



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.

Karrie J. Koesel
PhD Candidate
Cornell University
Department of Government

Topic of research

Religious Revivals, the Local State, and the Transition from State-Socialism

My dissertation research compares how regimes in transition from state-socialism are coping with the new religious and cultural realities. This project is a comparative case study of two countries – Russia and China – and my field research within Russia has been supported by the IREX-IARO Fellowship. My research addresses three sets of related questions. The first deals with the central control over religion. Why and how do Russia's and China's central governments seek to regulate religion? Second, I examine how central religious policies are implemented at the local level. What factors shape local authorities' attitudes and behavior toward competing religious groups? Under what conditions do local elites support, tolerate, or suppress local religious groups and communities? Finally, I explore how religious groups and communities attempt to influence the regulation of religious activities. How do religious communities use local governments to protect and promote their interests and values? Under what conditions do religious groups align themselves with the local state, the central state or international actors? What do these relationships in the public sphere suggest in turn about the changing boundaries between public and private, cultural and political arenas

of cooperation and contestation?

Relevance and contribution to field

My dissertation research places religion and culture in the context of political change and addresses the impact of religion on the political future of regimes in transition. This shift from a purely political understanding of regime change to one that recognizes the cultural dimensions of this process is important because the scholarship on the transition from state-socialism tends to focus on the political-economic dynamics of the transition, thereby ignoring cultural dimensions of political change. In this sense, the literature on transitions has remained secular. By discounting the intersection of culture and politics during this period of political flux, we leave ourselves ill-prepared to explain how religious groups are influenced by the course of political change and how, in turn, such groups shape the course of politics. This is critical, not just because liberalization and religiosity have moved in tandem, but also because the separation of Church and State has been widely understood to be central to the success of the democratic project.

A concise summary of your approach and research methodology including a list of research sites

The field research for the Russian portion of my project was conducted in two locations: Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan. My research approach combined in-depths interviews and ethnographic research with archival research. I conducted approximately 65 interviews with local government officials responsible for regulating religious groups, religious leaders and parishioners, and regional intellectuals. The goal of the interviews was to explore how the local state views competing religious groups, and to examine how religious organizations perceive their relationship to other confessions and those in power. My interviews with religious leaders additionally allowed me to observe the religious ceremonies and participate in their philanthropic projects. To supplement my interviews, I collected articles from local newspapers concerning religious conflicts in each region. The newspaper archive is intended to serve as a general database tracking the religious revival in Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan from 1989 to the present. A final research strategy involved collecting primary and secondary school textbooks which address religious themes. I selected textbooks which are approved by the Russian Department of Education and are commonly used in Russian Orthodox Culture and the History of World Religions classes.

A summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions

My research project explored the religious revival in Russia from three different levels: from the perspective of the central state, from the perspective of the local state, and from

the perspective of religious groups themselves. I will briefly discuss my preliminary research findings and observations at each of these levels.

My research began with the assumption that there has been and is a religious revival in Russia. While the majority of my interviews confirmed this assumption, the affirmation of a religious revival was always followed a discussion of religiosity in Russia. For instance, although the number of houses of worship (churches, mosques, temples, etc.) has increased tenfold in the past decade and people tend to self-identify as Orthodox or Muslim, the vast majority of Russian citizens have never attended a religious service. My interviews revealed that considering oneself a believer (*veruyuschij*) is more of a cultural identifier, than measure of religiosity; that is to say, people spoke about being “culturally Orthodox” or “culturally Muslim” but not observing the traditions or rituals of these religions.

The concept of an “Orthodox Culture” also tended to resonate among my interviews with local political elites. Where communist ideology has been discredited and democratic values have not taken hold, the concept of an Orthodox Culture has become the new national unifier. Orthodox Culture is considered a key component of the Russian national project and is something that should be preserved, protected, and promoted.

In explaining how and why the Russian state is regulating religious groups, a majority of my interviewees responded that both the pre-revolutionary and Soviet regimes sought policies that monitor, constrain, and even empower different religious groups; thus, it is not surprising that the current regime is continuing this tradition. Therefore, even a regime shift from socialism to democracy has not challenged the state’s tradition for monitoring religious activities.

When moving away from the central level to my two case studies, Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan, I found that my working hypotheses for explaining the relationship between the local government and religious groups were not the most interesting phenomena happening at the local level. In both Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan, there is considerable religious freedom and the registration process for religious groups is very straightforward, (in Nizhny Novgorod only one religious group, The Great White Brotherhood – a Christian sectarian group, was denied registration in the past decade). Instead, the more interesting phenomenon is the growing points of contact between the local governments and religious groups and the interpretation of what secularism means within a Russia context, and more generally, what secularism means to the larger process of democratization in Russia.

Russia is considered a secular state, with clear legal boundaries between the political and religious spheres. In practice, however, the meaning of secularism and the division between Church and State is less clear. I found that the concept of “secularism” is widely understood as Russia not having a “state” church, i.e., that the Russian Orthodox Church remains independent from state control. I also found considerable points of contact between the local government and religious groups that challenge a “western”

understanding of secularism. For instance, local governments might financially support the rebuilding of some churches, help secure land for other religious groups, provide gas and electric subsidies in the winter months to help heat cathedrals and mosques, and are encouraging the teaching of religion in schools.

