

Islam - a real concern for Moscow

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When you say Russia, you think of an Orthodox country, with deep roots in Christianity. In the 10th century, the Russian leader Vladimir adopted Greek Orthodox rites, and from that moment, the Russian state, in all its forms and

under all the regimes that ruled the country, Russians remained a people of faithful believers. Even in the Soviet era, beginning with 1922, when religion in the Russian state was forbidden and atheism became the official

doctrine of the USSR, the communists could not make religious faith disappear from people's minds and hearts. It was a harsh period, because of the Soviets' ideology that consistently advocated the control, suppression and, ultimately, the elimination of religious beliefs.¹

Communists did everything to destroy religion and its symbols: they destroyed holy places like churches, temples and mosques; religious leaders were ridiculed, harassed, deported and even killed. Schools and media were overwhelmed with messages coming from aggressive atheistic propaganda, and at all levels of society, the idea of "scientific atheism" was promoted, as the only truth the Soviet people should accept.

Even if the Soviet Union's Constitution guaranteed freedom of worship, punishments for those who practised religion were harsh and religion was completely suppressed in the time of Socialists. Later on, the official religion was tolerated and used by communist officials in order to expand control in areas where they could use this tool. We can say that never before in human history had there been such a concerted effort to stamp out not merely a religion, but all traces of it.²

But from the late '80s, with Mikhail Gorbachev in power, the Soviet state changed a lot. He gave people new freedoms, both political and social, and as a result, many of the buildings, monasteries and churches were returned to the official Orthodox Church. The year 1988 was an important turning point in the history of religion of the Soviet Union, it was the year when many old churches and monasteries closed down by Communists during the Soviet era were reopened.

¹ *Soviet Union. Policy towards Nationalities and Religions in Practice*, <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-12521.html>.

² Andrew Greeley, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Sep., 1994), pp. 253, <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1386689>.

Today, Russia has different religions with varying numbers of followers and the most important are Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism. From all these, Russian Orthodoxy is the main, dominant religion in the Russian Federation. Approximately 100 million citizens identify themselves as Russian Orthodox, although only 5 percent of Russians call themselves observant of religious Orthodox customs.³ Most of the Muslim population lives in the Volga - Ural region, but also in the Northern Caucasus, Moscow, St. Petersburg and the western part of Siberia. Buddhists live in three regions on Russian territory: Buryatia, Tuva and Kalmykia. Russia also has people who still practise pantheistic and pagan rites. They are residents of the Siberian region and are from the Far East part of the country, Yakutia, Chukotka etc.

Estimates show that Christians constitute the largest religious group of the Russian Federation, almost 83% of the country's residents considering themselves Russian Orthodox Christians. In 1997, on September 26, President Boris Yeltsin signed a law on religion that recognized four main religions: Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. The law's preamble recognizes the special link between Orthodoxy and the history of the Russian state, and also with the establishment and further development of the spirituality and culture of the Russian people.

The law adopted in 1997 officially guaranteed - even if it wasn't necessary - Orthodoxy as the main religion of the country. Furthermore, it gave full legal privileges to the Orthodox Church, which became the only religious organization eligible to receive state aid.

In the post-Soviet era, the relationship between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church has focused on a few issues,

³ *Russia*, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, International Religion Freedom Report 2010, November 17, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148977.htm>.

such as: the admissibility of religious instruction in public schools (through the framework of “Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture” courses); the introduction of chaplaincy in the armed forces; the restitution of property; and the limitation of competition by other faiths on Russian soil.⁴

Today, not only that the clergy are taking part in all levels of the social and political life in Russia, but the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the Kremlin seems to be very close, placing, according to some, other religions at a disadvantage. One of the people who identifies a problem in this closer relationship is Sergey Mozgovoy, from the independent Freedom of Conscience Institute, who stated in January 2010 that Russian lawmakers are rushing through laws to legitimize decisions made earlier by President Dmitry Medvedev on behalf of Russian Orthodoxy. These include teaching the Orthodox faith to the exclusion of others in public schools and universities and the establishment of a military chaplain corps.⁵

Islam in Russia

The second religion in Russia is Islam. The Russian Public Opinion Research Center Levarda made public in 2007, June 6 a poll that indicates that 6% of respondents say that they consider themselves Muslims. They constitute the nationalities that live in the North Caucasus region, somewhere between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea: Adygheians, Balkars, Chechens, Circassians, Ingush, Kabardins, Karachay and numerous Dagestani peoples. Another area where

Muslims live is the middle of the Volga Basin, Tatars and Bashkirs, most of them Muslims.

