam is widespread in the Northern Caucasus, Tatarstan (54%), Bashkortostan (54%), Orenburgskaya oblast (10%), Udmurtiya (7%), Mariy El Republic (6%), Chuvashiya (3%), Nizhegorodskaya oblast (1.5%). Recently the share of the Muslim population has been

considerably growing in Astrakhan oblast due to migration from the Northern Caucasus (according to certain data, in 2008 there were 500,000 Muslims out of a total population of 1.1 million.)

Moscow is the largest Muslim city not only in Russia but also in the whole of Europe according to various data from 1.5 to 2 million – 15%-17%. In the media the expression “Moscow is the second Mecca” can be found more and more often.

Muslim Areas

Apart from Moscow there are two major Muslim areas in Russia – the Northern Caucasus and Povolzhye (with Tatarstan as its centre). Each area is self-sufficient as far as cultural and religious traditions are concerned. Despite certain sporadic attempts to demonstrate their intentions to integrate they live in separate worlds.

“Russian” Islam cannot be called monolithic either. It is considered that nowadays there are three main trends in Russian Islam: traditionalist (official), radical and liberal.

The Traditionalist trend is indisputably dominant in the Islam of Povolzhye. Radical trends show themselves much more vigorously in Northern Caucasian Islam, although not in the majority of the population.

Contrary to what most people think, the most Islamized republic of the Northern Caucasus is Dagestan, not Chechnya. The population of Dagestan has increased by 400,000 people during the last eight years and amounts to three million people now; 95 % are Muslims and there are 803 officially registered Muslim associations compared to 500 in Tatarstan.) The role of Islam in politics has always been and still is very important in Dagestan. It is in this republic where the ideas of Islamic alternative and North Caucasian Islamic fundamentalism (both in its moderate and Wahhabi form) have taken their modern shape.

Most Cautious Short-Term Forecasts

By 2020 the number of Muslims will have increased. Given the current population growth rates, especially in the Northern Caucasus, and taking into consideration the migration, it could amount to 25 million people. Taking into account the fact that the overall number of Russian citizens will decrease to 130 million (from the current 143 million), “the Muslim share” will reach 17-19%. Simultaneously, the restructuring of shares will take place within the Muslim population - the largest group will be represented by Caucasians. The number of immigrants of North Caucasian origin in big Russian cities will also increase both in absolute and relative terms.

Two opposite trends will be more distinct than they are nowadays: on the one hand – dispersion of Muslims, first of all of Caucasians, in Russian society; on the other hand – their intention to keep their identity, the ethnic character of their business, especially at the first stages. Hence, it is possible that a new generation of politicians will emerge, who will represent the interests of various groups on the basis of ethnic and confessional characteristics. Quasi-religious movements could also emerge. (A similar process took place in the 1990s, but a trustworthy all-Russia party with Muslim social motivation was never formed.) These movements will not be characterized by separatist intentions.

Russia, as well as the rest of the world, will not manage “to get rid of” radical Islam, which will continue to exist under various names – Wahhabism, Islamism, fundamentalism. As before, it will be most vividly represented in the Northern Caucasus. However, seats of religious radicalism will be also preserved in Muslim Povolzhye. This is connected with the preaching activity of a new generation of clergy, educated in the Arab countries.

Alas, but even in ten years time terrorism under religious slogans will remain the disaster for Russia and not only for it. However, even despite such circumstances the authorities (including most probably the central ones) will have to start a systematic dialogue with the moderate Islamists.

In ethnic and confessional relations certain tensions will be preserved, which will be accompanied by direct clashes. This is the situation that we already observe. And if administration at all levels, leaders of ethnic communes, trustworthy clergymen play a waiting game, such conflicts will be more frequent and severe (“mini-wars” may even occur).

Thus, Russia will not become a Muslim country as some of our contemporaries – political scientists and writers - try to suggest. But “the Islamic factor” in the life of its society, in the formation of various political groups’ orientation will be more noticeable.

In this connection, the further growth of Islamophobia will take place, which will be firmly established in the political and everyday life mentality and behaviour in many Russian citizens.

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The main obstacle in the way of Islamisation of Russia was identified by Kniaz’ Vladimir as long ago as 986: “Russia’s merriment is drinking, we cannot exist without it.”