

## Islam And Politics in Present-Day Russia

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Despite the interest for Islam in Russia, for the Islamic factor in the country's domestic and foreign policy, and despite the growing number of publications on the subject, the Russian Muslim community remains largely "a thing in itself", an enigma. In other words, there are more questions than answers here.

### How many Muslims are there in Russia?

First and foremost, how many Muslims are there in Russia? And in general, who can be considered a Muslim? Taking the whole gamut of opinions into account, we will find that at the turn of the 21st century the number of Russian Muslim is anywhere between 15 and 35 million.<sup>1</sup> The figure most often mentioned in scientific publications and the country's mass media is 20 million or thereabouts. In 2001, scholars at the Russian Academy of Civil Service asserted that the number of those "who adhere to Islamic traditions" in Russia is 15 million.<sup>2</sup> Evidently, this figure is not far from the truth – but only if we consider merely the Muslims who are Russian citizens. However, there are many migrant Muslims living in Russia, both legal and illegal immigrants. According to various sources, the number of Azerbaijan citizens alone, for instance, is between 0.5 and 1.5 million. Opened in the late '90s in the Moscow district of Otradnoye was a Shiite mosque which is attended exclusively by Azerbaijanis. There are plans to open Shiite mosques in other Russian cities as well. The second largest migrant Muslim ethnic group in Russia are Kazakhs: their number is just under one million.

Therefore, the *overall* number of Muslims in Russia must be more than 15 million. Considering the Russian women who married Muslims and the children born of mixed marriages, the total number must be close to 20 million. It should be noted that, in keeping with the Muslim tradition, a woman who marries a Muslim becomes a Muslim herself. And so do children born of mixed marriages. This is an arguable view, of course, but it is held by the Muslim clergy, and so it cannot be completely ignored.

Who is to be regarded as a Muslim? There are two opposite views on that. According to the first, the number of *true Muslim believers* in the country is not above two or three million. The *Monitoring.ru* opinion-sampling service has found that Muslims constitute a mere 5% of the total number of believers in Russia, which this source estimates to be approximately 55%.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, according to the findings of the Moscow Institute of Sociological Analysis, in 1997, Muslims made up 6.2% of the total number of believers, and 6% of the overall population.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see: Alexei Malashenko. *Islamic Rebirth in Present-Day Russia*. Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow, 1998, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> F.M. Mukhametshin, A.A. Dubkov. *Muslim Organizations in the Russian Federation. The State, Religion and Church in Russia and Abroad*. Information-analytical bulletin, no. 2 for 2001, p. 155.

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Tulsy. *Wahhabites in Russia Defeat Moderate Muslims*. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Moscow, June 19, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> A.B. Zubov. *The Limits of Fractures and the Levels of Unity in Today's Russia: Lessons of a Sociological Study. The Spiritual Foundations of the World Community and International Relations*. Moscow, the Moscow State Institute of Foreign Relations of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moscow, 2000, p. 270.

There are no confessional statistics in Russia, and so the polls conducted both on the federal and regional level, including in Tatarstan and the republics of the North Caucasus, cannot give a final answer, no matter how hard their organizers may try, as to who can be considered a “true Muslim.” People are asked how many times a day they perform prayers, how often they go to the mosque, how profound their religious knowledge is, whether or not they know Arabic and the suras of the Koran, etc. On the basis of such criteria a conclusion is made whether a person can be regarded as a believer. The number of Muslims (as well as other believers) is estimated accordingly.

However, in the case of Muslims such an approach does not seem adequate. It does not present a full picture or make it possible to judge about the number of Muslims in Russia and, consequently, about the role the Islamic factor plays in present-day Russia.

A different criterion may be used to determine whether a person is a Muslim or not. This criterion lies outside the sphere of religion as such and it has nothing to do with a person’s fervor in observing the religious rites or his being informed about his religion. A person’s belonging to Islam is determined by his self-identification, the environment in which he was born and grew up, and the education he received. And in this respect the level of his religious knowledge or his meticulous observance of the religious rites are of no decisive significance.

Lastly, Muslims comprise ethnic minorities, and their confessional self-identification is a most important part of their national self-identification. Belonging to Islam actually becomes equivalent to belonging to an ethnic group. When every person who has a Muslim surname becomes a Muslim believer, we have the right to speak about ethnic Muslims, that is people who are born Muslims. Islam then turns out to be a consolidating element before the Russian majority (although there is inter-ethnic friction within the Russian Muslim community itself).

The self-awareness of a person as a bearer of a minority’s religion is being strengthened more and more by the increased xenophobia in Russian society, including increased Islamophobia. Muslim nations feel their isolation more keenly, and this further convinces them of their religious singularity and causes them to make additional efforts to confirm it.

Let us assume that the number of Muslims in Russia is close to 20 million, or about 12% of the country’s population. In this respect Russia is comparable with India where Muslims also comprise 12%, or even with the Philippines where they make up 5 or 6% (possibly more). In Russia the largest Muslim ethnic groups are: the Tatars (about six million), the Bashkirs (1.3 million), the Chechens (close to one million), and the Avars (about 600,000). Altogether in Russia, there are some forty Muslim ethnic groups, big and small.

