KABARDINO-BALKARIA: ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS IN THE 1990s AND 2000s

North Caucasus is one of the regions of the modern Russian Federation. Most of the peoples of the North Caucasus are Muslim. Islam penetrated into this region from the seventh to the fifteenth centuries. The modern peoples of North Caucasus are undergoing a revival of Islam in all aspects of their religious life, including some political and legal aspects of Islam. The aim of my paper is to consider the relation between Muslim and the Russian State in contemporary North Caucasus, using my field data on Kabardino-Balkaria – one of the republics of Russia in the North Caucasus.

Modern Islamic community

According to the official data gathered by the agencies that control activity of the Islamic communities in Kabardino-Balkaria, there were 132 Muslim communities (jamaats) in the republic by the end of 2002. In the 1990s, two to three Islamic communities emerged in every Kabardino-Balkarian settlement, usually uniting believers living in the same block (jamaat) and going to the same mosque or house of prayer. This is why the modern Islamic communities of KBR are also called jamaats. The number of jamaats in a settlement depends on several factors: firstly, on its total population; secondly, on the popularity of modern Islam among the younger generation of Kabardins and Balkars who makes up a larger part of the congregation; and thirdly, on the features of historical development of Islam in specific districts of Kabardino-Balkaria and the Islamic traditions established during the Soviet period.

The number of Kabardino-Balkarian jamaat members is difficult to identify – there are no clear-cut criteria to determine whether a person may join it or not. Jamaats can be formed by four categories of Muslims: 1) Muslims who do not go to mosque but offer timely namaz and keep fasts at home (these category of Muslims includes many women); 2) Muslims who only go to mosque on the major Islamic holidays, do not offer namaz at

home nor keep fasts; 3) Muslims who offer the Friday namaz at mosque and are free to offer it or not at home the other days; 4) Muslims who offer namaz at mosque every day if possible (this category of Muslims includes many young people).

The majority of middle-aged and elderly men consider themselves believers though they do not go to mosque or go there very seldom, on major holidays. Few of them consider themselves atheists. The process of Islamic revival has primarily touched on the young people aged 15 to 35, living in towns and villages, mostly in Balkaria and Greater Kabarda.

Most women do not go to mosque, or offer namaz at home. Elderly women, usually wives of senior Muslim believers, offer namaz and go to mosque on holidays or Fridays wearing hijabs. Also there are elderly women in Smaller Kabarda who hold to the tradition of offering namaz at home, like in the Soviet years. Twice a year, on the major Islamic holidays, many women happen to come to mosques in KBR. During the 1990s many middle-aged women had completed the Elementary Islamic Knowledge Institute courses and obtained the mosque school teaching certificates (certificates of the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of KBR).

Road to Islam

The Islamic revival as a whole has hardly touched on the middle and older generations. Most elderly and old Muslims who go to mosque and offer namaz now were doing so during the Soviet years as well. But there are also old men who adopted Islam very recently, in the early 1990s. The number of Muslims in KBR increases on account of involving teenagers and the young in the Islamic movement. A good part of the present-day religious community members started to go to mosques of the KBR five years ago, at most. The persons who usually encourage them to turn to Islam are their older relatives (brothers), friends, classmates, workmates, and teachers.

Mosques and houses of prayer

Every Muslim community has either a mosque or a cemetery house of prayer (Kabardian kh’e une). Young imams are now trying to explain to the mullahs who lead Friday namaz in cemetery houses of prayer that, according to the rules of Islam, the namaz cannot be performed there. It is obvious that such a tradition was actually born during the Soviet period when most mosques in the KBR were closed. The Soviet authorities only permitted Soviet Muslims of KBR to build small cabins for funeral implements at cemeteries. The highlanders fitted those cabins for performing religious rites and turned them into houses of prayer. According to the figures of the