Among the most revealing points of contact between the church and state is through current education reforms. Both Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan are currently revising their curriculum for primary and secondary schools to include elective courses on religion. The debate surrounding this initiative is not whether religion should or should not be taught, but instead over which religious groups will be included in the textbooks and who will be teaching the courses. Initially, in both Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan, the courses were entitled “Russian Orthodox Culture” and were designed to teach about the Russian Orthodox Church, its values and role in Russian history. Officials advocating this course, even within the largely Muslim republic of Tatarstan, argued that teaching about this course has three benefits. First, a course on Russian Orthodox Church will create a common identity for Russian citizens. Second, the course will teach an appropriate understanding of morality to combat the perceived trend of global moral degradation. Third, the course is designed to teach religious tolerance. Following the announcement of this initiative, religious leaders in Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan have been working with the local governments to redefine the parameters of the course and to include other confessions, explaining that teaching only about Orthodox Culture will create more polarization than tolerance. While these issues are still under consideration in both regions, the name of the courses have been switched to a “History of Modern Religions” and other “traditional religions” will be taught along side of Russian Orthodoxy (traditional religions include: Judaism, Islam, Catholicism, Buddhism and select Protestant churches.)

A final aspect of my research explored the relations among religious groups and examined how they seek to influence or align themselves with the local government. I found this aspect of my research to be the most surprising. By in large, relations among different religious groups in both Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan are friendly and conflicts are minimal. That being said, there is considerable competition among religious groups for governmental support and followers.

All religious groups I met with are all attempting to cultivate positive relations with the local government. The rationale is straightforward; the local government has access to funds, including money for rebuilding historic buildings, sponsoring conferences, and supplying permits for religious festivals to take place in public spaces. Religious groups are actively aware of what kinds of government resources are distributed to other religious groups, and the relationship between other confessions and the local state. In Kazan the secretary for eparchy of the Russian Orthodox Church knew exactly how many mosques had been built and in which villages with support from the government. In Nizhny Novgorod, I observed tension between religious groups regarding the perceived privileges of the Russian Orthodox Church. For instance, November 4th was created as a new national holiday, the Day of Patriotism and Remembrance. This day was selected because in 1612 a common man from Nizhny Novgorod (Kuzma Minin)

formed a militia to go to Moscow and fight the Poles occupying the Kremlin. This day was intended to be a day of national unification because Minin's militia was multi-ethnic and multi-confessional. In spite of the good intentions of the holiday, a conflict arose in how the holiday was celebrated. The Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church was invited to Nizhny Novgorod and led a long procession of icons around the city, making the celebration appear to be very ethnically Russian and Orthodox.

I additionally observed that relations among religious groups can be largely divided into two artificial categories groups, traditional and non-traditional religions. Traditional religious groups tend to only have contact with other traditional religious groups and have little interest in meeting or cooperating with other religious groups that are not considered traditional. Traditional religions also have the warmest relations with the local governments. Traditional religious groups include: the Russian Orthodox Church (and Old Believers), Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism. Depending on the regions, Catholics, Lutherans and Baptists may be included in the category of traditional religious groups if they established a pre-revolutionary congregation. It is important to note, however, that even within this category of traditional religions, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists in Nizhny Novgorod considered themselves to be treated as second class religions to Russian Orthodoxy; whereas in Kazan, the Russian Orthodox Church perceives itself as having considerably fewer privileges than Muslims.

A second tier of religious groups includes most Protestant Churches who arrived in Russia in the early 1990s, including mainly Charismatic and Evangelical churches. These second tier religious groups have contacts (and funding) with foreign counterparts, especially in Europe and America; however, they often have very weak ties to the local government. The bottom tier of religious groups is often pejoratively described as “cults;” these religious groups have little or no interaction with other religious groups or the local government; such groups include Scientologists and Mormons.

I found that while there is little communication between traditional and non-traditional religions, non-traditional religious groups have organized to court the local government for support. In both Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan Protestant ministers have formed groups that meet monthly to discuss shared problems. These groups have each elected local representatives to serve as the “Protestant” spokesperson to meet with local government officials. In Kazan, they have designed one Lutheran Minister, who also has a law degree, to act as legal council and aid in the registration and re-registration of Protestant churches.

Suggestions for future research agendas in your field and for the scholarly community

The role of external forces on religious groups in Russia needs more scholarly attention. It was often revealed in interviews with religious leaders that they rely heavily on outside sources for financial and spiritual support. For instance, in meeting with one minister

from a charismatic-evangelical church who ministers mainly to recovering drug addicts; he explained that in the mid-1990 he was harassed and arrested because the local police believed his church was involved with the smuggling of narcotics. He explained that he used his connections with evangelical churches in the United States as bargaining leverage against the local police to help him get released.

External forces on religious groups can also take alternative forms. In Tatarstan there is growing popularity among some young Tatar women to wear the headscarf (*hijab*), which covers their hair, ears, and throat but not their face. What is interesting about this shift in dress is that there is no precedent for wearing a headscarf in Tatar history. Pre-revolutionary Tatar dress only partially covered a woman's hair and allowed her braids to hang freely.

Policy Recommendations

One intention of my research project was to explore the positive as well as the negative interactions between religion and politics. All states regulate religious and cultural practices. However, scholarship on religion and politics tends to treat religion as destabilizing political forces – for example, Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, which argues that future global conflicts will be fought between religiously defined civilizations. Tatarstan, however, greatly challenges this argument. Tatarstan is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional republic that has seen little conflict along religious lines.

Moreover, Tatarstan's version of Islam (Sunni faith) – sometimes referred to as Euro-Islam, Jadidism, or more recently by some Tatars as Intellectual Islam – promotes tolerance of all religions. Contemporary Tatarstan illustrates that Islam and Christianity are not incompatible religions nor cultures, but can peacefully coexist. Thus, I would recommend that policy makers look to Islamic scholars in Tatarstan in hopes of creating a stronger dialogue between Christian and Islamic cultures.