

*Center for Strategic and International Studies  
Russia and Eurasia Program*

**“The Rise of Radical and Nonofficial Islamic Groups in Russia’s Volga Region”**

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**Speaker:**

Dr. Sergey Markedonov, *Visiting Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies*

**Discussant:**

Dr. Gordon M. Hahn, *Senior Associate (Non-Resident), Russia and Eurasia Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies*

**Moderated by:**

Dr. Andrew Kuchins, *Director and Senior Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies*

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**Dr. Markedonov** began by stating that in Russia and the West violence in the North Caucasus is generally associated with two causes: socio-economic conditions (e.g. poverty) and repressive governmental policies. However, the roots of instability in the Volga Federal District (VFD) are unlike the North Caucasus:

- Both Tatarstan and Bashkortostan are relatively wealthy “donor” regions situated on the Volga; they are net positive contributors to the federal budget. Tatarstan accounts for 24% of Russian industrial production, the highest in all of the country.
- The VFD hosts the Surgut-Polotsk oil pipeline and other gas pipelines, which supply energy to Europe. Consequently, the VFD is wealthier than many other areas of Russia.
- The VFD is more integrated in and accepted by Russian society than the North Caucasus. This dates back to the times of Catherine the Great, when Tatar nobles enjoyed levels of high social status, thus strengthening the loyalty of Muslims to the Russian government.

The VFD has unique dynamics and currently faces a multitude of challenges:

- Unlike the North Caucasus, the VFD is a multi-colored patchwork of different Islamic movements, which include *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and *Tablighi Jamaat*.
- There are more cases of conversions to Islam in the VFD than in the North Caucasus, including conversions of ethnic Russians.
- During the Soviet era local Islamic groups in the VFD remained largely isolated from global Islam. Now, Russia is witnessing the “globalization of Islam,” with domestic groups being exposed to new ideas from the outside world.
- The disintegration of the Soviet Union resulted in the collapse of the Soviet identity. This gave rise to the role of new identities in the 1990s. Nationalism, rather than Islam, was the most popular source of identity at the time. In modern Russia, this identity search contributes more to the rise of Islamic groups in the VFD than socio-economic factors or repressive governmental policies.

- However, the search for a Russian political identity is problematic. There is no cohesive national policy on this issue, and even Putin's statements on what constitutes a "Russian" are contradictory. At times, he addresses citizens as "Russian" using the ethnic Russian adjective (*russkii*), while other times he addresses them using the political Russian adjective (*rossiiskii*).
- There is also a split within official Muslim structures, which creates a permissive environment for radical groups. Some official Muslim leaders have used money (*zakat*) from radical groups to finance their campaigns against other leaders.
- A portion of the Russian population has been marginalized because of an ongoing urbanization and industrialization. When the Soviet Union collapsed, many Soviet industrial centers also declined substantially, leading to rural-urban migration. In some cases, when rural populations entered urban environments and failed to secure employment, they turned toward radical Islamic movements. Thus, radical Islam in the VFD is different from that in the Caucasus, where the phenomenon is more rural.

Current Russian policy toward Islam is based on supporting official Muslim structures such as the Spiritual Board of Muslims. This is an ineffective policy. Such spiritual boards often exploit the fears of the secular government by highlighting the threat of radicalism, which in turn allows them to obtain greater financial support from the state. Secular government management of regional Islamic groups, uninfluenced by the Spiritual Board of Muslims, would be a better policy.

Moreover, there needs to be dialogue between the various non-official Muslim groups to clarify the difference between radical and non-official groups. Second, Russian authorities need a clear approach to the question of political identity, not only for the VFD region, but for the entire country. Without such a policy, any action against radical Islamic groups will not achieve a lasting effect.

**Dr. Hahn** began by comparing the situation in the VFD with that of Dagestan. The Islamist situation in the VFD will not be as violent as in Dagestan. Factors constraining such violence are:

- The VFD has been better integrated into Russia and for a longer period of time than the North Caucasus. This is due, in part, to the fact that a greater percentage of the VFD population speaks Russian and the region has a greater frequency of intermarriage between ethnic Russians and non-Russians. The VFD enjoys a greater level of urbanization than the North Caucasus and is better integrated economically.
- Unlike in the North Caucasus, there is not a culture of "blood revenge" in the VFD.
- The region adopted a different strain of Islam than the North Caucasus. *Hanafi Madh'hab* is a more predominant and moderate tradition in the VFD.
- The North Caucasus is more influenced by the Arab and Sunni world, whereas the VFD is influenced by Central Asia and Turkey.