In the Russian Federation, Islam is considered a traditional religion, a part of the Russian historical heritage. On the existing Russian territory, the first Muslims were the Dagestani people, from the region Derbent (8th century) and the first Muslim state in Russia was Volga Bulgaria, established in 922. From the beginning of the Soviet era, the regime, fearful of a pan-Islamic movement, tried to divide the Muslims into smaller groups, into separate entities, a separation that was accomplished by creating six Muslim republics, where Soviet authorities promoted the development of a separate culture and language.⁶

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the official reconciliation between the Russian Federation - the successor of the Soviet state - and Islam began. In 1990, the restriction imposed by the Communists to the practice of religion was lifted, which increased the numbers of Russian Muslims that made pilgrimages to the holy city of Mecca. Also, in 1995, the Union of Muslims of Russia was established, an organization interested in improving inter-ethnic relations and ending the bad impression Russians had regarding Muslims and Islam.

But in late 1994, something happened in Russia that affected relations between Islam and Russian authorities and people. As a result of the Chechen rebels' intention of separation from the Russian state, Moscow decided to send the security forces in the Republic of Chechnya, where a brutal military action was launched. After two years of violations of human rights on both sides, Russian and Chechen authorities signed an agreement settling a form of peaceful *modus vivendi*, so

⁴ Dmitry Gorenburg, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Russian Politics*, Russian Military Reform, January 20, 2011, <http://russiamil.wordpress.com/2011/01/20/the-russian-orthodox-church-and-russian-politics-editors-introduction/>.

⁵ Peter Fedynsky, *Kremlin Ties to Orthodox Church Raise Concern*, Voice of America, January 31, 2010, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/europe/Kremlin-Ties-to-Orthodox-Church-Raise-Concern-83215807.html>.

⁶ *Soviet Union. Policy towards Nationalities and Religions in Practice*, <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-12521.html>.

that Russian security forces withdrew from Chechen territory.

The Peace Treaty signed in 1997 was not enough to erase the suffering and the hate from the Chechens' hearts, so a number of terrorist attacks attributed to Chechen separatists made the Kremlin decide to launch a second intervention in Chechnya in 1999. Ten years later, after the situation in Chechnya changed, once Ramzan Kadyrov was confirmed as Chechen President in 2007 and in 2009, Russian authorities decided to end counterterrorism operations in Chechnya. The specter of potential conflict in the North Caucasus was raised again by the March 2010 bombing of the Moscow metro and the January 2011 explosions in Moscow's Domodedovo airport.⁷

The rivalry between Russian Christians and Muslims

From the beginning, the Russian state has always bordered two different spaces: Europe and the Orient. In the past, the Communists found a way to make it work: they institutionalized atheism, personality cult and, in order to unify people of diverse faiths and ethnicities, they tried to make a homogenous working class and use other forms of propaganda to exclude Islam from the day to day problems. But the collapse of the USSR created a vacuum in ideology that reignited the search, approach and passion for religion, suppressed for so many years.

A new issue surfaced in Russia and became more and more evident: the struggle between Orthodox Christianity and Islam, keeping the pattern of East versus West competition. Recent years have proved that there is a trend for the East to gain domination over pan-Slavism in a time when the demographics of

the Russian Federation follows a downward line and the Muslims from the violent region of North Caucasus are looking for jobs in Russian cities.

Today, Moscow is confronting a big problem: the number of Muslims has increased massively, a situation that has conducted to ethnic hatred that has affected a big part of the Russian population. In Moscow's mosques there is not enough room for all Muslims anymore, so they have started to worship in the streets.

With an estimated number of 12.3 million migrants, Russia risks becoming a battlefield between the immigrants and ultra-nationalists. The latter perceive the growing number of Muslims as a danger to the motherland, so they militate for a "Russia for Russians!"⁸

If we look to growing Islam in the West, undoubtedly France is in the most difficult situation. With a Muslim population estimated at 10 - 15 % and a very low birth rate among its own citizens, the native French, and a high number of births among Muslim immigrants, the future of France is not so bright.

Regarding the Russian Federation, which is a special case, the situation is also problematic. It is estimated that its Muslim population is of about 10 to 12%, with a worst demographic situation than in France.⁹ So, in those cases, could we talk about Muslim power in Russia? It may sound strange, but the Russian Federation has the largest number of Muslims of all states in Europe, with the share of Muslim population rising very fast.

The 2002 census found that Russia's Muslims numbered 14.5 million, 10% of its total of 145 million people. In 2005, the Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, estimated the number of

⁸ Oxana Onipko, *Islamization of Russia*, <http://www.reportagebygettyimages.com/content/pdf/custom-pdf/11193.pdf>.