The bulk of Russia’s Muslim population lives in three of the country’s regions: the Volga Area, the centers of Russian Islam there being Tatarstan and Bashkiris with massive Muslim enclaves in some neighboring areas; the North Caucasus, with approximately four million Muslims; Moscow and the Moscow Region, where the Muslim population is between one and one-and-a-half million (some sources even say two million). Besides, the Chelyabinsk Region (Ural), the Orenburg Region (Southern Ural) and the Tyumen Region (Western Siberia) each have a Muslim population of more than 300,000. Furthermore, Muslims are dispersed throughout the territory of the Russian Federation, their concentration ranging from 0.2% of the population in several regions of Central Russia to 42.9% in the North Caucasus.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that unlike the large Muslim minority groups in Western European countries, the Russian Muslims are autochthonous. In fact, Islam appeared on the territory of the

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<sup>5</sup> Mufti Ravil Gainutdin. *Islam. Belief in Charity*. Moscow, 1997, p. 129.

present Russian Federation before Christianity. In the year 642 the Arabs penetrated the territory of what is now Daghestan and began spreading Islam there. In 2000 (1420 on the Muslim calendar), the Russian Muslims marked the 1400th anniversary of Islam's advent to Russia.

However, the fact that Muslims are part of Russia's indigenous population and that Islam has been present on Russian soil for a long time has not led to the formation of a single, consolidated Muslim community having common interests and being able to express them clearly. Despite their growing cooperation, the three regional Muslim enclaves – the Volga Area, the North Caucasus and Moscow – remain quite isolated from one another.

### **The process of Islamic rebirth**

The process of Islamic rebirth, which started in the early '90s, made the Russian Muslims keenly aware of being part of the Islamic civilization and belonging to the world Muslim community; it helped them to overcome the "little brother complex" formed during their presence within the Russian state and later, during the Soviet period. (In our view, it was precisely owing to Islam that the Tatars and the Bashkirs, who lived in a Christian environment, have managed to preserve their ethno-cultural identity which during the years of Soviet rule found itself on the brink of extinction).

The main results of the Islamic "Renaissance" are as follows:

- increased religious awareness and appreciation of being Tatars, Bashkirs, Avars, Chechens, etc. – not just an ethnic group but part of a giant civilization;
- rebirth of the Islamic customs and an unimaginable growth in the number mosques (in the year 2000 their number reached 4,658<sup>6</sup> as against a few dozen in the early '90s<sup>7</sup>). In Islam, mosques are more than mere religious structures, being a kind of political clubs;
- formation of a system of religious education, which helped to consolidate Islamic knowledge and tradition: registered in the Russian Federation at the end of 1999 were over 100 Muslim establishments of secondary and higher education<sup>8</sup>;
- restoration (painfully slow, one might say) of the Islamic spiritual elite;
- disappearance of the Iron Curtain, which enabled the former Soviet Muslims to restore the disrupted ties with their fellow believers abroad;
- and finally, politicization of Islam.

This last circumstance made Islam one of the most popular subjects with the Russian mass media, especially in view of the events in Chechnya.

### **Islam's becoming a factor in the political life**

There are several aspects to Islam's becoming a factor in the political life of Russian society. First, it is the formation of political organizations based on the principle of belonging to Islam and making appropriate religious demands (for instance, that the necessary conditions be created for every Muslim to lead "an Islamic way of life"). Second, involving Muslim

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<sup>6</sup> Indicated here are only the officially registered mosques. Actually, there are many more of them – probably, as many as 7,000.

<sup>7</sup> According to Mufti Talgat Tadjutdin, Chairman of the Central Religious Administration of Muslims, in the early 1990s there were over 70 mosques in Russia. *Time and Money*, Kazan, no. 113, October 3, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> N.Kh. Ryadzhapov. Islamic Educational Establishment in Russia. *The State, Religion and Church in Russia and Abroad*. Information-analytical bulletin of the Russian Academy of Civil Service, no. 3, 2001, p. 77.

clergymen in politics. Third, getting secular politicians, members of the central and regional elites, to turn to Islam. Fourth, the employment of Islam by political opposition parties and movements, including separatist ones. And last, taking Islam into account as a foreign-policy factor.

