

Moscow's Policies Unwittingly Promoting Islamist Extremism

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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.

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Despite the Kremlin's expanded "anti-extremism" measures and its pledges to fight Islamist movements, Russian authorities have adopted policies that make the rise of Islamist extremism in the country increasingly likely, a situation that has led one analyst to conclude that the authorities are "losing control" over Moscow and other major Russian cities.

Moscow has formulated three major policy initiatives to help fight Islamist extremism, but the policies seem to be having the opposite effect of the desired one, encouraging extremist actions instead of preventing them, and the authorities' ignorance of this fact will likely stall a shift toward more effective measures.

The first policy, enacted under pressure from the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian nationalists of almost all stripes, is a general refusal on the part of the authorities to allow more mosques to open in Russian cities (as opposed to in rural areas, where many have opened), even though the number of Muslims in many urban areas has grown rapidly since

the end of the Soviet era.

In Moscow, for instance, the number of officially registered mosques has increased only from four to five since Soviet times, while the number of Muslims has risen from less than 100,000 to more than 2.5 million. The situation is similar in St. Petersburg, where the number of registered mosques has gone from one to two, even though the number of Muslims has increased from 15,000 to around 1 million.

As a result, by deferring to the church and nationalist sentiment, the Russian government is effectively encouraging the formation of unofficial Muslim groups, many of whose members are either more radical to begin with or who become so as a result of the secrecy and sense of official persecution they experience.

Second, in its drive to construct Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's "power vertical," the Russian government has dismissed or undermined officials who have proven adept at dealing with Islamic groups and has signaled its intent to reduce the autonomy of governments in predominantly non-Russian regions across the country.

Take the case of Bashkortostan President Murtaza Rakhimov, who has been very successful in blocking the rise of Islamist movements in his republic: Because of his criticism of Moscow, he is [likely to be expelled from United Russia](#) and thus lose his job, and it is unlikely that his successor will be as effective in fighting extremism.

The Russian government also may resume Putin's program of amalgamating federal units, according to a [speech](#) prepared by Valery Tishkov, the influential director of the Moscow Institute of Ethnology, which calls into question the whole notion of "ethnic territories."

If that happens, it will not only anger many non-Russians (and some Russians as well) — it will also open the door for Islamic radicals to play on this discontent. Indeed, the radicals are certain to argue that only they and not some new, Moscow-installed ethnic leaders can defend and advance the interests of historically Islamic peoples.

And third, Russian officials, especially in Moscow, where they are more closely observed by Western embassies and journalists, have been reluctant to move as harshly against certain groups' activities in North Caucasian diasporas as they have earlier and elsewhere lest such actions trigger an even broader problem.

In the name of "tolerance," the authorities regularly put up with certain actions, including the use of guns, that Moscow would never allow if any other group engaged in them, [points out](#) Sergey Mikheyev of the Moscow Center of Political Technologies.

That has led some North Caucasians, many of whom are Muslims, to feel that they are subject to a separate set of laws and can continue to cultivate hostility in the Russian population and push "religious radicalism and the ideas of separatism" at little risk.

The government's failure to suppress such actions, Mikheyev continues, has radicalized ethnic Russians, contributing to the rise of xenophobia or even "neo-Nazism" and is thus

"inevitably leading to the loss of strategic control over the situation in the capital" and perhaps in the country as a whole.

Mikheyev's comments may overstate the current risk, but there is another danger that is all too real: Those in Moscow who would like to adopt an even more authoritarian course than that taken by the Russian government may welcome the chance to invoke the threat of Islamist extremism as justification, knowing that will play well in Russia and abroad.

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