

# POST-COMMUNIST ISLAM IN A POST-9/11 WORLD: THE STATE OF THE RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE

## Introduction

Mustafa Tuna and Andreja Mesarič

While Islam has historically been a salient part of the social fabric in the formerly communist territories of Eurasia, the number of individuals who identify themselves as Muslim and religion as a defining component of their identity and daily practice rose significantly since the collapse of communism in the Soviet Bloc and the Balkans in the early 1990s. Expressions of public piety, such as mosque attendance and the observation of Muslim dress codes, contributed significantly to the growing visibility of Muslims in the region. Besides the revitalization of local traditions, or in some cases their inventions, contacts with several Muslim networks and movements from outside the region led to a pluralization of approaches to right belief and practice among post-communist Muslims.

Meanwhile, military conflicts involving Muslims such as the Bosnian and Chechen wars in the 1990s followed by the global securitization of Islam politics after 9/11 deeply shaped the lens through which post-communist regimes and the broader global community observed the dramatic expansion and diversification of Muslim presence in post-communist space. Their shared response was an emphasis on policies that promoted centralizing government surveillance and regulations. More often than not, various degrees of disregard for human rights violations and the liberal democratic ideals that Francis Fukuyama had once suggested would define the world in the aftermath of the Cold War accompanied these centralizing tendencies.<sup>1</sup> Against this background, individual believers navigated and negotiated a complex landscape characterized by a new and expansive supply of products, ideas, and choices in the religious realm, rivalling claims to authority in defining the “right” choices, and the pressures and limitations that nationalist projects and heightened security concerns imposed on their abilities to choose.

To explain the dramatic transformations of the 1990s in the religious sphere, students of post-communist Islam have widely relied on the notion of the “return of Islam” in a significantly expanded and diversified religious marketplace.<sup>2</sup> The market metaphor offers powerful explanatory capacity.

The authors would like to thank Jesko Schmoller for his contributions to an earlier version of this introduction.

1. Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” in *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.

2. On “return to Islam” and its implications about “believing,” see Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy, eds., *The Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity* (Basingstoke, Eng., 2015); Ina Merdjanova, *Rediscovering the Umma: Muslims in the Balkans Between Nationalism and Transnationalism* (Oxford, 2013); Liliya Karimova, “Muslim Revival in Tatarstan: Tatar Women’s Narratives as Indicators of Competing Islamic Traditions,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 17, no. 1 (August 2013): 38–58; and Dilyara Suleymanova, “Islam as Moral Education: Madrasa

Carrying the discussion beyond the 1990s, however, the authors of this cluster suggest exploring two of its implications that have been largely left out of the discussion in the euphoria of the perceived triumph of liberal capitalism over state socialism following the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and the Balkans: the demand component of the market metaphor and the possibility of illiberal markets. This exploration helps us recognize and account for two observations: first, while the communist regimes collapsed, they did not leave a blank slate behind. Their legacies continue to define public and private choices in the post-communist world. Second, especially from the point of view of post-communist Muslims, the post-communist world is also a post-9/11 world: their experiences cannot be understood or explained without reference to the rise of global Islamophobia since 2001.

Our attention to the demand component departs from a seemingly intuitive yet still poorly acknowledged premise: the “return of Islam” in any form would have remained inconsequential without a corresponding “return to Islam,” that is, without Islam’s appeal to citizens of the post-communist space, their willingness to become customers in the emerging religious marketplace, the new forms of belief and practice that they chose to introduce in their lives, and the resulting loyalties and affiliations that they embraced. Several generations among the citizens of former communist regimes had been taught to believe in the secular conceptions of technological superiority, collective action, and human progress. Now, it was once again possible to believe and publicly embrace a religion without violating societal norms, the official doctrine, or in some cases the criminal code. It is true that once the post-communist states welcomed religion, a plethora of marketers flooded the scene with competing claims to the right version of Islam. Many of them were from Muslim-majority countries outside the region and arrived with powerful tools of dissemination, including full-time proselytizers as well as religious literature and media. In the end, however, it was the citizens of post-communist states who chose first to believe and then what to believe in. In fact, a significant number among them also travelled abroad to attend various institutions of Islamic education, where they sought religious knowledge and professional qualifications in order to serve as religious personnel back home.

