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Russia's Islam Balancing Securitization and Integration



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- *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East West*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021.
- *Memory Politics and the Russian Civil War. Reds versus Whites*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020, co-authored with Margarita Karnysheva.

Abstract

Russia's Islam has been much more than the two Chechen wars, and regular terrorist actions that have shaken the Russian territory. Islam constitutes an integral part of Russia's history and culture, and the Putin regime regularly celebrates Islam's contribution to the country and its greatpower reassertion.

Labor migrations from the North Caucasus as well as from Central Asia to Russia's main metropolises, a dynamic Islamic Runet debating about Islam in Russian, and the—apparent only—paradoxical marriage of convenience between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Muftiates contribute to this alignment of interests between the Russian regime and its Muslim constituencies, far away from the simplistic, black and white vision promoted by Western media of a Russia intrinsically opposed to Islam.

This paper discusses this fragile balance between securitizing Islam(ism) as a threat to the country's stability and multinational harmony, and recognizing Muslim citizens as a central support for the Kremlin, both in terms of electoral provision, authoritarian practices, and promotion of conservative values.

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Introduction

“Islam is a bright element of Russia’s cultural code, an integral, organic part of Russia’s history. We know and remember many names of Muslims who constitutes the glory of our Fatherland,” declared Vladimir Putin in 2013.¹ The Russian president, as well as many members of his government, regularly insist on Islam’s legitimate place in Russia and its role in supporting the regime in its patriotic endeavor. This stress allows to dissociate a “good” Islam, well integrated into Russian society, from a foreign and radicalized Islam, threat to the country’s stability and interethnic concord.

And indeed, if Russia’s Islam has often been perceived only through the distorting lens of the two Chechen wars, radical Islamism and terrorism, there is much more to the story.² Not only is Islam an integral part of Russia’s history and culture, but it has now spread beyond its historical regions (the North Caucasus and the Volga-Urals) to become a pan-Russian phenomenon. These transformations mean that Russia’s Islam has gradually lost some of its ethnic and local features and has been normalized as part of everyday Russianness. This is visible in the massive migration flows of Muslims from the North Caucasus across Russian territory and especially in all Russian metropolises; in the growing use of Russian as the language of Islamic debate; in the birth of a “Muslim public opinion” that transcends ethnic specificities; and in the role played by Muslim republics and constituencies in the Putin regime’s electoral legitimacy and ideological construction.

1. V. Putin, “Speech at the celebratory meeting of the 225 anniversary of the Central Spiritual Administrations of Russia’s Muslims”, Ufa, October 22, 2013, <http://kremlin.ru>.

2. J.-F. Ratelle, “A Critical Assessment of the Scholarship on Violent Conflicts in the North Caucasus during the Post-Soviet Period”, *Caucasus Survey*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2015, pp. 1-24.

The Plural Realities of Islam in Russia

Geographic Diversity

Obsessed with the growing visibility of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia and the regular references made to Orthodox symbols by Vladimir Putin and his government, external observers tend to forget the country's multiconfessionality. Of Russia's 146 million inhabitants (if we include the two million in annexed Crimea), about 15 million are nominally Muslims,³ in the sense that they belong to an ethnic group whose cultural background mostly refers to Islam. Of course, not all are believers and even fewer practice Islam. Some self-identify mostly by reference to their ethnicity (*natsional'nost'* in Russian), without placing any significance on religion; many combine ethnic and religious identities; and a minority consider religious belonging to be the main criterion of their identity.

To these 15 million nominally Muslim citizens should be added between 2 and 3 million labor migrants officially documented (those undocumented are by definition difficult to assess)⁴ who come from the formerly Soviet and culturally Muslim countries (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan). These migrants work and stay in Russia for different periods of time, but many of them plan to integrate into Russian society and, as in many European countries, a "second-generation migrants" phenomenon is now emerging in Russia's main metropolises. Russia also faces large internal migration flows: every year, around 5 million Russian citizens move within the country, a large proportion of whom are North Caucasians reaching to the country's other regions. Dagestan in particular has a negative net migration balance of tens of thousands of people per year.⁵

3. This number is based on the 2010 census data (and its updates) and includes all culturally Muslim populations. The number is confirmed by Pew Research Center's 2017 survey in which 10% of the Russian population (so about 14.5 million people) self-identified as Muslim: "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe", Pew Research Center, May 10, 2017, www.pewforum.org.

4. On the debate over migration data, see M. Denisenko, "Migration to Russia and the Current Economic Crisis", in A. Pikulicka-Wilczewska and G. Uehling (eds.), *Migration and the Ukraine Crisis: A Two-Country Perspective*, Bristol: E-International Relations, 2017.

5. N. Mkrtchian and L. Karachurina, "Migratsiia v Rossii. Potoki i tsentry pritiazheniia" [Migration in Russia: Flows and Centers of Attraction], *Demoscope Weekly*, No. 595–596, April 21–May 4, 2014.

Like the rest of their fellow citizens, Muslim Russians live in diverse socioeconomic and cultural situations. “Archipelago Russia”—a metaphor used to describe the extreme spatial and socioeconomic fragmentation of the country⁶—applies to them too.⁷ One can dissociate at least four different contexts for Muslim Russians.

First, in the North Caucasus and the Volga-Urals, Muslims live on their ancestral territories and cannot be considered a diaspora. The North Caucasus is set apart from the rest of Russia in many respects, including its remoteness and the low number of ethnic Russians still living: they still represent about 30% of the population in Karachay-Cherkessia and about 22% in Kabardino-Balkaria but only 3% in Dagestan, and less than 1% in Chechnya.⁸ In the Volga-Urals region, Tatars and Bashkirs are almost as numerous as ethnic Russians. The latter are better integrated into the Federation framework and Russian culture than their North Caucasian counterparts, but they, too, live on ancestral Muslim soil, the region having converted as early as the 9th century.

More recently, two other regions have come to host important Muslim communities: the Moscow region and Western Siberia. The Moscow region is home to about 2 million Muslims, both citizens and migrants, and has become one of the capitals of Russian (and European) Islam: it hosts one of the country’s main Islamic institutions, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation (DUM RF); has erected Russia’s main Cathedral Mosque;⁹ and serves as a hub to produce halal goods to be sent across Russia and the post-Soviet space.

Western Siberia, and especially the rich Yamalo-Nenets and Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrugs, has become the new home of tens of thousands of Muslims from the North Caucasus, Volga-Urals, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia, who have been migrating there since the 1960s to work in the oil and gas fields. These migrants, who now control a large proportion of Western Siberia’s informal and retail (transportation, food, clothes, and everyday furniture) markets, have been financially successful enough that it has become fashionable in

6. N. Zubarevich, “Four Russias: Rethinking the Post-Soviet Map”, in *Regionalism(s): A Variety of Perspectives from Europe and the Americas*, Innsbruck, Institut für Föderalismus, 2014, pp. 71-88.

7. R. A. Silant’ev et al., *Atlas Islamskoe soobchshestvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, Moscow: Inkotezh, 2018.

8. J. Radvanyi and N. Beroutchachvili, *Atlas géopolitique du Caucase*, Paris: Autrement, 2010.

9. R. Turaeva, “Imagined Mosque Communities in Russia: Central Asian Migrants in Moscow”, *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2019, pp. 131-147.

their countries or regions of origin to marry a “Northern guy” (*Severianin*), a migrant who has succeeded in Western Siberia.¹⁰

Beyond these four regions, Muslims have settled in all of Russia's major cities, as far as Vladivostok and Yuzhno-Sakhalin Island. Islamic communities prosper in Far North cities such as Norilsk, to the point that Russia can brand itself as having the northernmost mosque (a title for which it competes with Canada, as the booming oil region of Alberta hosts several small mosques).¹¹ Muslims from the North Caucasus, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have also settled in more rural regions, working agricultural lands largely abandoned by the ethnic Russian population. As such, Muslim communities are now scattered across the entire Russian territory and no longer limited to the two regions in which Islam was historically present.

