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## **The Perception of Islam in Russia: The Comparative Dimension**

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*Whereas a political market has developed in Western Europe in which negative clichés about Islam and Muslims are in demand, in Russia this market has not appeared. There are two reasons for this: the “autochthonous” nature of Islam in Russia and the specific features of the current political system. Due to these two factors, public articulation of negative attitudes toward Islam and Muslims is hampered and parties with an openly Islamophobic agenda are unlikely to emerge. At the same time, Russia is experiencing tensions similar to those in Western European societies. They include conflicts concerning the presence of Islamic symbols in the public sphere, such as wearing the hijab in public schools and building mosques in regions where Muslims are a minority. In spite of the officially promoted rhetoric of “interfaith harmony,” Russian society is deeply polarized. In regions where Muslims predominate the patterns of Islamic presence are different. As for migration into Russia from outside, this has not been an issue of public debate until very recently; Central Asian immigrants have been per-*

*ceived in terms of their ethnicity rather than religion. A shift in perception has begun to occur due to three reasons: (a) a reflection of the Western agenda in Russian media; (b) the increasing visibility of Muslim immigrants in public space; and (c) the involvement of Central Asian newcomers in several publicized terrorist attacks.*

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IT would be difficult to imagine a movement in Russia whose ideological focus was the struggle against “Islamization,” which is in rather striking contrast to many Western European countries where such movements have acquired a fairly wide scope. It would be equally difficult to imagine a Russian politician who would make passing laws in Parliament such as a ban on the public distribution of the Qur’an the center of his or her program.

Obviously, this contrast is due to the fact that Islam in Russia, unlike in Western Europe, is not “imported” by immigrants, but is a religion to which a significant part of the indigenous population belongs. Evidently, this circumstance also accounts for the difference in reactions to the tragedy of January 2015 in Paris in the editorial office of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*: there were mass demonstrations in support of freedom of speech in European capitals, but a mass rally in defense of the religious sensibilities of Muslims in the capital of one Russia’s regions, Grozny. Is it worth concluding from this that Russian socio-political discussions about Islam are a complete antipode to those of Western Europe? Is it correct to assume that due to the autochthonous nature of Russian Islam its perception in Russia is fundamentally different from that of Western European countries?

### **The “Islamic Threat” as a Trope: The Perception of Islam and Muslims in Western Europe**

The “Islamic threat” is a catchphrase that originated in anti-immigration rhetoric. One of the most important elements of this rhetoric has always been “the threat to national identity.” But if during the last third of the twentieth century this threat was associated with an increase in the proportion of the non-European (read: non-white) population (Hargreaves 2007), then at the turn of the twenty-first century it has been increasingly associated with a very particular category

of migrants — those from Islamic countries. The discursive shift that we are witnessing is that the “problem of Islam” is separating from the “immigration problem” and is acquiring a significant degree of autonomy. This autonomy is expressed, in particular, in the number of right-wing public figures who position themselves not as opponents of immigration but as opponents of Muslim immigration. A vivid illustration of this was the assassination of Pim Fortuyn. Since then Fortuyn’s anti-Muslim arguments have been introduced into the arsenal of almost all right-wing populist politicians and public activists. Betting on the anti-Islamic card allowed the once insignificant “Freedom Party” to become a powerful political force in the Netherlands. The “Alternative for Germany” (AfD), which arose only a few years ago, managed to overcome the five-percent barrier and enter parliament, not least thanks to the exploitation of the issue of Islamic immigration.<sup>1</sup> Confronting the threat to European identity that those arriving from Muslim countries supposedly brought with them formed the basis of the ideology of the “Pegida” movement — “European Patriots against the Islamization of the West.”

Of course, it would be quite wrong to conclude from the above that this tendency dominates the political field in today’s Europe. We are speaking here rather about a chain of exceptional instances. The European party system and electoral mainstream are still based on a liberal-conservative consensus, one that presumes the rejection of populist radicalism, and European civil society actively opposes attempts to discriminate against immigrants on the basis of religious affiliation. Suffice it to say, in particular, that in the eyes of the German political class AfD remains “untouchable” (all of the leading parties of the country have refused to collaborate with it), and more people come out for demonstrations against Pegida than for those carried out under the banner of the “European patriots.”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, it should be noted that in Western Europe (and in recent years also in the United States) a political market has developed in which such figures of speech as “the Islamic threat,” “the Muslim issue,” and “the Islamic problem,” and so on, are in demand. What is the pattern of assumptions behind these phrases? First, we should realize that

