

# Islam in Russian Society and Politics: Survival and Expansion

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In modern times, whether "healthy" or "sick" from an economic and political standpoint, Russia has managed to preoccupy outside observers with the changing condition of its psyche. What was known in Europe a century ago as the mysterious Russian soul is now antiseptically referred to as the problem of Russian identity. Paradoxically, while Russia itself is increasingly written off as an international power, and the signs of its potential descent into a repressive autocracy evoke relatively little concern from most Western elites and publics, the unsettled question of its civilizational identity is fraught with new surprises for international politics. This question is likely to be influenced over the long term by the ongoing expansion of Russia's Muslim community, and the increasingly assertive claims of its representatives to ideological influence and even a policymaking role at the federal level.

## **The Yeltsin-Era Orthodox Tilt: Courting a Religious Conflict**

The status of its Muslim minority is an extremely controversial subject in Russia. It goes to the heart of a long-standing debate on whether Russia is a European or a Eurasian nation by its culture and civilizational belonging. For some of the representatives and ideologues of Russia's post-Soviet elite who had traded Karl Marx for Samuel Huntington and eagerly paraded their cultural intolerance, "European" was unequivocally equated with "Christian." On the more pragmatic side, the post-Communist nomenklatura sought legitimation for the new social order in the Christian Orthodoxy and found reliable allies among its largely domesticated clergy. Thus, the Russian Orthodox Church, or more accurately its Moscow Patriarchate (whose canonical and moral legitimacy had been contested for most of the 20th century by rival branches of Orthodox Christianity), was granted a privileged position in the country, bringing it close to the status of the official government church, exemplified by its predecessor under the Romanov Empire. (This trend was further reinforced under Vladimir Putin when the Education Ministry openly considered the introduction of Russian Orthodox theology into university curricula.)

Accordingly, the Kremlin's treatment of Russia's Muslim minority with its specific interests and demands ranged from neglect to suspicion and outright hostility. The abruptness and some of the peculiar circumstances of the Soviet Union's demise, for example, have been attributed by reliable sources to the eagerness of Boris Yeltsin to get

rid of the Union's Muslim republics (some of whose leaders, such as Nursultan Nazarbaev, harbored their own blueprints for transformation of the USSR). This attitude fit into a broader pattern of cultural war against everything "backward," "Asiatic," and otherwise unconventional, a crusade that was part and parcel of the "Market Bolshevik reforms." As under Peter the Great, the cultural homogenization of society was an implicit goal. While making Russian ethnicity the basis for state-building was politically and often personally unacceptable for members of the new ruling class, using Christian Orthodoxy for these purposes was seen as perfectly appropriate (since its profession could be as ritualistic and divorced from daily practice and way of life as Marxist-Leninist rhetoric was before it).

These policies and attitudes were destined to backfire. Of course, the share of Muslims in the population of post-Soviet Russia is much smaller than it was in the USSR, where they made up to 40% of the total (and were likely to cross the 50% threshold in the next 15 years, had the USSR survived that long). According to a range of estimates, the number of Russian Muslims stands between 20 and 30 million, constituting 15 to 20% of the country's population. Taken together, however, Muslims are much more numerous than any other religious or ethnic minority in the country, are part of Russia's indigenous population, have inherited the institutional vehicle of Soviet-era autonomous republics tailored for the representation of their interests, and are positioned on Russia's strategically vulnerable and otherwise important territories.

The dangerous implications of a Muslim backlash for Russia's security and integrity became obvious as early as 1991-92. Chechnya's secession from Russia and Tatarstan's refusal to sign the Federation Treaty, for example, were at least in part a response to the eventuality of Russia's transformation into an Orthodox Christian state with an ethnic Russian slant. Nevertheless, part of the Moscow establishment kept escalating its confrontational anti-Muslim rhetoric and actions, which both contributed to and were further fueled by the first Chechen war of 1994-96. (These seemingly illogical policies were apparently designed in part to prevent a social explosion in the country by channeling discontent along ethnic lines, and to gain the support of nationalist voters by pitting destitute Russians against the Muslim minority.)