Institutional Diversity

Russia's Islam is impressively diverse not only geographically, but also institutionally. Although Islam does not recognize clerical institutions as mandatory intermediaries between humans and God, the Russian Empire—along with the Ottoman one—developed centralized institutions to represent Islam.

All the muftiates that exist in Russia today have their origin in the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly, created in 1788 by Empress Catherine II. After Stalin recognized religions in 1942, a Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Russia (TsDUMR) was created in Ufa; it has been led since 1980 by Chief Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, centrifugal tendencies also reached Islam, and several independent muftiates emerged, representing Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and the North Caucasus. These were followed by the Moscow-based Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation (DUM RF), headed by mufti Ravil Gainutdin. DUM RF is now the main competitor of the Ufa-based Spiritual Administration: the two entities jockey to speak in the name of the country's Muslims, fighting over mosques' allegiance and symbolic recognition by the Kremlin.¹²

Yet these two institutions and their small competitors—about 60 muftiates are legally recognized—far from cover the full spectrum of Islamic religious authority in Russia. While most Russia's Muslims are Sunni (about 90%), they may belong to different *madhhad*

10. A. Yarlykapov, “Divisions and Unity of the Novy Urengoy Muslim Community”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 67, No. 4-5, 2020, pp. 338-347.

11. M. Laruelle and S. Hohmann, “Polar Islam: Muslim Communities in Russia's Arctic Cities”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 67, No. 4-5, 2020, pp. 327-337.

12. R. Bekkin, “People of Reliable Loyalty...: Muftiates and the State in Modern Russia”, PhD diss., Södertörn University, 2020.

(Islamic jurisprudence schools) mostly Hanafi and to a lesser extent Shafii, which may create some intercommunity tensions. A small minority of Shiia, mostly Azerbaijanis, coexist independently.

Moreover, any Muslim community may have informal leaders whose knowledge wins them support. Russia's Islam has globalized over the past three decades and younger generations tend to search for religious guidance outside the country's official institutions. While the Russian legislation are severely restricted foreign financial support to Islam, for instance to mosque construction, foreign cultural influence remains more arduous to control: foreign preachers from Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, among others, have seen their works translated into Russian, allowing them to spread their interpretations of Islam among Russia's Muslims and raise new generations of Russian-speaking preachers. This plurality is reinforced by the ambiguous status of the Spiritual Administrations, which often appear more as administrative organs emanating from a secular (and, for long, atheist) state structure and used by it to regiment Muslims than as genuine, bottom-up structures reflecting the country's Islamic grassroots.

The Broader Context: A Securitized Islam

All over the world and especially in non-Muslim majority countries, Islam has been securitized, in the sense that the fear of “Islamic radicalism” dominates the narrative and public policies toward Muslims, forcing all other Islam-related themes to adapt to the threat context.¹³

In Russia, the securitization of Islam has happened at an accelerated pace compared to Europe due first to the war with Afghanistan (1979-1989), and then the two Chechen wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2000), during which local narratives of nationalism and national liberation were replaced by or at least became intimately interconnected with narratives of re-Islamization and, among radicals, of holy war (*jihad*). While it has domestic roots, this securitization has also been shaped by the West’s securitization of Islam around the War on Terror narrative coming from the US and the rising controversy around Islam(ism) in Europe.¹⁴ This securitization of Islam takes at least two forms: legislative and sociocultural.

Legislative Securitization: The Fight against Extremism

Russia has a long experience of Islamic terrorism due to the two wars in Chechnya and repeated instabilities in republics such as Dagestan and Ingushetia. In the 2000s, terrorist attacks stopped being contained to the North Caucasian region and began reaching Russia’s big metropolises, with several attacks in Moscow, St Peterburg, but also Volgograd.¹⁵ In the peak of the Syrian civil war and of ISIS rise, between 3,500 and 5,000 Russian citizens left for the war theater, to join either ISIS or Al-Qaeda. The Russian law enforcement agencies

13. R. Dannreuther, “Russian Discourses and Approaches to Islam and Islamism”, in *Russia and Islam: State, Society and Radicalism*, in R. Dannreuther and L. March (eds.), London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 9-25. See also K. Aitamurto, “Protected and Controlled: Islam and ‘Desecularisation from Above’ in Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 68, No. 1, 2016, pp. 182-202.

14. V. Malakhov and D. Letnyakov, “The Perception of Islam in Russia: The Comparative Dimension”, *State, Religion and Church*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2018, pp. 4-22.

15. E. C. Holland, F. D. W. Witmer and J. O’Loughlin, “The Decline and Shifting Geography of Violence in Russia’s North Caucasus, 2010-2016”, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 58, No. 6, 2017, pp. 613-641. See also J.-F. Ratelle and E. A. Souleimanov, “A Failed Counterinsurgency or a Model of Normalization? Making Sense of Chechenisation”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 68, No. 8, 2016, pp. 1287-1314.

played a laissez-faire policy, “inviting” fighters to leave as a way to dry the Caucasus Emirate from its recruits.¹⁶ The latest big terrorist attack on Russia’s soil has happened in 2017 in the St Petersburg metro, killing 15 people and injuring about 50 others. Yet, low-level militant terrorist activity has continued, especially in the North Caucasus, and the country counted at least four individual terrorist actions in 2019, here too mostly in the Southern Federal District or in the Moscow region.¹⁷ Globally, over the decade, the decline in violence committed in the name of Islam can be explained by both a decrease of ISIS-related and Caucasus Emirate violence on the Russian territory, and a better monitoring by the law enforcement agencies.

Russia’s anti-extremism legislation is known to be vague in its definition of extremism, even if it has gradually refined its legal tools.¹⁸ “Extremism” has been used to target political opponents, and has been used by Muftiates themselves as a way to intimidate their competitors, including in the North Caucasus.¹⁹ While describing the activities of Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, or the Caucasus Emirate as terrorist does not raise any concerns, the early inclusion of Hizb ut-Tahrir has been flagged by some human rights associations as legally unfounded. An international fundamentalist political party whose stated aim is the re-establishment of a world caliphate, Hizb ut-Tahrir has never committed violence. However, the European Court of Human Rights, petitioned by two members of the group who were hoping to see the Russian verdict contested, determined that the Russian authorities are justified in forbidding the movement on the grounds that Hizb ut-Tahrir calls for the overthrow of current political systems and the establishment of a dictatorial regime that would provide no protection for any democratic rights.²⁰

Since then, two other Islamic movements have been classified as extremist by Russian legislation, although they are not labelled as such in many European countries. The first is Tablighi Jamaat: the foremost Islamic proselytizing movement, it is pietist and does not call for any violence.²¹ The second is the Nurcu network (disciples of Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen), which is likewise not known for violence but has partially radicalized during its confrontation with the Erdoğan regime

16. J.-F. Ratelle, “Caucasian Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Understanding the Threat of Returnees in the North Caucasus”, *Caucasus Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2016, pp. 218-238.

17. State Department, “Country Reports on Terrorism: Russia,” state.gov, 2019, www.state.gov.

18. A. Verkhovsky, “The State against Violence in Spheres Related to Religion”, in O. Olikier (ed.), *Religion and Violence in Russia: Context, Manifestations, and Policy*, Washington DC: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018, pp. 11-42.

19. V. Bobrovnikov, “Islamofobiia i religioznoe zakonodatel'stvo v Dagestane” [Islamophobia and religious legislation in Dagestan], *Central Asia and Caucasus*, No. 8, 2000, www.ca-c.org.

