BRIEFING PAPER

The Changing Face of Islam in the Baltic States

Egdunas Racius
Vytautas Magnus University
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Briefing Paper

The Changing Face of Islam in the Baltics

Egdunas Racius
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Bio

Egdunas Racius is the Head and Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies at the Department of Regional Studies, Faculty of Political Science and Diplomacy, Vytautas Magnus University (Kaunas, Lithuania). He is the Reviews Editor of the Journal of Muslims in Europe and a co-editor of the Yearbook of Muslims in Europe (both by Brill). His research interests encompass European converts to Islam as well as Muslim revivalist movements. Račius’ recent publications include “Lithuanian Muslims’ attitudes toward participation in democratic political process: the case of converts”, in Jørgen Nielsen (ed.), Muslim political participation in Europe, Edinburgh University Press, 2013; “A ‘virtual club’ of Lithuanian converts to Islam”, in Göran Larsson and Thomas Hoffman (eds.), Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies, Springer Verlag, 2013; “Both Muslim and European? An Inquiry into the Case of the Muslim Community in Lithuania”, in Journal of Muslims in Europe, vol. 2:2, 2013.
THE CHANGING FACE OF ISLAM
IN THE BALTICS

Introduction

Egdunas Racius, on his lecture on Islam in the Baltic States and its transformation first started by stating that the Baltic States seem to be on the periphery of everything and anything. Since the Baltic States are still a little unknown in the mainstream literature, it is important to give a little introduction and background information before approaching the topic.

The question that will be addressed, will be what does “the changing face” mean, and what consequences that change might have or is already having on the four aspects that will be touched.

The three Baltic States are relatively small. The basic statistics of the population so we have some idea are; clue the population of Estonia is 1.3 billion, Latvia 2 million, and Lithuania 2.9 million. There are also a significant minority of Russians or other Slavic speaking groups like Ukrainians etc. When it comes to religion, one third of the Estonian population declared that they don't believe in anything. Other one third declared their belief in paganism. Christians are a minority with thirty five percent. Latvia has Lutherans and Catholics whereas Lithuania is predominantly Catholic.

Islam in the Baltics and the Tatar Migrations

When it comes to Islam, the situation of Islam in the Baltics is rather different from the rest of Europe. Islam came to Lithuania the same time it came to the Balkans. We know in the Balkans the Turks would come to the lands and spread religion. In Lithuania it was different. The Lithuanian dukes would go and bring Muslim prisoners. So it was not an invasion. In this regard history of Islam to Lithuania is different from most of Europe. When it comes to the other countries the arrival of Islam was late, it was due to the Russian wars the Turkic tribes arrived. Many aspects make the situation in
Baltic countries rather different than most other European countries. There might be some similarities with some Eastern European countries.

Islam came to Lithuania in the 14th century the time, when the biggest influx was at the end of this century. There may have been up to 100,000 Tatars. What is also unique in this regard is that the Tatar mobility could prove they were of noble origins. The grand dukes granted them nobility and levelled them with Christian mobility and gave them nearly as many rights. Whenever we talk about the presence of Islam what is visually recognizable is the mosques. The first mosques where built in the 15th century and they would be wooden and tend to burn so we don’t have mosques surviving from those centuries. There were also of course cemeteries. This migration lasted till the 16th century. Maps of the 15th century shows us that the Grand Duchy had territories up to Muslim states. So it had direct borders. The current republic of Lithuania is just a small part. If I were to give an overall assessment of Muslims in Europe I would claim they have successfully integrated to the society because the late authorities had been positively disposed towards the Tatars. The mainstream society that was Catholic were not so intolerant to these people who were so different in their ways of ritual. We don’t see those many cases of discrimination or criminality. The Tatars were very loyal and part of the society.

When we look at the other two countries the Muslims came rather late. The organizations start establishing themselves prior World War One. Prior to the First World War the community was rather big, whereas after Latvia became an independent state the Muslim population decreased. In Estonia also the numbers are meager. When the Soviets took over many of the Tatars migrated. In Sweden the first Muslims were the Tatars that migrated from the Baltic States.

The next question is, how then is religion governed in the three Baltic States? They are all secular with no state religion. In Lithuania 9 religious communities are recognized not all of them are Christians. Sunni Muslims are also recognized. Formally Sunni Muslims and Catholics are on equal footing vis-a-vis the state. In Latvia they distinguish between traditional and non-traditional religions. So Muslims are non-traditional and are not recognized. In Estonia they do not make a distinction between traditional and non-traditional religions and by law they cannot support religious communities financially. In Lithuania this is not the case. Every year the state allocates certain amounts of shares.

The Latvian and Estonian states opted for ethnicity and origin based citizenship policy which left significant part of the population as non-citizens of the respective countries. The bulk of Muslims who would fall into the category of Russian speakers would be forced to choose between Russian citizenship, UN passports or become stateless. Out of two and a half thousand Tatars in
Estonia only 750 were Estonian citizens. In the case of Lithuania anyone in Lithuania living there would get a citizenship and therefore there were no stateless resident. The Tatars are here coined as Soviet colonists but not in a negative implication. This choice of wording was chosen in order not to coin them as immigrant. They were in their own countries still as part of the Soviet Union. The Tatars would practice folk Islam, and in legal Islam the Hanafi school. What is also important is the Soviet regime, which was atheist worked hard to make people to abandon religious belief. That is why we have people who do not believe in anything. Most Lithuanians don’t practice Catholicism. For many groups Islam has become a feature of their ethnic heritage. The other thing since they do not practice is that if you go to a mosque you cannot find a Tatar. It can be said that they entered the period of post-Islam which may be a contested term. This is the picture of what Islam has been in the Baltic States. This however, would be a simplified version of Islam.

