

Foreword

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It is with great pleasure and pride that Vilnius University's Centre of Oriental Studies presents the latest special issue of *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*, featuring a collection of peer-reviewed articles on the religious and linguistic diversity of Turkic-speaking peoples in Eastern Europe.

The idea to publish the current series of articles developed from a panel presented at the 2014 Baltic Alliance for Asian Studies conference, during which the panel convenor, Dr. Zsuzsanna Olach, of the University of Szeged, and a group of scholars working in the field of Turkology gathered to explore aspects of the rich and complex linguistic, religious and cultural traditions of Turkic-speaking groups across Eastern Europe—a region that a non-specialist public would normally not immediately associate with a significant historical presence of Turkic-speaking peoples. The relevance and conceptual strength of the panel led the Centre of Oriental Studies to offer the possibility to turn it into a publication, with at its core some of the papers presented at the conference—with the addition of new material—prepared under the careful supervision of Dr. Olach. The volume you are holding is the result of the efforts of the conference organizers in managing the peer-review process and, especially, Dr. Olach's invaluable support in coordinating the authors' research process and identifying highly prominent authorities in the field to ensure a thorough and high-quality peer-review process.

This publication within the broader framework of our Centre's activities

For the Centre of Oriental Studies, the publication of this special issue is particularly important as it represents a remarkable opportunity to bridge geographic gaps and overcome the deeply entrenched assumption that Oriental studies should concern themselves exclusively with Asia. It is our firm belief that we as "Orientalists" actually have a lot to say about (and contribute to) other spheres of knowledge, and we are definitely up to this exciting challenge. Today's globalized world requires more

communication and dialogue between geographic areas, and the academic field of Oriental Studies can and should try to provide the tools and the framework to look beyond old divides, highlight similarities, decipher and understand differences, and promote a better mutual understanding between regions that often see themselves portrayed as irreconcilably opposed to one another.

Some example of recent activities in this direction

The aspiration to encourage a successful and positive mutual collaboration between Oriental studies and other spheres has been a defining feature of many of the activities of the Centre of Oriental Studies in recent years.

Summer 2014 saw the organization in Vilnius of a comparative seminar targeted at the general and academic public concerning corruption and politics in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Baltic States and Belarus. During this event, certain issues for Central Asian countries, in regards to corruption and money laundering, were analysed and compared with those of the Western regions of the FSU, highlighting similarities between apparently remote and disconnected areas in the political mechanisms behind corruption, and deconstructing both widely-held beliefs rooted in culturally essentialist claims of corruption as something that “Asian cultures allow”, and postulated essential differences between “developed” and “under-developed” countries of the post-Soviet space. The seminar instead showcased thought-provoking aspects such as the interconnectedness of the Baltic region with Central Asia; for example, in money-laundering, thereby rendering commonly-accepted dichotomies such as “developed/under-developed”, “Western culture/Eastern culture”, and “us/them”, problematic.

In August 2015, the Centre of Oriental Studies continued along this path of mutual collaboration by organizing a three day international conference dedicated to the applicability of Edward Said’s Orientalist critique and, more broadly, Post-Colonial Studies to the study of the FSU and Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine. The conference originated from the priorities dictated by the Ukraine crisis, which raised questions such as the sovereignty of post-Soviet and post-communist states, alongside the historical development, international alignment and the aspirations of state actors in the region. In this context, we felt that a narrative of “Russian interests versus Western interests/values” had gained currency in Western media and political discourses. Smaller actors of Eastern and Central Europe, Central Asia, the Baltics, and the Caucasus see their perspectives ignored or placed on a secondary level. As this led some scholars to suggest the existence among Western and Russian commentators of a “colonial”, “Orientalist” bias that favours the former imperial “centres” and sees

formerly subaltern actors as passive entities in a greater game, giving a stereotypical and demeaning image of such countries and their people, the Centre of Oriental Studies set itself the purpose of providing a platform to disseminate and discuss these ideas.

The purpose of the conference was to analyse these concepts and put them through the test of peer debate, tackling a number of research leitmotifs. The first one assessed the impact of colonial and Orientalist thinking on policy-making processes about the former subjects of Russian and Soviet power, assessing whether post-communist countries are seen as “passive” actors with “limited sovereignty”, “subordinated”—which limits their possibility to freely choose an international alignment—and of the common people in Eastern European countries, whom are denoted as “backward”, or “second-class Europeans”. The issue was also analysed from a historical perspective, to discuss if the possible understanding of Eastern Europe as a subaltern, passive entity biases Western views of history in the region. This leitmotif aimed to explore how prejudices impact the Western receptiveness of historical interpretations and discourses coming from former imperial subjects, making them less effective than competing narratives coming from Russia, and to understand how *this* impacts regional and international relations. The last leitmotif applied the concept of Orientalism and Post-Colonial studies to the study of the early Czarist imperial “frontier”: the North Caucasus, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia. To what extent, in what forms, and why do Orientalist stereotypes still bias our understanding of the Asian part of the former Czarist and Soviet sphere, and what is the impact of this on political and academic agendas?

Specific contributions of this publication to our academic vision

We have mentioned the commonly-held belief that Eastern Europe is not a region usually associated with the historical presence of Turkic-speaking communities. Exploring the religious and linguistic diversity of some of them allows, instead, to underline the relevance of Oriental studies not just as area studies but also as a conceptual “hub” for comparative research. In particular, we at the Centre of Oriental Studies believe that the exploration of such a topic represents an important step in the recognition of the contribution that Turkic peoples made to Eastern European cultures and traditions throughout the centuries. This publication provides a glimpse of a dimension of historical and cultural diversity that is all too often lost to observers of Eastern European affairs, and to the population of the region itself. Contemporary perceptions, often burdened by tragic historical events that eliminated a significant part of that diversity during the 19th–20th century, often tend to underline the ethno-national and religious homogeneity of Central and Eastern European countries, interpreting

the historical contacts with the “other”, primarily in terms of conflict. Groups, nations, languages and religions are often seen as “blocks” that didn’t (and don’t) interact, but rather clashed, or still clash, with one another. In our daily experience as academics working in Lithuania, we often face curious (and profoundly disheartening) cases of historical neglect with regards to the Turkic peoples; for example, few people in our own country are aware of the fact that whole areas of Vilnius were once inhabited by Turkic-speaking Tatar communities, whose identity was articulated in relation with those of the local Baltic, Jewish and Slavic communities, in a constant process of cooperation and reciprocal influence.

Yet, despite the neglect, and the efforts of totalitarian regimes to erase such a record of coexistence, this history of interaction and the mutual influence of languages, cultures, religions and identities cannot be underestimated. This publication helps to cast light on the astonishing complexity of the historical and religious experiences of Turkic-speaking peoples of Eastern Europe, highlighting their link with multiple, diverse and geographically remote religious traditions, as well as their historical roots with Central Asia and the Steppe region, in what becomes a portrayal of a Central-Eastern European region very different from the one we know nowadays. Because of this we hope these academic works offered in this edition will shine as an enlightening, interesting and fascinating discovery.

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