Post-communist Muslims did not blindly join the customer loyalty programs of specific suppliers. They selectively and situationally evaluated possible options, offered their loyalties, shifted them, or eclectically drew on a range of competing authorities available in the religious marketplace. An understanding of post-communist Islam that exclusively focuses on the supply component and the suppliers’ product descriptions therefore misses crucial details of the emerging landscape that is shaped by individual believers’ everyday choices. Andreja Mesarič’s contribution to this cluster, for instance, explores how pious Muslim women in Bosnia’s capital

city navigate the complex landscape created by the pluralization of Islamic authority. She argues that while we can observe a shift toward a form of religiosity that emphasizes individual engagement with Islamic learning, this search for knowledge is not detached from authoritative actors. Women negotiate multiple sources of Islamic knowledge that might offer conflicting opinions and engage with a range of actors that make competing claims to authority. By acknowledging or rejecting those claims, sometimes in contradictory ways, they both affirm and contest authority. Through this process, they contribute to the pluralization of Islamic authority as well as its continued relevance. Furthermore, women's positive engagement with a range of Islamic actors perceived as distinct, if not opposed to each other, raises questions about the existence of separate Muslim groups with clear and exclusive membership.

The second relatively unexplored implication of the market metaphor that the authors of this cluster would like to bring to attention is the growing illiberality of the post-communist religious marketplace. The atmosphere of freedom that enabled the expansion and diversification of that marketplace in the aftermath of communism was not merely a function of ideological preference. The socialist states had institutionally collapsed and lost their ability to regulate, therefore making liberalism a seemingly viable alternative. As those institutions gradually recovered or new institutions took their place, albeit without the socialist ideal, they began chipping away the freedoms—including religious ones—that characterized the immediate aftermath of communism.

Mustafa Tuna's contribution to this cluster focuses on this illiberal turn in the Russian context. To situate Russia's Islam politics in its gradual reversion to the Soviet practice of regulation and containment, he traces the early welcome and subsequent proscription of the works of a scholar of Islam from Turkey in the Russian Federation. He demonstrates how those old practices were now informed by the post-9/11 global narrative of fear about Islam. In part because of the war in Chechnya, its extension to the rest of Russia in the form of terrorist attacks, and the largescale influx of Muslim migrant workers from the Caucasus and Central Asia, anti-Muslim sentiments were already surging in Russia by the turn of the millennium. The post-9/11 context of Islamophobia, however, harnessed those sentiments with a language that Russian officials and conservative public intellectuals could deploy to justify restrictive and punitive policies against Muslims.

Although the Russian Federation accords a significantly larger space to religion than its predecessor—the Soviet Union—and therefore, a tangible religious marketplace continues to exist in Russia, the severity with which the Russian state defines, regulates, and polices Islam calls for a revision of the market model in order to account for the state's restrictive presence in the field. The Russian state does not flex its muscles simply to maintain free competition; it intervenes to shape both supply and demand. As a result, individuals can believe and practice Islam in Russia, but not freely. Choosing freely from the plethora of claims to right belief and practice in Islam, which once flooded the post-communist space, today risks a range of sanctions from public censure to ten years in prison in Russia. These interventions and restrictions in the

religious marketplace, especially when Islam is concerned, suggest a revival of the country's socialist past through the path-dependent efforts of individuals and government institutions. However, not socialism but globally-justifiable utilitarian concerns about security and conservative notions about the centrality of the Orthodox Church to Russian identity provide the ideological underpinnings of Russia's illiberal turn in the world after 9/11.<sup>3</sup>

This return to the model of regulation and containment in dealing with religions, and especially with Islam, has three main components. First, in a practice that can broadly be associated with nation-building processes across the post-communist space, the states establish or endorse official Islamic institutions and promote their monopoly over right belief and practice in their respective jurisdictions. In turn, these institutions enable post-communist states to normalize their relations with their Muslim citizens. Second, the official Muslim institutions and other state organs identify visions of Islam and networks of Muslims that remain beyond the boundaries of official Islam and designate, police, and try to eliminate those visions and networks as "security threats." Third, the fear that results from the perception of specific visions of Islam and Muslim networks as threat becomes amplified in the echo chambers of national and trans-regional publics and ultimately expands to target Muslims categorically, thereby preparing the grounds for various forms of anti-Muslim discrimination. The degree to which such perceptions of threat affect government policies and are generalized to feed into anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination varies across the post-communist space. Among the two countries under focus in this cluster, it is certainly more pronounced in the Russian Federation.<sup>4</sup>

Bosnia's regulation of religion is influenced by its peculiar political system, which was imposed by the international intervention that helped bring about the resolution of armed conflict in 1995. Split into the Serb majority Republic of Srpska and the Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) and Croat majority Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the country is run by a joint government and a three-member rotating presidency that ensures equal representation of Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. The international community continues to play a role in

3. On the growing salience of these conservative notions, see Mikhail Suslov, "'Holy Rus': The Geopolitical Imagination in the Contemporary Russian Orthodox Church," *Russian Politics and Law* 52, no. 3 (2014): 67–86; Marlene Laruelle, "The Notion of Eurasia: A Spatial, Historical and Political Construct," in Edward Holland and Matthew Derrick, eds., *Questioning Post-Soviet* (Washington, D.C., 2016), 127–40; and Irina du Quenoy, "Russia: The Stability Implications of State Policies Toward Religion and the Russian Orthodox Church," in Katya Migacheva and Frederick Bryan, eds., *Religion, Conflict, and Stability in the Former Soviet Union* (Santa Monica, CA., 2018), 159–80.