A New Form of Islam in the Baltics: The Converts

We need to come to the new face of Islam in the Baltics which is the converts. They are the new face of Islam in the Baltics. Why is that? Because there were hardly any ethnic Baltics as Muslims and this process started very recently. Now the numbers ever increasing. The Muslim figures would not be complete without bringing in the numbers. The only way an ethnic Baltic can be a Muslim is through conversion, if their parents were not Muslim in the first place, which would make them born into Islam. In the Latvian case it is not only ethnic Latvians but also Russian speakers that are converting. In the Lithuanian case there are also ethnic Russians, Polish and even Jews. What is important is that many don’t live in the Baltics. There is an understanding that the capital of Lithuanian Muslims is London.

Their Islam is not the Islam of the traditional groups they don’t share much with the ethnic minorities. Predominantly these young people convert without marriage and many converts are very devout. They are often identified with the revivalist ideas. There are also those who identify with Salafism. What is also very important is that they do not participate in whatever Tatars organize because theirs is ethnic cultural. What is very common is that these people tend to congregate in private at home. They have self-help online communities. What is important in the case of the Baltic States is that non-ethnic groups very often don’t know …. They have started formally organizing themselves and the organization they have make sure the cultural Muslims do not come because they don’t trust them. These people go to detail to try to explain what Islam is supposedly about. New converts happen to people having read about Islam on these websites. Most of the converts think that Tatars even if they had practiced Islam that Islam would be deviant. It is the form that they contain and no in-debt understanding. And these traditional Muslims have become apostates. There is a challenge that there are now two communities being formed. They have very little in common and they do not communicate. If these new Muslims will
aspire to take over organizations controlled by traditional Muslims, there will be intercommunity tensions and also with the state. For the Lithuanian state Islam is Tatar, and we already see that the convert community have demands. They want to teach children Islam in schools, halal meat, or Imams in prisons. And this irritates public institutions and the general society. It was not a problem to have Tatar Muslims because they did not want anything specifically Islamic but these new Muslims have demands. If Lithuania ever becomes a proper country of immigration then this will be accelerated and the process will be irreversible.

The Russian speaking Tatars have sentiments for Russia, converts do not speak Russia so they would not mingle with Russia or Russians and hence they look westward to English speaking countries. So there is generational differences. There is much cooperation among converts in these three countries. There is also another dimension; there is an evidence that the Tablighi Jamaat has discovered the Baltic States. It is the converts who mainly mingle with this community and organize their events. There also a total new trend that both Estonia and Latvia have citizens going to fight on the half of ISIS.

What is known in Lithuania in general about Islam is from the media. When it comes to Tatars the media is always positive. They are good Muslims. It is the converts that try to explain Islam and what the media does is that they take certain stories like failed marriages and bring them to the mainstream news. What is being done is that these converts are being portrayed in the light of abnormality of converting. It is a problem because media fails in its mission but what it does has no good for the community and supports and endorses the polarization of good-bad Muslims.

Conclusion

Islam in the Baltic States has existed in the Baltic States since the 14th century through Tatar migration. The long history of Tatar existence has been generally non-problematic for the states and the society. The main reason for this was because the Tatars were what can be called “cultural Muslims”, in that they do not actively practice religion and have no specific demands that would entail the state to look for different policies.

On the other hand in that last years there has been a trend of ethnics in the Baltic countries becoming Muslims, and this could only happen through migration. The differences of these new Muslims from the Tatars lies in the fact that they are very much practitioners of Islam and have certain demands according to their needs. These two groups have very little communication, mainly because the Tatars do not want to talk about religion but the converts want to talk about and learn about want religion, and what is more the converts want to be identified with their
religion. While Tatar organizations are more ethnic-culturally oriented, the convert community’s organizations are established to teach religion, and come together on a religious ground.

The general social and political outlook on the new emerging group of Muslims is not as positive toward as it would be toward the Tatars. One of the biggest reason for this is the media coverage of certain so-called negativities these people experience like failed marriages, bringing it to the mainstream news. Hence the Baltic States are in a process of getting in touch with new forms of Islam.
The Gülen Chair for Intercultural Studies in KU Leuven University is a research chair specialising in academic research, teaching and publication in the field of interculturalism, Muslims in Europe, cohabitation of ethnic-religious differences in plural societies.

The central purpose of these research areas are concerned with mutual understanding and social cohesion, especially targeting Muslims and their relations with the wider society in Europe. The purpose of the Chair is to stimulate research on intercultural understanding with a special focus on relations between Muslim communities and the wider society in Europe and in Belgium which includes the research on the Muslim presence in Europe and the implication of this presence on practice and policy, public life, ethics and education. The Chair wants to provide an academic platform where researchers can present, debate and exchange their findings on the study of Islam and Muslims in contemporary society, the minority and migration policies, and intercultural communication. The Chair does these aims by organizing international conferences, workshops, seminars, by funding researchers.