20. A. Verkhovsky, “Iavliaetsia li Khizb ut-Tahrir ekstremistskoi organizatsiei?”, SOVA Center, February 6, 2006, www.sova-center.ru.

21. According to data as of January 17, 2017.

in Turkey. To these three groups targeted by Russian legislation should be added several Crimean Tatar organizations. The latter found themselves in a difficult situation following Russia's annexation of the peninsula in 2014: they were given just three months to get rid of any literature included on Russia's extremist list, and several were subsequently fined for possessing forbidden literature.²²

Russia's state institutions employ different definitions to identify what and who should be condemned for extremism. The Federal Security Service (FSB) has a list of forbidden movements, while the Ministry of Justice has its own lists of extremist organizations, of individuals belonging to these organizations, and of materials—books, booklets, online articles, songs, and videos—that it considers extremist. Incitement to hatred—calling for interethnic violence or for terrorism—can be prosecuted under several different articles of the Penal Code. Last but not least, since 2012, the Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Telecoms, Information Technologies, and Mass Communications (Roskomnadzor) has launched a mechanism of Internet filtration based on the register of forbidden websites, mainly those spreading banned literature, some of which is Islamic.²³

Tables 1, 2, and 3 below summarize the state of different legal procedures for participation in extremist and terrorist organizations, for making extremist speeches, and for extremist materials from 2016 to 2020. The data, collected by the Moscow-based SOVA Center, show the total number of people, institutions, and materials condemned; the number of cases related to Muslims; and the number of cases where the SOVA legal team considers the decision legally unfounded.

As we can see, Muslims were the primary group condemned for participation in extremist and terrorist organizations (mostly for belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir and Tablighi Jamaat) until 2019, when their number dropped. Among those Russian citizens condemned for extremist speeches, Muslims constitute only a small portion, as the majority of this category comprises Russian nationalist, neo-Nazi, and white supremacist speeches, which the regime increasingly seeks to fight. The same goes for the list of forbidden materials: texts identified as Islamist constitute only a small part of the whole spectrum of banned literature, with most banned texts related to far-right groups.

22. See, for example, “V Evpatorii sud oshtrafoval imama za khranenie zapreshchennoi literatury,” SOVA Center, November 28, 2016, www.sova-center.ru; “Rukovoditel' dzhankoiskogo medrese oshtrafovan za khranenie literatury,” SOVA Center, August 26, 2014, www.sova-center.ru.

23. Federal Law of Russian Federation no. 139-FZ, “On Amendments to the Federal Law ‘On Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development’ and to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation,” Kremlin, July 30, 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

Table 1. Number of Citizens Condemned for Participation in Extremist and Terrorist Organizations, 2016-2020

| Year | Total | Muslim cases | Of Muslim cases, number of decisions considered legally unfounded by SOVA |
|------|-------|--------------|---|
| 2016 | 61 | 41 | 37 |
| 2017 | 89 | 79 | 74 |
| 2018 | 91 | 76 | 76 |
| 2019 | 122 | 88 | 74 |
| 2020 | 124 | 44 | 38 |

Source: SOVA Center.

Table 2. Number of Russian Citizens Condemned for Extremist Speeches, 2016-2020

| Year | Total | Muslims | Of Muslim cases, number of decisions considered legally unfounded by SOVA |
|------|-------|---------|---|
| 2016 | 254 | 16 | 4 |
| 2017 | 276 | 27 | 6 |
| 2018 | 238 | 14 | 2 |
| 2019 | 126 | 22 | 3 |
| 2020 | 136 | 41 | 12 |

Source: SOVA Center.

Table 3. Federal List of Extremist Materials to Be Banned, 2016-2020

| Year | Forbidden materials Total | From Islamic fighters | From other Muslim organizations | Number of decisions considered legally unfounded by SOVA |
|------|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| 2016 | 785 | 69 | 18 | 7 |
| 2017 | 330 | 30 | 13 | 7 |
| 2018 | 466 | 43 | 61 | 22 |
| 2019 | 193 | 16 | 3 | 3 |
| 2020 | 139 | 15 | 1 | 0 |

Source: SOVA Center.

Based on SOVA analysis, one can conclude that the Russian legislation does not target Islamic institutions or representatives to a greater extent than other Russian groups considered extremist—Russian nationalist groups are often more targeted than Islamic movements—but the inclusion of Tablighi Jamaat and Nurcu followers on the list of extremist movements is excessive and legally unfounded by European standards.

Another form of securitization of Islam is visible in the media realm, where Russian tabloids, as well as the main television channels, especially provocative talk-shows representing the *agitation* genre, have been brandishing classic narratives that amalgamate Islam, Islamism, and labor migrants.²⁴ This has been reinforced by the role of several Russian politicians—including provocative far-right figure Vladimir Zhirinovskiy as well as the former leader of the Rodina (Homeland) party Dmitry Rogozin—who are known for their overly xenophobic and Islamophobic speeches.²⁵

Sociocultural Securitization: Which place for Islam in the public space?

A second securitization trend relates to vivid debates on the place to give to Islam in Russia's public space.²⁶ These debates can go from legitimate discussions on the dialogue between the expression of religious feelings and a secular state setting, to Islamophobic perceptions and attitudes.

In Russia, data on anti-Muslim violence are untrustworthy, for two reasons: first, many people do not report such violence to the law enforcement agencies, especially if it was committed by the police; and second, the available statistics report ethnic violence rather than religious violence. Depending on the methods used to calculate it, violence against people with Muslim backgrounds ranges from 30 to 60 percent of all ethnic violence recorded by the SOVA Center.²⁷ However, the percentage of avowedly *religious* violence—that is, where Islamophobic comments made by the attackers were

24. S. Hutchings and V. Tolz (eds.), *Nation, Ethnicity and Race on Russian Television. Mediating Post-Soviet Difference*, London: Routledge, 2015. See also V. Tolz and Y. Teper, "Broadcasting Agitation: A New Media Strategy of Putin's Third Presidency", *Post-Soviet affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2018, pp. 213-227.

25. See D. Strovskiy, "Islam in the Russian Media," in *Islam in Russia: Politics and Society at Home and Abroad*, G. Simons, E. Shiraev, and M. Shterin (eds.) (forthcoming).

26. Cf. S. Ragozina, "Zashchishchaia 'traditsionnyi' islam ot 'radikal'nogo': Diskurs Islamofobii v rossiiskikh SMI", *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom*, Vol. 2, No. 36, 2008, pp. 272-299; M. Laruelle and N. Yudina, "Islamophobia in Russia: Trends and Societal Context", in O. Oliker (ed.), *Religion and Violence in Russia: Context, Manifestations, and Policy*, Washington DC: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018, pp. 43-63.

27. More specific data on attacks committed by radical nationalists in recent years are available in the annual reports of the SOVA Center: www.sova-center.ru.

reported—is small. Acts of vandalism are regularly committed against Muslim buildings, mostly cemeteries or prayer rooms, and burnings of the Quran are common (yet one struggles to get them inventoried, as the Russian justice system does not provide any data on it), but the majority of Islamophobic comments are made online by Russian nationalist websites.

Globally, cross-country analyses by the Pew Research Center show that the Russian society has been less concerned with “extremism” than European audiences and is broadly less Islamophobic (but more xenophobic).²⁸ This can be partly explained by the fact that the Russian political context has emphasized “ethnic separatism” rather than “religious extremism.” This was confirmed by Levada Center surveys from 2008 to 2012, in which Islamists ranked lower than Chechen insurgents, the United States, and NATO on lists of enemies of Russia.²⁹ Yet negative perceptions of Islam began to rise around 2015—in line with the *Charlie Hebdo* and the Bataclan terrorist acts: that year, the share of respondents who felt positively about Islam collapsed from 14 percent in 2008 to 8 percent, while negative responses jumped from 29 percent to 50 percent.³⁰ The latest Levada Center survey we have at our disposal, conducted at the end of 2017, indicates that Islam remains positively assessed—to a lesser extent than Orthodoxy but more than Protestantism.

