CARNEGIE MOSCOW CENTER

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Dynamics of Russian Islam

ALEXEY MALASHENKO | FEBRUARY, 2013

Islam is spreading in Russia, once again becoming a factor in Russian politics, to a greater degree than even in the 1990s. The authorities are not prepared for such a course of events and should take into account the possibility of interreligious confrontations in the future.

The North Caucasus is typically mentioned as a major hotbed of Islamic radicalism in Russia. The religious and political situations in other Russian regions, however, have traditionally been relatively stable. But the situation has changed recently in southern Russia, the Urals, Siberia, and the metropolitan Moscow area. This shift poses real problems for the Russian state.

The Volga Region with its Muslim population (Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and some surrounding territories with sizable Muslim minorities) has always seemed like an "Islamic island" in the vast "Orthodox Christian sea." A small, 18-kilometer-wide "isthmus" located in the Orenburg Oblast separates the Muslim-dominated part of Russia, specifically Bashkortostan, from Central Asia. Demographic changes and a spike in Muslim migration that are currently taking place in the Urals, the Volga Region, and Western Siberia now link the Russian "Islamic island" to the entire "Islamic continent."

In some previously docile Russian regions, parts of the Muslim population are becoming more radical and even extremist. Two watershed events occurred in Tatarstan in 2012: Mufti Ildus Faizov was seriously wounded, and distinguished Muslim cleric Valiulla Yakupov was killed. Said Afandi al-Chirkawi, a spiritual leader of the tariqatists (Sufi Muslims) and head of Naqshbandi and Shazali tariqas, was also killed in 2012 by Islamic radicals. Radicals also conducted a number of protests in Kazan and other cities where they expressed solidarity with Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, an Islamist organization that operates in Central Asia. Terrorist attacks carried out in Kazan have resembled extremist acts in the North Caucasus, and the media has even dubbed this phenomenon the "Caucasusization" of the Volga Region.

MUSLIM MIGRANTS IN RUSSIA

The situation in the Ural, Volga, and Western Siberian regions is changing in part because both internal and external migration are on the rise, with migrants coming from the North Caucasus, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia. This means that the Muslim space in Russia is continuously expanding.

The precise number of immigrants from Central Asia is unknown because most still enter the country illegally. But estimates indicate that of these immigrants, there are 700,000 to 1.2 million Uzbeks in Russia,[1] 800,000 to 2 million Tajiks, and 400,000 to 800,000 Kyrgyz. The estimated number of immigrants from Azerbaijan fluctuates between 600,000 and 1 million people.[2] The number of North Caucasian migrants is difficult to approximate, but it is certainly in the six-digit range.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has more than once put the number of Russia's Muslims at 20 million. According

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexey Malashenko *is the chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center's Religion, Society, and Security Program. He was head of the Sector on Religions at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Oriental Studies and taught at the Higher School of Economics and the Moscow Institute of International Relations. Malashenko is the author of numerous books, including Russia and Islam (2007), My Islam (2010), and Central Asia and Russia's Expectations (2012).*

to the 2010 census, the "ethnic Muslims" who are Russian citizens number approximately 16 million (those who were born into Muslim families and follow the Islamic tradition are considered ethnic Muslims). To arrive at 20 million or higher, the migrant population has to be added to the adherents of Islam among Russia's citizens.

The Kremlin thus views Russia's Muslim community as a single entity without distinguishing between the country's citizens and foreigners. Such a view is justified insofar as the Islamic factor in Russia's cultural, social, and political life is a cohesive, indivisible phenomenon.

ISLAM'S COMPLEXITIES

In the 1990s, Russian politicians and the academic community came to divide Islam into "traditional" and "nontraditional" branches. Traditional Islam is understood as a religious tradition that intertwines with ethnic culture and adherence to "one's own" centuries-old theological and legal school of thought (mazhab). In Russia, Bashkirs and Tatars adhere to Hanafism, and the Muslims in the North Caucasus for the most part follow Shafiism. Different strains of Sufism (such as tariqatism in the North Caucasus) are also part of traditional Islam.

