

Russia's Muslims

A Growing Challenge for Moscow

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In dealing with Russia's Muslim minority, the government in Moscow is facing a challenge that is likely to become more serious in coming years. By most estimates, self-identified Muslims make up at least 10 percent of the country's total population of approximately 143 million. Looking at population size alone underestimates the political and demographic influence of Russia's Muslims, however. Ethnic Muslims are growing in number even as Russia's total population shrinks. They are geographically concentrated in large cities, the Volga region, and, most significantly, the North Caucasus, a region that in recent years has been wracked by violence.

The post-Communist Islamic revival in Russia began gradually, but gathered steam in the late 1990s. Mosques quickly opened in virtually every Muslim village, not just in the North Caucasus, but also in the Volga region and in parts of Siberia inhabited by Tatars, Kazakhs, and Bashkirs. The total number of mosques in the country increased from 300 in 1991, to 4,000 in 2001, to over 8,000 today. In cities that had previously been limited to one large mosque each, smaller mosques began to open in every neighborhood. Many of these mosques were financed by foreign money, much of which came from private foundations in Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states. Given the sudden increase in demand for clerics versed in Islamic thought and practice and the lack of Islamic educational facilities in the region, these foundations often sent clerics to run the new mosques. Many of these clerics sought to eliminate local practices and innovations by preaching the puritanical Salafi Islam most commonly practiced in Saudi Arabia. Although Salafi practices appeared excessively strict - and therefore radical - to most Russian Muslims, they gained popularity with young people who distrusted local Muslim leaders because of their lack of Islamic education and possible ties to Russian security services. Many of these students came to believe that Salafism

was a purer form of Islam and rejected traditional Islamic practices of the region. Local leaders felt threatened by these foreign clerics and their followers and, by highlighting the danger of the spread of Islamic radicalism in Russia, succeeded in having most of them expelled by the late 1990s. Nevertheless, Salafi Islam continued to spread throughout Russia's Muslim republics, particularly in the North Caucasus. Russian leaders came to brand all followers of Salafi Islam, regardless of their political views, as radical Wahhabis. Authorities believe that they are the main source of religiously-inspired violence in the North Caucasus and Russia as a whole.

The Arc of Instability

Although Salafi Muslims are found throughout the Russian Federation, the majority of the movement's Russian followers live in the North Caucasus. It is thus not surprising that the government's relationship with its Muslim population has been dominated for the past several years by the dynamics of this region. During the first Chechen war, the Russian government was able to mostly contain the conflict within Chechnya's borders, though occasional terrorist attacks occurred outside the republic. Over time, however, the conflict shifted in nature and scope, which was especially evident during the second Chechen war.

This war began with an invasion of Dagestan by groups that included both Chechens and Dagestanis. They proclaimed their goal to be the establishment of an Islamic state throughout the North Caucasus. The Russian government defeated the incursion and then used it as a pretext to launch a new invasion of Chechnya. Nevertheless, this demonstrated that what had begun as an ethnonationalist struggle for Chechen independence had become a broader Islamist struggle under the influence of the international radical Islamist community, which had sent money and people to help fight.

The current situation in Chechnya is gradually beginning to normalize. The war itself has been reduced to isolated skirmishes, and some of the leading Chechen terrorists have been killed, including Shamil Basayev, the leader of the Islamic radical wing of the nationalist movement since the mid-1990s. The Russian government has been relatively successful at turning over administration of the region to its local Chechen allies, who have even undertaken some physical reconstruction in the republic. The region is now controlled by Prime Minister Ramzan Kadyrov, who runs his own private army with a reputation for extreme brutality and who is reported to have personally participated in the torture of civilians. Although Kadyrov's rule has been repressive, the amount of violence directed at civilians in the region has declined significantly under his rule as the effectiveness of the separatist forces has diminished over time.

As violence has been declining within Chechnya, however, it has been spreading to other parts of the North Caucasus. Three years ago, major violence was still confined to Chechnya and Dagestan. Since then, it has spread throughout the region, with major attacks in Ingushetia in June 2004, in Beslan in September 2004, and in Kabardino-Balkaria in October 2005. The March 2005 killing of Aslan Maskhadov, the secular nationalist president of the independent Chechen republic, shifted the balance of forces

within the armed separatist movement in the North Caucasus in favor of forces seeking to establish a pan-regional Islamic state. While Chechen terrorist attacks have occurred outside the republic since 1995, the more recent attacks have been carried out not by Chechen infiltrators, but primarily by fighters from the towns and regions where the attacks took place. This crucial change demonstrates that the character of the fighting has evolved; Chechen radicals now primarily serve a coordinating role while locals familiar with a particular location carry out the actual attack.

