

SITUATION OF MUSLIM MINORITIES IN EASTERN EUROPE

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SUMMARY: 1. MUSLIM MINORITY IN BULGARIA. 2. MUSLIM MINORITY IN RUSSIA. 3. SURVEY OF PEW RESEARCH CENTER.

Since the Soviet policies determined for many years relations between the state and religion in other socialist countries¹, it would be logical to consider it in the first place. The Soviet way of limiting the exercise of religion and permissible church activity was followed in the states of Eastern Europe after 1945.

The USSR and Czechoslovakia had a system of antagonistic top government officials. There was an overpowering influence of the state in religions matters and limitations of religious activities to a constant oppression. But in the case of the GDR, Poland and Yugoslavia there was a system of antagonistic separation of state and church.

[For example, Article 82 of the Polish Constitution prohibited the use of force to settle religious issues. And Yugoslav law prohibited "the misuse of religion and religious activity for political goals" (art.174). This flexible provision enabled the misuse leading to repressions against religious communities].

Before 1917, there was a notion of the Muslim nation and Russian Islam. After the revolution the perception remained for some time: even a "Muslim Red Army" or "Muslim Social-Communist (Bolshevik) Party" for a short time existed. Since 1920s the Soviet government policy applied

¹ The Soviet example was not followed in the G. D. R only.

different tactics: from isolation and splitting to violent assimilation and genocide.

Deportations were applied against about a dozen of Muslim peoples (Crimean Tartars², Meskhetian Turks; from North Caucasus - Chechen, Ingush, Karachai and Balkars people plus some Ossetian Muslims, Cirkassians and Avars).

The Bolsheviks' policy of splitting in the Muslim nation (Umma) resulted in forming of 5 nation-states in Central Asia and of different ethnic territorial autonomies. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Muslim *Umma* already divided into dozens of nations and ethnic groups proved to be divided again - by state borders. The similar situation occurred in Socialist Yugoslavia. However, in 1971, Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) were fully recognized as a nationality and in the census the option "Muslims by nationality" was added. Nowadays, Muslims in independent federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina are in the majority (51%).

1. MUSLIM MINORITY IN BULGARIA

After Russian Federation, the largest Muslim minority lives in Bulgaria, an unitary state. The rate of Muslims in Bulgaria is about 12-15% (from 800 thousand³ to 1,06 million⁴). + Slide

The fight against religion as an 'opium of the people' and a 'capitalist experience' was led by means of atheistic propaganda and gradual closing down of religious offices. After 1952, the study of religion was banned from all public schools and the number of Islamic religious leaders and mosques dropped sharply.

Muslims especially suffered under the restriction of religious freedom by the communist Todor Zhivkov's regime (1954-1989) which suppressed religious communities. The Bulgarian communist regimes declared traditional Muslim beliefs to be diametrically opposed to secular communist ideology. Study of the Quran was completely forbidden as well as all Turkish language courses were prohibited (by 1972), even at the ele-

² 300,000; 200,000; 450,000; 130,000; 85,000; 45,000+140,000

³ <http://www.nsaglam.com/Files/Links/Worldandislam/Countries/Europe/Bulgaria.html>

⁴ <http://www.pewresearch.org/>

mentary level. Arabic and Turkish names and even the dress-style were prohibited too. The programme of so-called 'revival' was carried out in several stages. By 1974, the Muslim names of 220,000 Pomaks had been changed to Bulgarian ones and their religious life was extremely restricted. Finally, over 300,000 Bulgarian Muslims (Turks) had to emigrate to Turkey between May and September, 1989.

After the breakdown of communism, Muslims in Bulgaria again enjoyed greater religious freedom.

Nowadays, the situation of Muslim minority in Bulgaria is stable but there are some problems of discrimination and xenophobic attitude of nationalists and the Right. First of all, it is "Attack", a Bulgarian nationalist party, founded in 2005. The party is considered racist and xenophobic, especially anti-Muslim, antisemitic and anti-Roma. The party is closely tied with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attack_\(political_party\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attack_(political_party)) - cite_note-Hopkins-3 In the Bulgarian parliamentary elections of 2005, 2009, and 2013 Attack was consistently the fourth-strongest party.

The Muslim community in Bulgaria is increasingly concerned about the recent islamophobic and abusive political discourse that increases the feeling of insecurity among the Muslims in the country. Security-oriented counter-terrorism measures are having a disproportionate impact on the Muslim community and individuals.

