

**AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society programme  
Workshop on “Interpreting information on Islam”  
Novgorod, 31May-1June 2008**

# **The study of post-Soviet Islam: methodological and political challenges**

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## **Introduction**

Since the collapse of Communism Islam has re-emerged as an important factor of cultural and national self-identification among the ex-Soviet Muslims who number over sixty million people. This has occurred in the context of the post-Communist ideological void, weak civil society and the re-integration of ex-Soviet Muslims within the wider Islamic world, from which they had been cut off for more than a century. Meanwhile, despite the great political relevance and scholarly importance of the study of Islam in the former USSR it has remained severely under-researched in both the West and in the ex-Soviet countries. This paper provides a researcher's insights into the methodological complexities and political and security challenges of conducting research on Islam in the USSR.

## **The problems for the Western studies of Islam in the ex-USSR**

The vast majority of Western academics and politicians have continued to consider the ex-Soviet Muslim regions as peripheral to the Islamic world, largely because of their inclusion in the Russian Empire – a primarily Orthodox Christian entity and the USSR – a highly secularised state. As a result, most existing studies on contemporary Islam have tended to focus on developments in the Middle East, North Africa, Indonesia and other areas at the centre of global Islamic developments and general trends in Islamic thinking. The Western research into Islam among extremely multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Muslim communities of the former USSR has been hindered by the lack of sufficient linguistic and area studies expertise. On the other hand, a limited number of those Western academics, who work in the field of ex-Soviet Islam, came from the Sovietologist background and therefore tend to deal with it under the heading of Security Studies. Much of their research has been directly related to policymaking and security concerns. Without undervaluing this research, it has suffered from the relative dearth of independent research into the cultural, social, historical, ethnic and religious complexion of Islam and Muslims in various parts of the former Soviet Union.

Another serious hindrance for better understanding of Islam in the former USSR, as well as in the West and other parts of the world has been the theoretical “straight-jacketing” of the subject. The comprehensive research into Islam has suffered from the *de facto* prevalence of a solo-discipline theoretical approach and

the continuing theoretical “demotion” of area studies, based on multi-disciplinary theoretical approach. For example, in recent years the British universities have experienced a sharp drop in PhD students conducting research in Muslim regions of the former USSR, who chose an area studies approach, compared to those students, who opted for a single-discipline theoretical framework (political sciences, sociology, history, theology, anthropology, human geography, etc). The corollary has been an expansion of a patchy, one-sided research into the subject. On the other hand, those few researchers who genuinely adhere to a multi-disciplinary theoretical approach, have often been accused of theoretical inadequacy and anthological vagueness. Among the implications of this situation has been a significant decline in funding for area studies-based research which is the most appropriate for the study of Islam in ethnically and linguistically diverse ex-Soviet Muslim countries.

Yet another problem has been a growing impact of the UK domestic political and academic discourses on Islamic extremism and Islamic-inspired violence on the funding of Islam-related research in other parts of the world. Thus, following the Islamist atrocities in New York and Washington in September 2001 and especially the London bombings in July 2005 there has been a great increase in the studies of radical Islam in the UK and other Western countries and its interactions with global *jihadist* networks. This, however, has not been accompanied by an increase in the studies of dominant moderate forms of Islam in the UK and elsewhere, including the Muslim regions of the USSR. The imbalance of research themes has reflected an increasing political “securitisation” of Islam in the UK and the wider West.

### **The problems for the study of “home” Islam in the ex-USSR**

The study of post-Soviet Islam in the ex-Soviet countries has had some similar problems, as well as some specific problems. The comprehensive research into “home” Islam has been hindered by three major factors. One is the legacy of over seventy years-long institutionalized atheism which negated the very existence of Islam, as well as other religions in the Soviet Union. At the same, the USSR’s internationalist and super-power stance accounted for the formation of a large group of highly qualified researchers of “foreign” Islam, ie Islam in countries of the Middle East, Africa, in subcontinent, Indonesia, etc. As a result, the research into “home” Islam has been largely conducted by specialists of “foreign” Islam who were affiliated

to academic institutes or departments of “external” regional studies, such as the Middle Eastern, Arabic, Balkan studies, or more general ethnographic, historical, social and political studies.

