
THE WORD OF THE GUEST EDITOR

Since the beginning of the Millenium, Africa has captivated a new level of attention, enthusiasm and lust on the part of the world's leading state and non-state actors. Due to the singular bounty of its natural resources, optimistic demographic futures, positive trends in the development of human capital and sustained economic growth Africa is now frequently referred to as the Continent of the Future.¹ According to the forecasts of the Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, provided the current trends persist, the steadily consolidating Africa is due to assume the role of a new full-fledge center of global economic and political power, commanding over 40 percent of untackled global natural resources (without the maritime and deep-ocean component), 55 percent of the planet's population and over 70 percent of the annual increase of the middle class in the world. Besides, over a quarter of votes in the UN General Assembly will continue to belong to African member states. Taken together the above mentioned factors jointly give African nations powerful potential say in the future global governance.

The recognition of the paramount importance of the African natural resources, population potential and the development dynamics of Africa resulted in ideological, economic and military-political expansion into the continent of external players on the scale last witnessed during the great scramble for Africa in the late 19th century. True, the corona virus pandemic and the subsequent ongoing global economic crisis have introduced previously unexpected features into the picture of a new normality in the world. But at least up till now, the Africa-related trends of the global transformations have not changed and, despite inevitable temporary damage, they still look healthy and robust.² Of course, a very significant bulk of historic problems, including some labeled as "endemic" for Africa (income inequity, healthcare problems, corruption, significant level of political instability, internal conflicts, etc), will inevitably remain evident and, in certain cases, even crying in the future too. But hardly any of them will represent a dominant characteristic of African development through the middle-term to long-term perspective of the current century.

The global transformations, underway now, have generated important changes in the sub-regional priorities of international state and non-state actors that are particularly active in the African direction. North-Eastern African (NEA) part of the continent has gained new importance and perspective. These are countries with access to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, but some are the

1 Ruslan Dmitriev and Stanislav Gorokhov, Geostrategic Competition of Non-State Actors in Africa: The Roman Catholic Church in the Fight for the 'Continent of Hope', *Journal of the Institute for African Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 4, 2019, pp. 70-81.

2 Irina Abramova, Coronavirus in African: Social, Economic and Political Consequences, *Outlines of Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, Law*, Vol. 13, No 5, 2020, pp. 38-56.

landlocked African nations (Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, eastern Chad and the Central African Republic, and Rwanda, the latter increasingly gravitates towards the east coast of the continent). In the 2020s, strategic attention to this zone is likely to increase sharply. According to a forecast, in 2020–2030 the sub-region will experience an economic boom and an increase in geostrategic significance, resulting from its active integration into global infrastructure, transport and information and communication chains.³ This is largely due to the special importance of the sub-region to the viability of the southern route of Beijing’s “One Belt One Road” initiative and the “Chinese Dream” megaproject.

This already puts on the agenda the issue of security guarantees in this sub-region, where the potential for interstate confrontations and the threat of terrorism is high. Even today, the subregion is witnessing an unprecedented spike in creation of military bases by players external to Africa, from NATO powers to Japan, Turkey and Persian Gulf monarchies. The religious factor in this context is already playing and will continue to play a very significant role in the development of the region. And the point is not only that the region’s population is heterogeneous in confessional terms and in faith-related cultural backgrounds. The peoples of the sub-region represent an endless mosaic of often conflicting (or hybrid) religious, socio-cultural constructs, national, racial, ethnic and ethno-political identities. This fact greatly impedes the processes of national consolidation and state building.

The religion factor still continues to be a channel for external manipulation and management of the development of the situation in NEA, from the encouragement of religious extremism and terrorism to influencing the political decision-making process in the country, influencing the election results and forming development strategies. This factor is not unique for Northeast Africa. Suffice to mention typologically similar historical experience of partition of the British colonial India, or more recent history of the former Yugoslavia, or the current attempts to bring a schism in the Orthodox world by dividing the existing Churches on the secular principles of the current national sovereignty. At the same time, like elsewhere in the world, religious institutions and organizations themselves, being non-state actors of global weight, are implementing their agenda in Northeast Africa in many ways: from vying to increase the number of supporters and followers through proselytism to active interference in the domestic political, cultural and even economic life of the countries in the sub-region.

The current issue of the *Politics and Religion Journal* is dedicated to the multifaceted in-depth analysis of the role of the religious factor in Northeast Africa. Recent patterns and the dynamics of the eventful development of NEA highlight how the various ways religious values enter the political, economic, strategic and cultural life of the nations in the sub-region. The extreme manifestations are

3 Irina Abramova and Leonid Fituni, *The African Segment of Multipolar World; Dynamics of geostrategic significance*, *Mirovaya Ekonomika I Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya*, Vol. 62, No. 12, 2018, pp: 5-14.

witnessed in the terrible toll of thousands of human lives claimed not only by religious extremism and terrorism, but ethnic and religion-based separatism. In broader picture religious segregation and exclusion contribute to the preservation of enclaves of illiteracy and poverty in certain areas in this part of the continent.