Last December the Supreme Muslim Council of the Muslim Denomination in the Republic of Bulgaria signed a petition against the bill submitted by the far-right coalition "United Patriots". The bill makes amendments in the Penal Code to fight so-called radical Islam. In the opinion of Chief Muftiate, the amendments adopted by the National Assembly restrict religious freedom. Bulgarian Helsinki Committee emphasizes that the definition of radical Islam is absurd, the changes are discriminatory and may lead to the stigmatisation of large groups of people, not only Muslims⁵.

⁵ <https://www.liberties.eu/en/news/zakonoproekt-radikalen-islam/13811>

According to the adopted amendments, "radical Islam" is "when a person campaigns for the establishment of an Islamic state (caliphate), when he/she strives for the enforcement of Sharia law over secularism, when he/she agitates for violent implementation of religious principles or promotes violence in the form of a sacred war against

The new bill is based on a section of the Penal Code that provides for detention of up to three years for preaching "fascist or other anti-democratic ideology". This provision is a residue of the criminal law of the totalitarian regime, similar to the Russian anti-extremist law that is considered as analogue to the old articles on Anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda⁶ (Art. 70 of the RSFSR Penal Code).

All these amendments neither allow Muslims to observe their religious ceremonies in another language except the Bulgarian one, nor can they receive donations, nor can they get involved in joint activities with other organizations.

In 2003 (in the *Günde v. Turkey* case), the European Court of Human Rights ruled that peaceful preaching of an undemocratic ideology, when expressing religious beliefs, is protected under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The punishment of such forms of expression under Bulgaria's new bill as well as under Russian law violates rights of Muslim and other religious minorities.

2. MUSLIM MINORITY IN RUSSIA

The Russian constitution stipulates the state is secular and provides for religious freedom, guaranteeing the right to freedom of conscience and to freedom of religious worship. The constitution also bans any limitations of human rights on religious grounds and prohibits actions inciting religious hatred. The constitution states all religious associations are equal and separate from the state.

The Russian Federation is home to 20 or 23 million ethnic Muslims (according to official figures and to unofficial estimates), that is about 14-16% of the country's population. Russia is the biggest country with Muslim minority in Europe. The Muslim population is made up mainly of the Muslim peoples of the Federation but also Muslim migrants from Central Asia.

non-Muslims, when he/she campaigns in order to raise followers for Islamic terrorist organizations."

⁶ <https://www.svoboda.org/a/24246569.html>

[The Federal Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations adopted in 2007, acknowledges Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country's four "traditional" religions, constituting an inseparable part of the country's historical heritage].

By law, officials may prohibit the activity of a religious association on grounds such as violating public order or engaging in "extremist activity." The law criminalizes a broad spectrum of activities as extremism, including incitement to "religious discord" and "assistance to extremism," but the law does not precisely define extremism or require an activity include an element of violence or hatred to be classified as extremism. Being a member of a banned religious association designated as extremist is punishable by up to six years in prison for individuals and up to 12 years for persons with official status. First time offenders who willingly forsake their membership in banned religious organizations are exempt from criminal liability if they committed no other crimes.

Republics in the North Caucasus have varying policies on wearing the hijab in public schools. Hijabs are banned in public schools in most of Russian regions. However, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov successfully enforced in 2011 a rule that women who work in or enter government buildings (including offices, libraries, and schools) must wear headscarves.

In relations with the Russian majority, according to many Muslims, the situation now is better than it was five-ten years ago. There has been more support, including financial from the State, for numerous social, religious, educational projects and events.

However, the Government has used counter-terrorism to commit serious violations of religious freedom against the Muslim population. There were numerous cases of Muslims being prosecuted for extremism or terrorism even when they have no clear relation to such activities. These included individuals detained for possessing religious literature such as the Qur'an, or on the basis of evidence allegedly planted by the police. Some people suspected by local police of Islamic extremism allegedly were subjected to torture and ill-treatment. According to human rights groups, a Supreme Court decision to ban 19 Muslim groups for alleged ties to international terrorism made it easier for officials to arbitrarily detain Muslims for alleged connections to these groups".

One grievance of the Muslim communities in many countries of the region is the difficulty in obtaining land or permission for the construc-

tion of mosques. For example, around 70,000 Muslims currently live in Sofia but they have only one mosque built several centuries ago (seating capacity of 500-600 people). Construction of a second religious temple is not permitted by the municipality, although the Muslim community has ground plot for years.

