

## **The Festival of Eid in Kremlin**

**By Xhavit Shala**

In an effort to divert attention<sup>1</sup> from its internal problems Russia is blackmailing Europe<sup>2</sup> by trying to cast the creation of an independent Kosova in religious setting. The Russian strategy of blocking the independence of Kosova is both unrealistic and unfounded. The state of Kosova will be a democratic and secular state where all religious communities in spite of their size will feel equal. The Russian attempts while succeeding in delaying the solution will not be able to sacrifice Kosova. Rather than instigating religious tensions elsewhere, the Russians had better pay serious consideration to resolving the growing religious problems within their own federation. It is not unlikely that soon the Russian will have to celebrate Eid in Kremlin. "In a few decades Russia will become a state with a Muslim majority," Paul Goble, a specialist on ethnic minorities in the Russian Federation, says.<sup>3</sup>

"Kosova is the red line that can not be crossed," Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, said in September 3, speaking at the Institute for International Relations in Moscow.<sup>4</sup> But in spite of Russia's threat Kosova is a Euro-Atlantic issue and with or without Russia's approval it will be resolved. The real red line, which the Russian have already approached, is the current state of tension in relations with the Muslims population in their own territory. The Russian state must make every effort to avoid the chechnyization of relations with the Muslim population. Otherwise, the consequences for Russia's security will be dire.

Relations with Islam will be a very important element that can determine Russia's state of security. The importance religion plays in the life of Russia's ethnic Muslims has increased significantly during the last decades. Islam remains an important element in the social and cultural formation of the society and its influence in Russia's domestic and international relations will only increase. President Putin has pronounced the number of Muslims in his federation is 20 million. The number of Muslims in the former Soviet Union was calculated to be around 80 million.<sup>5</sup> In eight out of the sixteen former Soviet Republics, Muslims made up the majority of the population.

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<sup>2</sup> The article was first published in "Koha Jonë" Tirana and "Express" Prishtina, October 5, 2007

<sup>3</sup> Analyst Predicts Muslim Majority in Russia Within 30 Years-VOA- Washington 28 February 2006

<sup>4</sup> Statement by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affaires, Lavrov, at the Institute for International Relations in Moscow, September 3, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> A. Kalam- Muslims in the former USSR-

[http://www.geocities.com/alcislam/civilizim/muslimanet\\_rusi.html](http://www.geocities.com/alcislam/civilizim/muslimanet_rusi.html)

The leaders of the Russian communist revolution considered relations with their Muslim nationals very important for the future of the Soviet Union. Initially, they made sure to sweet talk this population into obedience. A statement addressed to the Muslim population signed by Lenin in December 4, 1917 said, "Live now in peace because from now on your traditions, faith, cultural and national institutions will be free and never to be trampled upon by anyone. You are free to organize your own national lives without interference from the outside."<sup>6</sup> Of course, none of these promises were to be kept afterwards.

But things today are different. Russia is facing two big problems in its relations with the Muslims. Inside Russia there is a growing enmity against Muslims and there is a danger of the Arabization and radicalization of Islam there. The demographic changes underway in Russia make both of the elements mentioned above even more problematic. It is likely that in 30 to 50 years, the majority of the population in Russia may be Muslim. According to studies, the number of ethnic Russians is falling by 700 thousand people a year. This trend is a mainly a result of the high levels of mortality amongst ethnic Russians ranging from 18 to 55 years of age. "Russian adolescent males are dying at a rate that is fitting only for a war zone and not a modern society. The levels of alcoholism, disease and industrial accidents are very high," the VOA correspondent, Jela de Franceschi, says.<sup>7</sup>

In the meantime the Muslim population is increasing by four percent per year. According to UN estimates, the Russian population of about 140 million citizens may be reduced by one third by the year 2050. Many experts say that a combination of low levels of births among ethnic Russians and an increase in the Muslim population may lead to a Muslim majority in Russia by the middle of this century.<sup>8</sup> Some other analysts also say that the demographic changes underway in Russia may have long term international implication and may present a serious challenge to the West.

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, there has been deterioration in relations with the Muslim population. This hostility in relations between the Muslim population and the Russian state was initially observed in the northern Caucasia and was seen as related to the war in Chechnya. Such sentiments, however, are spreading to other Muslim populated areas of Russia as extremist wahaby-selafi groups are taking advantage of the situation. Such groups are trying to make inroads into other traditional Muslim areas in Russia, a strategy they tried to execute in the Balkans in the early 90's. "In Dagestan alone there may be about 10 thousand wahaby. There is a danger that they may spread over to other areas."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A. Kalam- Muslims in the former USSR-

[http://www.geocities.com/alcislam/civilizim/muslimanet\\_rusi.html](http://www.geocities.com/alcislam/civilizim/muslimanet_rusi.html) -

<sup>7</sup> Jela De Franceschi "Russia: Will the Muslims one day become a majority?" "VOA" 21-06-2007

<sup>8</sup> Jela De Franceschi "Russia: Will the Muslims one day become a majority?" "VOA" 21-06-2007

<sup>9</sup> Aleksey Malashenko –"The Islamic factor in Russia." (the author is an expert on oriental studies and ethnic relations at the Carnegie Center in Moscow, and a professor of Foreign Relations at Moscow's State Institute)

Following the 9/11 attacks, NATO and the U.S. provided Russia with important assistance in its effort against extremism. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan, one of the biggest exporters of Islamic extremism in the former Soviet Republics, was overthrown.<sup>10</sup> But in spite of these developments, the radicals not only were able to survive but they continue to remain an influential political and religious force. “If a new conflict was to explode in the Northern Caucasus, the whole region could be plunged into an inter-ethnic conflict that could have unpredictable consequences,” Aleksey Malashenko, an expert on oriental and inter-ethnic relations at the Carnegie Center in Moscow, says.

The Russian state is trying to resolve the problems with its Muslim population by using the same repressive means used during communism. The Russian government is now repressing Islamic activism through laws that protect the Orthodox Church. “During recent years the government of President Putin has worked to develop a quasi nationalist ideology. It has grown more tolerant of extremist nationalists and other xenophobic groups in Russia,” Peter Reddaway of George Washington University says<sup>11</sup>. This approach will not only fail in resolving the crises but will also further radicalize it by helping the Islamic extremists gain more popular support. The case of Chechnya is an example to that. The West also must do more to push Russia to integrate the Muslim populations into the mainstream and ensure that their religious and other human rights are respected. Failure to deal with this issue now would increase the chances of political instability within the Russian Federation.

The Russian strategy to block Kosova’s independence on religious grounds is unrealistic and unfounded. Despite the various labeling placed on the Kosova state, Russia real concern is that a new democratic and pro-American state will be created in the Balkans. The Russian and Slav-Orthodox efforts to portray Albanians as a foreign element in the Balkans are destined to fail. On the contrary, the Albanian model of equality in treatment of religious communities in a democratic and secular state is the model that the Russians had better emulate in relations with Muslims in their own state. Otherwise, they could end up chechenizing (Chechnya) their relations with all Muslims in their federation. This development would have dangerous consequences for the security of Russia and beyond.

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<sup>10</sup> - Xhavit Shala “Albanians in the crossroads” p. 64

<sup>11</sup> “VOA”- 21-06-2007