While Russia's constituent republics with a titular Muslim population were, except for Chechnya, not in a position to secede, they responded to the Kremlin's policies of political surveillance, financial neglect, and cultural exclusion by fencing themselves off from federal authorities to the extent possible, rallying around local nomenklatura bosses, and consistently supplying votes for the opposition (and in 1993, against the Yeltsin constitution) in large numbers (up to 80% in Dagestan and the Ingush Republic). The result was a peculiar balance of powerlessness. For its part, Moscow was unable to penetrate the thick social networks at the local level to control Muslim republics effectively. On the other hand, the republics had no lobby to defend their interests at the federal level, meager access to government funds in between electoral seasons, and were among the first casualties of every budget cut in Moscow.

## Islamic Conversion Among Ethnic Russians

While the whipping up of anti-Muslim sentiment on the part of some circles in the Kremlin (and their associated media outlets) has been largely instrumental and geared to short-term political purposes, there is also a deeper unease with the entrenched position of Islam--an anxiety that unites parts of the Orthodox clergy and its opportunistic allies in the ruling elite, leading them to view the relationship between Russian Orthodoxy and Islam as akin to a zero-sum game. The perception is that of a "status quo" church that is tied to one nation, one ethnic group, and devoid of missionary zeal, versus a creed that is supra-ethnic, multinational, and above all, expanding. This insecurity is similar to the one experienced in the Russian Orthodox church vis-à-vis Catholicism and proselytizing Protestant sects, but is much bigger due to the number of Muslims in Russia and the undeniable historical legitimacy of their presence, which is an obstacle to prohibitive legislation. (With Mohammed's followers taking over the city of Derbent in contemporary Dagestan as early as the 640s, Islam was the first monotheistic religion to spread on the territory of today's Russian Federation, three centuries before the first conversions to Orthodox Christianity in Great Novgorod.)

In recent years, the mainstream Russian media has carried more and more reports about the spread of Islam among ethnic Russians, which seems paradoxical in light of their recurrent bouts of semi-official anti-Muslim propaganda. Newspapers note that the number of converts has been swelling among young Russians in particular. A sizable part of them live in Muslim-populated territories such as Tatarstan, and thus are directly exposed to the Islamic way of life. More remarkable, however, is the case of Karelia--the mostly Russian-populated republic bordering on Finland--with no Tatars or Chechens. According to recent reports in *Nezavisimaya* and *Obshchaya Gazeta*, the Muslim community in Karelia was founded by an ethnic Russian and currently comprises around 20,000 of Karelia's 700,000 residents, with 6,000 believers in the capital city of Petrozavodsk. It has acquired its own imam--an Arab student appointed by the Islamic spiritual authorities of the European part of Russia--and has successfully campaigned for permission to build a mosque, in spite of threats from local Russian nationalists. If these numbers are true, this trend of Islamization is hard to dismiss as Western-style counter-cultural posturing.

Yet another noteworthy case was the recent conversion of Vyacheslav Polosin, an established intellectual and public figure who is also a former Christian Orthodox priest. (In the early 1990s, Polosin--one of the founders and leaders of the Christian Democratic Movement--authored Russia's first law on freedom of conscience, and was a member of the leadership of Russia's first democratic legislature, dispersed by Yeltsin in 1993.) His visibility provided additional evidence for those observers who believe the current expansion of Islam among ethnic Russians is occurring at least partly, if not substantially, at the expense of the Orthodox Church.

While the potential causes of Islamic expansion requires academic study, let us outline a few hypotheses. One is Russia's successive defeats in military ventures in Afghanistan and in Chechnya, which even in the mainstream Russian media were often carelessly

(and quite improbably in a thoroughly secular Russia) portrayed as instances of a "clash of civilizations" between Christian Orthodoxy and Islam. In this context, the "mobilizational" capacity of Islamic culture has been widely discussed in the Russian media over the past decade. Yet another factor in Islamic expansion may be the powerful example of Muslim communities inside Russia being able to survive and protect their members against harassment and the economic adversities caused by market reforms. This has been particularly striking when compared to the extremely atomized and pulverized condition of ethnic Russians, whether secular or Orthodox faithful, even in those locations where they constitute a numerical majority. Several media reports highlighted instances of Islamic conversion by Russians hit by economic adversity or personal disaster who found the local Muslim community as a last resort in the search for material and psychological assistance. Last but not least, there are important societal groups for whom siding with a threatened or oppressed minority is an essential manifestation of "Russian-ness." Some of these groups also saw behind the anti-Muslim campaigns the looming threat of future repression against minority cultural groups among ethnic Russians themselves.