Islamic political organizations in Russia have been active for slightly more than a decade. The first of them was the Islamic Rebirth Party (IRP), created in the Soviet Union in June 1990. Although the party was not destined to become one of Russia's influential organizations, it gave an impetus to Islam's politicization during the remainder of the Soviet epoch and later, after the disintegration of the USSR. Thus, in 1991 the Tajik branch of the IRP became an independent national Islamic Rebirth Party of Tajikistan, which formed the core of the local opposition.<sup>9</sup> According to different sources, in the early 1990s the IRP had from 3,000 to 5,000 members, most of them residing in the North Caucasus, more specifically in Dagestan. There were IRP cells in some Russian cities where Muslims formed a minority – in Saratov, Astrakhan, Penza, Chelyabinsk and Tyumen, as well as in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The party's activity was limited to holding press conferences, rendering verbal support to the Muslim groups and movements of the former USSR and publishing its leaders' speeches in the press. Party congresses were practically not convened. In 1992, perhaps the only large-scale conference was held in Saratov (by the way, the present author was a guest at it). The IRP had practically no mass base. It attempted publishing a newspaper called *Al Wahdat* (Unity), but managed to print only a few hundred copies of its first two issues (which today are a rare collector's item). Furthermore, right from the outset a split appeared among the party's founders and protagonists due to a variety of ambitions. All that caused the fall of the first Islamic political organization in Russia.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that the IRP has played no role in the life of Russia's Muslim community. In the first place, it created a precedent for the appearance of an Islamic political grouping in the Russian Federation. In the second place, the party was officially registered – that is, recognized by the authorities. And this was done twice: in Dagestan and in Moscow, where the IRP Organizing Committee was registered. In the third place, the IRP embraced Muslim politicians and ideologists, who later became highly active politically, becoming a “visiting card” of Islamic radicalism. Among them were: the party's Chairman Ahmed-kadi Akhtaev, his deputy and future head of the Islamic Committee, Geidar Jemal, who is also one of the most outstanding Islamic journalists, and Bagautdin Muhammad, the chief ideologist of Islamic radicalism in the North Caucasus.

The IRP's disappearance in 1994 did not mean that Islam had given up its plans of engaging in politics. Back in 1990 an Islamic Cultural Center was established in Moscow. Despite its official name, the center became politicized soon enough, and its head, Abdul-Wahed Niyazov, later became one of the founders and leaders of influential Muslim political organizations. In the mid-1990s several Islamic parties and movements, both national and regional, appeared in Russia.

Established in 1995 were the Muslim Public Movement “Nur” (“Light”) and the Union of the Muslims of Russia (UMR).

The more important among the regional groupings were: the Tatar party “Ittifik”, the “Muslims of Tatarstan” movement, the Youth Center of Islamic Culture “Iman”, and

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<sup>9</sup> A branch of the Islamic Rebirth Party also appeared in Uzbekistan, becoming the first seat of political Islam, and another – in Kazakhstan, where it functioned for a few months and then disappeared. Most prominent the IRP became in Dagestan, chaired by Akhmed-kadi Akhtaev, a native of that republic.

Daghestan's Islamic Democratic Party (later renamed the Islamic Party of Daghestan), "Jamaatul Muslimi" and the Islamic Center "Kavkaz." Also, there appeared a dozen of smaller associations<sup>10</sup> which appealed to religious ideology. They included branches of international Muslim organizations (such as the "Muslim Brothers"), formed mostly on an ethnic principle. Three Islamic groupings were active in Chechnya, about ten in Daghestan, one or two in the Karachai-Cherkess Autonomous Region and Ingushetia. Some of them had just several members and some – several hundred.

While it was hardly possible to strictly categorize the Islamic political associations, two trends of their activity were easily discernible. The first, characteristic of the UMR and "Nur", consisted in a desire to become established on the national political scene as defenders of the social and religious interests of the Russian Muslim community, while at the same time cooperating with the central and local government bodies and trying to influence them as much as possible. This task was facilitated by the fact that the leaders of the UMR and "Nur" were energetic and ambitious and that, unlike the IRP, these organizations had cells practically all over Russia, wherever there were Muslim communities.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, they had a functional infrastructure, even if not a strong one, as well as access to the mass media.

Both the UMR and "Nur" appeared at a time when the political situation was aggravated in Russia. Despite their claims of independence, they sided with and depended on the influential secular political forces. The first UMR leader, Ahmet Khalitov, for instance, was an associate of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the head of the Liberal-Democratic Party and one of the most popular politicians at the time. The "Nur" leader, Khalid Yakhin, was an assistant to Alexei Mitrofanov, an LDPR member famous for his nationalist utterings. Later on, both Khalitov and Yakhin were dismissed as heads of their organizations. After that "Nur" drew closer to the "Yabloko" democratic movement led by Grigory Yavlinsky. The UMR was denied registration, which, in the opinion of its leaders, was both due to political reasons and the fact that Muslims lacked the bureaucratic know-how and efficiency. Thereupon, the organization got under the wing of the "Russia, Our Home" movement, then a "ruling party" headed by Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin. At the presidential elections the UMR supported Boris Yeltsin. Led by its chairman, Nadirshakh Khachilayev, and the head of the Islamic Cultural Center, A.-V. Niyazov, the UMR acted aggressively enough. This was appreciated by the Kremlin which rendered the Muslims its support, including financial assistance. In the course of two election campaigns Islam's political participation was actually legitimized.

During the 1995 parliamentary elections "Nur" got 0.58% of the votes in the whole of Russia (it was favored by a total of 393,500 voters). In Chechnya and Ingushetia it got 23%, in Tatarstan 5% and in Bashkiria 1.25% of the votes.<sup>12</sup> For a newborn party representing the interests of a religious minority that was not so bad.

