

Egdūnas Račius

Muslims in Eastern Europe

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Eastern Europe, in a broad sense, is one of the most problematic regions in contemporary Islamic studies. On one hand, there is a ‘indigenous’ Muslim population (such as Bosnians, Polish-Lithuanians, Crimean Tatars, and many ‘Muslim’ nationalities in Russia), but on the other hand, some Eastern European countries have also become destinations for Middle Eastern diasporas. This mix of religious experiences (compare, for instance, the religious practices of Bektashi Albanians in Macedonia and Salafi/Wahhabi circles in Russia) makes it difficult to draw any generalizations. In this book, Egdūnas Račius, a well-known scholar of Muslim minorities in Europe and professor of Islamic studies at Vytautas Magnus University (Kaunas, Lithuania), makes one the first attempts to conduct such a study. Based on his years of research experience, it describes the Muslim landscape of the region in an easy, accessible, well-supported way. As the author himself describes it, the book covers twenty-one Eastern European post-communist countries and presents the development of the centuries-old Muslim communities in Eastern Europe through the prism of emergence and survival. This book tells of these Muslim communities’ resilience in the face of often restrictive state policies and hostile social environments, especially during the half-century communist period, followed by their subsequent revival in the aftermath of the Cold War. Finally, the book recounts the profound demographic changes taking place in the composition of these communities but also, more importantly, in the forms of Islam they practice (p. xiii).

The next eight chapters present historical overviews covering all the countries in the area (the Yugoslav successor states and North-Eastern, South-Eastern, and Central Europe). The author is especially careful to establish the environment in which Muslim populations have lived for many years: “In many of the Eastern European countries, by virtue of belonging to a non-Christian faith (often coupled with belonging to a non-Slavic-speaking ethnicity), Muslims have had to constantly struggle to be accepted as part of the nation and its state. However, sometimes, their efforts have been offset by the antagonist reaction on the Orthodox Church’s side” (p. 166). Consequently, “though there are many fields and contested issues where Muslimophobia [Račius uses this term instead of the more commonly used ‘Islamophobia’; M.Y.] may express itself not only rhetorically but also in practice—like dress code, diet, prayer facilities, artistic and other creative expression, sports and leisure—the ‘mosque issue’ may probably be regarded as the most symptomatic of them all” (p. 168). That is why the number of purpose-built mosques in Eastern Europe still seems to be unconnected to the size of the Muslim population.

Apart from some other sources reporting on Muslim communities in Eastern European countries (such as the Yearbook of Muslims in Europe series published by Brill), this book is one of the most copious sources of factual information and religious statistics (e.g. the numbers of mosques and Islamic organizations and schools) in every country studied. Even more importantly, the trends in the religious life of Muslim communities are accurately represented: tensions between various interpretations of Islam (Sufi/Salafi, traditional/non-traditional, and indigenous/diaspora), relations between Islam and the state (loyalty versus neutrality in communities), and issues of leadership. Foreign actors are also noticed as well: “If there has

been a general trend to 'indigenise' and 'nationalise' Islam in the post-communist Eastern European countries, there is also a discernible opposite trend, that of making it trans-national" (p. 150). For Eastern Europe, this is mostly about different Turkish organizations (starting with the Diyanet, the Directorate of Religious Affairs) and Salafi communities.

A very important point is also a kind of forecast for the Muslim population in Eastern Europe. Račius argues that whether the Muslim and non-Muslim segments of Eastern European societies grow closer or further apart depends on numerous factors, many external and hard to control. However, it is already evident that with the changing demographic make-up of local Muslim communities and more and more Muslims of immigrant and convert backgrounds (and their various forms of religiosity) appearing on the scene, not only are intra-communal relations among Muslims bound to change but the views on Muslim populations among non-Muslims in Eastern European countries will also undergo profound reassessment (p. 169). The same is true on the radicalization issue. The author argues that the radical strain within the revivalist segments of Eastern European Muslim communities will be strengthened by the return of the *muhajirun* – which will not only intensify securitization of the "Muslim issue" in various countries but also increase the already simmering tensions between Muslims and the non-Muslim population segments in Eastern Europe predisposed to Muslimophobia (p. 163).

Muslims in Eastern Europe can be a good source for anyone who is interested in this area. Due to the inclusion of many explanations (e.g., definitions of Islamic terms), the book can be easily used not only by Islamic studies scholars but also by those who approach the issue from other related fields. Hopefully, new studies of the region will cover Eastern European countries in even more detail.
