RELIGIOUSNESS OF THE POPULATION AND LOCAL NETWORK INTERACTIONS IN THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF THE RUSSIAN-MONGOLIAN CROSS-BORDER AREA

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Abstract - This article presents the results of a sociological study of the religiosity of the population in the border regions of Russia and Mongolia in the context of studying religious landscapes and network mechanisms of interaction between religious communities. The study was carried out with the support of RSF grant No. 24-48-03002 "Religious Landscapes of the Russian-Mongolian Border Region: Institutional and Network Mechanisms for Constructing Religious and Ethnic Identities and Security in a Post-Secular Reality."

Keywords - Religiosity, Religious Identity, Religious Landscape, Religious Networks.

I. INTRODUCTION

Religiosity, as a characteristic of individual consciousness and behavior, is undergoing serious transformations in the modern world. Technological and cultural changes, on the one hand, create new challenges for faith (the intensive development of science leaves less and less room for religious interpretations), and on the other hand, transform religious and spiritual practices, making them more open and accessible for study. Religiousness is an important part not only of religious but also of other social identities, primarily ethnic and national, embedded in the "cultural code" and mentality, sprouting in seemingly distant manifestations of sociality, such as in the civil and political spheres, and takes on a special dimension in the format of "civil religion," "secular religion," religious aspects of professional ethics, etc.

Being filled with personalized content, religiosity is formed in a specific sociocultural context and has strong regional specificity, reflected in the ethno-confessional diversity and uniqueness of different regions of the world. At the same time, the term embeddedness, originally developed within the framework of K. Polanyi's moral economy as an explanatory principle for economic actions [4], has been significantly developed in network ontology as a concept that allows shifting the focus to the level of interpersonal (dyadic) and network relationships, emphasizing the importance of place and spatial proximity in the formation of trust and social capital in religious communities [7]. Domestic researchers use the concept of rootedness in conjunction with locality and family ties and interpret it as the degree of attachment to a place, connection with the community [2], often in combination with generational ties (living in the region of previous generations of the family). It is generally accepted that rootedness contributes to the formation of cohesion, readiness for joint action, and interest in the development of the region of residence [1].

II. METHODS

In recent years, research into the religiosity of the population has intensified significantly in connection with security issues and migration processes, especially in frontier territories, which are an arena for the clash of civilizational identities and social interactions at the boundaries of cultural environments. The Central Asian region attracts widespread attention not only in connection with the geopolitical "pivot to the East" and economic integration projects (such as China's "New Silk Road" or the CAREC program), but also due to the increased interest in the unifying principles of sociocultural integration, especially in cross-border areas that share common historical, natural, ecological, and ethnocultural determinants of development. The Russian-Mongolian border region is just such a territory, rich not only in common cultural heritage, but also in close contacts with the border regions of Russia, which are quite differentiated in terms of ethnic, linguistic, and religious composition. The adjacent territories of Russia and Mongolia are represented on the Russian side by the regions of Siberia and the Far East (the Republic of Altai, the Republic of Tyva, the Republic of Buryatia, and the Trans-Baikal Territory), and on the Mongolian side by the aimags of Bayan-Ulgii, Uvs, Zavkhan, Khuvsgul, Bulgan, Selenge, Khentii, and Dornod aimags, with a total border length with

Russia of 3,543 km. In a broader sociocultural and historical context, the area of cross-border cooperation and interregional interaction is much wider. For example, within the transboundary region of Greater Altai, it unites the Altai Krai, the Republic of Altai, the East Kazakhstan Region, the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China, and the Khovd and Bayan-Ulgii aimags of Mongolia. In 2024-2025, as part of the RSF international project No. 24-48-03002 "Religious Landscapes of the Russian-Mongolian Border Region: Institutional and Network Mechanisms for Constructing Religious and Ethnic Identities and Security in a Post-Secular Reality" with the aim of studying the characteristics of the population's religiosity and analyzing religious landscapes in the Russian-Mongolian border region, sociological surveys were conducted in the Khovd aimag (Western Mongolia, n = 461) and two Russian regions (Altai Krai and the Republic of Altai, n = 1355), with respondents aged 18-79.