Nontraditional Islam encompasses the forms of Islamic views that began entering Russia after the breakup of the Soviet Union, when the borders with the broader Muslim world were opened. It includes Salafism, fundamentalism, and Wahhabism; the one general term used to define all of these strands—even if not entirely correctly—is "Islamism."

The adherents of traditional and nontraditional Islam engaged in a fierce struggle in which the traditionalists were supported by the secular authorities. The Russian authorities have grown accustomed to the confrontation between the two factions of Islam and have always viewed nontraditional Islam as alien and hostile, as well as the ideological foundation for extremism and terrorism.

Salafism, however, is also a part of Islamic tradition. It originated as early as the ninth century and became a legitimate component of Muslim theology and religious ideology. Pitting Salafism against the native Caucasian or Tatar Islamic factions is primarily political.

Islam experts and some imams are coming to the conclusion that the dichotomy between "native" and "foreign" Islam needs to be abandoned. It is noteworthy that some Dagestani politicians knowledgeable in Islam are already cautiously abandoning such divisions. The local (mostly Sufi) traditionalists and their Salafi opponents, primarily from a moderate wing, are looking for and finding common ground on some issues.

In fact, both have the same goal of instituting Islamic order and introducing sharia law, differing only on the methods of accomplishing that goal. The Salafis are ready to resort to violence. The traditionalists believe in the possibility of peaceful evolution and claim that "re-Islamization" and instituting sharia law is possible within the framework of the Russian state.

Even though President Putin has stressed the necessity "of supporting traditional Islam," such statements do not reflect all the complexities of the internal struggle within Islam.

BECOMING MORE OBSERVANT

In recent years, Islamization has been a distinct characteristic of Muslim migration. Obviously, the term "Islamization" is relative when applied to adherents of Islam. But it is meant in the sense that the earlier waves of Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek migrant workers that went to Russia often violated sharia dietary prohibitions (consuming non-halal food and alcohol), rarely visited mosque, prayed less than required, and did not always fast during Ramadan.

But as migrant communities in Russia became more organized and a Central Asian middle class and business elite emerged, Islam started playing a more prominent role in migrants' lives. This helps to unite the Muslim community, allows the community to retain its ethno-religious identity, and serves as a means of consolidating against the mounting attacks from the growing Russian nationalist camp.

Generally speaking, Muslim migrants from the North Caucasus are very observant. The more cosmopolitan Azerbaijani migrants to Russia have been less inclined to turn to religion, but they are also beginning to reclaim their religious identity. In a few instances, migrants from Azerbaijan petitioned the local Russian authorities to construct "Azerbaijani" (that is, Shia) mosques.

In some areas, migrants account for a good portion of worshippers. According to some Tatar imams, migrants make up more than half of worshippers during Friday general prayers in Chelyabinsk, Khanty-Mansiysk, Salekhard, Saratov, Yekat-

erinburg, and many smaller towns. There have been instances when Tatar imams who did not command the respect of their new congregants refused to conduct services in mosques and asked to be replaced. Some sources claim that Tajiks comprise at least 7 percent of Russia's imams, while the total number of non-native imams in Russia comes to 17 percent. Of the 80,000–100,000 Muslims that attend Kurban Bayram (Eid al-Adha) celebrations at the Moscow Cathedral Mosque, migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia account for more than half of the attendees.

There is a severe shortage of mosques in Moscow due to the migrant influx. Currently, only five mosques are in operation in the Russian capital. In recent years, the construction of mosques has been increasingly frequently financed by migrant businessmen. The first "Tajik" mosque opened its doors in Vladivostok in 2012. Migrants are raising money to build mosques in Naro-Fominsk near Moscow, as well as in Kurgan, Orenburg, Tyumen, and other Russian regions, with the mosque being both a place of worship and also a center for Muslims to socialize and discuss political issues.