Table 4. Levada Center Survey, “What Is Your Attitude toward Islam?”, 2008-2017

| | 2008 | 2017 |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|
| Very positive | 23% | 18% |
| More or less positive | 27% | 31% |
| Neither positive, nor negative | 32% | 31% |
| More or less negative | 6% | 10% |
| Very negative | 2% | 4% |

Source: Levada Center, January 23, 2018, available at : www.levada.ru.

As in Europe, Russian public opinion is divided on societal issues related to the visibility of Islam, with particular flashpoints being Islamic dress and mosque construction. A 2015 survey by the Levada

28. J. Poushter, “Extremism Concerns Growing in West and Predominantly Muslim Countries,” Pew Research Center, July 16, 2015, www.pewglobal.org.

29. *Obshchestvennoe mnenie 2012*, Moscow, Levada Center, 2012, 198.

30. “Terakt v Parizhe: karikatury, islam, zaprety,” Levada Center, January 29, 2015, www.levada.ru.

Center shows that about three-quarters (74 percent) of respondents have a negative attitude toward the hijab (36 percent very much against and 38 percent mildly against), with the highest proportion of negative reactions in Moscow (91 percent against).³¹ There have been several cases of discrimination against people identified by their mode of dress as Muslim in hospitals, in workplaces, and on public transportation.

However, the main bone of contention with regard to the Islamic dress code relates to wearing hijab in schools and higher education institutions. As in the rest of Europe, the issue of young girls wearing a scarf at school has become a symbolic battleground between secular and religious norms in the public space. In Russia, no federal law forbids wearing a scarf in educational institutions. The decision is therefore left to regional or local authorities, and sometimes to school directors themselves. In traditionally Muslim regions, tolerance of wearing a veil has always been higher. However, in many of the country's regions, girls with scarfs are refused entry into the classroom. This has become a regular issue in several regions which are not historically Muslim but which today host relatively important Muslim communities, such as Stavropol, Volgograd, and Ulyanovsk, as well as in Tatarstan, where the population is almost equally divided between ethnic Russians and Tatars.

As in Europe, another sensitive issue is the construction of new mosques or prayer houses. Here too, one lacks comprehensive data on this topic, but the SOVA Center records between 6 and 14 cases of protests per year around a new mosque project.³² In 2015, the Levada Center organized a survey on perceptions of new religious places that demonstrated the gap between Orthodox and Islamic places of worship: 60 percent of respondents said they would very much or pretty much welcome the construction of a new church, while only 29 percent felt the same about a mosque.³³

The construction of new mosques gives rise to two kinds of issues: legal problems with the local administration and protests from some segments of the population.³⁴ Opposition to erecting Islamic religious places sometimes comes from the local authorities, which refuse to issue construction permits. More often, however, it is the local population—frequently but not systematically led by Russian nationalist groups—that is the engine of a negative reaction and

31. "Rossiiane ne podderzhali noshenie khidzhabov v uchebnykh zavedeniakh", Levada Center, June 30, 2015, www.levada.ru.

32. According to data as of the end of November 2016.

33. Levada Center, "Terakt v Parizhe."

34. For details, refer to the annual reports of SOVA Center. See also O. Sibireva, "Problemy realizatsii svobody sovesti v Rossii v iuule – sentiabre 2016 goda", SOVA Center, November 23, 2016, www.sova-center.ru.

lobbies the municipal powers to stop construction. The most striking example is probably Moscow itself, where there are approximately two million Muslims but only five functional mosques. Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyenin has stated on several occasions that the city has enough Islamic prayer places because the majority of these Muslims are migrants, and thus supposedly not destined to stay in Moscow.³⁵ As a way to “outsource” the issue, Sobyenin has proposed to build new mosques and prayer rooms not in the city of Moscow itself but in the Moscow region, which now counts 19 of them—although the Spiritual Administration of Muslims acknowledged that there were significant tensions in localities where mosques were planned and very few new projects were able to be formalized.³⁶

35. “Sobyenin: Mecheti v Moskve dostatochno”, *Rosbalt*, October 13, 2016, www.rosbalt.ru.

36. “Musul'mane prosiat u glavy Podmoskov'ia mesto pod mecheti,” *Rakhman*, February 7, 2013, <http://mro-rahman.ru>.

Asserting the Russianness of Islam

This securitization trend should be balanced against the agency that Muslim institutions and citizens display in showcasing their “normalcy” as Russian citizens. Before addressing the pivotal role of Islam in Russia’s political and cultural debates, it is necessary to mention the terminological issues that pervade the question of Islam’s “Russianness.” In Russian, there are two terms that translate as “Russian:” one (*russkii*) refers to cultural identity and the other (*rossiiskii*) to civic identity.

In the early 2000s, Sergei Kirienko, then Presidential Envoy to the Volga Federal District, and his team promoted the notion of Russian Islam (*russkii Islam*), in the sense of an Islam of Russian culture and of Russian language, to exhibit Islam’s integration into a pan-Russian framework, but the notion was heavily criticized by many Muslim leaders, especially in the ethnic republics, for diluting ethnic specificities within a wider Russian culture.³⁷ Since then, the notion of Russia’s Islam, or Islam of Russia (*rossiiskii islam*), has been spread by the Muftiates as a way to maintain the multiethnicity element while insisting on Islam’s legitimate place in Russia. Yet this second notion, too, is unsatisfactory, since the adjective *rossiiskii* is often either associated with the decried Yeltsin period or considered a meaningless administrative classification that does not speak to the majority of the population.

The Muslim Regions as a Cornerstone of the Putin Regime

Like any so-called hybrid regime, the Russian regime needs popular support to function and secure legitimacy without resorting to a repressive apparatus. With popular support for the presidential party, United Russia, on the decline in the country’s main cities, most prominently in Moscow and St Petersburg, the regime has

37. K. Graney, “‘Russian Islam’ and the Politics of Religious Multiculturalism in Russia”, *Rebounding Identities: The Politics of Identity in Russia and Ukraine*, D. Ariel and B.A. Ruble (eds.), Washington D.C., Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006, 89–115.

increasingly had to rely on the “periphery,” i.e., rural regions and ethnic republics.³⁸

Of these, Muslim republics appear to have outsize importance to the electoral stability of the regime.³⁹ Looking at the results of presidential elections (2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2018), parliamentary elections (2003, 2007, 2011, 2016), and the constitutional referendum of July 2020, Samuel Sorokin concludes that the six main Muslim republics—Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan—deliver on average 84 percent of their votes to the president and United Russia. In the last four presidential elections, Vladimir Putin (Dmitri Medvedev in 2008) received on average 88.5% of the vote in these republics compared to 67% nationwide, while in the parliamentary elections United Russia received an average of 79.5% compared to 55.86% nationwide.⁴⁰ That makes the Muslim republics part of the backbone of the regime, with a central role to play in ensuring its electoral legitimacy. These “electoral sultanates,” to follow the expression crafted by Dmitri Oreshkin,⁴¹ can be explained by a blend of massive fraudulent practices during elections, use of “administrative resources” to pressure the population to go voting and to vote “correctly,” and popular support to those in power, often with the implicit idea of politics as an exchange of services (“we support them, they will respond to our claims”).

