

## **A Word from the Guest Editor: The Problem of Radical Islam in the Post-Soviet Space**

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The collapse of the Soviet Union, the acquisition of sovereignty by the former republics, the emergence of an ideological vacuum, the search for identity and – as a consequence – the growth of nationalist and separatist sentiments led to socio-political instability and economic crisis throughout the post-Soviet space. In such socio-political circumstances, religion became a means of expressing national identity for many during this period. At the same time, the emergence of new republics in the post-Soviet space intensified the processes of penetration of new religious teachings, often radical in nature, into Central Asia, the South Caucasus and some other regions of Russia. Emissaries from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and other Muslim countries poured into Russia, Transcaucasia and Central Asia, carrying their own interpretation of Islam, often contradicting the traditional one professed by the peoples who inhabited these territories for centuries.

Islam has become an effective tool in the geopolitical and political games of the elites in Russia and Central Asia. In Central Asia and in the North and South Caucasus, the process of politicization began in almost the same way – with the emergence of the so-called enlighteners. Religion turned out to be closely intertwined with politics and criminal activities of the so-called “new Muslims” representing radical currents of Islam. The so-called modern Islamic religious revival was directed at society rather than at the state and appealed to the spiritual needs of the individual. According to Olivier Roy this has led to “a diversity of manifestations of religious practice and discourse related to both social movements and group and individual strategies” (2017, 14). Nevertheless, the problem of religious extremism and terrorism is relevant not only for Russia

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and its neighbors, but also for the countries of Europe where there are numerous poorly integrated and often radicalized, in relation to the “values” of the country of residence, Muslim communities. It should be also taken into account that among all varieties of extremism, it is religious and political extremism that surpasses in its scope and influence on large groups of the population.

Moreover, along with their independence after the collapse of the USSR, the states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus received unresolved border conflicts. The protracted conflicts, which turned into a war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, led to the appearance in the conflict zone of mercenaries from international terrorist organizations fighting previously in the Middle East, in particular “Jabhat al-Nusra” (banned in Russia), “Firkat Hamza”, “Sultan Murad”, as well as extremist Kurdish groups. Thus, Transcaucasia is now capable of becoming a new springboard for international terrorist organizations from where militants can subsequently infiltrate into the states bordering Azerbaijan and Armenia, including Russia. At the same time, radicalization of some migrant workers from Central Asian countries is becoming a major challenge for Russia. Many of them are poorly educated, and present an easy target for numerous religious recruiters.

It would be right to start the review of articles in this issue with the article “Contemporary Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia: Genesis and History of Development” by Ivan Safranchuk and Rustam Makhmudov. This article explores the patterns of development of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia, its origins, history and future. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Islam in Central Asia was formed mainly under the influence of internal regional factors intertwined with local traditions, thus creating a special ethno-cultural identity. Perestroika contributed significantly to the revival of political Islam, resulting in the emergence of numerous parties and movements in the region. The authors suggest a distinction between organizations that are mainly focused on Islamic revival in the region, purification and non-violent politicization, and those that have extra-regional ambitions and use the region as a recruiting base for their organizations and cells. The authors conclude that despite pressure from Central Asian governments, radical Islam may still have some influence in Central Asia as the region is undergoing a religious renaissance enhanced by socialization and exposure to Islamic culture. However, in general, radical preaching remains mainly active on the Internet, social media and messengers, raising the question of the future development of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia.

The article “Three Dimensions of the South Caucasian Conflicts: Dynamics, Commonalities and Differences” by Sergey Markedonov and Anastasia Pavlova discusses the existence of protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus and their

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classification. They revise the existing academic understanding of the conflict dynamics in the South Caucasus, and suggest a new theoretical and methodological framework for studying their nature. They rightly argue that conflicts in the South Caucasus should be studied by focusing on mutual influences at the local, national and international levels with a religious perspective, taking into account ethnic and religious factors as well as the influence of interested foreign actors. They also argue that conflicts in the South Caucasus have three dimensions: local, national and international. Sources of discontent are rooted locally and historically, and can impede the implementation of decisions taken at higher levels. In some cases, the influence of external factors can be excessive, but they do not completely replace the influence of local ones. The authors conclude that the conflicts in the South Caucasus are a tangled knot of contradictions and interactions, so the situation in the region cannot be 'frozen' once and for all.

In this context, the article "Islamic Radicalization in Georgia: Integration, Identity and Religion" by the Georgian scholar Archil Sikharulidze is of special interest. The Muslim community in Georgia is the largest religious minority in the country, and yet it struggles to be at least partially represented and integrated into the society. The author emphasizes the general tendency of this community to alienate itself from the Christian majority and to attempt, especially on the part of the Muslim youth, to seek external opportunities, actors and groups with which to identify. The author believes that Georgian Muslims are generally not prone to radicalization, but if they do, three factors contribute to it: lack of general integration into Georgian society as a whole, an identity crisis due to the entrenched formula "to be Georgian is to be an Orthodox Christian," and internal religious rivalry between "traditional" and Salafi branches within Islam. In addition, radicalized groups often consist of young people, who are particularly vulnerable to these factors and see no opportunities for self-determination and self-expression locally. Despite the evidence of Islamic radicalism on the ground, local authorities are not interested in implementing policies at the national level, relying on various police and security agencies to combat radicalism. As such, the local Muslim community finds itself cut off from political and socio-economic processes, and seeks opportunities abroad. According to Sikharulidze, this has opened a window of opportunity for Salafism, offering local Muslim youth a "better" life by joining its worldwide network - the global Muslim 'ummah'.