After the 1995 parliamentary elections and the 1996 presidential elections won by Yeltsin the activity of the both national Muslim organizations began to wane. This can largely be attributed to the fact that from the Kremlin's point of view they had fulfilled their main mission, and the government did not need them any longer. Receiving no seats in the State Duma, both

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<sup>10</sup> For more details see: The Public Movements and Political Parties of Daghestan at the Present Time. Makhachkala, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> By the end of 1995 there were "Nur" party cells in 72 regions of Russia. According to the UMR leaders, structures of the Union were to be found in all of Russia's regions, except in Chukotka.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted from: Alexei Malashenko. Islamic Rebirth in Present-Day Russia... p. 141.

the UMR and “Nur” receded into the shadows of the political life. It was only in 1996, as a result of additional elections in Daghestan, that Nadirshakh Khachilayev managed to become a member of the Russian parliament.

The second trend in the activity of the Muslim organizations relates to the spread of opposition attitudes among the members of the Muslim community. It should be noted that even the largely law-abiding and conformist UMR had often declared its disagreement with certain elements of the official course. First and foremost, its disagreement concerned the situation in Chechnya where actual hostilities had been going on since 1994. However, opposition attitudes were also in evidence on other matters, both social and religious. For instance, in the UMR’s statements and the speeches of its leaders it was repeatedly pointed out that the rights of Muslims were being infringed, that the authorities displayed a partial attitude towards Islam, and that the Kremlin openly violated the principle of remaining equidistant in regard to the country’s main religions – Russian Orthodoxy and Islam – in favor of the former.

Manifestations of opposition attitudes are also observed on the regional level. In fact, they are even more pronounced there at times. For the local opposition, as a rule, does not care about what image it presents in the eyes of the central government. Its aim is to attract the attention of the Muslims who are dissatisfied with the policy pursued by the local officials. On this level, the religious and nationalist-religious opposition is more down-to-earth and closer to the man in the street. It is also more radical and can therefore cause much inconvenience to the authorities.

The main aim of such organizations is to make their presence felt. A case in point is “Ittifak” which throughout the 1990s maintained its image of a radical and scandalous nationalist-Islamic opposition with the help of its leader, the poetess Fauziya Bairamova, a gifted speaker who loves to shock her listeners. Originally, “Ittifak” was a nationalist organization more than anything else, but in 1996, after the Milli Majlis (so-called “People’s Parliament”<sup>13</sup>), which is close in spirit to “Ittifak”, adopted a document entitled “Tatar Kanuny” (“The Constitution of the Tatar People”), in which the accent was placed clearly on the religious foundation of “Tatarism”, “Ittifak” finally became established as a radical Islamic grouping. Of course, being practical-minded, the “Ittifak” members do not call for an immediate establishment of an Islamic state, but they do insist that Tatarstan must follow its own path of development, one founded on religious and nationalist values. Or as the Tatar historian and politologist Rafik Mukhametshin has put it, the leaders of “Ittifak” and the Milli Majlis “turn to Islam in search of a specifically nationalist way of development” for Tatarstan.<sup>14</sup>

“Ittifak” has accused the authorities of Tatarstan, and above all its President, of ignoring Islam, following in the wake of Moscow, and of betrayal of the republic’s national interests. Such two-fold accusations leveled against the authorities are also characteristic of other regional opposition-minded organizations, including the Islamic Party of Daghestan (IPD). Its leader, Surakat Asiyatilov, has repeatedly declared his support of President Putin. In actual fact, however, the IPD likes to criticize the local authorities for paying little attention to the needs of the Muslims, for doing nothing to counter the moral degradation of society and to prevent the

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<sup>13</sup> “Milli Majlis”, a socio-political organization, was created as a counterbalance to the official parliament of Tatarstan.

<sup>14</sup> Rafik Mukhametshin. Islam in the Socio-Political Life of Tatarstan at the End the 20th Century. “Iman”, Kazan, 2000, p. 66.

penetration into the republic of the norms of behavior that are against the Islamic moral standards.

### **The activity of the Islamic socio-political organizations**

The activity of the Islamic socio-political organizations is taking place against the background of the conflict in Chechnya where the separatists try to impart a religious substantiation to their struggle and employ the Islamic slogan of jihad. Islamic radicals are becoming increasingly active in Russia's Muslim neighbor states in Central Asia. The influence exerted on the Russian Muslims by the countries of the Middle East promotes the politicization of Islam. The radicalization of Islam is proceeding against the background of unceasing resentment felt by the Muslims against the officials who, while being unable to overcome the country's economic difficulties, have amassed fortunes (huge by Russian standards), who are steeped in corruption and who prevent ordinary citizens more and more from taking part in resolving everyday problems.

All that may result in the social protest of a part of the Muslims – their desire to protect their ethnic interests and enhance their political status – acquiring a religious coloring. This is felt most keenly in the North Caucasus.

There the level of Islam's radicalization is higher than in Russia's other regions having a Muslim population. This is a natural result of the confrontation between Moscow and Chechnya (although the roots of the Chechen conflict lie outside Islam). However, even without the Chechen conflict the influence of Islam on the socio-political life in the North Caucasus, especially in its eastern part, would still be high owing to the peculiarities of the formation of ethno-confessional tradition, the circumstances under which the North Caucasian Muslims were annexed to Russia and a kind of self-sufficiency of the Muslim "subcivilization" of the North Caucasus (which accounts for its being isolated, to a degree, from the rest of Russia). Aside from Chechnya, where the economy has been completely disrupted because of the conflict lasting many years, Daghestan and Ingushetia, it must be admitted, are the least developed regions of the Russian Federation. Unemployment there is of catastrophic proportions: in the late 1990s it was 32.4% in Ingushetia and 8.1% in Daghestan (that is, officially; according to unofficial statistics, it was up to 60%).<sup>15</sup> The combination of the peculiarities of historical development and Islamic tradition with the present socio-economic crisis has predetermined the use of Islam by the local opposition as an instrument for satisfying their political ambitions and promoting their plans of transforming the region.