A second aspect stressing the central role of Muslim regions relates to the federal status of the Russian Federation. Under Putin, the country has recentralized and many components of its federalism—decentralized fiscal policy, right to schooling in national languages, etc.—have been partially abolished. While the questions of teaching national languages have created tensions, especially in Tatarstan,⁴² there remains an informal federalism related to the judicial system in the North Caucasus. This concerns not only Chechnya, whose exceptional status outside of the Russian legal frame is well-known and explicable for historical and political reasons, but the whole region.

38. K. Rogov, “Administrative Mobilization and the Dynamics of Electoral Manipulations on Putin’s Presidential Election”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, August 20, 2018, www.ponarseurasia.org.

39. T. Gerber, “Political and Social Attitudes of Russia’s Muslims: Caliphate, Kadyrovism, or Kasha?” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, April 5, 2017, www.ponarseurasia.org.

40. S.A. Sorokin, “Eurasianism and Political Islam in Russia: Ethnoreligious Identities in Transformation, 1990-2020”, PhD diss., European University Institute, 2021, 266.

41. D. Oreshkin, “Resurs dlia elektoral’nykh sultanatov” [Resources for electoral sultanates], *svop.ru*, June 9, 2017, <http://svop.ru>.

42. G. Yusupova, “Why Ethnic Politics in Russia Will Return”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy memo*, No. 584, March 26, 2019, www.ponarseurasia.org.

Regional customary law (*adat*), as well as, in some cases, Sharia, are increasingly accepted as an integral part of an informal legal system alternative to the official courts, which are considered slow and corrupt.⁴³ The number of religious marriages (*nikah*) not declared to state authorities has become widely practiced, as a way to bypass the Russian legislation that does not recognize polygamy. In 2020, the Moscow-based Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Russia even published a ban on marriage between Muslim men and non-Muslim women, a decision that was however criticized by many other Islamic institutions as going against the country's national harmony.⁴⁴ Obviously, these trends do not fit a Western-centric vision of federalism as democratic decentralization, but they confirm the still influential, centuries-long imperial legacy of judicial pluralism.

Islam as an Integral Part of the Regime's "Conservative Turn"

Beyond offering electoral predictability for the regime in its quest for popular support, Russia's Muslim republics have played a central role in accompanying, and sometimes even preceding, the regime's progressive officialization of conservative values.

As it was discussed in a 2017 Ifri paper,⁴⁵ the ideology constructed by Ramzan Kadyrov as head of Chechnya has been able to blend a militant patriotism that hypes support for President Putin and classic references to Russia as an Orthodox and ethnically Slavic country, on the one hand, with an ultra-conservative Islam inspired by Islamic puritanism and strong anti-Westernism, on the other. While the Chechen regime promotes a so-called traditional Islam inspired by Chechen folklore and Sufi tradition, it is set apart from official traditional Islam due to its very conservative interpretation of religious norms. It is not Salafi, in the sense that it does not confine itself to the Quran and hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad, but it claims to take its cues from sharia on issues of manners and mores: alcohol consumption is strictly monitored, gambling is officially banned, the broadcasting of Western music is controlled. Under a so-called "moralization" program, it is now almost obligatory for women to wear the veil in public places. Kadyrov himself has publicly stated that women are inferior to men, has called for honor crimes to be made legal, and has spoken out in favor of polygamy.

43. E. Lazarev, "Laws in Conflict: Legacies of War, Gender, and Legal Pluralism in Chechnya", *World Politics*, Vol. 71, No. 4, 2019, pp. 667-709.

44. "Mixed Marriage Ban for Russian Muslims Sparks Backlash", *The Moscow Times*, November 12, 2020, www.themoscowtimes.com.

45. M. Laruelle, "Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 99, March 2017, www.ifri.org.

Even leaving aside the extreme case of Kadyrovism, Russia's Islam has applauded the regime's so-called "conservative turn." Although we lack comprehensive sociological data, we know that Russian citizens who identify themselves as Muslim are more likely to believe in the existence of God than those who identify as Orthodox Christians.⁴⁶ Muslims in the North Caucasus are statistically much more likely than the population as a whole to oppose foreign funding of domestic NGOs that either monitor elections or work on environmental issues, as well as to express antipathy toward homosexuals.⁴⁷ Similarly, the LegitRuss survey, conducted in spring 2021, confirms that people from the North Caucasus are the strongest supporters of heterosexual marriage.⁴⁸

The Muftiates play an active role in promoting these traditional values. The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Bashkortostan has for instance launched "courses of preparation to family life" delivered at the mosque for young people ready for marriage.⁴⁹ The Muftiates were also vocal during the discussions around the 2020 constitutional amendments to be sure heterosexual marriage will be enshrined in the constitution. The leader of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Tatarstan, Kamil Samigullin, for instance expressed that the Russian Constitution should strengthen "traditional moral values," the central one being that a family can only be constituted "by the union of a man and a woman."⁵⁰

A 3,000-respondent survey carried out in 2016 by a group of scholars from the Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPА, formely RANKhiGS) and the Gaydar Institute for Economic Politics in Dagestan further offers us insights—even if not representative—into the moral values of the Dagestani population. It shows, for instance, that youth are largely more religious in their practices than older generations. Among the most salient differences between Dagestanis and most Russians are a strong gendered division of labor (only 7 percent of men with small children would agree to let their wives work, even if the children were

46. "Verkhovestvo Prava", Levada Center, May 20, 2020, www.levada.ru.

47. T. Gerber, "Political and Social Attitudes of Russia's Muslims", *op. cit.*

48. "LEGITRUSS: Values-Based Legitimation in Authoritarian States: Top-Down versus Bottom-Up Strategies—The Case of Russia", funded by the Research Council of Norway, Project number 300997.

49. Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Russia, "Sovremennaiа sem'ia trebuet novykh podkhodov dlia ee sokhraneniia. Pri mechetiakh nachnut deistvovat' komnaty semeinoi konsultatsii" [The contemporary family needs new approaches for its preservation. New rooms for family consultations to open at mosques], dumrb.ru, August 20, 2021, <https://dumrb.ru>.

50. "Konstitutsii khotiat dovavit' dukhovnosti" [Spirituality to be added to the constitution], *Kommersant*, January 30, 2020, www.kommersant.ru.

supervised by their grandparents during this time) and a higher level of homophobia (at 94 percent opposition).⁵¹

The Theological Russification of Russia's Islam

The Russification of Islam also transpires at a more theological level. Russia's management of Islam—and indeed of all religions—was born from the Soviet framework. The authoritarian, atheist Soviet regime feared religions as potential competitors for its ideological legitimacy.⁵² Today, the Russian system recognizes four major religions—Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism—that are “traditional” for the country and hence accorded extensive rights; they participate in an Interreligious Council of Traditional Religions. Those denominations that are considered “non-traditional,” meanwhile, must undergo more complex processes to gain administrative recognition. The dichotomy between “traditional” and “non-traditional” has spread widely, becoming both a component of self-identification for communities and individuals and a means of regulating intra-community conflicts, as it makes it possible to excommunicate competitors and ideological enemies for not conforming to “traditional Islam.”⁵³

The notion of “traditional Islam” has been conceptualized by Islamic theologians themselves, including the Tatar Valiulla Yakupov (1963-2012). Generally speaking, traditional Islam means loyalty to the Russian state, civic patriotism, and acceptance of Russia's multiconfessionality; adherence to Hanafism and its *madhhab*; recognition of Islam being mixed with ethnic features; and valorisation of Sufi traditions.⁵⁴ This definition is rooted in theological debates that took place within the Spiritual Administration during Soviet times, when Islamic theologians with competing ideological loyalties (Hanafi, Sufi, Safi'i, Hanbali...)

51. I. Starodubrovskaja, E. Lazarev, and E. Varshaver, “Tsennosti dagestanskikh musul'man: chto pokazal opros” [The Values of Muslim Dagestani: what the survey shows], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 2016, www.kavkaz-uzel.eu.

