FORUM

Islam and Ethnicity in Russia Together or Apart?

Islam and Ethnicity in Russia An Introduction

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Those who are not all that familiar with Russia might be unaware of its religious diversity and the complex ways in which religion relates to national and ethnic categories. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church has managed to regenerate and now exerts a considerable influence on the conservative agenda promoted by the government. But just like Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism are, since 1997, considered traditional religions of Russia, forming part of the country's heritage. And with the demographic changes in mind, no religious group will, in the near future, gain as much prominence as the Muslim one: experts assume that by 2050 the Muslim share of the Russian population will amount to more than one third (Laruelle 2016: 1).

In this forum discussion we wish to direct the reader's attention to the ethnic dimension of Islam in Russia. It may come as no surprise that in the world's largest country, with its exceptional diversity and after decades of social engineering under the Communist Party, the question of identification is a complicated one for minorities, however they define themselves. Both among the various groups of the North Caucasus and Turkic peoples such as the Tatars and Bashkirs, to be found in the Volga and Ural regions as well as Siberia, Islam is the predominant religion, but – and this is the topic of this forum – in diverse configurations with ethnic and national identities.

The essays examine the question of the relationship between Islam and ethnicity in Russia from the perspective of a variety of everyday Muslim experiences and of social or official discourses about Islam. The forum unravels these complex ways of living and thinking about Islam, in which ethnicity may or may not play a role from pious Muslims

forming a 'halal movement'; Central Asian migrants; Tatar Muslim officials, Islamic clerics from the past and nationalists; Muslims in the eastern and western parts of the North Caucasus and, finally, Shia Muslims, a diverse group composed of autochthones and migrants. At the core of a study of the relation between Islam and ethnicity we find the question of whether these two aspects of identity are distinct or if they can and do merge and even reinforce each other. The question is particularly acute if we consider the wide diversity of ways in which Muslims live their religion. The concept of 'ethnic Muslims' as it exists in Russia indicates that the notion of Muslim identity, 'Muslimness', is intimately linked to ethnicity as an essence shared by all members of the national community (see Benussi and Zhemukhov in this forum). Faith can be said to be carried *in one's heart* (Benussi) and does not necessarily lead to a Muslim lifestyle. Here ethnicity and Islam are linked intimately but, one could say, *at the expense* of religion in the sense that religious practice does not play a significant role in daily life.

We find the exact opposite when ethnicity appears as irrelevant to the Islamic faith and the two aspects of identity are kept separate. This is the case for Central Asian migrants, as shown by Roche; Russian converts to Islam and also the 'halal movement', as analysed by Benussi. For Central Asian migrants Islam represents a status translation from a migrant identity that creates barriers to integration into Russian society to a respected Muslim identity. Here Islam is lived and experienced as ethnically *inclusive* and as an integrative factor. The halal movement, composed of scripturally oriented observant Muslims, Muslims who live their faith on the basis of the Islamic scriptures, also represents this inclusiveness. These experiences of relating to Islam reveal a dynamic and cosmopolitan vision of Islam in which one is part of a global ummah. They are also in tune with changes in the Muslim world. Roche's and Benussi's studies are ethnographies of dynamic urban spaces.

Although Islam and ethnicity can appear as distinct or as weakening one another, other essays in the forum also show efforts to harmoniously integrate various layers of Muslim identity comprising an ethnic, religious and national identification. The concept of traditional Islam represents this effort to solve the difficult conundrum of a multilayered Muslim identity. However, by contrast to the active commitment to observe the religion and the phenomenon of a practice-based ethic among pious Muslims, as discussed before, the notion of 'concept' already suggests the existence of discourses and categories about Islam. The question is how categories such as traditional Islam

and Euro-Islam (Schmoller) can be related to concrete, lived religious practices apart from the phenomenon of weak religiosity as represented by 'ethnic Muslims'. The notion of a localised Islamic orthodoxy, as discussed by Di Puppo, represents such an attempt to elevate the theological credentials of a local Islam. The Hanafi legal tradition figures prominently in this idea of an 'orthodox traditional Islam'. Garipova suggests, however, another view of the Hanafi legal school as a major component of a Tatar Muslim identity. She shows how shari'a law was, in pre-Soviet times, practised in a much more flexible way than the now-prevalent rigid interpretation of it may lead us to assume and, thus, was able to accommodate components of customary law, Russian imperial law and even other Muslim legal schools.

The effect of political change on religious and ethnic identification becomes apparent in several contributions to the forum. With the failure of the national movements for independence in Chechnya (Zhemukhov) and sovereignty in Tatarstan (Schmoller), a shift from ethnic to religious identification can be interpreted as a common reaction to crisis. Although ethnic minority nationalism has not become a thing of the past in Russia, it cannot compete with the success story of Islam over the last twenty years. As a traditional religion, Islam also benefits from state support (Roche). Islam, even when lived as beyond ethnicity, can provide a reservoir for social aspirations, as in the case of the halal movement, where a halal lifestyle can be a way to distance oneself from the 'Russian mainstream' (Benussi). Similar distancing from ethnic categorisation can be noted in the case of other piety revivals on the rise amongst the ascendant middle classes in other geographic contexts, such as the numerous Pentecostal/Charismatic Christian movements burgeoning all over the world. In the case of Shia Islam, future developments could both maintain or diminish the role of ethnicity (De Cordier). Shi'ism can be seen as an inalienable component of a Eurasian subsphere in the Islamic world, but it can also channel dissatisfaction with the official Sunni authorities both among Tajik migrants and among small ethnic groups in the North Caucasus (De Cordier).

All the essays show that Muslim experiences in Russia cannot be understood outside the global debates taking place today in the Muslim world and also the question of the place of religion in current societies. Muslims in Russia search for answers to the question of how to live their religion that lead them to multiple worldviews: from visions of a dynamic and cosmopolitan Islam as a path to a modern, consumerist lifestyle, to the idea of a Eurasian space, with its specific blend of

local cultures and religions. The wide diversity of these visions shows how conservative views that seem prominent today can take very different and dynamic shapes and how the topic of Islam in Russia offers us a privileged viewpoint to gain a deeper understanding of them.

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Reference

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