1. The attempts by AfD leaders to exclude Muslims from legislation protecting religious minorities are worthy of note: “Alternative” suggests declaring Islam an ideology, not a religion.
2. After Pegida held a demonstration in Dresden in January 2015 with the participation of 25,000 people, counter-demonstrations were held throughout Germany, bringing together a total of 200,000 people. See “Deutschlandsweit Proteste” 2015.

we are dealing with the essentialization of the concept of “Islam”; Islam is presented as an unchanging essence, not as a religion that exists in a variety of versions; rather, this is “Islam as such.” This ahistorical entity is assumed to embody immanent conflict (the “bloody borders of Islam” in Samuel Huntington’s mythopoetic description) and an essentially anti-democratic objective (ultra-right politicians,<sup>3</sup> journalists, and writers<sup>4</sup> all repeat the mantra about the “totalitarian nature” of Islam).

Belief in the fundamental “civilizational incompatibility” of the Islamic and Western worlds suggests that Muslims living in the West are agents hostile to Western culture. Immigrants from Islamic countries and their descendants are suspected of deep disloyalty to the constitutional foundations of Western nation-states. “Muslims” in the framework of this ideological construct are not real people with different worldviews and different attitudes toward Islam, but are seen as a single united community whose members dream of creating a new Caliphate in place of today’s Europe.

Despite the caricature-like nature of this image, some very serious authors participate in its dissemination. Among them is the publicist David Pryce-Jones, who writes for such conservative publications as *Commentary* and *The National Review* (Pryce-Jones 2004, 2008). In the online version of the latter, Pryce-Jones maintains a blog that regularly addresses “the Islamic problem.” This, in his opinion, consists in the cultural incompatibility of immigrant Muslims and indigenous French. Pryce-Jones sees the manifestation of this incompatibility, among other things, in the cases of setting cars on fire that have become routine in the Parisian suburbs and that are committed mainly by teenagers of Maghreb origin.<sup>5</sup>

However, behind the trope of “the Islamic threat” lie not only phobias but also concerns that do have some validity. We are referring first of all to radical Islamism whose adherents preach violence. Since

3. “Islam and freedom are incompatible.” Gird Wilders made this the slogan of his 2017 election campaign. Among the bills he proposed to the national parliament was a ban on the public dissemination of the Qur’an (which Wilders equated to *Mein Kampf*).
4. Some like Paul Berman or the now-deceased Oriana Fallaci achieved high status in the informal ranking of doomsayers; see Berman 2003; Fallaci 2004. Other anti-Islamic publicists compensate for their modest popularity with copious activity in the press and on the Internet. To this last group belongs the German author Michel Ley; see Ley 2015.
5. Pryce-Jones 2015. Readers, however, may be aware that young people of Arab origin living in France are largely non-religious, and they may doubt that the participation of adolescents from this environment in criminal activity can be explained by their confessional affiliation. To dispel such doubts, Pryce-Jones asserts that when setting fire to cars the young men cry “Allahu Akbar!”

some Muslim migrants (albeit miniscule in terms of percentage) do fall under radical influence, Western European societies face a very serious challenge. Journalists who focus on this issue are not usually inclined to distinguish between religious doctrine (Islam) and ideology (Islamism). As a result, when discussing the problem of Islamic radicalism a slight semantic substitution turns the problem into not one of a specific group of people but about Muslims as such.

Secondly, we are talking about the crisis of secularism. The point is not only that in the population of European countries, which in the majority is religiously indifferent, the share of those for whom religion is significant (and these are Muslims) is growing. The point is to rethink the role of religion in society — a process denoted in modern social science as “post-secularism” (Uzlaner 2013).

In this context, once again, many publications substitute the notion of a mythical clash of civilizations for an analysis of a complex set of real problems (normative, social, political, legal). One of the most prolific authors of this sort of work is the American Catholic writer Bruce Bawer, who lives in Norway (Bawer 2006, 2009). Although it would be wrong to suggest that such works do not meet with opposition from social scientists, the publications of the latter are rarely wrapped in popular packaging and therefore do not reach a wide audience (Klausen 2005; Haddad 2002; Roy 2007; Roy 2017; Norton 2016).

