

**BETWEEN RADICALIZATION AND REPRESSION:
MOSCOW'S REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS
AND
RUSSIA'S MUSLIM COMMUNITIES**

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The Russian government's requirement that all Muslim groups register with the state is contributing to the repression of many of those that do and the radicalization of the many more that do not. To be sure, this situation, which reflects both the nature of Islam and Moscow's more general approach toward Muslims, is different in kind and not just in degree from the situation confronting other faiths there. But it serves as a useful reminder that it is important to consider the content and consequences of Russian government registration requirements and not just the ability or inability of a particular congregation to gain that registration.

There are roughly 8500 Muslim religious communities on the territory of the Russian Federation today. Only about 3,000 of them are currently registered with the authorities. The others either have chosen not to apply for registration or more rarely have been turned down by officials in Moscow or in the regions.

On the one hand, this reflects the relatively recent appearance of these groups: More than 95 percent of the 8500 Muslim groups now operating in the Russian

Federation have arisen since 1990. Consequently, many of them are not in a position to meet all the requirements for registration that the Russian authorities often impose.

And on the other hand, this pattern is the product of the complicated interrelationship between Islam and the Russian state over the past 250 years, one in which the government has repeatedly attempted to control its Muslim citizens by imposing a set of bureaucratic hierarchies and procedures which are utterly foreign to the fundamentally non-clerical Islamic faith.

As the Russian Empire expanded into Muslim regions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the tsarist government struggled to regulate Islam by the establishment of a set of institutions known as Muslim Spiritual Directorates. These bodies, which continued to exist in Soviet times, have no basis in Islamic theology. And as a result, Islam in the Russian Empire and in the Soviet Union remained divided between these tiny official structures whose links to and reliance on the state deprived them of the authority that the faithful might be expected to extend to natural leaders in their communities and a much broader and informal set of beliefs and practices among that country's Muslim communities. Because the latter stood outside the official hierarchies and were thus illegal from the point of view of the Soviet state, those who took part in them were doing something inherently political.

Muslims there as well as Soviet and Western analysts described this division as one between a typically deracinated and KGB-controlled "official" Islam, on the one

hand, and “popular” and often radical “underground” Islam on the other. And many Muslims expected that with the fall of Soviet power, this division would disappear, and that Muslims would be allowed to organize themselves as they had before the Russian state imposed the MSD system.

That has not happened. Instead, Muslim leaders have organized ever more MSDs – there are now more than 60 in the Russian Federation alone – and sought to sell themselves to the Russian state as the guardians of “traditional” Russian Islam in exchange for both official recognition and even financial considerations. At the same time, and especially since September 11th, Russian President Vladimir Putin has sought in the name of “fighting terrorism” to use the MSDs and the registration process to impose greater control over the Muslim communities of the Russian Federation.

Often that has taken the form of insisting the Muslim groups register and subordinate themselves to one of the pro-government MSDs or face the use of the police powers of the state against them. That has led to widely reported outrages of official misbehavior in both the Middle Volga and the Northern Caucasus and prompted some groups which had been registered to reform themselves into non-registered communities in order to get out from under these bureaucracies.

But instead of gaining the greater control over the Muslim communities that it seeks, the Russian government by its latest actions has only further undermined the authority of the MSDs, showing a large number of them to be little more than the

handmaidens of the authorities. And at the same time, Moscow has radicalized opinion among unregistered Muslim groups, many of whose members now accept the arguments of those -- including both mullahs trained abroad and missionaries from Middle Eastern countries -- who argue that both the Russian government and its MSD allies are enemies of Islam.

The situation has now moved toward a vicious circle in which official repression is leading to more radicalization and that in turn is invoked by officials to justify even harsher actions. Is there anyway out? And can we in the West make a positive contribution to the situation?

I think the answer to both of these questions is yes. There is a way out: The Russian state needs to move from a politically defined registration system to one in which religious groups will provide information about themselves and agree to obey the laws of their country but will not have to sacrifice their faith in order to do so.

And we in the West can make a contribution by insisting on that and by including representatives of both "official" and "unofficial" Islam at meetings where religious and human rights are to be discussed such as the upcoming sessions in Corduba.

In the current environment, one in which many in Russia and elsewhere justify anti-Islamic attitudes and actions by pointing to Muslim involvement in terrorism, neither of these steps will be easy. But both are necessary if we are to avoid the further

alienation of the Muslims of the Russian Federation from their government and the rise of a dangerously radical Islamic explosion there, something that could threaten not only that country but our own as well.