One of the main tools of this study is the "Centrality of Religiosity Scale" (CRS) proposed by Huber, S. (Huber, Huber, 2018). This methodology was validated and tested in a large-scale cross-cultural study (21 countries, more than 100,000 respondents, including Russians). Its purpose is to measure the intensity (centrality) of five dimensions of religiosity: public and private practice, religious experience, and intellectual and ideological components. The scale is based on a multidimensional model of religiosity developed by Glock and Stark (1966), adjusted in accordance with sociological theories, including identity theory (Stryker, 1980), exchange theory (Homans, 1974), and the concept of Wimberley (1989).

This comprehensive approach made it possible to develop a reliable empirical tool for describing religious practices. For this study, we decided to use CRS-20 because it has five extra questions, which makes this scale applicable not only to Abrahamic traditions but also to other religious groups, which is most suitable for the multi-faith Russian population. The CRS index ranges from 1.0 to 5.0 and was calculated by dividing the sum of the scores for individual questions by the number of questions. According to the methodology of Huber S. (Huber, 2018), the population was categorized into groups using the following threshold system: "non-religious" – from 1.0 to 2.0 points, 'religious' – from 2.1 to 3.9 points, "highly religious" – from 4.0 to 5.0 points [8].

III. RESULTS

The religious situation in Western Mongolia is characterized by uniqueness and considerable diversity: one in ten religious communities is located here, including 13% of Buddhist churches and 90% of Islamic mosques, concentrated in the Bayan-Ulgii aimag. Although Christian denominations, including Protestant denominations, are represented and carry out regular activities, they account for only 5% of all Christian churches and monasteries in the country [3]. The uniqueness of the Khovd (Kobdo) aimag is determined by its wide ethnic diversity (19 ethnic groups). Each of the 17 somons of the aimag has its own monasteries, dugans, or datsans. According to data from the Statistical Service of Mongolia for 2023, there are 11 official religious organizations operating in the aimag, including 6 Buddhist organizations and 5 Christian organizations.

The Altai Krai and the Republic of Altai also have an extensive network of religious sites, represented by more than 400 religious organizations of various orientations. Two peaks can be identified in the formation of the institutional and organizational component of the religious landscape: the most intensive self-organization of religious associations took place in the mid-2000s, when 192 organizations (48% of all currently functioning) were registered in the Altai Krai, and 32 organizations (50%) in the Republic of Altai. The second period of growth was observed from 2012 to 2019: during this time, 168 organizations (42%) appeared in the Altai Krai, and 18 out of 63 (28.6%) in the Altai Republic.

Given the predominantly Russian ethnic composition of the population, more than 76% of religious organizations in the Altai Krai are Orthodox. Catholic organizations operate in the regional capital, as well as in the western part of the region – in the German National, Slavgorod, Talmen, Yegoryevsk, and Volchikhinsky districts, Biysk, and Novoaltaisk. Protestant organizations do not have a clear localization. Muslim organizations are concentrated in the cities of Barnaul, Biysk, Slavgorod, Rubtsovsk, as well as in districts located near the Kazakh border: Kulundinsky, Mikhailovsky, and Uglovsky. Krishnaites and Buddhists, new religious movements, operate mainly in the cities (Barnaul, Biysk, Rubtsovsk).

In the Altai Republic, traditionally considered a place where world religions converge, the widely represented network of Orthodox parishes is overlaid with a unique national component of the religious landscape, primarily represented by the ethnic religion of the Altai people ("white faith," "Ak jian"), which is currently developing in various ways—as part of Buddhism and ancient Turkic influences, as reformed shamanism, and as a separate movement unrelated to other world religions, promoted by the new Burkhanist intellectual elite [5, 6]. Thus, Protestant organizations, concentrated mainly in the republic's capital, Gorno-Altaysk, and the nearby Mayminsky and Chemalsky districts, have a fairly strong influence. Muslim communities have a strong influence in the south, especially in the Kosh-Agach

district, where half of the population are ethnic Kazakhs who moved here at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In recent years, the Buddhist movement has begun to grow stronger. In the republic, it is represented by official organizations operating in Gorno-Altaysk, Chemal, Maymin, Ongudai, and Ust-Kansk districts, coordinated by the Central Spiritual Administration of Buddhists of the Altai Republic. Shamanism in its organized form is developing in the Turochak district, where the local shamanic organization Yrys operates, although, of course, shamanic practices are much more widespread than is often claimed by tourist organizations that organize tours to the shamans of Altai.