During many years, ECRI (European Commission

against Racism and Intolerance) has recommended that the Russian authorities grant permission for Muslim communities to build a sufficient number of mosques to exercise their right to manifest their religion in worship. For example, in Moscow there are 6 mosques for 2 million Muslims. This is a widespread problem at local level in regions where they are a minority and can be attributed to religious intolerance on the part of local people and the authorities. Along with insufficient number of mosques, there are checks of papers, searches, seizing religious literature, preventing congregants from attending Friday prayers, and warning them to stop attending the mosque, even arrests near mosques or in other places of worship.

According to public comments by Mufti Ravil Gainutdin in 2011, there were 241 official mosques in Russia but 7,200 unofficial mosques and praying houses have been built throughout the country during 20 years (1990-2010). By the end of 2017, the total number of Muslim places of worship is 8000. For comparison, in communist China with 20,000,000 Muslims there are 30,000 mosques; moreover, unofficial ones are not possible there.

[In general, religious minorities in Russia said local authorities used the country's anti-extremism laws to add to the list of banned religious texts. Local officials continued to prevent minority religious organizations from obtaining land, denied them construction permits for houses of worship and, in some cases, announced plans to confiscate or demolish places of worship. The government continued to grant privileges to the ROC (accorded to no other church or religious association), including greater access to public institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, police, and the military forces].

The situation for Muslims and minorities in general is especially bad in the Krasnodar Krai (province in the South). According to ECRI, "attempts by human rights organisations to monitor discrimination suffered by vulnerable groups have been met with hostility by the authorities, including criminal investigations and prosecutions, as well as aggression on the part of right-wing organisations". The latter are mainly presented by

Cossacks. There are many reports of harassment of Meskhetian Turks and North Caucasians by Cossacks. ECRI has heard about some cases of harassment by Cossacks⁷ of vulnerable groups, in particular Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar Krai.

BTW, in Russia, Central Asians are 22 times more likely than others to be stopped and searched by police.

According to numerous reports, corruption is widespread throughout the Russian Federation and particularly so in the police. Numerous cases have been documented on police extorting bribes from persons belonging to vulnerable groups. Other abuses regularly committed by the police include disproportionately frequent identity checks, arrests, detentions, humiliation and physical brutality of the same target groups. Cases brought before the European Court of Human Rights have consistently condemned Russia for breaching Article 11 (freedom of assembly and association) read in the light of Article 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion).

Though President Vladimir Putin once stated that "Wahhabism in itself does not pose any threat", local laws in the regions of Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan ban "extremist Islamic Wahhabism." Hence, in February 2006 local police in Kabardino-Balkariya started compiling a list of "Wahhabis" by going to educational institutions and noting the names of students who prayed regularly. Under the new government in that region, however, pressure against Muslims seemed to diminish.

According to human rights groups, bans on Muslim groups made it easier for officials to detain some individual Muslims arbitrarily for alleged connections to these groups.

The organizations Nurjular and Tablighi Jamaat remain banned. The government maintains that Nurjular is a Muslim religious organization of followers of Turkish theologian Said Nursi. However, Muslims who read his books maintain that there is no Nurjular organization. The ban on Nurjular rests on the conclusion that Said Nursi's works are "extremist"

⁷ Cossacks perform policing duties on the basis of contracts or in accordance with the Federal Law on General Principles of the Organisation of Local Selfgovernment in the Russian Federation of 2003, which gives municipal entities the right to "create conditions for the work of groups of volunteers to protect public order"

and promote intolerance. As for Tablighi Jamaat⁸, the organisation itself and some human rights activists claimed it follows the law and exists solely to educate persons about Islam.

According to the international NGO Forum 18, authorities in four regions of Russia pursued separate cases against a total of 11 Muslims, including 2 imams, arrested between December 2015 and March 2016 on extremism charges for reading the works of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi. One of them was placed in solitary confinement for six months without the right to correspondence. Five followers of Nursi were sentenced in March 2017 in Ufa; all of them received suspended sentences.

The followers of the radical Islamist party Hizb ut-Tahrir have also been targeted since the party was banned in Russia as a terrorist organization without any evidence of a propensity to violence. In recent years, they have been prosecuted under the anti-terrorist Criminal Code provisions (not anti-extremist articles) and sentenced to lengthy prison terms of up to 20 years.

The most absurd⁹ ban was the decision, rendered in 2013 by a xxxthe Oktyabrsky District Court in Novorossiysk, to recognize as extremist the Translation of the meaning of the holy Qur'an into Russian by religious philosopher Elmir Kuliyeu. This ban caused unprecedented outrage among Russian Muslims. Finally, the Krasnodar Regional Court repealed that decision.