The idea of an Islamic alternative, which has become widespread in the North Caucasus is particularized in the four levels of the Islamic project comprising its own plan for the organization of society and of the political space of the region. These four levels are: 1) North Caucasian; 2) subregional (Chechnya + Daghestan + Ingushetia – to a certain degree); 3) national-republican (Chechnya, Daghestan); 4) local, that is, suitable for small, mostly rural, enclaves.<sup>16</sup> It seems that implementing the project at the first three levels is completely unrealistic. Attempts to establish an Islamic state have failed even in Chechnya where the majority of the population opposed the idea of a total Islamization of the country's social and

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<sup>15</sup> Russia's Political Almanac for 1997 (edited by M. McFaul and N. Petrov), Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow, 1998. vol. 2, The Socio-Political Portraits of the Regions, pp. 111, 137, 160.

<sup>16</sup> See: Alexei Malashenko. The Islamic Reference Points of the North Caucasus. Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow, 2001, pp. 137-164.

political systems. Neither has this idea gained mass support in Daghestan. There were two reasons for the failure to unify Chechnya and Daghestan into a single Islamic state in the late 1990s: first, the majority of Daghestan's population was against it; second, the local elites in Daghestan justly believed that such a unification would inevitably lead to a redistribution of power and of the economic resources in favor of the Chechens.

Furthermore, the Islamic project is doomed in the region as a whole, since the population in the western part of the North Caucasus has been Islamized to a lesser degree and it has much less sympathy for shariat than do the Chechens or the Daghestanis. In view of that, the statement made by the Procurator-General of the Russian Federation in August 2001 to the effect that the "Wahhabites" were planning a coup d'état in Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia, appears to be an untruth: in those two regions radical Islam enjoyed very little support, and appeals for establishing an Islamic state could not have evoked a positive response.

On the local level, however, there still are opportunities for a partial implementation of sharia law. There are enclaves in Chechnya and Daghestan (for instance, the four villages in the famous Kadar zone<sup>17</sup>) where a considerable part of the population favor the introduction of the Islamic laws. The leaders of the Chechen refugees have declared the Pankisskoye Gorge area in Georgia "Islamic territory."

Some politicians and experts consider it possible to employ sharia law on a limited scale (provided the supremacy of the secular federal laws is retained). Thus, Leonid Syukiyainen, a major authority on Muslim laws in Russia, believes that "the prospect of shariat being included in the legal system should be regarded not as a necessary evil but as a natural process of the restoration of legal traditions which in the North Caucasus go back many centuries."<sup>18</sup>

On the whole, the radicalization of Islam in the late 1990s revealed its limits. Although reference to Islam has played a consolidating role in the Chechen separatists' struggle against Moscow, appeals for building an Islamic state were treated skeptically by the majority of the Muslims, while many people viewed negatively the demands of the fighters for the purity of Islam – the home-grown Salafites. For instance, they demand that the people of the Caucasus renounce their customary form of religious belief, Tarikatism (the Caucasian variety of Sufism), as well as the surviving syncretic traditions. As a result, the different interpretations of Islam and the struggle in their defense have led to a split among the Muslims of the North Caucasus.

Similar differences exist among the Muslims in the rest of Russia, particularly in such regions as Tatarstan and Siberia, or even in Moscow. There they are not so acute, of course. But the question of how Muslims can be accustomed to shariat and how its tenets can be applied to the secular state is still being heatedly discussed both by scholars and politicians.

In Tatarstan, Bashkiria and South Ural the local authorities have noted manifestations of radical Islam being spread by imams and medrese teachers who are graduates of institutes and universities in Saudi Arabia (King Fahd University), Kuwait, Tunisia ("az-Zeituna"), Egypt ("al-Azhar") and Morocco ("al-Karaviin"), as well as their pupils, young intellectuals and students of secular schools of higher education. At times their actions become really outrageous, especially when they express publicly their solidarity with the Chechens. Every now and then, there appear press reports (as a rule, their truthfulness is denied by the Muslim authorities) to the effect that at

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<sup>17</sup> While not demanding secession from the Russian Federation, the Salafitic leaders of these villages proclaimed an Islamic state on their territory.

<sup>18</sup> Leonid Syukiyainen. Does Shariat Have a Future in the North Caucasus? *NG-Religions*, Moscow, February 27, 1997.

various mosques and medreses controlled by radicals, militants are being trained for fighting in Chechnya. Reacting to such reports, the public authorities take repressive measures. In 2001, for instance, in the city of Naberezhnye Chelny (Tatarstan), after an investigation conducted by the Russian Federal Security Service, the authorities closed the Yulduz Mosque. The teachers and students there were accused of spreading “Wahhabism.” Also, the teachers were charged with training “militants.”

