



The role of Islam in the lives of Central Asian migrants in Moscow

Sophie Roche

Key points:

Moscow, with two million Muslim residents and up to two million more migrant workers, has only four mosques, and the municipal authorities have repeatedly dismissed all efforts to build more, despite an urgent need.

Many young men become practicing Muslims during their stay in Russia. In Russia's bazaars Islam becomes an important means of organizing life, as well as securing hygiene and moral behavior. It is also through Islam that young Tajik men turn humiliating working experiences into positive values by becoming religious practitioners.

Mosques are increasingly used and understood as central places for social, educational and political activities. After the prayer, numerous groups form around activists who try to raise awareness on different issues, especially those related to migration and politics in the Muslim world, which are discussed and openly debated.

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Sophie Roche is a Junior Research Group Leader at the Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies at Heidelberg University. She recently published *Domesticating youth. The dynamics of youth bulge in Tajikistan* (Berghahn, 2014). She works on religious practices among Tajik migrants in Russia.

Russian politicians regularly emphasize their good relationship with Islam at home, especially with Islam in the Volga-Ural region and with several Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East. However, forms of Muslimness that go beyond this narrowly defined “good” and “Russia-friendly” Islam are treated with suspicion. The North-Caucasian populations, legally citizens of the Russian Federation, are treated more like a foreign element and as a “problem” rather than as a legitimate part of Russian Islam, not to mention Central Asian migrants, who are seen as a highly problematic population.

Within Russia, the very term *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker), used to designate migrants from Central Asia, emphasizes an economic approach to migration rather than a process impacting social and cultural identity, religious belief and practices, in addition to households’ micro-economy. As *Gastarbeiter* Central Asian migrants’ Muslimness is often seen as endangering the peaceful, home-grown Islam of Russia, and the traditionally friendly relations with the Muslim world.

Migrants and Muslims in Russia

Russia’s Muslim population today is about 20 million, which includes the Muslim populations of the Volga-Ural region as well as of the North Caucasus. With the exception of the Kazakhs, the orientation of Central Asians (both Persian-speakers and Turkic-speakers) towards Russia’s north rather than the Islamic south and west is, historically speaking, a new phenomenon that started in the eighteenth century and became more pronounced in the nineteenth century.

During the Soviet period educational migration between Russia and Central Asia was twofold: Central Asian students went to Russia for higher education in secular topics, while Russian Muslims moved south for religious education. For instance, the Grand Mufti of Russia, Ravil Gaynutdin, received his religious training at the Mir-i Arab madrassa in Bukhara, one of the main Islamic centers in the Russian-speaking world and the most honorable place to receive religious education.¹ Even today religious elites in many post-Soviet countries still share a common educational background in Central Asia.

Today’s Russia hosts around 6,000 mosques for about 20 million officially self-identified Muslims –migrants excluded. Many of these mosques are headed by Tajik, Chechen, or Tatar *imom qotib* (prayer leaders).² But Moscow, with two million Muslim residents and up to two million more migrant workers, has only four mosques, and the municipal authorities have repeatedly dismissed all efforts to build more, despite an urgent need.³ Moscow’s mosques are overcrowded and every Friday several roads around the religious buildings have to be closed during prayer hours. One of the reasons advanced by the municipal authorities for not building mosques is that the majority of their attendants are migrants, not Russian citizens.

Central Asian migrants are often forgotten from the general picture of Islam in Russia, even though they constitute a growing part of the Muslims of Russia. The country received 4.8 million migrants from Central Asia in 2012.⁴ They work primarily in the building sector, in small business (e.g., bazaars), and in the public service sector (mostly street sweeping, rubbish). Often at the lower level of the social hierarchy, questions of honor and status are obviously pressing for migrants. Boris Nieswand, in his book on migration and religion among Ghanaian migrants, discusses the status translation that migrants undergo in order to turn humiliation in migration into honor back home.⁵ For Tajik migrants, this is not only done through economic success (sending remittances home) but also by appealing to religious values that are independent of economic status.

Interviews with migrants, especially from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, confirm that many young men become practicing Muslims during their stay in Russia. On the one hand the social context urges them to do so: they often live in humiliating conditions with other men in overcrowded housing while facing hostility from a large majority of Russians. On the other hand, their religious identity becomes a major resource to surpass ethnic boundaries and claim honor and respect from Russians, whom they consider to overconsume alcohol. This religious identity is hence initially formed based on direct contact with

other Muslims, second, with Russians, and third, through social media.