To conclude:

General Threats to Muslim Minorities in Eastern Europe

- Intolerance and discrimination towards migrants, ethnic and religious minorities;
- Rising support for xenophobic parties in Europe;

⁸ In 2009, the Russian Supreme Court banned the activities of the international religious organization Tablighi Jamaat ("Propaganda of Faith") as extremist.

⁹ Another example: Imam of the Kurgan mosque Ali Yakupov left a comment in November 2015 under the material published on VKontakte on the subject of Muslim women in China not being allowed to wear a hijab. In his comment, Yakupov allegedly spoke of "divine punishment" that was going to befall the Chinese communists. This statement was interpreted as incitement of hatred toward the corresponding social group, that is, the Chinese Communist Party. The case was examined in court in the spring of 2017 where A. Yakupov was acquitted.

- Harmful stereotypes and distorted images in the media: Muslims and Islam are often demonised in mainstream media;
- The rise of isolated, parallel societies, partly resulting from the socialist period oppression and the modern violations;
- Islamic extremism and the misconception of Islam as a religion of violence;
- The decline in democratic freedoms, including religious one and freedom of expression.

3. SURVEY OF PEW RESEARCH CENTER

In 2012-2016 Pew Research Center polled Muslims in the former Soviet republics, including Russia, as part of a survey of Muslims in 40 countries around the world. The survey found relatively low levels of religious belief and practice among Muslims in the former Soviet bloc countries compared with Muslims elsewhere around the world. No more than half of Muslims surveyed in Russia, the Balkans and in Central Asia say religion is very important in their lives, compared with the vast majorities of Muslims living in the Middle East, South Asia, South-east Asia and Africa.

Following the same pattern, fewer Muslims in most countries of the former Soviet bloc than elsewhere say they practice core tenets of their faith, such as fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, or giving zakat (a portion of their accumulated wealth to the needy). And considerably fewer in most countries favor making sharia the official law of the land in their countries.

While Christianity is the region's dominant religion, four of the 18 countries surveyed have enough Muslim respondents to allow for separate analysis. In each of these countries, overwhelming majorities of Muslim adults say they are proud to be Muslim, ranging from 90% in Russia to 99% in Georgia. At least half say they feel strongly connected to other Muslims around the world. And majorities in Bosnia, Russia and Georgia say they feel a special responsibility to support other Muslims.

Compared with the Christian populations in Russia, Kazakhstan and Bulgaria, Muslims are generally more religiously observant; higher shares among Muslims than Christians in these countries say religion is "very im-

portant" in their lives, report daily prayer and say they attend religious services at least weekly.

Meanwhile the percentage of Muslims in Central and Eastern Europe who say they pray all five salah every day is considerably lower than among Muslims in several other parts of the world. In Russia, for example, 23% of Muslims say they pray all five salah daily, while in Bosnia 20% say this. Elsewhere in the region, even smaller shares of Muslims report praying all five salah. Also, the percentages of Muslims who are weekly attendees are relatively low compared with Muslims in many other parts of the world.

Among the four countries with significant Muslim populations, only in Bosnia (66%) and Russia (55%) majorities of adults report fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. About one third of Muslims (36%) in Bulgaria say they fast during Ramadan; while fewer say they give zakat - an annual donation of a portion of their wealth - (45% in Russia and (26% in Bulgaria).

Both in Russia and Bulgaria majorities say "religion should be kept separate from government policies" (50% against 42%). Sentiment favoring the separation of religion and government is strongest in Bosnia, a religiously mixed country that endured a war in the 1990s fought along religious and ethnic lines.

In addition, Muslim minorities in the region are considerably more likely than members of other religious groups to prefer a religiously and culturally diverse society. In Bulgaria, for example, fully 72% of Muslims say they prefer a pluralistic society (only 46% of Orthodox Christians in the country).

Majorities of both Catholics and Orthodox Christians (medians of 63% and 61%, respectively) say they would be unwilling to accept Muslims as family members. Regionally, more Catholics than Orthodox Christians say they would not accept Muslims as neighbors or as fellow citizens.

There are relatively low levels of rejection of Muslims among Christians in countries that were part of the 1990s Yugoslav wars. In Bosnia, for example, just 8% of Catholics and 12% of Orthodox Christians say they would be unwilling to accept Muslims as neighbors.