Whatever the case, "evangelical" Islam is clearly an unsettling phenomenon for most Russian observers and practitioners of religious politics, for whom the undeniable link between ethnicity and religion is a normative standard, an analytical framework, and a guide for political engineering.

### **Political Islam in Putin's Russia: The Niyazov Case**

"Political Islam" in Russia has developed at the intersection of Muslims' attempts to secure representation of their interests as the largest nationwide minority and federal politicians' efforts to "play the Islamic card" within the existing culture of conflict for political gain. Nevertheless, over the past decade, several projects to build a political organization of Russian Muslims (e.g., Nur, Majlis, and Union of the Muslims of Russia) have ended in failure.

In 1999, the Yeltsin administration's unleashing of the second Chechen war and the use of ethnic nationalist and Islamophobic frenzy (under the guise of a struggle against the "Wahhabis") to marginalize the opposition and secure Yeltsin's political dynasty put the Muslim question front and center in the national political debate. Yeltsin's leading opponents at the time, Yevgeny Primakov and Yuri Luzhkov, aligned themselves with leaders of the predominantly Muslim autonomous republics (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Ingushetia), and the chief of Russia's Council of Muftis, Ravil Gainutdin. However, given Luzhkov's previous record of behavior vis-à-vis ethnic minorities in Moscow, his attempt to campaign on the platform of ethnic diversity and tolerance was widely seen as opportunistic.

For its part, the Kremlin was also actively in search of a group of Muslims that could at least partly attenuate the extremes of the anti-Wahhabi propaganda and broaden the electoral base of the hastily assembled Unity slate. To an extent, this purpose was

accomplished by bringing the Refah (Welfare) Party under the Unity umbrella. Refah, founded in 1998 as a Muslim political organization, had been untested in electoral campaigns, and its support base remained uncertain.

The striking thing about Refah, however, is that among several nationwide Muslim organizations, only it is led by an ethnic Russian convert. Its leader, 32-year-old Abdul-Wahed Niyazov (whom Aleksei Malashenko justifiably calls "the most energetic Muslim in Russia"), was born as Vadim Medvedev and discovered his Muslim identity via marriage in the early 1990s. Vyacheslav Polosin (the recently converted former Orthodox priest, nowadays Ali-Vyacheslav) also joined Refah as its ideologist and editor of its leaflet, *Musul'manskaya Gazeta*. While on its website Refah boasts support among Russia's ethnic minorities and most of its second-rank officials are ethnic Tatars, the ethnically Russian and "missionary" aspect of this organization is rather conspicuous. (Missionary, of course, is a highly controversial term with regard to Islam. In this context, missionary means not explicitly proselytizing, but set up by recent converts and aimed, at least implicitly and in part, at attracting new ones.)

As a result of the 1999 Duma elections, Refah acquired 5 legislative seats on the Unity party list, and claimed 5 to 7 more supporters among other deputies. This number (less than 3% of the total) is highly disproportionate to the share of Muslims in the general population. The very appearance of such a group in the ranks of the dominant Duma faction in the midst of the government's anti-Wahhabi campaign heightened its visibility, however, giving it strategic advantage over several other Muslim organizations that had tried to participate in federal politics with little success.

The subsequent evolution of Refah and its leaders has been no less intriguing. Among the gray mass of rubber-stamp bureaucrats from the Unity faction, Niyazov asserted himself as an articulate and idiosyncratic politician, and an outspoken critic of what he calls the anti-Muslim bias and even "hysteria" on the part of some (namely government-sponsored) media. He has repeatedly claimed that his party's larger goal is to protect all of Russia's ethnic and religious minorities, acknowledging by implication the common interests of Russia's minorities vis-à-vis the Yeltsin-era trend (inherited and reinforced by Putin) toward homogenization of the country. Given that he was initially assigned to one of the lowest-profile committees in the Duma, his autonomous activities and pronouncements were apparently not planned by the Kremlin. At the same time, Niyazov has been prudent enough to avoid criticizing the Kremlin's brutal policies in Chechnya or Putin personally--something that in the current political climate would mean subjecting oneself to ostracism and personal destruction. Nevertheless, the very fact of his unsanctioned activities and his deviant ideological line appeared to be enough of an irritant for Unity managers. In March 2001, the conflict was made public, and Niyazov quit Unity to become an independent legislator. Several days later, he announced the creation of the Eurasian Party of Russia, claiming--no doubt, with considerable exaggeration--to have secured the support of about forty Duma members.