In the following section I explore some concrete examples of how migrants shape their view on Islam. I argue that it is the specific context of migration in Russia that pushes Central Asian migrants to see Islam as a moral compass for evaluating relationships and which helps them to constantly adapt to turbulent social, economic, and political situations. For clarity I restrict the ethnographic account to a bazaar in Moscow.

Bazaars as platforms of religious learning

Bazaars are an integral part of the post-Soviet economy and constantly adapt to the fast-changing business conditions and legal environment. Moscow is surrounded by bazaars in which goods flow in and out of town. Along with the establishment of European-inspired commercial malls (Auchan, Saturn, Media Market, Real, etc.) in the last couple of years the number of bazaars has rapidly decreased, a result also of being discouraged by the city mayor. Since the collapse of the Cherkiz bazaar, which was the largest of its kind until 2010, competition among remaining bazaars has increased. Some had to close temporarily or permanently, some never managed to open while others prospered until they were marginalized by the European-style commercial malls.

Bazaars are micro-states in the sense that they have their own hierarchy, security apparatus, housing, etc. Central Asians are strongly represented at all levels, from OMON units (Mobile Unit for Special Tasks, Russian special-purpose police) down to baggage carriers (*aroba kash*). Some of the bazaars offer accommodation for the *aroba kash* and *brigadirs* (foremen of working brigades), that is, containers for 6 to 12 persons. In these container villages Islam becomes an important means of organizing life, as well as securing hygiene and moral behavior. In other words, Islam organizes social life. Although they do not always pray and even less so together, religious practitioners set the frame for behavior. According to Tajik migrants working as *aroba kash* and living in container villages, many migrants pray regularly, or at least do so during Ramadan. This is also true for brigades working

in the construction sector, often headed by a person who himself has completed the *hajj* and works as prayer leader. The rhythm that Islam provides through regular prayer is a way to order everyday life in a context that is typically insecure and disorderly. Migrants constantly risk arrest or deportation by the police, and are aware of their vulnerability vis-à-vis Russian authorities and their fellow citizens who use their dependency to cheat on their wages. To date there has been little political activity from the migrants to resist police practices; instead, Central Asian migrants prefer to contextualize their situation in religious notions of martyrdom.

Accompanied by a young Tajik while visiting a bazaar in Moscow, I was introduced to some of the local “religious authorities”. One group consisted of three young Da’vachi men (missionaries), dressed in loose white cloths, and belonging to the *Tablighi Jamaat* movement. They share a shop together and work one third of their time at the bazaar, two thirds being reserved to *da’va* (proselytizing activities) and to their family that remains in Central Asia. At another place a man stands around chatting with some Tajik boys, his trousers put up above the ankles. He is an active Salafi, who rejects any other kind of religious orientation other than the Qur’an, and was trying to convince the boys that there is no such thing as “Tajik Islam” and that Islam is a unified and universal culture. These two groups, the Da’vachi and the Salafis, tend to publicly polemicize with each other during prayers, especially during Ramadan, and are identifiable through the arguments they use in a discussion. Sufis are not visible as such, and they usually do not look for public conversations. No one of Hizb ut-Tahrir was to be found among the Tajiks on the bazaar, the reason being that most members are highly educated and act more on a political level—one can find them in and around mosques.

My informant, who had contact with all these practitioners, spent his leisure time discussing Islam with them. The work schedule at the bazaar allows for longer breaks in which he roams around and goes to meet his friends, all of whom are traders like him and his elder brother. Unlike the streets of Moscow, the bazaar streets are safe for him and have been his world for more than five years. He goes into Moscow almost solely for

administrative reasons, to extend his work permission and registration, and spends the whole day at the bazaar, going back home with his brother to their flat only for prayers, and for the night.

The local religious leaders (as identified as such by the informant)—each with their own point of view—reject Islam as a component of ethnic or national identity. Instead, they favor a discourse saying that Islam is a universal concept that integrates different ethnic groups and provides a safe, just and moral concept for politics and social life all over the world. They consider Russia a good place because of the freedom of belief and the right to proselytize. Though not common, some of them admitted to having a Russian wife along with their Tajik spouse back in Tajikistan. Any ethnic-based criteria were rejected as unfounded, considering that several millions of ethnic Russians are Muslims and conversion is rather successful.⁶

However, while the abovementioned religious leaders back a particular interpretation of Islam, the majority of the young men like my informant maintain their view of Islam as closely linked to Tajik identity. Any question or disagreement among them end in a call or mail to Eshon Nuriddinjon, an influential religious Tajik authority of famous lineage who uses the Internet to communicate with young Tajiks all over the world. His website is consulted by thousands of Tajiks and when he visits Russia his meetings with migrants attract several thousand participants.