52. K. Aitamurto, “Discussions about Indigenous, National and Transnational Islam in Russia,” *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 2019, pp. 198–213; K. Aitamurto, “The Approved and the Disapproved Islam in Russia,” in G. Simons and D. Westerlund (eds.), *Religion, Politics and Nation-Building in Post-Communist Countries*, London: Routledge, 2015.

53. R. Bekkin, “People of Reliable Loyalty...”, *op. cit.*

54. A. K. Bustanov and M. Kemper (eds.), *Russia's Islam and Orthodoxy beyond the Institutions: Languages of Conversion, Competition and Convergence*, London: Routledge, 2020, pp. 819-828. See also L. Almazova and A. Akhunov, “In Search of ‘Traditional Islam’ in Tatarstan: Between National Project and Universalist Theories”, *Context. Časopis za interdisciplinarnе studije*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2019, pp. 11-46; L. Di Puppo and J. Schmoller, “Here or Elsewhere: Sufism and Traditional Islam in Russia's Volga-Ural Region”, *Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2020, pp. 135–156.

worked to conceptualize what was acceptable in the Soviet framework and what had to be rejected as foreign.⁵⁵

Today, all non-conformist—or non-traditional—versions of Islam are subsumed under the label “Salafi” (previously, preference was given to the term “Wahhabism.”) In line with this interpretation, non-conformist Islam is necessarily deemed “foreign” (Arabic, Turkic, Pakistani...) and politically dangerous if it is not recognized by the Muftiates. This has led to the amalgamation of various distinct phenomena: the very small minority of people inclined toward terrorist violence for religious or other reasons; those calling for Islam to become a political ideology (not necessarily through violence); and those promoting a literal reading of the Quran (Salafis), who think society will gradually and peacefully Islamize itself.

Although we lack in-depth survey data, research conducted among different Muslim communities of Russia seems to confirm a growing polarization between two interpretations of Islam. On one side, Islam is the family transmission of religious, cultural, and ethnic practices that include observance of traditional family holidays (*Eid al-Adha*, or *Kurban bayram* and *Eid al-Fitr*, or *Uraza bayram* in Russian) and life-cycle rituals (births, weddings, funerals)—the so-called “traditional Islam” promoted by state institutions and Spiritual Administrations. On the other side, Islam is a more individualized practice disconnected from family traditions or ethnic kinship and determined by the personal selection of preachers, often informal ones who lack domestic institutional legitimacy. This second interpretation of Muslimness contradicts the conventional vision of Islam as part of ethnic culture and therefore tends to be seen by the Russian state and Islamic institutions as a “dangerous” trend. Paradoxically, therefore, the Muftiates’ strategy of crafting a “correct Islam” has led to the so-called “Sunnification” of some segments of Russia’s Islam—that is, the gradual structuring of a more doctrinal Islam that can compete with the Muftiates for legitimacy during theological disputes.⁵⁶

The “traditional versus non-traditional” frame has also shaped the way in which the Russian state understands Islamic education, in a very similar way to France’s efforts to build an *Islam de France* in which religion and civic patriotism would be not only compatible but intimately interrelated. In the early 1990s Russia was wide open to foreign religious influences, both from proselytizing Protestant groups and from Islamic movements, but this parenthesis closed

55. E. Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

56. L. Di Puppo, “The Paradoxes of a Localised Islamic Orthodoxy: Rethinking Tatar Traditional Islam in Russia”, *Ethnicities*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2019, pp. 311-334.

rapidly due to the Russian Orthodox Church's protests against other Christian denominations' activities and the war in Chechnya, respectively. Foreign funding for new mosques came under heavy scrutiny from state organs, while schools opened by the Sulaymaniye Sufi or the Nurcu movements were closed in the early 2000s.

Since then, the Russian state has tried to take control of Islamic education in order to supervise the theological construction of a Russian Islam. In 2005, the Ministry of Education launched the "Program of Assistance to the Development of Religious Education, Chiefly Muslim Education," guaranteeing more than 4 billion rubles of investment in the development of domestic Islamic education up to 2020.⁵⁷ If the state and the Spiritual Administrations have indeed retaken control of administrative processes such as mosque funding and approval of imam nomination, the phenomenon of Islamic foreign education has been more difficult to reduce. Today, Russian graduates of foreign Islamic educational centers (Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Morocco, Tunisia, Malaysia, Indonesia) are increasingly influential in the national Islamic education system.

Here too, we have only partial data. The data collected by Leila Almazova for the case of Tatarstan show that 45 percent of those teaching religious courses and Arabic language at the Russian Islamic Institute are graduates of foreign programs, 70 percent of those teaching at Kazan Islamic University, and up to 90 percent of those teaching at the Bolgar Islamic Academy. The others trained either in Russia or in Uzbekistan at Mir-i Arab Madrassa in Bukhara, the historic center of Islamic knowledge for the post-Soviet region.⁵⁸

Orthodoxy and Islam: The Ecumenical Partnership

The grassroots conservatism of Muslim constituencies is reflected in the growing cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Muftiates.⁵⁹ The latter accept and even claim their status of second *inter pares* behind the ROC.⁶⁰ The Muftiates seem, for instance, desperately trying to present themselves as a national "church for Islam,"⁶¹ an Islamic analogue of the ROC that would be a

57. L. Almazova, "Mobile Actors in the Islamic Education of Post-Soviet Tatarstan", in M. Laruelle and J. Schmoller (eds.), *Cultures of Islam: Vernacular Traditions and Revisionist Interpretations across Russia*, Washington DC: GWU Central Asia Program, 2021, pp. 21-36.

58. *Ibid.*

59. The spiritual authorities representing Judaism and Buddhism follow the same trend of cooperating with the ROC.

60. G. Sibgatullina, "The Muftis and the Myths: Constructing the Russian 'Church for Islam'", *Journal of Religion in Europe* (forthcoming).

61. The term was first introduced by R.D. Crews in *Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

unique institutional intermediary between the body of believers and the secular state. The Moscow-based Muftiate released a “Social Doctrine of Russia’s Muslims” (*Sotsial’naia doktrina rossiiskikh musul’man*), inspired by the ROC Social Doctrine, explaining how being a “good Muslim” means being an obedient citizen of a secular Russian state. The ROC and the Muftiates speak the same language in terms of Russia’s move toward conservatism in its domestic policy and reassertion on the international scene: while the latter’s position on the Middle East is more nuanced, the two are united in their criticism of the West and of liberalism.⁶²

More than a simple pragmatic cooperation between the two religions, one can notice a kind of blending of Russian Islam with the heavy symbolic politics of the ROC. The Chief Mufti of the Ufa-based Central Muslim Spiritual Administration, Talgat Tadzhuiddin, has never hidden his friendship with former Patriarch Alexey II, whom he considered “the country’s supreme spiritual leader,”⁶³ and has created for himself the title of “Mufti of All Russia,” an obvious echo of his Orthodox counterpart’s designation as “Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia.” Similarly, he has publicly engaged in a “Muslim” version of some Orthodox rituals, such as sprinkling objects with holy water,⁶⁴ and has used the expression “Holy Russia” on several occasions. In 2015, in the midst of polemics about the impact of ISIS propaganda, Tadzhuiddin went so far as to say that “Russia’s Muslims already have a caliphate: Holy Russia.”⁶⁵ As Gulnaz Sibgatullina has noted, because Islam is interpreted using an Orthodox Christian vocabulary and increasingly in Russian, there is a growing convergence even at the semantic level.⁶⁶

The Muftiates also follow the path forged by the ROC of gradually challenging the secular principles of the Russian state. The ROC is becoming increasingly vocal about its desire to be recognized as a key partner in any state-society interaction and its hopes to penetrate secular state institutions.⁶⁷ The Church is already enmeshed into the

62. A. K. Bustanov and M. Kemper, “Russia’s Islam and Orthodoxy beyond the Institutions: Languages of Conversion, Competition and Convergence”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2017, pp. 129–139.