The further political prospects of Niyazov and his followers are uncertain. In the short run, for Niyazov (and the few public politicians that remain in the country), everything

depends on how far President Putin and his inner circle decide to go in narrowing the space for expression of autonomous political interests and views. It is quite possible that Niyazov's unenviable status as a rank-and-file member in the rubber-stamp parliament will compel him both to scale back his activities and to change tune and perform the services required by the presidential administration to secure a second Duma term. It is unlikely that he will shift into open opposition and gravitate toward Yabloko, a party that has traditionally been identified with the interests of ethnic minorities, and is now battling for its survival. On the other hand, Niyazov's continued media exposure and his own self-confident pronouncements on matters domestic and foreign suggest that the Kremlin has not yet figured out what to do with Russia's "most energetic Muslim," and whether he and his organizational activities might become useful to the powers that be at a certain point in the future. Taking into account the present alienation between the government and most of the country's minorities, the interests of both sides may be paradoxically served by an ethnic Russian convert who has mastered the rules of the game in what Robert Daniels aptly calls "the Byzantine snakepit" of Moscow politics.

### **Implications for Russian and International Security**

Over the long term, peace and stability on the Eurasian landmass will hinge not least upon the choices that Russia, or those who speak on its behalf, are making with regard to its cultural and civilizational identity. These cannot be "either-or" choices of European versus Eurasian, or Christian versus Muslim--especially given the fact that Russia's prevailing culture is deeply secular and defies identification with larger communities (and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future). At the moment, however, the fluid situation is influenced by two opposing tendencies: 1) the official imposition of Orthodoxy and political and legislative uniformity from the top; and 2) increasing assertiveness and expansion of Islam in Russian society (which is at least partly a response of some previously secular or Orthodox Russians to the anti-minority bias). The crux of the matter is whether this round of the Kremlin's homogenizing drive will ultimately prevail, and whether "Europeanism" and Christian Orthodoxy (as represented by the Moscow Patriarchate) will become part of ideological indoctrination at the expense of other cultures. What is at stake is Russia's most valuable and most vulnerable legacy--a multiethnic, multid denominational society. In this regard, the political status and future prospects of the Russian Muslims are gradually becoming an important barometer of Russia's development.

Among Western analysts, some would apparently prefer to see Russia evolve into a nation-state of the traditional European type, based on one dominant ethnicity and culture. This preference is much stronger among increasingly influential groups in Russia's ruling establishment. Some are hinting that such a "Russification" of Russia would serve Western interests well by eliminating imperialist temptation and nostalgia, as if a nation-state cannot pursue imperialist policies.

However, this line of reasoning is deeply flawed. Despite all possible twists and turns, Russia has no other long-term choice except further integration into the global economy

and cooperation with the West. If this is so, the ethnocentric policies of Russian Westernizers that antagonize the Islamic minority (and by implication parts of the larger Islamic world), would compromise Western values and principles and exacerbate the relationship between the West and Islam--two of the most powerful and dynamic civilizations of the contemporary world. Even the existing asymmetry between the size of Russia's Muslim minority and its representation in the national elite breeds trouble by encouraging radicalism and the use of undemocratic means in political struggle on the part of Russia's Muslims.

The growth of democratic channels of political representation for Russia's largest minority, and its eventual inclusion in decision-making at the national level and in Russia's debate over its national identity, would strengthen the country's domestic as well as external stability and security. It would further avoid Russia's transformation into another hotbed of unnecessary conflict between Western values and parts of the Islamic world. This is why Christian-Muslim relations, the status of Muslims' civil rights, and the development of Islamic politics in Russia should be watched closely.

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