The activity of international Islamic organizations, above all those which spread Islamic fundamentalism (mostly in covert ways), popularizing among the Russian Muslims alien interpretations of religious and socio-political questions. The most active in this regard are: the World Assembly of Muslim Youth with headquarters in Saudi Arabia, the “al-Haramain” Saudi organizations, the Ibrahim al-Ibrahim charitable foundation, the Kuwaiti organization “Da’ava al-igasa”, the Sudanese International Association of the Islamic Appeal, and some other organizations. As is known, the majority of Russia’s Muslims belong to the most liberal, Hanafite madhhab, or school of religious law. Widespread in the North Caucasus is also Shafiism whose doctrine is the second most tolerant. (Altogether, there are four theological schools in Islam: the two mentioned above plus Malikism and Hanbalism which are popular in the Middle East and in North Africa).

Islamic missionaries who come from abroad and their supporters here preach what they call “pure Islam”, rejecting any other “ways” relating to this or that madhhab. This is a Salafitic school which, more often than not, is termed “Wahhabism” by the Russian establishment and in the mass media and which is the chief opponent of Hanafism and Tarikatism so popular among the Muslims of Russia.

### **Coexisting in present-day Russia**

Coexisting in present-day Russia, or rather competing with each other, are two forms of Islam. The first is the traditional, “mild” form professed by a majority of the Russian Muslims (herein the theological and cultic distinctions between Hanafism and Tarikatism are deliberately overlooked). The second is a rigid, politicized form whose adepts believe that the forms of Islam that have historically evolved in Russia have been subjected to distortions. They further believe that these distortions must be corrected by restoring the true Islamic norms of behavior and ways of thinking. Fundamentalist propagandists try to impress it on Muslims that their way of life is incompatible with the Islamic precepts. The fundamentalists sharply criticize the Muslim clergy for cooperating with the secular authorities which, they believe, not only dislike Islam but also try to prevent its rebirth. Therefore, restoration of the Islamic principles presupposes an inevitable conflict between the true Muslims and the authorities together with their supporters, Muslim conformists.

On the other hand, the traditional clergy, who oppose the fundamentalists (Wahhabites), insist that the ideas propagated by their adversaries are incompatible with the traditions of the Russian Muslim community and run counter to the cultural values that have evolved there. In “The Main Provisions of the Russian Muslims’ Social Program”, drawn up in 2001, the Council of the Muftis of Russia accuses the fundamentalists of: “negation of the four historically established madhhabs and of Shiism; assertion of their own uniqueness which gives them the right to declare traditional believers ‘non-Muslims’;” and, finally, “arrogating to themselves the right to curtail the rights of ‘infidels’, including traditional Muslims, or even to kill them...”<sup>19</sup> A

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<sup>19</sup> The Main Provisions of the Russian Muslims’ Social Program. Moscow, 2001, pp. 28-29.

statement by the Council of the Muftis of Russia, issued in connection with a clash between traditional Muslims and fundamentalists, which took place in Daghestan in 1997, stressed “the danger of spreading ideas and notions alien to the Muslims of Russia concerning the ways of resolving socio-economic and spiritual problems.”<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, there is no uniform approach to fundamentalism among the Muslim clergy. Some churchmen, while accusing fundamentalists of spurning traditional Islam and of subversive activity against the state, appraise the phenomenon of fundamentalism, or Wahhabism, as legitimate and being part of the religious thought and practice inherent to Islam.

In the opinion of Ravil Gainutdin, true fundamentalism is “peace and reflection, and no aggressiveness.”<sup>21</sup> And as for Wahhabism, he considers it to be a stage in the development of Islamic religious thought, which has now lost its relevance, and believes that “an attempt to transfer it mechanically to other countries produces collision with the other Sunni schools and with the local traditions of professing Islam.”<sup>22</sup> According to this logic, the radicals who are active in Russia, while remaining Muslims, find themselves under the influence of certain ambitious politicians and, in an attempt to please them, disseminate erroneous religious interpretations. In other words, all that is reminiscent of the thesis popular in Islamic social thought: there is no such thing as “bad Islam”, there are only bad Muslims.

Some other Muslim churchmen regard fundamentalists as apostates and call for a ban on their activity – as this was in Daghestan where the local sheikhs and imams initiated a special amendment to the republic’s Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations. The amendment was entitled: “On Banning Wahhabite and Other Extremist Activities.”

It should be noted that the Russian imams and mullahs fear their rivals who are often better trained professionally and who act more aggressively and with greater fervor. Besides, being younger people, they enjoy certain popularity among the Muslim youth. While fundamentalism’s possibilities should not be overestimated, account must be taken, on the other hand, of the dynamics of non-traditional Islamic notions being spread among the Russian Muslims. It is a fact that in practically all regions there are “opposition” medreses and groups, albeit not very numerous, in which Islamic dogmas are being studied and which clearly base socio-political teaching on protest against the present state of affairs.