63. Mentioned in N. K. Gvosdev, “The New Party Card? Orthodoxy and the Search for Post-Soviet Russian Identity”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 24, No. 6, 2000, pp. 29–38.

64. T. Rakhmatullin, “Chem otlichilsia Talgat Tadzhuiddin za 40 let?”, *Real’noe vremia*, June 19, 2020, <https://realnoevremya.ru>.

65. “Tadzhuiddin anonsiroval khalifat ‘Sviataia Rus’” [Tadzhuiddin announced the caliphate ‘Holy Rus’], *Islamnews.ru*, November 10, 2015, <https://islamnews.ru>.

66. G. Sibgatullina, *Languages of Islam and Christianity in Post-Soviet Russia*, Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2020; A. K. Bustanov and M. Kemper, “Russia’s Islam and Orthodoxy beyond the Institutions”, *op. cit.*

67. A. Agadjanian, “Tradition, Morality and Community: Elaborating Orthodox Identity in Putin’s Russia”, *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 45, No. 1, 2017, pp. 39–60; K. Stoeckl, “Russian Orthodoxy and Secularism”, *Brill Research Perspectives in Religion and Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2020, pp. 1–75.

military (the Ministry of Defense, the military-industrial complex, and the military service institutions),⁶⁸ as well as the prison system, but has partly failed to penetrate educational institutions. For instance, the introduction of school classes on Basics of Orthodox Culture as part of the portfolio of options offered under the broad umbrella of “Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” has not lived up to the Church’s expectations. In 2017-2018, slightly over one-third of Russian families (37 percent) selected the class on Orthodoxy, while 42 percent opted for secular ethics and 17 percent for world religious cultures. Similarly, the course on Islamic culture was mostly chosen by parents in the North Caucasian Federal District, at 39 percent.⁶⁹

Each time the ROC feels that its values agenda is being attacked by the secular or liberal segments of society, it can count on the support of the Muftiates in these new cultural wars. In 2017, for instance, Muslim institutions joined Orthodox radicals in decrying the widely publicized film “Matilda,” which depicts the (well-documented) love story between the young Nicholas II, still only a tsarevich at that time, and ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska. Because it reveled in portraying the sexual life of the future tsar (and not with his future wife, no less), several Church figures argued that the film was blasphemous and called on believers to pray that it be banned, even if the Patriarchate did not make any official statements. The Muslim authorities took the blasphemy charge very seriously and were more repressive than many Russian regions: the autonomous republic of Tatarstan banned the film from public theaters (but not private ones),⁷⁰ while local authorities in Chechnya and Dagestan, with the support of Moscow’s main mufti, Albir Krganov, asked that the film be banned in their republics and called for a replacement film that would show the last tsar in a better light.⁷¹

68. D. Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019.

69. O. Iakimova, “A Decade of Religious Education in Russian Schools: Adrift between Plans and Experiences”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 676, November 2020, www.ponarseurasia.org.

70. “Territoriiia ‘Matil’dy’: gde možno i gde nel’zia smotret’ fil’m v Rossii. Karta” [Matilda’s territory: where can we see the film in Russia and where it is forbidden. A map], *Meduza.io*, August 10, 2017, <https://meduza.io>.

71. “Muftii Moskvyy predložil sniat’ blokbuster o Nikolae II v otvet na ‘Matil’du” [Moscow Mufti proposed to make a big production film on Nicholas II as an answer to Matilda], *Interfax*, August 9, 2017, www.interfax.ru.

Testing New Islamic Political Models Adapted to Russian National Identity Debates

Finally, Russia has regularly been projected as a space for launching new political models that would combine references to Islam and cultural elements considered primordial to Russian identity. The idea of Eurasia has been the most useable slogan for shaping an inclusive national ideology that captures both local-level Muslim identities and the pan-Russian theme of defending Russia's cultural and political uniqueness against the West.

Already in late Soviet time, during Brezhnev time, the Muslim Spiritual Administration worked hard to create a model of Soviet Islam that would make Islam and communism compatible through a focus on social justice, social harmony, and world peace.⁷² It would be a mistake to denigrate this construction as pure propaganda: for many Muslims, Muslim (in the sense of "traditional Islam") and Soviet realities were indeed compatible. In the 1970s, the birth in the underground of the "Islamic Rebirth" organization, which grew in Tajikistan before spreading among different Soviet Muslim constituencies and became a political party in 1990, spread the idea of an Islamic revolution across the Soviet Union.⁷³ Combining different ideological trends inspired from the Iranian revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood, or Turkish Islamism, the Party of Islamic Rebirth rapidly collapsed but has remained a cadres school for all those trying to craft an Islamic project for Russia.

In the 1990s, in line with the liberalism of the Yeltsin era, Tatarstan took the lead on promoting a "Euro-Islam" (*evro-islam*)—that is, an Islam that would integrate harmoniously with the pro-European stance of the era's Russian elites while stressing the uniqueness of the Volga-Urals within the Russian federal construction. The movement failed at gathering support outside of the Tatar world and was seen by many Muslim figures as too Russified, pro-Western, and Tatar-centric to be legitimate.⁷⁴ In the early 2000s, the theory of "Quranic humanism," launched by Taufik Ibragim, a scholar from the Russian Academy of Sciences, was adopted by the Moscow-based Muftiate to advocate for a universal

72. E. Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim*, *op. cit.*

73. T. Epkenhans, "The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan: Episodes of Islamic Activism, Postconflict Accommodation, and Political Marginalization", *Central Asian Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2015, pp. 321-346.

74. K. Matsuzato, "The Regional Context of Islam in Russia: Diversities along the Volga", *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2006, pp. 449-461; K. Matsuzato (ed.), *Islam ot Kaspiia do Urala: Makroregional'nyi podkhod*, Sapporo and Moscow, Rossiiskaja politicheskaia entsiklopediia, 2007.

liberal Islam, but here too, the project failed.⁷⁵ Neither Euro-Islam, nor “Qurānic humanism” were able to secure significant popular support among Russia’s Muslims nor get themselves endorsed at a sufficiently high federal political level to be imposed from the top.

Over the course of Putin’s long presidency, such ideological constructions have taken a more vivid anti-Western and Russian nationalist turn. Besides Kadyrovism, one can identify at least three ideological constructions in which Muslim thinkers have played a crucial role. The first is undoubtedly the most representative and officialized, while the second and third are much more marginal. Yet, one misses any kind of statistical data to capture their genuine representativeness.

1. A classic Eurasianism based on the idea of a common Eurasian civilization shaped by an Orthodox-Muslim blending—and specifically a Slavic-Turkic fusion—in early medieval statehood. This Eurasian civilization would be fundamentally conservative and determined to resist Western liberal globalization and cultural standardization. There have been several iterations of this narrative. First came a Volga-Ural-centric one: in the 1990s, Talgat Tadzhuiddin rehabilitated the notion of the Bolgars, Islamic converts who lived peacefully alongside Russians, as the original people of Tatarstan, rather than the Tatar-Mongol invaders from the East. In the 2000s, Tadzhuiddin partnered with the main neo-Eurasianist ideologist, Alexander Dugin, joining his Eurasia Party and then his International Eurasianist Movement, but this failed to produce a legitimate Muslim Eurasianist claim that could gain broad popularity.⁷⁶

The second iteration, launched by Tadzhuiddin’s competitor, Ravil Gainutdin, and his young deputy, Damir Mukhetdinov (b. 1977), has been more successful in two respects: it has eliminated the Volga-Urals-centrism of the first iteration in favor of a pan-Russian Muslim Eurasianist discursive line, and it has dissociated itself from Dugin to follow the Kremlin’s capture of the notion of Eurasia.⁷⁷ Since then, Gainutdin and Mukhetdinov have vividly insisted on Russia’s Muslims as the “Eurasian foundation of Russian

75. M. Kemper and G. Sibgatullina, “Liberal Islamic Theology in Conservative Russia: Taufik Ibragim’s ‘Qur’ānic Humanism’”, *Die Welt des Islams*, March 2021, <https://brill.com>. See also R. Bekkin, “The Renovationist Movement in Contemporary Russian Islam”, *Context*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2019, pp. 65–90.