### **Islam and Muslims in Russian Public Discourse**

As we have already noted, the principal feature of Russia in the context of the current discussion is that here Islam is not a religion introduced by immigrants, but represents a faith with which a significant segment of Russian society identify themselves.<sup>6</sup> And in the official state position and in the perception of ordinary citizens, Islam is one of the “traditional religions” of Russia (as opposed, in fact, to the various forms of non-Orthodox Christianity, which are not considered traditional). Hence there are significant restrictions of a protective nature on the public articulation of negative opinions about this religion and its adherents. In the Russian political field, there is no place yet for figures similar to, say, Girt Wilders, who is continuing the work of the abovementioned Pim Fortuyn. In Russia, even those political activists who in fact share the beliefs of the Dutch populist prefer not to

6. Various estimates put the number of Muslim Russian citizens at from 12 to 18 million. See Malashenko 2007, 10.

publicize them and usually exercise caution when speaking on issues related to Islam.<sup>7</sup>

In this situation, the only “socially acceptable” channel for expressing a negative attitude toward Islam and Muslims is to reference the problem of Islamic radicalism, primarily in the terms in which it has been discussed in the West. Hence, there is a rather artificial distinction made between “traditional” (Russian) and “non-traditional” (non-Russian) Islam. For the former, loyalty to the Russian state and a peaceful attitude are assumed, while the latter is by definition unlawful, fraught with extremist sentiments and threatening terrorist activity. Although this distinction does not stand up to criticism for a number of reasons,<sup>8</sup> it continues to be repeated in public discourse on a regular basis. There are, however, certain distinctions to be made, depending on the agents of the discourse in question.

In the rhetoric of the top bureaucracy and of politicians within the system, the thesis of Russian multinationalism and multiconfessionalism, as well as of Russia’s “unique experience” of peaceful coexistence among representatives of different cultures, is fundamental. Russia is represented as a country that is “intertwined with the Islamic world by traditional, natural ties” (Putin 2003) and even is an “organic part” of the Muslim world (Medvedev 2009).

Nevertheless, some system politicians do deviate from this “general line” from time to time. However, each time their deviations spark criticism from the authorities and/or representatives of civil society (as well as from representatives of Islamic regions) and often lead to “self-criticism” by those who have dared to manifest self-will. Thus on the eve of Duma elections in 2016, the press received a recording of a conversation between Iabloko party leader Sergei Mitrokhin and journalist Yulia Salnikova in which Mitrokhin called Islam “the horror of the modern world,” a “brake on modernization,” and so on. Soon after,

7. In this regard, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who periodically allows himself very extravagant judgments, comes to mind. Thus after the terrorist attacks in Volgograd in 2013, speaking on a television talk show, he broke out into a rant in which among other things he called for official control over the birth rate in the North Caucasus and for banning all study of Islam. However, first, this kind of statement is usually followed by explanations that Zhirinovskiy’s words were “misunderstood” and “taken out of context,” and second, unlike his Dutch colleague, he never attempts to turn his ideas into legislation.
8. Ironically, during the Soviet era “traditional Islam” was associated with backwardness and hostility to progress. For a brilliant analysis of this issue, see Dannreuter 2010, 12–13. On the position of the authorities at that time and the “official” Islamic organizations they supported in opposition to traditional Islam, see Babadzhanov 2001, 170–84.

he apologized to all Muslims, stressing that this was a private conversation, made public without his permission (“Sergei Mitrokhin” 2016).

As for politicians outside the system, those who do not feel bound by the conventions of the mainstream, they may allow themselves sharp attacks on Islam and Muslims. This applies not only to marginal ultranationalists, who periodically frighten the public with “Islamic expansion” into “Russian lands,” but also to Alexei Navalny, who tries to appeal to the broadest possible social base. A suspicious attitude toward Muslims is an integral part of Navalny’s anti-immigration agenda, which, as we know, is in favor of introducing a Russian visa regime for the countries of Central Asia. He has repeatedly stated that “young Muslim men” from these regions are a breeding ground for terrorism (Naval’nyi 2015b). Navalny also permits himself to make ambiguous statements concerning Russian Muslims, who regularly accuse him of inciting inter-religious strife and Islamophobia. Thus in one of the materials on his site Navalny, quite loosely interpreting data from opinion polls, concludes that “the growth of religiosity” among Muslims in Russia inevitably leads to their radicalization, even up to a readiness to fight for Islamic causes with weapons in hand (the very title of this material itself is provocative) (Naval’nyi 2015a).