Factors that contribute to the rise of radicalism:

- Putin dismantled the traditional Tatarstan model, which had centered on three pillars: autonomy of Tatarstan within the Russian Federation, Euro-Islam, and interethnic and intercultural comity. This model was the basis of moderate Islam and was discredited by Putin's centralization of power. Consequently, more radical alternatives and an alliance between nationalism and radicalism emerged.
- In the VFD there has been an increase in the immigration from the North Caucasus and the influence from the Caucasus Emirate. The influence of the *mujahedin* has also increased the radicalization.

## Discussion:

The discussion opened with a question about the connection between the Tartar population in Ukraine and Tartars in the Volga region.

- Dr. Markedonov noted that *Hizb ut-Tahrir* is more popular in Ukraine than *Salafi* movements, but admitted he does not have more data to make any general conclusions. The problem of radicalism and the search for identity exists in Ukraine, and the authorities realize this. However, the problem in Ukraine may be more ethnic than religious. Land distribution policies play a major role in provoking a rise in Islamic extremism in Ukraine.
- Dr. Hahn stated that there are bound to be social network connections between Crimean and Volga/Ural Tartars, but that there is not necessarily any radical element in this relationship. Despite this, the Caucasus Emirate websites did call for a radical liberation of Crimean Tartars and an establishment of an Islamic state.

The next question was about the possible connection between Putin's opposition to NGOs and his caution about the influence of foreign Islamist movements.

- Dr. Markedonov stated that Putin opposes NGOs because of his concern over the West's influence in Russia and the threat it may pose to the nation's sovereignty. Putin's primary concern over NGOs is to prevent foreign interference within Russian internal affairs; it was not aimed specifically at Islamism.

A participant raised the question of whether it is possible that Wahhabis finance radicals in the Volga region, as was the case in Chechnya.

- Dr. Markedonov asserted that there is no concrete data available on states or groups in the Persian Gulf financing North Caucasus' Islamist groups. The idea of such financing is more of a speculation than factually supported information. Moreover, the intellectual importation of ideas behind radical Islam is more important than available financing. Ultimately, money will not achieve a result without a persuasive idea.
- Dr. Hahn noted that Arab states did finance North Caucasian Islamist movements in the 1990s, and this has been well-documented. It remains unknown however whether the Arab states continue to finance radicals in the North Caucasus today. The majority of local *mujahedin* financial support comes from Russian Muslims.
- Dr. Markedonov added that there must be a differentiation between foreign state and non-state funding of Islamic radicals in Russia. The most dangerous threat from the consequences of the Arab Spring is the unpredictability of the new civil society and what relations these new governments will have with radical Islamic movements in Russia.

The following point was about the levels of radicalism for organizations such as *Tablighi Jamaat* and *Fethullahcilar*, and whether these groups aim to convert the population into their ideology.

- Dr. Markedonov stated it is difficult to measure the exact extent of Islamic radicalism. Experts diverge in their estimations and Islamist organizations are secretive on the matter. Some experts, like Rafik Muhametshin, Rector of the Russian Islamic University, deny the existence of underground Islamists. Others, like Islamologist Rais Suleimanov, estimate the number to be 3,000 Muslims ready to join the Caucasus *ji*had. It is also difficult to estimate the number of *Fethullah Gülen*'s followers.
- In regard to the difficulty of estimating the Islamist population, there are two ways to measure the number of radicals. One is to identify radicals by their terrorist activity; the other is by intellectual activity. It is not clear which is a better method. In regard to goals of Islamist groups, radical groups do aim to increase their numbers as an instrument of increasing their influence.

The next question was whether violence in the Volga region is a response to state's attempts to impose a national religion.

- Dr. Markedonov asserted that radicalism is a response to failing government institutions (e.g. courts) which do not fulfill their protective legal roles. The search for a new, post-Soviet identity is also an important factor. It is also important to differentiate between different types of "Islamisms". For example, Ramzan Kadyrov is not a *Salafi*, but is not a secular leader either. He promotes Islam, but is still loyal to the federation.
- Dr. Hahn added that there are also different variants of Islam. For instance, Islam in Chechnya and Islam in Dagestan are different. The North Caucasus also has different *Sufi* trends. Tatarstan could make better use of *jadidism* scholarship to counteract radical Islam.
- In regards to the imposition of a national religion, official Islamic groups in Russia associate themselves with the state. This discredits the official Islam in the eyes of the population, because the state is seen as corrupt.

A participant asked whether violence in the North Caucasus is a result of a local struggle against perceived Russian colonialism, or if it is possible that local rebels use radical Islam to mobilize the population to support an anti-colonial cause.

