Islamic Studies in Post-Soviet Russia: in Search of New Approaches

Islamic studies have benefited from the fall of the Soviet rule, which saw the return of Islam to the public sphere and the recognition by Yeltsin’s government as the second main religion in Russia. The state does not control the teaching of Islam, nor has it imposed any mosques except in Chechnya and Abkhazia. The government, however, has permitted the establishment of mosques and the opening of Islamic studies. Despite this, the field has been affected by the rise of Islamic radicalism, which has led to the closure of many mosques and the harassment of Islamists by the authorities.

The study of Islamic studies in Russia has been characterized by the expansion of the field and the development of new interdisciplinary programmes. New research bodies such as the Centre for Islamic Studies (CAS), headed by Prof. V.V. Naumkin, and the Centre for Central Asian and Regional Studies (CCRS), under the direction of Dr. V.I. Svetlovsky, were founded within the Academy of Sciences in Moscow. The CCRS focuses on political studies in modern post-Soviet areas, the CAS has three main purposes: publication and translation of Arabic manuscripts, research on pre-Islam and Sunism, and studies in urgent political issues in the other post-Soviet Muslim areas. The CAS cooperates in its research missions with colleagues in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Its recent works, such as a case study by Dr. D. Makarov on the Wahhabi community in Russia, have contributed significantly to a deeper understanding of the various forms of post-Soviet Islam.

Within this context, the world of modern Muslim societies and communities in Russia and the former Soviet Central Asia has been characterized by the expansion of Islam, its influence in urgent political issues in the other post-Soviet Muslim areas. The CAS cooperates in its research missions with colleagues in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Its recent works, such as a case study by Dr. D. Makarov on the Wahhabi community in Russia, have contributed significantly to a deeper understanding of the various forms of post-Soviet Islam.

Post-Soviet Islam is often interpreted as a revival of unchanged local traditions, able to resist any Soviet innovation. The most eminent advocates of this concept include: Prof. Alexander Benniges (deceased), speaker about the Moscow State University, and Prof. M. Bennigsen-Broxup, and Prof. S.P. Polyakov (DHMSU), the author of Traditionalism in the Modern Central Asian Society, published in Russian in 1989 and soon published in English in the USA. Some authors ignore prima sources including numerous field and archival data, were informed by an erroneous and not correct official materials. Both of these faults can be found even in accurate writings of contemporary political scientists such as Islam in the History of Russia, by Prof. R.G. Landa (IOS), and the Muslim World of the CIS Countries compiled by A.S. Umarov (the Moscow branch of Carnegie Endowment, 1996).

Much more fruitful seem to be the approaches of Russian Islam, which is characterized by the expansion of the lexicon. The 1

The study of ‘Russian Islam’ in the last years, Russian scholars have begun to turn their attention to ‘Russian Islam’, as it emerged from those ties and the intense relationship between Russia and the Muslim peoples of the Volga river region, Siberia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Islamic studies become more interdisciplinary in their approaches. In addition to written sources, Islamists examine contemporary institutions and practices of post-Soviet Muslims. Within this context, the world of modern Muslim societies and communities in Russia and the former Soviet Central Asia has been characterized by the expansion of Islam, its influence in urgent political issues in the other post-Soviet Muslim areas. The CAS cooperates in its research missions with colleagues in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Its recent works, such as a case study by Dr. D. Makarov on the Wahhabi community in Russia, have contributed significantly to a deeper understanding of the various forms of post-Soviet Islam.

Research on pre-modern and modern Islam conducted in post-Soviet Russia, has been well studied, and is very poorly known to scholars from abroad – both in the West and in the former Soviet sphere. Despite the fall of the iron curtain after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is an informational barrier separating post-Soviet and non-Soviet authors. Moreover, there is a lack of research on Islam! Which academic school training specialists in Islamic studies have survived since the pre-Soviet and Soviet times? To what extent do post-Soviet scholars know and share modern Western approaches and concepts in Islamic studies?

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