Opinion makers are the next group of participants in public discourse. This includes experts, journalists, writers and famous academics who have access to the mass media and thereby have the ability to influence the attitudes of their fellow citizens. The spectrum of opinions here is extremely broad, from conventionally “Islamophobic” to conventionally “Islamophilic.”

To start with the first group, in the Russian media (and especially in RuNet), you can find a lot of publications on Islamic topics accompanied by headlines like “The Green Plague,” “Beat Islam — Save the Planet,” and so on (Malashenko 2007, 62–64). Their authors, as well as leading radio and television talk show hosts and TV experts who frighten the average listener with the “Islamic threat,” can hold a wide variety of political convictions. However, all of them are united by thinking in terms of the “clash of civilizations,” that is, they essentialize the differences between the European (“Christian”) and the Islamic worlds, with the indispensable demonization of the latter (Abashin 2005). Thus, the journalist Alexander Kots warned the inhabitants of the capital in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* that entire districts of Moscow will soon turn into Muslim ghettos, where “a generation [of children] will grow up under Sharia law” (Kots 2007); the nationalist activist Konstantin Dushenov publishes materials on creeping Muslim expansion in Russia (“Vsled za

‘Moskvabodom’” 2016); Deacon Andrey Kuraev in one of his books with another very provocative title asserts that “in today’s Russia, the slightest attempt to enter into discussion with Muslims immediately triggers a warning that those who attend Mosques have swords and hexogen [aka RDX or T-4, an explosive] at hand” (Kuraev 2004); publicist Yulia Latynina in her program on the radio station Ekho Moskvyy (which is liberal) criticizes the European elites “who after every act of terrorism begin to explain that it is criminal to accuse peaceful Islam of terrorist attacks,” and expresses bewilderment regarding why Europeans rose up in arms at Trump for his statements about the need to close entry to the United States for immigrants from Islamic countries, and suggests that “Europe, perhaps, will perish because of political correctness.”<sup>9</sup>

At the opposite end of the spectrum are those participants in public debate who seek to protect Muslims from stigmatization. Hence the journalist Maxim Shevchenko regularly raises the topic of discrimination and persecution of Muslims in Russia, sometimes making shocking statements, for example, that “the situation of Muslims [in today’s Russia] resembles the position of Jews in Nazi Germany in 1934, before concentration camps but already with a ban on certain professions, with special [negative] attention paid to them.”<sup>10</sup> His partner in journalism, Nikolai Silaev, also seeks to show that Russian public consciousness is filled with unreasonable suspicion and phobias toward Muslims and that “‘the Islamic threat’ is not so much a reality as a way of perceiving reality” (Silaev 2006).

Of course, both “Islamophilic” and “Islamophobic” positions are conventions that we have intentionally identified as two poles of public discourse. As a rule, the majority of participants in the public discussion of Islam and Muslims is ambivalent. Thus among those who can be provisionally called “Orthodox fundamentalists,” positions on this issue vary greatly. Typical titles of their articles on the relevant Internet resources announce: “Islam Actively Displaces Christianity in Britain” (“Islam aktivno” 2014); “Most Danes Believe That Islam Has a Negative Impact on the Development of Their Society” (“Bolshinstvo datchan” 2010; “Vafa Sultan” 2008). At the same time, more mod-

9. Here are references to several of Latinina’s program *Kod dostupa* [Access code] on which these issues were discussed: <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/code/1897628-echo/>, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/code/714906-echo/>, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/code/1675290-echo/>.

10. Interview with M. Shevchenko on the program *Osoboe mnenie* [Particular opinion] on the radio station Ekho Moskvyy, January 26, 2017, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/personalno/1916290-echo/>.

erate views are also represented in the same resources. In the eyes of some Orthodox fundamentalists, the expansion of Islam should only cause concern insofar as it replaces Christianity (as, in their opinion, happens in the West). In Russia, alarmism is inappropriate, to the extent that an acceptable balance is maintained in symbolic space. If Islam is considered a traditional religion in certain parts of Russia<sup>11</sup> and does not make inroads on the traditional domination of Orthodoxy, Muslims are treated with benevolence. In the first place, they are in any case dearer to the heart of Orthodox fundamentalists than atheists and agnostics; secondly, Muslims are perceived as allies in Russia's confrontation with the "noxious West." As a well-known filmmaker has put it, "Islam, especially Russian Islam, is much closer to Orthodoxy than Catholicism" ("Islam blizhe Pravoslaviiu" 2006).

