

Islam in Russia: Religion and Politics

The recent history of the Russian Muslim peoples is characteristic of societies with religious pluralism. Nevertheless, it has its specific features, which are linked, in the first line, to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the demise of the Communist ideology and its practices, a part of which was formed by atheism and religious persecution. Besides, the Moslems participated, together with all other citizens, in the build-up of the new Russian state. This went with conflicts that had an ethnical and confessional component. During the last two decades Russian Moslems reasserted their fully-fledged presence in the world Islamic *ummah*, which became a signpost for its internal processes as well as for its relations to the non-Moslem world.

Who is considered a Moslem in Russia? If one includes only those, who regularly observe the prescribed rites and prohibitions, there are, according to various estimates, 8-9 mn. However, the judgment on the religious affiliation of individuals should be based not on the strict observance of religious norms or the knowledge of the holy texts. According to data provided by Moslem mass media, over 90% of the Moslems do not visit the Mosque¹. The point is the individual's identity, the social environment which has formed their consciousness. This is why a figure of 20 million Moslems in Russia would correspond to reality.

The 90s marked the epoch of religious renaissance in Russia and the introduction of religious freedom. In varying degrees of intensity, three generations of imams, muftis, preachers and members of the secular Moslem intelligentsia participated in the renaissance (legalization) side by side. The first, the senior population, i.e. those who are between 70 and 80 in 2009/2010, the second, namely the clerics who are between 50 and 60 and were, at the beginning of the 90s, under 40, and the third, the population in their thirties. The main load of the Islamic "perestroika" was shouldered by the second generation. The middle generation had opponents on both flanks. For one thing, the old Soviet imams, who had become accustomed to the atheist regime and could, due to their low level of education and their inertia lose their influence – which actually happened – and the pushy young people who had received their education abroad, rejected the local ethno-cultural Islamic tradition and came out for Islamic universalism (which practically turned out to be an incarnation of Arab Islam). The young competitors were more dangerous. They commanded a superb level of knowledge, they had grooved their rhetorical skills at Islamic universities abroad. Nevertheless, the middle generation succeeded not only in preserving its influence, but also to find a common language with many graduates of foreign universities, in convincing them of the necessity of a synthesis of universal and local "traditional" Islam.

In mid-2000 still another, factually the 4th generation of Islamic clerics and preachers in the last two decades, emerges. This generation does not remember the atheism of the Soviet epoch and perceives religious freedom as something natural; it is therefore not capable to adequately evaluate the significance of the Islamic renaissance for the Russian Moslems. This generation is orientated towards universalist Islam.

As a consequence of the Islamic renaissance or its legalization, Russian society, during the last two decades, adapted to the fact, that it is not only a multiethnic, but also an entity of religious diversity. The next-door neighbor may be not only a representative of another ethnic group, but also be affiliated to another religion. Islam became "homegrown" at the beginning of the 21st century. Regardless of the complexity and the contradiction of its perception, of the incomprehensibility of Quor'anic Arabic, and of the rigorous bans imposed by the Sharia,

¹ *Sovremennaiia Mysl'*, Moscow, No. 12 (81), 2005, 5.

Islam, which embraces followers such as Bin Laden, is socially recognized as a part of Russian tradition and history. Russia has formally re-legalized its religious diversity. Russian Islam is internally diversified. There is a certain concentration of radicals in the Caucasus area. Islamization promotes the general de-modernizing trend in the North Caucasus.

In the Tatar-Bashkirian Islamic area the radicals are less visible. Yet, even here, they occupy a small, but sustainable niche. Their presence is felt in almost all Moslem-inhabited regions of Russia. If one looks on the map, where their cells and "circles" (comprising 5-10 members) are marked by green stars, one might get the impression that Russia is literally caught in a net of Islamic radicalism. Its presence is given in Tatarstan (Naberezhnye Chelny, Al'met'ev, Nizhnekamsk, Kukmor), in Bashkiria (Agidel', Baimak, Oktyabrskoe, Sibai, Ufa), in Mordovia (Beloozer'e), in Samarsk Region (Togliatti), in the Kurgan, Orenburg, Penza, Perm, Ul'yanov, Chelyabinsk and Tyumen' regions and also in the southern regions of Russia, which are geographically close to the Moslem Caucasus. In Moscow similar sustainable groups cannot be observed, although the capital is a transit rout of radical emissaries. The full potential of radicalism might be delivered in case of a general rise of political and social tensions, something that does not depend directly on the internal situation within the Islamic community. From this perspective, it is of paramount importance, which consequences the recent economic crisis will spawn in the powder keg of the Northern Caucasus. Possible social shocks will entail a corroboration of the religious factor and social protests will be couched in Islamic language.