The plurality of workers and ethnic backgrounds makes the bazaars in and around Moscow unique microcosms of religious interaction. Economic relationships and dependencies shape much of the daily interactions at the bazaars. However, the religious is very present. It crosses economic hierarchies (a mullah *aroba kash* is treated with great respect by traders for instance), and defines relationships between both genders or among different ethnic groups. It is also through Islam that young Tajik men turn humiliating working experiences into positive values: religious practice increases their status back home, independently from their economic success.

The social and economic world of the bazaar is not defined by religious rules, nor can we speak about any ethnic group being more religious than another. Instead, individuals are constantly and creatively reinterpreting their relationships with others and use Islam as a way of qualifying those relationships. At times this is done to distance themselves from humiliating practices, or to refute economic or social exclusion, while at other times it allows them to connect with people from a different background. Thus, while one can work at a bazaar without engaging in religion at all, many young Central Asian men do come into contact with religious actors at one point or another. Yet it should be mentioned that neither Islam nor ethnic belonging has led migrants from Central Asia to build up larger communities with any sort of political impact.

Islam as a potential political resource

Generally, Central Asians have not been politically active in defending their rights in Russia. But mosques are increasingly used and understood as central places for social, educational and political activities. After the prayer, numerous groups form around activists who try to raise awareness on different issues, especially those related to migration and politics in the Muslim world, which are discussed and openly debated. These religious groups have thus been crucial in shaping migrants' views and they invite important leaders like Eshon Nuriddinjon or Muhiddin Kabiri, leader of the Islamic Revival Party Tajikistan, to speak to the migrant community. Using the mosque as a key place of meeting, they transport the message that Islam is what connects people both socially and politically. Such meetings are recorded by the participants and soon circulate via mobile phones. Thus, even those who work at bazaars or construction sites and are not able to physically go to such meetings receive the message conveyed.

Relatively few people have organized political education centers like Izzat Aman, whose group met every Sunday—until it was banned. The group of about 15 people discussed new laws in Tajikistan, political practices, and current developments in other Muslim countries. While their discussions did not place Islam at the center of every debate, Islam provided the framework for

a common spirit, and the attendees of this group often prayed together at prayer time. According to Izzat Aman, Islam is the moral cement that keeps people together. He believes that no political change in Central Asia will happen today if Islam is not the moral foundation for this change as, according to him, people have had too many negative experiences with communism, democratic promises and other forms of modernity.

Although Izzat Aman speaks to a large audience with such ideas, most migrants are afraid to engage politically and prefer to see Islam as a social and individual resource. Their fears are related to the situation of Islam in Russia but also to the political situation in their home country, which has a direct impact on the migrants. For instance, since 2010, the Tajik state has conducted a massive campaign against religious education abroad, which has forced thousands of young men to interrupt their education in Muslim-majority countries and leave for Russia, rather than to come back to Tajikistan, where they could face persecution. Russia today has become the main hub for Central Asian migrants who plan and finance their travel to the rest of the Muslim world.

¹ The center of religious administration under the Soviet Union, the SADUM, was located in Tashkent. For the history of Islam in SU see among others: A. Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Y. Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

² For comparison, Germany has about 3,000 mosques for some more than four million Muslims.

³ According to *Forum 18* Moscow would need between 20 and 30 mosques to host Islamic believers. "RUSSIA: No more mosques for Moscow?" *Forum 18 News Service*, 26 September, 2012, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1747.

⁴ H. Pilkington, *Migration, displacement and identity in post-Soviet Russia* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁵ B. Nieswand, *Theorising Transnational Migration. The Status Paradox of Migration* (London: Routledge, 2011)

⁶ Every time I visited the main mosque in Moscow (Prospekt Mir) people reported having had official

Conclusion

In the introduction I briefly mentioned how Islam in Russia is sometimes seen positively by the authorities, and sometimes negatively, depending on the context. This is also reflected in the migrant community, which, on the one hand, plays the role of the victim and uses Islam to convert humiliating conditions into values, and on the other, profits from the chaotic conditions offered by Russia's bazaars to pursue their own interest in religion. In both cases migrants in Russia are constantly on the move: people circulate, change jobs, react to changes, evade police raids, adapt to economic shifts, and eventually leave Russia to go back home, seek further education, or work in a Muslim country. This belonging to a Muslim religious community, then, is not absolute and the intensity with which migrants identify with Islam or practice their faith may evolve rapidly. But it is one of the most important resources for establishing identity, self-esteem and evaluating social relationships, and it will continue to deeply shape the Central Asian migrant community in Russia.

conversations with several men – even small groups of young soldiers.

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