76. D. Shlapentokh, “Islam and Orthodox Russia: From Eurasianism to Islamism,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 41 2008, pp. 27–46.

77. M. Kemper, “Mufti Ravil Gainutdin: The Translation of Islam into a Language of Patriotism and Humanism,” in A. K. Bustanov and M. Kemper (eds.), *Islamic Authority and the Russian Language: Studies on Texts from European Russia, the North Caucasus and West Siberia*, Amsterdam: Pegasus, 2012, pp. 105–141. M. Kemper, “Religious Political Technology: Damir Mukhetdinov’s ‘Russian Islam’”, *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 2019, pp. 214–233.

civilization” and the Eurasian Economic Union as a “Muslim Union.”⁷⁸ They have adjusted their discourses to harmonize with the Kremlin’s anti-Western agenda: Mukhetdinov portrays for instance Russia’s Muslim community as grounded in “anti-globalism, defence of traditional values, traditional multiculturalism, and moderate conservatism.”⁷⁹

2. A revolutionary Islamic Eurasianism, embodied by Geydar Dzhemal (1947–2016), an esoteric philosopher of Russian and Azeri extraction who drew parallels between Russian Orthodox nationalism and Islamic renewal and stated that the “red-brown” (Russian nationalist) and “green” (Islamic) movements shared common objectives. In this logic, Russia is the country best placed to forge an international alliance to counter the United States’ unipolar world because it can rely on both its Slavophile nationalist tradition of anti-Westernism and its partial belonging to the Islamic world through its Muslim minorities. Dzhemal’s Islamic political philosophy, inspired by the Iranian Revolution yet Sunni, was too radical to appeal to a broad audience but remained quite visible on the Russian Islamic ideological market until Dzhemal’s death.⁸⁰

3. An Islamic “White” Russian nationalism, represented by ethnic Russian converts to Islam. Here too, one lacks data about the trend of conversion, but several observers notice a rising tendency.⁸¹ Converted were first unified in the National Organization of Russian Muslims (NORM, *Natsional’naia organizatsiia rossiiskikh musul’man*), created in 2004. One of their main representatives, Ali Polosin, a former Orthodox priest converted to Islam working for the Moscow-based Muftiate, has invited Russians to convert to Islam as the only path to moral and physical regeneration after decades of state atheism and then of Western-inspired liberalism.⁸² Many converted have now joined the Russian section of the World Murabitun Movement. Led by Kharoun Ar-Rusi, the Murabitun Movement is directly inspired by far-right metaphysics and the so-called Primordialist School of Julius Evola. It calls for the recognition of a “White Islam,” asserting that Islam is native to the

78. G. Sibgatullina and M. Kemper (eds.), *The Imperial Paradox: Islamic Eurasianism in Contemporary Russia*, Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2019.

79. D. Mukhetdinov, *Rossiiskoe musul’manstvo: Traditsii ummy v usloviakh evraziiskoi tsivilizatsii*, Moscow, Medina, 2016, pp. 6–7.

80. G. Sibgatullina and M. Kemper, “Between Salafism and Eurasianism: Geidar Dzhemal and the Global Islamic Revolution in Russia”, *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2017, pp. 219–236. See also Marlène Laruelle, “Digital Geopolitics Encapsulated: Geidar Dzhemal between Islamism, Occult Fascism and Eurasianism”, in M. Suslov and M. Bassin (eds.), *Eurasia 2.0. Russian Geopolitics in the Age of New Media*, Lanham: Lexington, 2016, pp. 81–100.

81. Authors’ discussions with anonymous staff at the Cathedral Mosque in Moscow.

82. V. Ali Polosin, *Priamoi put’ k Bogu*, Moscow: Ladimir, 2000.

original European population and should be dissociated from the idea of migration from the southern side of the Mediterranean.⁸³

83. See G. Sibgatullina's ongoing research project WhIsE (White Islam in Europe).

Conclusion

If Russia shares with many Western countries a securitization of Islam that borrows both from the domestic context of local secessionism and terrorism and from the broader “War on Terror,” it has also been able to promote a much more consensual role for Islam in a pan-Russian framework. Although versions of Islam that challenge the legitimacy of the Muftiates are carefully monitored and often repressed, a more submissive Islam has been able to develop in the shadow of a regime demanding before all ideological loyalty.

Russia’s rebranding as a conservative power, which serves the stability of the regime, has put the country’s two main religions—Orthodox Christianity and Islam—into a paradoxical situation. Both benefit from the marriage of convenience with state institutions in terms of financial and institutional support, yet they still have major ideological differences from the state, as the ROC and the Muftiates promote a much more conservative agenda than the regime is ready to enforce. While the ROC needs state support to legitimize its efforts to shape Russians’ moral attitudes and behaviors—efforts that have met with very limited success⁸⁴—the Muftiates find themselves in an easier situation, as Muslim constituencies are globally more conservative in terms of more than average ethnic Russians.

Yet, the Muftiates are at risk of being bypassed by more radical groups and figures acting in the name of Islam, which is not the case for ROC, except for some tiny Orthodox fundamentalist movements. The Muftiates are increasingly denounced as weak institutions with no role beyond bureaucratic administration of Islam-related matters and little theological legitimacy. This has pushed them to partner as much as possible with both state institutions and ROC to keep the fragile balance between the most radical parts of their constituencies and the secular structures. As everywhere in the world, Russia’s Muslim communities are shaken by internal debates about what Muslimness means and how it should express itself in private and public spaces. While these debates reveal a quite polarized Russian Muslim society, the Muftiates seek to maintain a consensual line in the face of independent religious figures who are often much more competent to engage in theological debates and better informed about the state of discussions at the Ummah level.

84. P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud, “Not So Traditional After All? The Russian Orthodox Church’s Failure as a ‘Moral Norm Entrepreneur’”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, Vol. 710, September 2021, www.ponarseurasia.org.

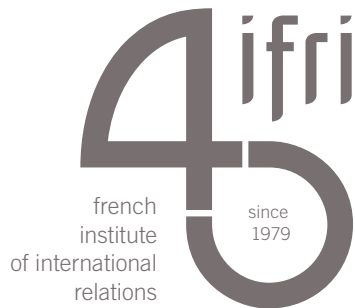
Over the years, Russia has become a key country to explore the evolution of Islam in a secular/Christian context, and many parallels with the evolution of Europe's Islam are still to be investigated. The fact that the President of the European Muslim Forum is a Russian citizen, converted to Islam, Abdul-Wahed Niyazov, is just the tip of the iceberg of this growing Europeanization of Islam in which Russia could become a key actor. Highlighting this new trend was the 14th International Muslim Forum in Paris, organized by Russian Muftiates in 2018, during which Russian delegates branded Russia as a hub for European Muslims to reach out to the global Ummah, build a halal-friendly economy, and take model on its multiconfessional conservative consensus for feeling “at home” in Europe.⁸⁵

85. “14th International Muslims Forum Opens in Paris”, Russian Mufties Council, n.d. www.muslim.ru.

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