Radical Islam competes for influence with the tariqas, the religious orders. By getting involved in politics and directing their attention to social issues, the tariqas become more similar to the Islamists in their ideology and their practice.

The well-grooved convergence sets in: radical and traditional Islam joint in their attempt at introducing the Sharia; their critical positions toward Western expansion, US exceptionalism, and the Islamic world. (True enough, the radicals share the idea of a clash of civilizations, while traditionalists think it is incorrect). The mutual rapprochement of the positions of "new" and traditional Islam is unavoidable: the followers of both currents view Islam as the fundamental order of social relations which must be realized by their control over the government or a radical takeover.

In regions where Muslims constitute a majority or a significant minority, one can observe an endeavour to establish an "Islamic space". Such spaces are in the making in Dagestan and Chechnya as well as in other republics of the region; its characteristics are visible in Tatarstan and Bashkiriya. The Vaqf system (religious endowments) is being reintroduced. There are attempts at re-establishing Islamic principles in banking. In Chechnya and Dagestan gambling houses and saunas are prohibited, in Dagestan, several well-known singers and artists are blacklisted because their behaviour on the scene and in everyday life offends the feelings of believers. Islamic fashion is popularized with the hijab as the basic item. Polygamy is de-facto legalized and is openly propagated not only by the clerics, but also some politicians, including the Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov, and the former Ingushetian president Ruslan Aushev.

The system of relations between Islam and the state is developing. The efforts of the Kremlin to build an "Islamic vertical" have been replaced by the understanding that Russian Islam is polycentric in terms of its organization und cannot be assembled around one institution or one leader.

²G.Kh. Koveshnikova, Sh.M. Abubekerev, *Raschet zakata v Rossii po bukhgalterskomu balansu*, Kazan, 2008, 43.

It is impossible not to recognize the special role that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) played in the formation of Russian statehood. Nevertheless, such a recognition by necessity entails the corroboration of the special place of the ROC in society, its claim for a "special relationship" with the state. This, in its turn, negates equality between denominations and means that the first place is given to Orthodoxy and only the second to Islam. The ostentatious display, in federal TV channels, of the president and the premier praying in church, the relentless efforts of the ROC to introduce as a mandatory subject "fundamentals of orthodox culture" in secondary schools, the necessity to obtain informal clearance from the ROC leadership for the construction of mosques, all that triggers resentment with the Muslims which, by the way, is rarely uttered in public.

Muslim foreign policy activity serves to corroborate the claim about Russia's special place in global politics, about its "intermediary" situation as a Eurasian state which enables it to play the part of a bridge between the Muslim world and the West. It is indeed possible in some cases that it is easier Moscow to interact with Muslims than with Europeans or US Americans. Between Muslims and Moscow there are no sensitive issues (like those which emerge in the relations with the West), concerning the compliance with democratic standards, the legitimacy of their presence in the Big Eight, and the conduct in the European parliament. The „Islamic factor“ is a tangle of various religious and secular problems. This complex is permanently shaped by internal and external circumstances of a political, socio-economic and naturally properly religious nature. On top of that, Russia faces dramatic demographic difficulties which give a special significance to the increase of the Muslim population.

Muslim immigration from Central Asia and the South Caucasus will increase inexorably. Although migration has a two-way profile, a small number of Muslims takes roots in Russia. A paradoxical picture emerges: On the one hand, the migrants are somehow separated from Islam, and for some of them, Islam is a tool of self-defense in an alien environment. This is reminiscent of the situation of Muslims in Europe, where Islam also plays an important role among migrants.

The state is obliged to deliver by elaborating a tactical and effective model of relations with the various denominations. It is clear that an absolute secularism is out of the question and that the secular authorities will have to play the difficult part of mediators.