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Cultural Transformation and Change of Identity in the Northern Caucasus*

TAMARA SIVERTSEVA

Profound and uncontrolled processes have been taking place recently on the socio-cultural level in the Northern Caucasus. Islam has survived in this region not only as a religion or a form of personal piety but also as a way of life, as a factor in the organisation of the rural community and as a real power structure. In the past few years the local Islamic leaders in the region's rural areas have been obliged to perform the functions of both religious and secular authority. The formal legitimisation of decisions is also becoming the prerogative of Islam, and this fact baffles the former secular leaders and leads to their sporadic rebellion.

The Northern Caucasus has always been an important geopolitical region. The recent processes of change have already led to the transfer of a significant part of this region from the zone of Russian cultural and political influence to that of Islam. This means that strategic geopolitical prospects are beginning to be determined by a new cultural and religious orientation: away from the imperial centre and towards the religious centres of the Islamic world. One obvious symptom of the change of geopolitical zones is the fact that future local and religious leaders are receiving their political, religious and cultural education in different places from their predecessors. In the not-too-distant past, leaders were trained at the imperial centre or in a hierarchy orientated towards that centre. A condition of a successful career was a rejection of Islam; there were no prospects of advancement within the Islamic political tradition. Now, however, a substantial proportion of the young people inheriting posts in local and regional power structures are receiving their instruction in the world centres of Islamic culture and politics far away from the Commonwealth of Independent States.

One of the most important causes of the progressive transfer of a large part of the North Caucasus to the Islamic geopolitical zone is the remarkable intactness of a living Muslim cultural tradition. Field studies in mountain villages in Dagestan and conversations with people who were born there (first-generation urban intellectuals) have shown that Islam is highly tenacious and resistant to the pressure of the external repressive apparatus. One sign of the living and, most importantly, continuous tradition of Islamic learning is the widespread knowledge of Arabic among country people. In rural and mountainous regions new Islamic educational and religious centres are being opened by scholars of Arabic, who have numerous pupils. There

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are not nearly enough teachers yet, but a tradition of handing down sacred knowledge from teacher to pupil is already established. A teacher is typically a grandfather, and the pupil a grandson who is assimilating Islam and whose ambition is to enter an Islamic university in one of the recognised centres of the Muslim world. The fathers, the urban intellectuals who sought to succeed under the Soviet system by rejecting Islam, are thus bypassed.

An important consequence of this situation is an identity conflict unknown to the central regions of postcommunist Russia. A sense of community within the world of Islam and a gravitation towards the holy centres of the Muslim world is in conflict with another type of identity, shaped over several decades: that with the imperial centre. The conflict between these two identities has recently become a serious issue, because the opportunities for members of the old *nomenklatura* to find a place for themselves in the new power structures in the Islamic regions are much more restricted than those of their colleagues in the central regions of postcommunist Russia. Our field studies are confirming our impression that the disctinction between the new and the old elite coincides with a distinction between those who are involving themselves in international Islamic culture and those who are not, one clearly defined 'cultural' indicator being knowledge of Arabic. An ability, gained after years of study, to read and interpret the holy books is a 'pass' required for entry into the new elite.

The young Islamic leaders are indifferent to the political problems facing their fathers' generation, involving the conflict of identifies described above. Having learnt Arabic (first holy and then secular) and undertaken a *haj*, they are aware of themselves as a part of the great world of Islam. Having visited its centres, they regard themselves as emissaries to their own native countries with the task of reviving Islamic culture. In this context their goal is to build an infrastructure of Islamic secondary schooling and, in the future, university education. The future religious leaders, similarly, are not generally concerned about day-to-day current disputes, but set themselves long-term goals (including personal ones) in the context of their perception of the North Caucasus as part of the world of Islam. They are interested in stability and are not inclined to let the Russian authorities involve themselves in their local problems, which they believe they can solve themselves. The old elite, on the other hand, typically tries to involve the Russian authorities in local conflicts, and this is a destabilising factor in the transition to a new geopolitical identity in the region.