How does the religiosity of the population manifest itself in the regional landscape? How are individualized religious beliefs connected with the components of the religious social space, represented both by material objects (religious buildings and structures) and intangible social ties, most densely concentrated within religious communities, parishes, and other more or less organized associations of believers? The results of sociological studies conducted in the Russian and Mongolian regions provide partial answers to these questions.

The question of how religiosity should be measured remains one of the most controversial among religious scholars. Without going into detail, we would like to point out that when planning the study, it was important for the authors to take into account the multidimensional nature and individual-social duality of religiosity, as well as the confessional diversity of the regions, which determined the choice of Huber's religiosity centrality scale as the most relevant to the project's objectives. With a complex structure representing five dimensions of religiosity (public, private, intellectual, ideological, and expressive), the scale can be used in a metric (as a continuous variable) and categorical form, which allows for multiple comparisons across different indicators. According to the results of the analysis in Russian regions, 62-63% of the population had an average level of religiosity, while the low-religious population accounted for 23.6% in the Altai Krai and 19.0% in the Altai Republic, while high index values were found in 12.5% of residents of the Altai Krai and 16.0% of residents of the republic. The results of the study in the Mongolian aimag were generally similar: 64% of respondents had average values, 18.9% had low values, and 7.8% had high values (the remaining shares were uncertain values). The highest values of religiosity were observed in Muslim groups – 22% in Mongolia and 37% in Russia.

When assessing the demand for religious infrastructure, about 20% of residents of the Altai Krai and the Altai Republic, and 16.6% of Khovd Aimag, regardless of their level of religiosity, considered it important to visit a temple and participate in religious services. Among highly religious citizens, the share of such responses exceeded 83-85% in Russian regions and 88% in Mongolia. More than half of those surveyed in the Altai Krai and Khovd Aimag (54.7% and 50.4%) and 39.3% in the Altai Republic noted that it was important for them that the church be within walking or transport distance; among church-going Orthodox Christians and active practitioners of other religions, the church was an urgent necessity (more than 72-80% of responses were “important”). Thus, the value of the religious landscape and the ability to satisfy the spiritual needs of representatives of different faiths was highly valued not only by believers: at least a quarter of respondents in all regions with low religiosity also noted the importance of having religious institutions close to their place of residence.

Visiting religious institutions was pretty much linked to being involved in religious networks: at least one-fifth of respondents in Russian regions considered themselves part of a religious community (church parish, religious association), and among highly religious citizens, 65-70% in Russian regions were involved in religious communities. In Mongolia, religious-based network ties were even stronger, accounting for 37.6% of the total sample and 80.0% of highly religious citizens. The importance of belonging to a religious community was emphasized by 17% of residents, and among religious people, 83% of cases. Among the activities practiced in religious communities, spiritual practices took the leading place. Thus, 58.8% of respondents who were members of religious associations in the Altai Republic gathered to participate in worship services and joint prayers (38.2% in the Altai Krai). In second place was charitable activity (32.3% in the Altai Krai, 28.2% in the Altai Republic), more than a fifth of respondents helped with the construction of temples and economic affairs in churches and temples, contributed to the upbringing of children in religious traditions, and more than 15% helped create content on social networks and the Internet.

In the Mongolian sample, the key activities were charity work (19.6%), assistance in educational activities (15.4%), publishing (13.5%), and cultural meetings (13.5%). More than a tenth (12.2% of the involved group) participated in missionary activities.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, the religious landscape primarily provides institutional conditions for satisfying spiritual needs and expressing and manifesting religiosity. However, it is also an important part of the social space where the interests of believers and non-believers, citizens involved in religious practices and indirectly involved

in religion, intersect. Representing an urgent need for believers in the borderlands, the infrastructure of religious institutions acts as a crossroads of religious cultures, a sign of religious diversity in the Russian-Mongolian borderlands. In a post-secular society, religious social networks not only perform traditional functions of joint religious rituals and the exchange of religious knowledge, but also contribute to non-denominational activity. Alongside general trends, which are particularly noticeable given the similarity in the assessments of residents of the three regions, there are regional and denominational characteristics that manifest themselves in certain typical practices. Thus, while in Russia the emphasis is on internal economic activity and support for the material aspects of religious life, in Mongolia there is a fairly strong influence of missionary work and the spread of religious doctrine.

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