CONVERSIONS TO ISLAM

Slavs are converting to Islam in increasing numbers. There were between 2,000 and 3,000 Slavic converts to Islam in the early 2000s (excluding the Russian and Ukrainian women who married Muslims).[3] Current estimates vary, but numbers in the tens of thousands are often cited.

Kharun (Vadim) Sidorov, the head of the National Organization of Russian Muslims, founded in 2004, and the head of the Community of Russian Muslims of the Urals, claims that in his region, every Friday's prayer service brings three new Russian converts to Islam. He also says that ethnic Russians comprise up to 40 percent of congregants in some mosques.[4] In some cases, Russians establish their own congregations, while in others they join the already-established multinational communities.

Different reasons account for this phenomenon. Some Russians are disenchanted with their own ethnocultural and religious identity, and they respect Islam's special vigor, its global ambitions including Muslims' involvement in politics, and its capacity to challenge the West. The idea of Russia "withering" as a state, nation, and civilization first appeared over ten years ago, along with fictional literature on the subject. The central theme was the Islamization of Russia, which reinvigorates the country and leads it toward a triumphant victory over its adversaries. Some Russian nationalists also have quite a positive view of Islam, seeing it as their ally in confronting the West.

As of today, there is no reason to believe that Russian converts to Islam have become a mass phenomenon. Nevertheless, the number of such converts has been rising among Islamic radicals in the last few years. They participated in the Nevski Express high-speed-train bombing (2009), the terrorist attack at Domodedovo Airport (2010), the murder of Said Afandi al-Chirkawi (2012), and other acts of terror.

THE RADICALIZATION OF RUSSIA'S MUSLIMS

Russian Islam experts and Russian politicians agree that Russia's Muslims are becoming radicalized. Bashkortostan's president, Rustem Khamitov, cautiously notes that religious radicalism also poses a risk to the republic.[5] The Minister of the Interior of Tatarstan, Artiom Khokhorin, states that "for thirteen years already an undeclared war has been going on in the republic."[6] One commentator also claimed that "the future goal of Islamists is Siberia."[7]

An increasing number of Islamic radicals from Central Asia are especially active in the Russian regions that border Central Asia or are located nearby (including the Astrakhan, Chelyabinsk, Kurgan, Omsk, Orenburg, Tomsk, and Tyumen Oblasts as well as the Republic of Bashkortostan). Salafi circles dominated by local Muslims operate in the Volga Region, primarily in Tatarstan (Almetyevsk, Kukmor, Naberezhnye Chelny, and Nizhnekamsk), Bashkortostan (Agideli, Baimak, Oktyabrskoye, Sibaya, and Ufa), and in the Nizhniy Novgorod, Samara, Saratov, and Ulyanovsk Oblasts, as well as in Mordovia.

Some of the migrants to these regions belong to Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami and recruit local Muslims into groups of three to five members that call for the creation of an Islamic caliphate and distribute flyers and radical literature, such as the Al Va'i journal. According to one analyst, "There is a significant number of Salafi communities, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami cells and other radical organizations in the Ural Federal District. These organizations may follow the example of their counterparts from other Russian regions and carry out similar brazen attacks in the Urals."[8]

The traditionalists are gradually losing their popularity among Muslim youth in Russia. They have few charismatic and professionally educated clergymen and have been tarnished by collaboration with the secular authorities, to whom they remain loyal. The young people are seeking something new in Islam, something turned toward the current events in their republic, the country, and the world. The traditionalists, who are fixated on preserving the mazhab and ethnocultural traditions, are unable to provide satisfactory answers. Salafis and radicals, for their part, are often capable of offering answers to the questions that concern the youth.

Opinions differ on how much danger radical Islam presents to the stability of a particular region and of the country as a whole. Some believe that the "Islamic challenge" is overrated and poses little threat, while others claim that radicalization exacerbates the situation and is making interreligious and interethnic conflicts worse.

