

Opening of Muslim television station in Russia

13 February saw a test transmission by the first Muslim television station in Russia. The founding of this station, which will be supervised by the pro-government Board of Muftis of Russia, should on the one hand be seen as a gesture towards the several million Russian followers of Islam, and on the other as an attempt by the state to take control over how the principles of Islam and information on the religion are presented and taught.

In Russia, Orthodox religious stations such as Spas ('Saviour') have long been in operation. Russian Muslim circles first announced their desire for a TV channel in the 1990s, but failed to convince the highest authorities. As a result, a profound impact on how the fundamentals of Islam were taught was made by the creators of internet websites, which often represent radical beliefs (they include links to pages related to the Caucasian armed underground).

The activation of an Islamic station will symbolically boost the self-esteem of Russian nationals who practise Islam. It will also form part of the national discussion on how representatives of different nations and religions can live together in one state. This discussion was catalysed by the ethnic riots which have broken out in recent months in Moscow and other cities. Back in December, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin proposed a stricter policy towards migrants from ethnically non-Russian regions; in turn, at a meeting on 11 February of the Presidium of the Council of State (the advisory body bringing together the heads of the regions), President Medvedev endorsed the concept of creating a pan-state identity and a sense of community for an entire multi-ethnic society. <GÓR>