4. On anti-Muslim discrimination in Russia, see Alexander Verkhovskiy, "Russian Approaches to Radicalism and 'Extremism' as Applied to Nationalism and Religion," in Roland Dannreuther and Luke March, eds., *Russia and Islam: State, Society and Radicalism* (New York, 2010), 26–43; Marlene Laruelle and Natalia Yudina, "Islamophobia in Russia: Trends and Societal Context," in Olga Oliker, ed., *Religion and Violence in Russia: Context, Manifestations, and Policy* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield; Washington, D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018), 43–62; Vera Tolz and Sue-Ann Harding, "From 'Compatriots' to 'Aliens': The Changing Coverage of Migration on Russian Television," *Russian Review* 74, no. 3 (July 2015): 452–77.

Bosnian politics, particularly through the Office of the High Representative. The control of religious life by adopting patterns previously developed during communism has therefore not taken place in quite the same way as in Russia. Bosnia has comprehensive legislation guaranteeing religious freedom, which provides for the registration of new religious institutions. This legislation nonetheless privileges established religious institutions by recognizing them as “traditional religious organizations,” and consequently gives them symbolic power to define acceptable religious practice in the Bosnian context, be it Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Catholic, or Jewish.<sup>5</sup>

The state has also capitalized on post-9/11 Islamophobic discourses in order to deal with what it considers undesirable forms of Islam and the Muslims promoting them. Aligning Bosnia’s policies with the US-led “global war on terror” offered the country’s authorities an opportunity to take action against a number of Muslim non-governmental organizations as well as international aid workers and military volunteers that stayed in Bosnia after the war.<sup>6</sup> More recently, inflated concerns over the recruitment of Bosnian and other Balkan citizens by Daesh (ISIS) reinforced the link between Salafism and terrorism in the public imagination and served as fodder for alarmist responses by some political elites. Furthermore, the post-9/11 discourse on Islam fed accusations against certain interpretations of Islam that arrived in Bosnia through transnational actors as not only foreign but dangerous and in need of containment, often leading to the internal othering of Muslims by Muslims.

Concerns around the definition of the appropriate ways of being Muslim in post-communist space and who gets to define it run through both of our contributions. In both cases, the communist legacies of religious control and global Islamophobic discourses adapted to local and regional concerns shape such definitions of appropriateness. Tuna’s work focuses on the deployment of the global post-9/11 anti-Muslim rhetoric to establish prescriptive controls over Muslim populations by limiting acceptable religious expression to officially-endorsed notions of “local” or “traditional” Islam and by proscribing transnational Muslim networks as a potential threat. Mesarič’s contribution, on the other hand, explores women’s everyday experiences of negotiating an Islamic landscape populated by actors that have found themselves on different sides of the discursively-constructed divide between traditional and transnational Islam. In both cases, government-endorsed institutions representing official Islam mediate the fine line between concerns for security and regulation and the pursuit of individual believers to identify the right forms of belief and practice. Viewed from Tuna’s macro-level perspective, the Russian state appears to have mobilized its resources in favor of a highly-regimented,

5. “Managing Islam and Religious Pluralism,” a special issue of *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), Ahmet Alibašić and Nedim Begović, “Reframing the Relations between State and Religion in Post-War Bosnia: Learning to be Free!”, 19–34.

6. Darryl Li, “A Universal Enemy?: ‘Foreign Fighters’ and Legal Regimes of Exclusion and Exemption Under the ‘Global War on Terror,’” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 41, no. 2 (2010), 355–428; Christian Moe, “The War on Terror and Muslim Opinion-Making in Bosnia,” in Anne Stensvold, ed., *Western Balkans: The Religious Dimension* (Oslo, 2009), 91–183.

illiberal religious marketplace. Viewed from the viewpoint of Mesarič's micro-level analysis, individual believers appear to maintain ample agency in the market despite the presence of an institution of official Islam but without a counterpart to the Russian state's heavy-handed intervention in the religious field. In both cases, however, the specter of 9/11 looms large in the background, inevitably relating both the governments' and individuals' choices about right belief and practice to a reductionist cliché about "good" and "bad" Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

7. Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York, 2004).