The idea of an alliance between Orthodoxy and Islam on the basis of protecting "traditional values" against "globalization" is quite popular in this sector of the ideological field. Vsevolod Chaplin, who for a long time headed the Synodal Department for Relations between Church and Society, in his speech at the 10th International Muslim Forum in Moscow (December 2014) called on Muslims to unite with the Orthodox in the face of the global "civilization of sin."<sup>12</sup> This idea is popular with the adherents of "neo-Eurasianism" headed by Alexander Dugin, for whom the very fact of the centuries-old coexistence of Orthodoxy and Islam on Russian territory confirms the notion of a special "Russian civilization" that unites East and West.

The next group of participants in Russian public discussions about Islam can be designated by the term "spokespeople for Islam." These are individuals and organizations acting on behalf of Islam. This group, in turn, breaks up into two subgroups. The first is official Muslim organizations and their leaders. First of all, this is the Central Spiritual Directorate of Russian Muslims (TsDUM) under the leadership of Talgat Tadzhuiddin, which by their own count unites more than 2,500 Muslim

11. In this regard, the expression "ethnic Muslims" is often used; it is obvious that they are drawing a parallel to the "ethnic Orthodox."

12. "RPTs prizvala musul'man" 2014. Within the Orthodox Church, of course, there are differing attitudes toward Islam. Thus, the Muslim community often accuses the religious scholar Roman Silantiev, who is a member of the leadership of the World Russian People's Council (an organization closely affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church), of Islamophobia. The Council of Muftis of Russia even issued a special appeal in connection with the publication of R. Silantiev's book *Noveishaia istoriia islamskogo soobshchestva v Rossii* (The most recent history of the Islamic community in Russia). It called the book "libelous in nature" and incompatible "with the ethics of interfaith communication" (see "Obrashchenie muftiev Rossii" 2005).

communities throughout the country, with the exception of the North Caucasus. In 1996, because of disagreements with the Directorate over a series of issues, an alternative “umbrella” organization emerged, the Council of Russian Muftis (SMR), headed by Ravil’ Gainutdin. Even earlier, in 1992, an independent Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Tatarstan (DUM RT) was created, which was primarily concerned with making this federal republic of Russia more independent (so-called *suverenizatsiia*) (Mukhametshin 2005, 131–32). There is also the Coordinating Center for Muslims of the North Caucasus (established in 1998), headed by Ismail Berdiev. These four organizations oversee the majority of Muslim communities in Russia; the remaining ones exist autonomously or are included in smaller associations (Silant’ev 2016, 16–17).

The heads of these organizations are members of various state consultative institutions (the Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations under the president, the Public Chamber, etc.). They receive government funding and are invited to important public events such as the president’s annual message to the Federal Assembly. In addition, they closely cooperate with a number of ministries and departments, as well as with regional authorities, especially in the Islamic regions of the federation. Researchers note that “in most of the [federal] republics of the North Caucasus, the spiritual administrations make up almost a single entity with the republics’ leadership” (Tul’skii 2005, 234).

The Russian authorities actively support this system of “nationalizing” Islam that they inherited from the Soviet era. The reason for this is obvious and consists in convenient management: it is easier to deal with several large organizations than with a multitude of disparate religious communities. In turn, representatives of “official” Islam, due to their privileged position, have the opportunity periodically to broadcast their views to society on various topical issues. For example, after the terrorist attack in the Dubrovka Theater Center in 2003, the Muslim Spiritual Board of the Republic of Karelia issued a public statement demanding that the media “stop using Islamic religious terms with respect to people accused of terrorism and murder” (it was referring to expressions such as “shahid,” “warrior of Allah,” etc.) that they said were insulting to true Muslims and spread religious enmity (Kuznetsova-Morenko and Salakhatdinova 2004, 11).

Needless to say, representatives of official Islam share the idea that there is a basic separation between the “traditional” Russian and foreign (by default “non-traditional”) Islam, which is also key for the Russian authorities. As Ravil’ Gainutdin formulated this thesis, “the mentality of [Russian Muslims] *differs radically from the mentality of fellow*

*believers from foreign countries* [italics added]. Muslims are quite well integrated into Russian society and the idea of an Islamic state is alien to the absolute majority of them” (Gainutdin 2004, 169–70).