In this respect, the example of southern Russia is sometimes cited. Southern Russia, particularly the Stavropol Region, has experienced significant Salafization of its Muslims—primarily Muslim youth. This change complicates the already-troubled relations between Muslims and Slavs and fuels Slavic migration into central Russia, thus shifting the demographic balance in southern Russia. Stavropol Krai, with Muslims accounting for 26 percent of its population, is not the only region affected by these shifts; Krasnodar Krai (over 20 percent Muslim), Astrakhan Oblast (30 percent), Rostov Oblast (over 10 percent), and other areas are also impacted.

ISLAM AND POLITICS IN RUSSIA

Islam has become a factor in Russian politics, and its presence in the country's political life is even more pronounced than it was in the 1990s. Muslim activism in Russia continues to develop and radicalize. It is easy for Islam to become a form of social protest and an instrument in the struggle for social justice. Reoccurring ethnic conflicts may ultimately lead to interreligious confrontation, and the Russian authorities are not prepared for such a course of events.

Both socially and ethnically, the ummah in Russia is very heterogeneous, and so far ethnic solidarity still prevails over religious unity. However, Muslims could potentially form a more consolidated front. Islam is specifically brought up when social and ethnic conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims escalate. Simmering Islamophobia could produce religious consolidation as well. And when Russian nationalists and certain Russian Orthodox Church ideologists periodically proclaim "Orthodox Russia" to be the best model for Russian statehood, this also contributes to a consolidation around Islam.

So far, the influence of the Arab Spring on Russia's Muslims has been rather limited. But eventually the events in the Middle East are going to affect the post-Soviet space, including Russia.

Notes

[1] Yelena Sadovskaya, "Kazakhstan v Tsentralnoaziatskoy migratsionnoy subsisteme", *Postsovetskie transformatsii: otrazhenie v migratsiyah*, Zh. Zaionchkovskaya, G. Vitkovskaya (eds.) (Moscow: IT "Adamant," 2009). Available in *Demoscope Weekly*, no. 415–416 (March 22–April 4, 2010): p. 21. http://demoscope.ru/weekly/2010/0415/analit04.php

[2] Elshan Rustamov, "V Rossii nakhoditsya bolee 600 tysyach migrantov iz Azerbaijana", 1News.az, December 29, 2012. Available at: www.1news.az/region/Russia/20121229011520232.html.

[3] Galina Sapojnikova, "Pochemu russkie prinimayut islam", *Komsomolskaya Pravda,* October 21, 2003. Available at: www.kp.ru/daily/23141/24151

[4] There is no independent statistical data to confirm this.

[5] "Tochek, po kotorym starayutsya razorvat' obshestvo, mnogo", Interview with Bashkortostan's President Rustem Khamitov, *Kommersant*, December 18, 2012. Available at: http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2093147

[6] Artem Malyutin, "Tatarstan priznal neobyavlennuyu voinu s radikalami". Available at: Kazanweek.ru/article/4619/

[7] Xavier Le Torrivellec, "La Sibérie, prochaine cible des islamistes", *Le Monde*, November 30, 2012. Available at: http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2012/10/30/la-siberie-prochaine-cible-des-islamistes_1783145_3232.html

[8] Aleksei Starostin, "Vliyaniye protestov i revolutsiy na uralskih musulman", *Islam in the CIS* (Moscow—Nizhniy Novgorod), no.3: p. 37.

CARNEGIE MOSCOW CENTER

Founded in 1994, the Carnegie Moscow Center brings together senior researchers from across the Russian political spectrum and Carnegie's global centers to provide a free and open forum for the discussion and debate of critical national, regional, and global issues.

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Founded in 1910, the Carnegie Endowment is a leading, nonpartisan think tank specializing in foreign affairs. It is also the world's first truly global think tank with operations in Washington, Moscow, Beijing, Beirut, and Brussels.

@CarnegieMoscow **facebook.com/CarnegieMoscow**