Continuing the initiated theme, in his article entitled "Religious topics in Central Asian secular Telegram Channels" Andrey Bykov analyzes the issues of modern Muslim youth in Central Asian secular Telegram Channels (based on fieldwork research for June 2023-May 2024). Bykov analyzes the issues of modern interfaith interaction in Central Asian states, paying attention to the

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important, in our opinion, problem of perception of the religious situation in the electronic media, primarily in Telegram channels. The author studied the issue of users' attitudes towards radical Islam, including its extremist manifestations. In his study, the author used marketing research methods to analyze socio-political content. He makes a reasonable conclusion that in the post-Soviet era the place of atheistic ideology in spiritual life was actively replaced by religious ideology. The process of strengthening the role of religion is inherent in both Muslim and non-Muslim population of the region. In the author's opinion, the process of politicization of Islam in all countries of the region is currently experiencing the second stage of its evolution (1. Stage of formation and actual merger with a part of political elites; 2. Stage of distancing of the state from Islamic ideology and restrained opposition). At the same time, Bykov emphasizes that for the so-called supporters of secular religiosity, the penetration of Islam into the sphere of secular education raises certain concerns, namely the fact that Islam has begun to play such an important role that it acts as a deterrent to the development of education and technological and social progress. The author concludes that the majority of users in all republics tend to suppose that the activities of hostile organizations and media should be controlled, and more often outright banned. Nevertheless, the situation in each country is different. The situation looks most calm in Kazakhstan, where 90% of the population supports the government's policy of curbing Islamism and other forms of extremism. In Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and especially Tajikistan, the situation is not so clear-cut. In the author's opinion, the situation is more unstable in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. For Kyrgyzstan, according to commentators, the main threat is internal, while for Tajikistan it is external.

Akhmet Yarlykapov's article "Islamic Networks in Russia: The Transformation of the Local Ummah in a Global Context" is also dedicated to the study of Muslim networks in Russia. The author emphasizes that Islamic networks are increasing participation in the Russian Ummah, taking leadership from the traditional spiritual administrations of Muslims. Messaging applications play a key role in the activities of Muslim networks, ensuring their effective functioning. Muslim networks in Russia also contribute to the deeper integration of the country's Ummah into the global Islamic community through the formation of transnational networks within the Salafi and Sufi paradigms. Muslim trans-regional networks are prominent in the country, effectively unifying the Islamic space and promoting internal cohesion. As a result, many Islamic organizations make extensive use of networks to expand their sphere of influence.

"What can money do? How budget expenditures influenced terrorism in the

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North Caucasus” is the article coauthored by Nikolai Silaev, Ekaterina Arapova, Nikita Neklyudov, Vasily Taran and Natalya Samoylovskaya. Using the example of several Russian regions, the authors try to answer the question of whether policies aimed at socio-economic development in specific sub-national regions can help reduce terrorism. As a result of the analysis, the authors found a direct causal relationship between budgetary expenditures on the national economy and the frequency of terrorist attacks, with higher expenditures correlating with an increase in the number of attacks in two of the three republics, namely Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria. In contrast, government investment in human capital, expressed in terms of spending on education and health care, contributes to a decrease in terrorism in one of the three republics, namely Kabardino-Balkaria. These results allowed the authors of the study to reach the following conclusions: the reduction in terrorist acts in Russia seems to have been achieved mainly through political means, and that the government’s policy of socio-economic development in the North Caucasus produces at best neutral results. The second conclusion is that there are significant differences between the republics in the correlation between budgetary expenditures, economic performance and terrorist activity. These findings reveal the different nature of terrorist activity in the post-Soviet space and in Europe, for example, where radicals often come from marginalized Muslim communities.

“Challenges to Russia’s civil unity and internal stability from religious, ethnic and regional extremism: key factors” by Igor Savin is particularly valuable because it is based on the author’s field research. Regional extremism was studied using the same methods in two groups of Russian regions: in the republics of Altai, Buryatia and Kalmykia, and in the republics of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan; religious extremism was studied on the example of the Republic of Dagestan, and ethnic extremism was studied on the example of Russian Kazakhs living mainly in regions bordering Kazakhstan and migrant communities in the Moscow and Yaroslavl regions. While author concludes that signs of the formation of religious, ethnic and regional extremism do exist, in none of the regions they are not destructive or irreversible processes.

Finally, it should be noted that we are witnessing that the most important consequence of the politicization of religion has been the entry of Islamic radicalism into the Russian political arena. Islamic radicalism today has an international nature and is undoubtedly a threat to national security for all countries, not only in the post-Soviet space. Terrorist organizations have created transnational network organizations that are unique in their effectiveness. The so-called “Islamic extremism” has already succeeded in creating a negative image of Islam in the global public consciousness. Furthermore, the events that has

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taken, and is taking, place in Central Asia and the Caucasus raise a number of questions. Is the emergence of Islamic radicals in these regions due to the course of events per se or were they, as politicians claim, exported from abroad? To what extent is Islamic radicalism a domestic problem in these countries and to what extent is it brought in from outside by international terrorists? Will the Islamic states, whose establishment the radical Islamic groups have declared their goals, appear on the map? Only by answering these questions we reveal the specifics of Islamic radicalism in the post-Soviet space.

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