- Dr. Hahn argued that Islamism is not a tool for anti-colonial struggle, but that it is purely ideological. Even if the motivation was anti-colonial, the movement would still attract radicals by a virtue of an advertised ideology. There may be some nationalists in the movement, but this is not its essence.

The following question was about the amount of Central Asian migration to Russia. What is the role, if any, of Central Asia in moderating extremism in the VFD?

- Dr. Markedonov criticized the absence of a concrete immigration policy in Russia. Many Russians confuse North Caucasians with migrants from Central Asia. The Russian government needs to define its political and economic goals more transparently and view immigration as a tool for achieving them.
- Dr. Hahn added that Central Asia may have a moderating influence on extremism in the VFD, but it only takes a few radicals to spoil this positive effect.

The next discussion topic was the difference between Tatar nationalism and radical Islamism.

- Dr. Markedonov noted that nationalism was more dominant in the early 1990s compared to radicalism. In the North Caucasus, Islamism became more popular after nationalists failed to deliver economic prosperity. This caused population's disillusionment and made radicalism a more popular alternative.

Another participant asked about religious identity permeating the secular legal sphere in the North Caucasus, where attorneys often appeal to the Muslim consciousness of the judges to make a legal case and the demand for rule by *shari'a* law is increasing. Given the growing Islamic conversion rates in the VFD, is there a chance of a *shari'a* legal system rising in parallel to the secular legal system?

- Dr. Hahn does not see a possibility of a *shari'a* legal system gaining prominence in the VFD.
- Dr. Markedonov agreed that *shari'a* law is not an imminent possibility in the VFD. The *shari'a* system may have more potential in the rural areas, but these are more passive.

The following question was on the types of governmental policies that lead to radicalization (e.g. the order to demolish a mosque in Astrakhan).

- Dr. Markedonov argued that the problem should not be framed as caused by the government only. This would be an oversimplification. For instance, in Astrakhan there is a tension between different kinds of Muslims, such as Tatars and Dagestanis. There is also a struggle for money. For the federal government, the problem is an erosion of its power and a lack of a concrete policy on Islamism. Thus, the issue is much more complex.

The discussion then shifted to a question about using the words “Islam” and “Islamism” as political versus legal terms, and whether Islamism is always a political term.

- Dr. Markedonov noted that the use of the term Islamism here is a political, not judicial one, and the term Islam refers to the religion. Russian law defines radicalism and terrorism, but does not have a definition of Islamism. There is a methodological difficulty in defining Islam.

A participant asked what role of *Sufi* structures play in Islamist radicalism.

- Dr. Hahn clarified that *Sufis* have the potential to contribute to radicalism. Thus, the Russian government is interested in keeping the *Sufi* sheikhs on its side to avoid their support of radicals in Russia. Incidents where *jihadists* have killed *Sufi* sheikhs actually help Russian authorities garner support of *Sufis* because these assassinations alienate *Sufis* from radical movements. As a result, *Sufis* align with the Russian regime to seek protection from radicals.

Another participant asked to expand on the topic of mutual influence between the VFD and the North Caucasus and whether there is evidence of the North Caucasus being used as an example for politicization of Islam in the VFD.

- Dr. Hahn asserted that the influence is mainly from the North Caucasus to the VFD, not the other way around. This is due to the direction of immigration flows and a different nature of Islam in both regions.
- Dr. Markedonov commented that the influence between the VFD and the North Caucasus goes both ways. For instance, radicals in the VFD consider Islamists in the North Caucasus as their model. Conversely, moderate Muslims in the Caucasus view the spiritual leadership in Kazan and Ufa as an example of a moderate religious practice.

The next question asked for an estimation of a number of Muslims in these regions. Dr. Markedonov said that the exact number of Muslims in Russia is unknown. The census data excluded this question. Some experts estimate the number of “ethnic Muslims” to be 14 to 15 million. According to these measures, Muslim populations of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan are about 54 percent each.

The discussion concluded with a question about how much of the phenomenon of radicalism is a reaction to federal/regional policy and how much of it is a reaction to Russian nationalism.

- Dr. Hahn stated that undoubtedly some radicalism is a reaction to Russian nationalism and vice-versa. Tatars seem to get along with Russians on the surface, but it is hard to predict what factors may destabilize this equilibrium. This depends, in part, on the Russian government’s approach toward the issue. Russian state policy is an important factor driving radicalism, but it is not the most important. A proper state policy would reduce terrorism in half, but would not solve the entire problem.
- Dr. Markedonov added that the problem is not an overwhelming presence of the government, but its lack of presence in both regions. There is a policy deficit on the issue of radicalism. The state outsources this policy to external agents, such as spiritual boards of Muslims.