Revolt of the Hopeless

Moscow blames the spread of violent Islamist radicals throughout the North Caucasus on foreign influences in the region. However, in explaining the rise of violent Islamism, the role of mercenaries and ideologues from the Muslim world is very much secondary to domestic factors. Russian President Vladimir Putin's North Caucasus policy has, if anything, hastened the spread of Islamic radicalism in the region. Federal and local governments have come to see all religious Muslims as potential radical Islamists and have increasingly begun to suppress Islam as a whole. Youth who studied Islam in the Middle East and practice the religion peacefully, but in ways different from local tradition, are treated with suspicion and sometimes arrested and beaten. Such actions mainly serve to further radicalize pious Muslims, some of whom then turn to violence.

Widespread corruption and poverty throughout the region have contributed to the popularity of radical Islam. Unemployment rates throughout the North Caucasus hover around 50 percent, and wages are only two-thirds the Russian average. Much of the population has come to blame this poverty on the corruption of local government officials and local representatives of the federal government. Massive corruption has virtually eliminated outside investment in the region and is in the process of destroying the region's political institutions. The common view among the population is that powerful clans have monopolized the political and economic resources of the region and that representatives of these clans exploit the local population, steal resources sent by the federal government, and use their political power to repress anyone who tries to change the situation through political or legal channels. Since proponents of radical Islam insist that under Islamic rule theft and corruption will not be tolerated, many unemployed young men have turned to it as an alternative to a hopeless existence.

The Future of Muslims in Russia

Russia's Muslims could potentially play a dominant role in Russian political life. Even now, the Russian government has made efforts to use its Muslim population to increase ties with the larger Muslim world, including becoming an observer at the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the most important international organization of Muslim states. At the same time, the Russian government has used the specter of Islamic radicalism to maintain its popularity and justify its continuing war against Chechen rebels.

Sharp cultural, ethnic, and religious divisions within the Muslim community, however, have limited the political influence of Russian Muslims and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Since the start of Soviet modernization efforts in the

1920s, Russia's Muslims have been divided between urban dwellers and villagers. Urban Muslims look down on their rural cousins as uncultured and tradition-bound, while rural Muslims see urbanites as having abandoned the ways of their community in favor of Russian culture. As modernization and urbanization continue, recent migrants to the cities are at the forefront of efforts to get Russian Muslims to maintain traditional cultural and religious values. These migrants are especially likely to turn to radical Islam, especially if they encounter difficulties in adapting to city life.

Ethnic divisions will also continue to play an important role in shaping disagreements within Russia's Muslim community. Tension between Bashkirs and Tatars over the status of the several hundred thousand Tatars living in Bashkortostan will divide the Volga Muslims, while Balkars and Cherkess in the North Caucasus will continue to agitate for the formation of their own ethnic regions, separate from the larger Kabardin and Karachai communities with which they are now joined. Ongoing ethnic tensions in Dagestan between Dargins, Avars, and Kumyks may become more severe now that Avars control all of the republic's political institutions. Finally, there is another division between members of such indigenous ethnic groups and Muslim migrants from Central Asia and Azerbaijan who live in the larger Russian cities and work primarily as traders.

The dominance of ethnic divisions over Muslim unity has been one of the main sources of grievance among Russia's growing population of radical and reformist Muslims. These groups, some but not all of which support the use of violence, have been preaching that ethnic divisions within the Muslim community can be overcome by purifying Muslim practice and belief according to Salafi tenets. Followers of Salafism in Russia have indeed developed far more extensive cooperation across ethnic groups than have followers of traditional Islam. But at the same time, they have brought about a new, and potentially even more serious, split within the Muslim community – between those who practice the new imported doctrine and those who follow more traditional spiritual and ritual-focused Muslim practices.

The diversity of Russia's Muslims presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Moscow. The Kremlin needs to work carefully to limit the spread of potentially violent radical Islam in the North Caucasus and beyond without alienating the rest of Russia's Muslim population. So far, the government has not done a very good job of this. There is still time, however, for Russian policymakers to come to understand that not all pious Muslims are potential violent radicals. In fact, the majority of Russia's religious Muslims opposes radical Islam and would gladly work with the government to reduce its influence. Such an alliance could be cemented if the Russian leadership began to treat its Muslim population with respect, appointed regional leaders who have the trust of the local population, and acted to reduce the corruption that has virtually destroyed the economy of much of the North Caucasus. This is the goal of policies recently undertaken by Dmitry Kozak, Putin's representative to the Southern Federal District. Kozak has engineered the replacement of several corrupt governors with reformers who are less beholden to local clans and who have shown themselves less likely to engage in indiscriminate reprisals against religious Muslims. The security forces in the region and in Moscow oppose his efforts, however, and it is not clear which side will ultimately gain the upper hand. A complete revision of Russian policy toward Muslims may not

be possible until after the Russian presidential elections of 2008.