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Kazan Tatars, Muslims and Shamans Present Three New Challenges to Moscow

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

Three very different actions by the Kazan Tatars, a major Muslim Spiritual Directorate, and the shamans of the Russian Federation reflect the unintended consequences of Moscow's approach to ethnic and religious issues and present new challenges to the Russian government that it may find difficult to dismiss out of hand.

First of all, having secured Moscow's agreement to declare Kazan "the third capital" of Russia, some Kazan Tatars are now seeking to have the central government declare their language "the second state language of Russia" because the Tatars are the second largest language community there and serve as Russia's bridge to other Turkic-speaking peoples.

The World Forum of Tatar Youth, which has organized this effort and put up a special website to press its case, seeks more than just recognition. It hopes to use this campaign to reverse recent cutbacks in Tatar language use outside of Tatarstan because unlike other nations in Russia, most Kazan Tatars live beyond their republic's current borders.

And to that end, the group plans an online petition campaign, something that will both raise national awareness among young Tatars (another goal of the group) and challenge Moscow's policy under Putin and Medvedev of cutting back the national component of education in many areas.

Second, the Muslim Spiritual Directorate (MSD) of the European Part of Russia has published two books by Said Nursi on its list of "approved Islamic literature," even though these and other works of the Islamic writer have been declared "extremist" by Russian courts and are included on the Federal List of Extremist Materials.

On the one hand, this action by the MSD reflects a widespread view among many Muslim leaders that Russian courts lack the expertise to decide who is "extremist" among Muslims. And on the other, the timing of this action appears to be a protest against the composition of the new justice ministry group that is supposed to provide such testimony.

However that may be, at least some Muslims close to the Russian government, including Mufti Mukhammedgali Khuzin, who is himself a member of that new justice ministry group, say that the MSD's actions represents "a challenge to the leadership of the country."

Such "a demonstrative approval of materials that form the ideological foundation of the Nurjilar organization, which the Supreme Court recognized last year as extremist, is an unconcealed challenge and may be considered as spitting in the face of the Russian powers that be," Khuzin told Interfax.

At the very least, this decision of the MSD for the European Part of Russia, especially given the prominence of that group within the Union of Muftis of Russia and its authority among many Muslims as a traditional rather than radical forum, will spark new tensions between the government and Muslim leaders, at a time when Moscow would like to avoid them.

And third, there is another emerging challenge, although it may seem extraordinarily distant from Russia's corridors of power. The shamans of Russia have announced plans to hold the "first popular elections of the Supreme Shaman of Russia," thus creating a leader who could speak for them in Moscow.

In recent months, shamans in Siberia and the Far East have been among the leaders of protests against the destruction of the environment by Russian officials and Russian firms, and with a popularly elected leader, they are likely to demand that they should be represented in Russia's Inter-Religious Council as one of the country's "traditional" religions.

Patriarch Kirill, who in his earlier incarnation as the head of the Moscow Patriarchate's External Affairs Department took the lead in organizing that group and using the term "traditional" to embrace only Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, will thus face a new test, especially since many in Russia see shamanism as part of their heritage.

But Moscow is unlikely to make a concession on this point because many would see the addition of yet another "traditional" religion as opening the way for the inclusion of other groups, including Catholics and Protestants, and that could destroy precisely

the exclusionary, religious "power vertical" in which both Kirill and the Kremlin have invested so much.

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