Back at the turn of the 1990s, in the Russian Federation and the rest of the Soviet Union there appeared a conflict between the Orthodox clergy, closely linked with the Party-administrative “nomenklatura”, and the comparatively young, 30-40-year-old imams<sup>23</sup> who, influenced by the democratization of society and the fall of the Iron Curtain, tried to speed up religious rebirth and to restore the authority of Islam among the already semi-atheistic but still responsive to confessional tradition ethnic Muslims.

That post-perestroika generation of imams and muftis did not even suspect at first that in the second half of the 1990s the logic of religious rebirth would lead to a development where

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<sup>20</sup> A statement by the Council of the Muftis of Russia regarding the events in Daghestan. Moscow, May 13, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, Moscow, July 20, 1993.

<sup>22</sup> “The Position of the Council of the Muftis of Russia on Wahhabism”, August 2, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Among that generation of the Muslim clergy the most colorful individuals are: Ravil Gainutdin, Imam of the Moscow Cathedral Mosque; Omar Idrisov, Imam of the Nizhni Novgorod Cathedral Mosque; Mukaddas Bibarsov, Imam of the city of Saratov (at one time he was an activist of “Russia’s Choice”, a movement headed by Yegor Gaidar, present-day Russia’s first Prime Minister); and Imam Nafigulla Ashirov, who during the period of Soviet rule was persecuted for spreading Islam.

their rivals would be not only the former collaborationist clergy of the Soviet type, but also the adherents of fundamentalism. They were surprised at the formation in Russia of a qualitatively new segment of the Muslim clergy, a kind of “Young Imams”, who adhere to a different Islamic tradition, giving priority to the Salafitic principles instead of the traditionalist-ethnic ones.

The conflict within the clergy is a reflection of the above-mentioned contradictions between the “two forms of Islam.” The bearers of traditional Islam are patently loyal to the authorities, while their opponents demonstrate an opposite attitude. While such a state of affairs is typical of all Muslim regions without exception, it is more pronounced in the North Caucasus, first of all in Daghestan and Chechnya where the Salafites have managed to create a ramified infrastructure of their own. The state takes part in the confrontation between the two forms of Islam. In the words of Vakhit Akayev, a Chechen scholar, “without state support the traditional clergy will hardly manage to resist the aggression of religious radicals not only in the North Caucasus, but also in the country as a whole.”<sup>24</sup> This approach reflects the official view of the situation in Islam, as well as the position of those churchmen who believe that they are unable, on their own, to defeat the Islamists using external support and who insist on being helped by the local and federal government bodies. Among the most vehement opponents of the “Wahhabites” are: the former Mufti of Chechnya Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen administration since the year 2000; the late Sayid-Muhammed Abubakarov, the former Mufti of Daghestan (he was killed in 1998 by an explosion in Makhachkala, possibly engineered by the radicals); and Talgat Tadjutdin, the head of the Central Religious Administration of Muslims.

The internal Islamic conflict is bound to continue for an indefinite period of time and will probably become even worse. This will have a negative effect on Russia’s Muslim community by creating a breeding ground for Islamic radicals and generating a resentful attitude to all Muslims on the part of the rest of the country’s population.

### **Relations between Islam and Orthodoxy**

Relations between Islam and Orthodoxy, the predominant religion in Russia, are far from simple. Dialogue between them is a subject popular with churchmen of both confessions, as well as politicians and journalists. The official mass media, including radio and television, like to describe the dialogue as successful and as being an immanent factor of Russia’s socio-political and religious life. Formally, such an opinion is difficult to dispute: it is confirmed by numerous statements in favor of such a dialogue, the efforts of representatives of both religions to promote peace, and a great number of conferences, seminars and other meetings at which the words “dialogue” and “interaction” are used repeatedly.

There is no doubt that in a polyethnic and polyconfessional country dialogue is absolutely necessary. It is not so easy, however, to define this particular dialogue or to describe the state it is in at present. The notion of inter-confessional dialogue comprises several aspects, and each of them is so important that it seems impossible to determine their priorities. One of these aspects is mutual understanding and tolerance between the Muslims and the Orthodox believers.

During the Soviet rule there was no such problem: inter-confessional distinctions were simply ignored, since the atheist state declared religion the domain of old people and a “moribund phenomenon” in general (in the early 1960s the then head of state Nikita Khrushchev promised to show the people “the last remaining priest”). The liberalization of the late 1980s led

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<sup>24</sup> Islam and Politics (based on material devoted to Chechnya). Islam and Politics in the North Caucasus. The North Caucasian Review. Issue One, Rostov-on-Don, 2001, p. 75.

to a renaissance of religion, one of the aspects of which was the realization by citizens, including Muslims (or, perhaps, Muslims above all), of their confessional belonging. Suddenly, the Russian citizen discovered that his neighbors or co-workers or even relatives and friends may not only belong to a different ethnic group but also profess a different religion, such as Islam. They may go to a different church, a mosque for instance, and have their own ideas about righteousness. The Russian citizen learned that a Muslim had over a billion fellow believers all over the world, whom he could appeal to and express his solidarity with, even if this was against Russia's interests – as it was during the conflict between the Muslims and the Orthodox believers in Kosovo. Here is a historical allusion that seems relevant: in the early 19th century, during the Russian-Turkish war, the Muslims of the Russian Empire refused to fight against their fellow believers, the Turks. Showing understanding, the Russian government allowed them not to go to war against “their brothers in faith.”<sup>25</sup>

Confessional differences hamper national consolidation. Beginning with the sending of Soviet troops to Afghanistan in 1979, the USSR, and then Russia, was continually involved, directly or indirectly, in conflicts in which it opposed Muslims. This could not but produce an adverse effect on the Orthodox believers' perception of the Muslims, and vice versa. Islamophobia is spreading in Russian society,<sup>26</sup> which builds up tension not only in areas where Muslim and Slavic populations live in close proximity to each other – as this is, for instance, in Southern Russia – but also in several other regions where the number of migrants from the Caucasus is growing.