Leonid Fituni begins his article "Religion, Elites and Sanctions in Northeast Africa: Regional impacts of superpower messianism" with the analysis of the recent transformations in the confessional landscape of NEA. He argues that though the observed changes reflect the objective processes of modernization in region, they were to a significant extent stimulated and accelerated by the subjective influence of local elites, who incessantly fought for ethnic autonomy, confessional separation or clan supremacy. Their action has been efficiently and selfishly exploited by a wide range of external state and non-state actors - from the global superpowers to international extremists. The recently resumed superpower rivalry, now between USA and China, both of which have made manifest their messianic messages to the world and to the countries of the region, can further aggravate the ethnic rifts and confessional discord in the region.

The article of Tatiana Denisova "The First Russian Religious Missions to Ethiopia at the End of the 19th Century" is devoted to relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. In the 1880s, the first religious missions were sent to Ethiopia, and contacts between the two churches were established. The author notes, that Ethiopia is a country of the ancient Christian religion, which has managed to defend its independence for many centuries, surrounded by hostile, primarily Muslim, neighbors. In this the Russian public saw direct parallels with the history of Russia, morally and politically identifying itself, with the proud people that heroically defended their national and spiritual independence. Sympathy for a distant country and its people was strengthened by an entrenched (but erroneous) belief of the Russian public about the close theological similarity of the Russian Orthodox and Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo churches.

Stanislav Mezentsev, the author of the article "Politics and Religion in the Formation of Ethiopian Statehood: Retrospective from Empire through Revolutionary Dictatorship until Federal Democratic Republic" argues that the process of formation of the Ethiopian Statehood was inextricably linked to significant and contradictory influence of different religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism, but Christianity above all. However, it was not a one-way influence of the religion upon the country's political life. The imperial policies and politics in turn, often exploited religion for Empire's own benefits. The importance of Christianity in Ethiopia's culture and history is not limited to the antiquity. The Christian religion from ancient times to the present is an integral part of the basic foundations of all aspects of Ethiopian society. However, after the 1990s, Islam began to play an increasingly prominent role. It cannot be ruled out that this trend will continue

to increase in the medium term. Many experts say that the danger of radicalization of Islam in the Horn of Africa, including Ethiopia, is on the rise. The growth of Salafist ideology in East Africa has challenged long established norms of tolerance and interfaith cooperation in the region.

Sergey V. Kostelyanets in his article "The Rise and Fall of Political Islam in Sudan" has a different opinion. He comes to the conclusion that the phenomenon of political Islam in the post-colonial Sudan may seem to have completed a full life cycle. The politicization of Islam prevailed merely as a tool of legitimization, a favored crutch of the autocratic regime; the theological aspects gave way to political necessity. Moreover, political Islam failed to provide answers to social and economic problems, and it also no longer offered spiritual guidance. The factionalism of the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan contributed to the weakening of the Islamists' support base and decreased their mobilization potential. The author believes, that despite the continuing spread of Islamic values and norms in Sudanese society, a revival of political Islam in the country is unlikely, at least in the immediate future.

Olga Kulkova in her article "Russia's "Soft Power" as an Aspect of its Foreign Policy Interaction with the Countries of North and East Africa" analyses the Russian understanding of the "soft power" concept as a complex of tools and methods to reach the foreign policy aims through public diplomacy, information and communication technologies, humanitarian assistance and cultural initiatives, civil society interactions, and religious and inter-religious dialogues. She describes how Russia implements its various assets in Africa in recent years creating its unique "soft power". According to Olga, Africa is one of the world's hubs with an intense interaction of representatives of different cultures, religions and civilizations. That's why special attention is paid to the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in relations with Africa and global interreligious dialogue. Olga Kulkova assesses challenges Russia faces in this regard. First Russia-Africa Summit (2019) became, in her opinion, a strong impetus for developing new strategies of partnership with the African states in spheres of cultural, information and humanitarian interaction.

The aim of the article by Grigory Karpov, titled "Situation of Migrants from North and East Africa in the UK on the Eve of the Census 2021: Religious and Political Aspects", is to analyze the African diasporas in modern Great Britain. Speaking about the specificities of regional migration from Africa, it is important to take into account that the main flow of Africans to the UK came from former colonies, primarily from the countries of South, West and East Africa. In this regard, the main focus of this article is on the diasporas of representatives of Somalia and Zimbabwe, which have formed large and prominent communities, numbering 100-200 thousand people. The author emphasizes, that religion plays an equally important role in everyday life among Somalis in Britain. For Somalis, the oral tradition of passing on experience and knowledge remains the main one. The

Islamic dress code can be a serious barrier to employment for women of Somali origin. The end of the 20th – early 21st centuries expectations about the integration of Africans into the host society on the platform of a common British identity did not come true. Religion, language, identity, employment patterns, cultural traditions and much more contribute to the separation of African diasporas from British society and from each other bringing the UK not to a common unity and cohesion but to a new level of fragmentation exactly along ethnic and religious lines.

Last but not the least, the article by Anna Suchkova on “International tourism and political and ethno-religious issues in Africa. A case for member-countries of Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD)” examines the impact of tourism on inclusive development, weakening of ethno-religious problems, security and elimination of violence in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. Even during complicated ethnic and religious conflicts, tourism can play a positive role if professional tourist associations and companies themselves give up ethnic and religious prejudices and offer a constructive, non-ethnic agenda capable of uniting people with different objectives.

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