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UDC 32:297

DOI <https://doi.org/10.36059/978-966-397-414-9-25>

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MUSLIM MINORITIES, RELIGION-STATE RELATIONS AND THE DILEMMAS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF ISLAM IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

Key words: Islam, Europe, state, Muslims, institutionalization.

In the past several decades, the issue of institutionalization of Islam has consistently come to the fore in the socio-political spheres of many European countries. On the one hand, the creation of various organizations that aspired to speak for a segment of the Muslim population could be viewed as a natural social process and an inevitable part of Muslims' attempts to uphold their rights and freedoms in predominantly secular – but at the same time historically Christian – milieus. Likewise, the

institutionalization “from below” has also been driven by ambitions and aspirations of certain clerical figures who try to secure a commanding position for their preferred theological or ideological version of Islamic teaching in a given society without a local Islamic tradition. In other words, such social actors usually see establishing a Muslim entity as an opportunity to solidify or expand their capital of religious authority.

On the other hand, though, as has been pointed out by many researchers, since the early 1990s the process of institutionalization of Islam in some European countries has been incentivized, supervised or even manipulated by the state itself. In such cases, it can be observed that, for one reason or another, the authorities were anxious to establish a single representative Muslim organization (akin to a “Muslim church”) which could stem foreign influences and also act as a partner for the authorities in promoting religious tolerance, integrating migrant communities and fighting the threat of radicalization and terrorism.

In light of this dichotomy, the presentation focuses on a range of dilemmas that accompany the emergence of Muslim structures which operate as fully fledged centers of religious authority, consultative umbrella-type entities or as unions of believers with a common ideological vision of Islam. One of these dilemmas concerns the intrusive role of the state that needs to perform a balancing act between its inherent secular provisions safeguarding the freedom of religion and its pressing policy interests, including the need to accommodate Muslim minorities in the framework of a particular legal system. A clear-cut example of this dilemma can be found in the case of Belgium where the government’s efforts to create and maintain a single consultative entity for representing all Muslims of the country ended in failure in 2022 after the Executive of the Muslims of Belgium (EMB) was deprived of its status as an official interlocutor of the state due to a general lack of transparency and alleged infiltration of extremist elements into the EMB’s ranks.

On the other side of the spectrum, European Muslim communities themselves face a set of challenges related to their vast ethnic, cultural and ideological diversity – a situation which, in the absence of a strong guiding hand of the state or theologically prescribed institutional entity, inevitably results in organizational pluralization of religious authority and competitive struggles between different groups of believers. In this regard, without the ability to fall back on the concept of “church” in their historical traditions, representatives of the Islamic faith often need to adjust to the situation by forging “church-like” structures of their own in order to better protect their rights and interests.

Overall, the issue of institutionalization yet again demonstrates the problematic nature of Islam-state relations in many European countries

with large Muslim minorities. Against the backdrop of looming radicalization and terrorist threats, it is understandable that many governments would prefer to deal with a single representative body which could speak for all Muslim believers on the national level and serve as a deterrent which counteracts negative trends. At the same time, the creation of such an entity often means intrusion of state authorities in internal affairs of religious communities which cannot be convincingly justified or effectively executed in advanced liberal democracies. Thus, more research is still needed in this area to work out most suitable policies for solving the current dilemmas and accommodating Muslims in the context of the 21st century European societies.