⁹ *Russian Army to Be Muslim Majority In Few Decades*, Prophecy News Watch, <http://www.prophecynewswatch.com/2011/January01/0141.html>.

⁷ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Background Note: Russia, March 16, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3183.htm>.

Muslims at 20 million. Ravil Gaynutdin, head of Russia's Council of Muftis, talks about 23 million, including Azeri and Central Asian migrants.¹⁰ And the problem is that the Muslim population on Russian territory is increasing, while the number of native Russian people decreases.

In 2010, the leader of the Russian Muslim community criticized in a serious way the Russian authorities. Ravil Gaynutdin, the head of the Council of Muftis, accused Moscow of attempting to "suppress Islam" and trying to prevent the unification of all Muslims that live in the Russian Federation. Three years earlier, in 2007, Shamil Alyautdinov, the imam of one of Moscow's four mosques, insisted that Russians should not use the word "minority" for the followers of a religion which emerged on Russian territory much earlier than Christian religion did. This looks more like the attitude of someone who defending his territory, a harsh statement that cannot bring anything good.

Russian ultra-nationalists versus Muslims

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, followed by a growing number of Muslims on the territory of its legal successor - the Russian Federation, and the effects of the Second Chechen War made many of the Russian extremist groups associate Muslim population and Islam - their religion, with terrorism and domestic crimes. Russians are also angry because of Moscow's financial support for the North Caucasus region as part of the Kremlin's policy and intentions to keep it under the Russian influence and control.

Until now, Moscow was the main target in Russia in terms of political extremism and violence. Reports of independent organizations

talk about hundreds of people killed by radical nationalists. In 2005, a report edited by international human rights watchdog Amnesty International revealed that at least 28 people were killed and a number of 366 assaulted, violent racism being the cause of these casualties. In 2006, in the northern town Kondopoga, police forces were supplemented after hundreds of ethnic Russians burned businesses and cars owned by traders that came from the Caucasus. The cause of this violence was the death of two ethnic Russians a week before, after a fight with some Chechens.

Russian authorities have always had a tolerant policy regarding extreme-right nationalist groups. They are allowed to gather for an annual rally every year. Banned a year before for technical reasons, in 2010 the event was reuniting together more than 5,000 people. On December 11, present in Moscow's Manezh Square, somewhere close to the Kremlin, Nazis saluted and launched racist slogans. They didn't stop and started savagely beating citizens who seemed to be from Central Asia or the Caucasus, Russia's mainly Muslim southern region, and at least 20 people needed medical assistance.

In 2011, on November 4, thousands of far-right Nazi-saluting nationalists gathered in the streets of the Russian capital in what was called the "Take Back Russia" demonstration against the Muslim population. People were angry because of the migrants coming from the Caucasus region, but also for the money Moscow is allocating for this region. About 5,000 Russians, most of them young people, were chanting "*Russia for Russians*" and "*migrants today, occupiers tomorrow*", protesting against the danger of the high number of non-Slavs in Moscow and other parts of the country.

And these are only a few of the many incidents that have happened in last years in Russia, and no doubt that in the future racist incidents will

¹⁰ *Russia's Muslims. A benign growth*, The Economist, April 4, 2007, http://www.economist.com/node/8961754?story_id=8961754.

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continue to be a real concern for Russian authorities. Today, Moscow is facing a real problem: growing racism of the radical nationalists and the growing number of Muslims in Moscow and other parts of the country. Undoubtedly, the increasing influence of the Muslim community, corroborated with the demographic shift (if it proceeds for a long time), can change the situation in Russia in a dramatic way, and the country would suffer because of the decrease of the number of followers of the Christian religion. And this is the biggest fear of all Russians. But the Russians' fear is contrary to the feelings of the Muslim population about Russia - they feel proud of living and working there.

In this context, the real problem for the Kremlin seems to be the different approach to the situation by the two sides involved in it: while the unwanted Muslims are right in the place they want to be and they want to live, Russians' hatred is growing and is impossible to fight with, because in their opinion, Russia is only for the Russians and not for other people. Also, the Kremlin must eliminate or at least blur the causes of disagreement between Russians and Muslims. But how can Moscow do this? There are two important issues and none of it can be "fixed": first, there is the religious problem, and the second one is the money that the Kremlin allocates for the North Caucasus so it can control and maintain its domination in the region.

In this case, Moscow must find a solution to make the living of Russians and Muslims together much easier, and to reconcile both sides for now and for the future, especially as it is estimated that by the year 2050, Islam is likely to become Russia's predominant religion.

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