At the same time, it should be noted that relations among official Islamic structures are very difficult,<sup>13</sup> and might be more appropriately described in terms of competition and a struggle for resources rather than of consent and cooperation. In addition, these institutions are distinguished by the different degrees of willingness with which they are ready to broadcast a “Muslim” position on various issues in the Russian public space. For example, Gainutdin and one of his deputies Damir Mukhetdinov openly opposed the compulsory introduction into schools of classes on “Foundations of Orthodox Culture” and against other measures favoring Orthodoxy (Mukhametshin 2007, 52). Representatives of the Council of Russian Muftis supported Kosovo’s independence from Serbia in 2008, which radically diverged from the official Russian position, and they continued their active cooperation with Turkey even after the cessation of official Russian-Turkish relations in November 2015 (“Sovet muftiev,” 2008). In contrast, Talgat Tadzhuiddin of the Central Spiritual Directorate of Russian Muslims and the mufti of the Spiritual Assembly of Russian Muslims, Al’bir Kr-ganov, have usually taken a much more conformist position regarding the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Grassroots public activists who claim to articulate an “Islamic” point of view on key political issues make up a second subgroup of “spokespeople for Islam.” They sometimes manage, if not to influence public opinion, then to achieve public visibility, thus challenging “official” Islam’s claim to speak for the entire Russian Muslim community. One notable figure of this kind was Nadir Khachilayev, a member of the State Duma, who in the 1990s headed an organization called the Union of Russian Muslims. Khachilayev was an ardent critic of the corruption that prevailed in his native Dagestan, and was a preacher of so-called “New Islam,” which attempted to combine the customs of mountain folk with interpretations of certain aspects of Islam that he himself proposed (Ignatenko 2004, 26; Allenova and Gerasimov 2003). Khachilayev vehemently denounced the official Muslim clergy as “state muftis and other ‘legal’<sup>14</sup> spiritual pastors ...

13. For more detail about schisms and re-groupings within the Muslim Spiritual Administrations in the post-Soviet period, see Laruel’ 2005, 163–75; Iunusova 2007, 142–54.

14. Literally, “in the law,” an ironic reference to “thieves in the law” (*vory v zakone*) or members of old-style Russian organized crime. — Trans.

concerned only with strengthening their positions,” and he also insisted on the need for Muslims to live “according to the laws of Allah,” and not by the rules of secular power (Khachilaev 1997, 6). Khachilayev’s career was cut short when he was assassinated in 2003.

A prominent “Muslim voice” for a quarter of a century was Heydar Dzhemal’ (1947–2016), chairman of the Islamic Committee of Russia, an organization that in the opinion of many observers represented the personality of its leader and creator rather than serving as a broad-based public platform. Dzhemal’ published an Islamic magazine and newspaper, conducted programs on several Russian television channels, and also actively participated in political life — he ran for the State Duma and spoke at opposition rallies. For him, Islam was not only a religion, but also a political project, an alternative to modern “soulless” globalism.

Obviously, from this perspective, dividing Islam into domestic and imported is out of the question. According to Dzhemal’, Islam functions as a global emancipatory idea aimed at uniting all oppressed people who are dissatisfied with the status quo, just as communism once did (Dzhemal’ 2001). Heydar’s son, the journalist Orkhan Dzhemal’, has become a notable media figure, and many of his public statements sound like a development of his father’s ideas.<sup>15</sup>

Here we can also mention the journalist and political commentator Ruslan Kurbanov, a regular participant in political talk shows on Russian TV and author of many publications in which he calls on Russian Muslims to abandon their “inferiority complex in the face of [the non-Islamic] majority” and enter “into competition with non-Muslim projects” relating to social arrangements, including active resistance to the influence of Western liberalism on Russian society (Alishaev 2008).

To the two subgroups described we should add another player who has appeared on the Russian political scene during the last decade. This is the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, who claims almost a monopoly in expressing the point of view of “Russian Muslims.” Suffice it to recall his public criticism of the minister of education O. Vasilieva, who supported a ban on wearing the Muslim hijab in school, or his sponsorship of the million-strong protest in Grozny in September 2017, after reports of violence in Myanmar against the Rohingya Muslims; at the rally Kadyrov himself demanded that the top Russian leadership inter-

15. For an articulation of his ideas, see *State, Religion and Church* 5, no. 1 (2018): 154–66. Orkhan Dzhemal’ was killed on assignment in the Central African Republic on July 30, 2018. — Ed.

cede on their behalf. The rally mentioned at the beginning of this article that was held in the Chechen capital soon after the terrorist act in the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial office was also an initiative of Kadyrov, who declared that he considered his personal enemies “all those who support the ‘right’ of *Charlie Hebdo* and other publications to insult the religious sentiments of one and a half billion Muslims” (“Ramzan Kadyrov” 2015).