The second reason is the persistence of the Soviet social sciences paradigms which refrain from dealing with politically and ideologically controversial issues in their respective countries. Despite of interacting for over decade with other, especially the Western, theoretical discourses, the vast majority of post-Soviet academics, especially outside Moscow and St-Petersburg have continued to use the Soviet-era scholarly apparatus. Their research has tended to focus on ethno-linguistic, cultural and ethnographic peculiarities (costumes, music and folklore, etc.) and other static characteristics of various Muslim people. Compared to researchers in the West, most of their ex-Soviet counterparts have tended to avoid research into the phenomenon of religious and national mobilization and its role in nation- and state-building, something which tends to be central to Western theories of nationalism. As a result, Soviet academic discourse on religion and nationalism has remained predominantly descriptive and apolitical in nature.

Most ex-Soviet scholars have remained ambivalent about conducting research into any religious and national phenomena. It is worth remembering that until the collapse of the Soviet system any manifestation of religiosity, or nationalism and its academic investigation were treated with suspicion as remnants of “obscurantism and narrow bourgeois-nationalism.” The memory of numerous political trials of leading Muslim Communists and non-Russian Soviet ‘nationalists’ like Veli Ibrahimov, Mir Sayid Sultan-Galiev, Turar Ryskulov, Vyacheslav Chornovil and Feyzullah Hocaev were effective deterrents against any attempts at in-depth analysis of religious and national mobilization in the USSR. Yet another aggravating factor has been the structure of Soviet academic institutes which were modeled on the Communist Party with its rigid hierarchy and centralism. Under that system any expression of intellectual dissent, or disagreement with the “official” line, could cause serious political, professional and personal implications. As a result, many ex-Soviet academics have preferred to play it safe and to confine themselves to a predominantly ethnographic descriptive framework. The grave corollary has been limited ability of post-Soviet academics to engage in, and inform, public debates and policy-making after the end of Communism.

The third reason is the increasing “securitization” of Islam and Islam-related topics in the ex-Soviet Muslim territories. The elevation of Islam into a “national security issue” has turned an independent scholarly investigation into Islamic phenomenon into a problematic task. In this respect the situation has been similar to that in the UK and wider Western Europe.

### **The feasible methodology for the study of Islam**

My previous research in the Muslim regions of the USSR has proved the effectiveness of a four-phase methodology. The first phase involved the gathering of data on political, economic, cultural, ethnic and religious developments in the targeted regions from a variety of sources – official documents and statistics; local, regional and national printed media; programmes and leaflets published by Islamic, national and nationalist organisations in various languages, including Arabic, Avar, Azeri, Balkar, Kazakh, Kumyk, Kyrgyz, Nakh, Russian, Tajik, Uzbek and Uyghur. Other sources also included material published by the Islamic Spiritual Boards, information provided by local Islamic websites, and material from foreign Islamic literature, periodicals and websites.

The second phase involved the ethnographic observation, life-story interviewing and semi-structured interviews with informed sources, Islamic religious figures, religious practitioners, local and regional experts, and officials. This phase enabled the researchers to obtain additional first-hand data when addressing the project’s research questions.

In the third stage, a series of propositions were developed on the basis of the collected data regarding various aspects of Muslims societies under examination. These propositions were then tested, whenever possible, through focus-group methodologies.

The fourth stage involved the analysis of the gathered data from different regions. This was followed the comparison of the findings from different regions. The findings were then placed within a wider regional and global context. Finally, the research findings were integrated in a monograph, or a series of substantial articles in referred journals and disseminated at relevant international and national conferences and workshops.

### **Personal safety and ethical considerations**

The research in the Muslim regions of the ex-ESSR is characterized by cultural and political sensitivity. It carries certain potential risks not only for the UK-based and regional researchers, but also for the respondents. This particularly relates to conducting semi-structured interviews with Islamic leaders and Islamists. Previous experience revealed that those risks could be mitigated by a careful and sensitive approach that guaranteed anonymity to the respondents and that did not place them in a position that might compromise them. Due to the politically sensitive nature of the research area (closed societies, authoritarian regimes, intense state surveillance of officials and opposition leaders and activists, suppression of opposition and strict censorship of media) the interviewees, both from government structures and the opposition, often insist on preservation of their anonymity and non-cataloguing of the provided information as a condition for interview. This is because even in the anonymised form it may be possible to identify them given their prominence in the public sphere and to seriously endanger their careers, or even their lives.