## Islam and the Russian State

Provisionally, one could describe this relationship as a triangle, at the top of which is the state power (the Kremlin); in the lower lefthand corner, Muslim organizations that the state classifies as “traditional Islam” and therefore recognizes and supports; and in the lower right, unofficial movements and organizations that arise from the unsatisfied social and moral demands of Russian citizens of the Muslim faith (in official terminology, “representatives of non-traditional Islam”). The Kremlin’s position is to encourage the former and ignore the latter. Obviously, the construct labeled “traditional Islam” is nothing more than a projection of the authorities’ expectations onto Russia’s Muslim population. The state would like to deal exclusively with these structures that are easy to manage; everything beyond them is seen as a potential threat. Hence there is a policy of prohibition and repression against any form of grassroots activity by Russian Muslims, as well as the labeling of all unofficial Muslim religious currents as “Wahhabism,” which drives the adherents of “untraditional Islam” underground (Verkhovskiy 2010, 35–36; Kisriev 2007, 29).<sup>16</sup>

However, since at this time no national state is an isolated entity, the triangle described above should be better thought of as a pentagon: the upper corner (the Kremlin) is influenced by political developments and legal decisions in other secular states,<sup>17</sup> and the lower right corner (unofficial Islamic movements and organizations) experiences the direct and indirect influence of general global trends in the religious sphere and in the world of Islam in particular.

16. The unproductive nature of dividing Islam into “traditional” and “non-traditional” is also due to the fact that such a dichotomy simplifies the rather motley, mosaic structure of Russian Islam, which (especially in the North Caucasus) includes various trends, groups and directions (see Iarlykapov 2013, 133–52).

17. I have in mind, first of all, Russian legislation with regard to freedom of conscience that is based on the same principles as that of other secular states. Secondly, official Russia constantly “looks over its shoulder” at the current religious and political situation in Western countries (from the debates about the hijab and the scandal over caricatures to discussions around the “burkini”).

## **Conflicts around Islamic Symbols: Russian Specifics**

In 2003, there was a court case in which a group of women from Tatarstan attempted to defend their right not to remove their headscarves when being photographed for a passport. After losing in all the courts and listening to a public rebuke from President Putin, who urged them not to insist on their demand, which contradicted the rules of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, their case reached the Supreme Court, which — to everyone’s surprise — took their side, allowing women believers not to remove the hijab when being photographed for official documents. The signal to society was transparent enough: Russia is a multiconfessional country in which adherents of different religions have the right to publicly express their identity.

Still, despite the official rhetoric of interfaith harmony, Russian public space is permeated with contradictions and conflicts very similar to those that unfold in the public space of its Western neighbors. In Russia — of course, excluding regions with a heavy Muslim population — one can observe the same negative reaction to mosque construction projects as is often observed in Western Europe.<sup>18</sup> Thus in Moscow, residents of different regions (in Tekstil’shciki in 2010 and in Mitino in 2012) actively protested against plans to build mosques, and each time the city authorities were forced to abandon their original plans. As a result, whether due to the protests or to the authorities’ using them to justify their own passivity, in Moscow with its significant Muslim population (both native and immigrant), today there are only four large mosques, while there are five large synagogues and 1,100 Orthodox churches and chapels.

## **Muslims Immigrants: From Ignoring to Problematizing Them**

Until very recently the Muslim affiliation of a portion of Russian immigrants (primarily those from Central Asia) was not a significant topic of public discussion except on the part of ultranationalist organizations. Thus the now banned Movement against Illegal Immigration called the mass migration of laborers from the Muslim countries of Central Asia “a breeding ground for recruiting terrorists” and one of the organizers of the “Russian March” (a yearly event organized by

18. On conflicts over the construction of mosques in European cities, see Saint-Blancat and Schmidt di Friedberg 2005, 1083–1104; Allievi 2010.

nationalist groups), Alexander Sevastyanov, stated that if the current migration policy did not change, Russian cities would soon be “taken over by ethnic Muslims” (“Zaiavlenie DPNI” 2010). In the “Russian Marches” themselves anti-Islamic slogans do periodically surface, although they are not the main ones for their participants.

Migrant laborers from post-Soviet states belonging to the Islamic cultural sphere (in particular, from Central Asia) have usually been perceived by the authorities and by the general public in ethnic rather than religious terms. In the first two post-Soviet decades the average Russian perceived people from these regions as “Kirghiz,” “Tadzhik,” “Uzbek,” and so on, and not as “Muslims.”<sup>19</sup> Ethnic identification also dominates over the confessional in the minds of migrants themselves. It is not accidental that immigrant organizations that have arisen in Russia have been formed on the basis of ethnic and national, rather than confessional identity .

However, since the 2010s the situation has been changing. The Islamic affiliation of Central Asian immigrants has become a topic of public debate. Why did this happen? In our opinion, three interconnected factors have played a role. The first is the growing visibility of Muslim immigrants. Since the number of mosques in Russian metropolitan areas is disproportionately small in relation to the number of potential parishioners, during the great Muslim holidays there is real pandemonium around mosques. Hundreds pray right on the street, a sight that causes average citizens a feeling of discomfort. The second factor is the activity of TV talking heads who continually reinforce this discomfort with talk shows about “the Islamization of Europe.” The third factor is the series of terrorist acts that have been prepared and carried out by citizens from Central Asian states. It is unnecessary to state what kind of reaction these factors create in people’s minds.

The further development of the situation will largely depend on the attitude of Russian Muslims. Specifically, will they see the Central Asian immigrants as co-religionists and feel solidarity with them, protecting them from stigmatization, or, on the contrary, will they prefer to join the socio-cultural mainstream, which has had a cautious and even negative attitude towards *gostarbeitery* (literally, “guest workers” [German]; in Russian, “migrant laborers”) or “illegal aliens” from Central Asia?

19. It is extremely noteworthy that the violent actions of the Russian ultra-right are also addressed mainly to “hetero-ethnic” and not to “heterodox” groups. The objects of their attacks are usually people of “non-Slavic appearance,” whereas mosques almost never become targets.

## Conclusion

When comparing Russian and Western European perceptions of Islam, significant differences emerge. In many European countries, parties with an anti-Islamic agenda operate legally. These parties often achieve impressive success precisely because of their emphasis on “the Islamic threat.” But there are no such parties in Russia. In Western Europe there have also been movements in recent years fueled by the fear of Islam; in Russia, no such movements exist. Thus if in the Western European public space there is a political market in which negative clichés about Islam and Muslims are in increasing demand, in Russia this market has not appeared, and if the existing political system is preserved, it does not seem likely that it will appear.

In most countries of Western Europe, anti-Islamic (not to say Islamophobic) views are widely represented in public debates. And although they meet fairly vigorous opposition both at the level of the journalistic community and at the level of civic activism, one cannot deny that such views are present in the mainstream media. Between those whom we may provisionally call Islamophobes and their opponents there is *open discussion*. In Russia, there is more of a *latent confrontation* between these two positions. On the one hand, it is very doubtful that organizations would arise whose central agenda is the fight against the “Islamization” of Russia, if only for the reason that several Russian regions are already historically “Islamized.” On the other hand, there are many people in Russia who sympathize with the ideas of Oriana Fallaci and Pim Fortuyn; they simply prefer not to advertise it. Propaganda of such ideas would immediately cause the most energetic response from Russian Muslim activists, not to mention from figures like Ramzan Kadyrov.

Russian cultural and symbolic space is essentially divided into “Orthodox” and “Muslim” zones of influence, and between those who control discourse there is an unspoken pact about non-interference in each other’s affairs. As for the mainstream media, it is dominated by the official narrative of “interfaith harmony” and “interconfessional dialogue.” The central media diligently avoid the articulation of existing tensions.

For obvious reasons the problem of Islam in Europe has been discussed in connection with the new emigration from Islamic countries. In Russia, until recently this linkage was almost completely absent; Islamic issues and the problem of immigration were discussed separately. Until the beginning of the 2010s, the ethnic categorization of immigrants over their confessional identity predominated. The per-

ception of people from Central Asia as Muslims rather than as Uzbeks, Tadzhiks, Kirghiz, and so on, is a relatively recent phenomenon.

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