It is common knowledge that in the mass consciousness Islam is being increasingly associated with militants wearing green headbands and armed with Kalashnikov automatic rifles. According to a sociological survey conducted in Moscow back in 1994, 15.5% of the capital's population had a negative attitude to Islam. There is no doubt that today, several years later, this percentage is much higher – owing to the war in Chechnya. There is much evidence that Slavic populations resent the opening of mosques and religious centers, and even the setting up of Muslim cemeteries.<sup>27</sup> It is noteworthy, for instance, that in some towns of the Moscow Region the local authorities gave Muslims permission to open new mosques only upon securing the consent of the local Russian Orthodox Church leaders.

Of course, it would be wrong to say that today only the feelings of mutual enmity underlie the relations between the Muslims and the Orthodox believers. On the whole, their relations are characterized either by tolerance or elementary indifference. However, the conflict of religious identities still exists, particularly in view of the fact that both religions claim being perfect and possessing the ultimate truth. Typically, some Islamic radical ideologists, such as Geidar Jemal for instance, believe that the general crisis in Russia can be overcome through the country's Islamization. With all the outward absurdity of such an assertion, it is in keeping with the basic Islamic belief that in the long run all the people on earth will be converted to Islam. This, incidentally, is the spirit of the letter which Ayatollah Khomeini sent to Mikhail Gorbachev

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<sup>25</sup> Sergei Melkov. *The Islamic Factor in Present-Day Russia*. Moscow, 1998, p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> For details see: A.V. Kudryavtsev. *Islamophobia in Post-Soviet Russia*. Published in: *Islam in the CIS*. The Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 1998, pp. 170-171.

<sup>27</sup> In Moscow the planned cornerstone-laying ceremony at the construction site of a Muslim center never took place; in Vladivostok it was forbidden to build a mosque on a construction site selected by the Muslims because the building would be higher than the nearby Orthodox church; in Murmansk, at the construction site of a mosque, building machines and equipment were partly stolen and partly broken, etc.

in 1989. In his message the Iranian leader urged his Soviet counterpart to embark upon the path of the true faith.<sup>28</sup> And so it rather follows that from the formal theological viewpoint a compromise between Orthodoxy and Islam is more than difficult.

This is well understood by churchmen in both religions who, despite mutual suspicion, are trying to achieve a mutual consensus – even if an unstable one. Maintaining constant contact between the clergies is another important aspect of the inter-confessional dialogue. Here too there are achievements and problems. This dialogue is actually a “trialogue”, since the Muslim clergy and the Orthodox church build their relations with due account of the position of those in power. Taking place against the background of the socio-cultural formation of a new Russia, this triologue bears the imprint of historical tradition. Finally, it cannot be comprehended outside the context of relations between church and state.

Orthodoxy has always played a special role in Russia’s state development, and its influence on the country’s official ideology has always been great. After the more than 70-year-long period of communist atheism the Russian Orthodox Church (further on abbreviated as ROC) frankly indicated its claim to a special place within the Russian state structure, as well as the right to give advice to those in power. Suffice it to recall that during the abortive coup of 1993, Alexiy II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, attempted to mediate (although unsuccessfully) between President Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet. In recent years the patriarch has constantly figured among the country’s leading politicians and his rating has been rising steadily. In the summer of 2001 he was among the top ten politicians in Russia. In the year 2000 the ROC Archbishops’ Council adopted “The Fundamentals of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church”, its first-ever independent social doctrine which set forth the main principles of the organization and functioning of society.<sup>1</sup> Appeals to Orthodoxy were made by some experts who were close to those in power and who, in the late 1990s, worked hard (without success though) on a project of “the national Russian idea.” Finally, the ROC legalized in fact its participation in all sorts of political actions. The Moscow patriarch sitting on the right of the President, clergymen consecrating large industrial enterprises (including projects of military importance), priests present among the troops during the oath-taking ceremony – all that became part and parcel of Russia’s secular life. It shows that if the ROC is not trying to achieve the status of an official religion for Orthodoxy (which is unrealistic, of course), then it wants to make this religion “the first among equals.”

As for the state, its attitude to these claims is ambivalent. On the one hand, the secular nature of government in Russia has never been doubted. In other words, the Russian Federation has always been true to the principle of secularism. On the other hand, at times the ruling establishment, which has failed to resolve many of the social problems, including the settling of the Chechen conflict, feels that it has to buttress up its legitimacy and tries to do so with the help of the ROC.<sup>2</sup> It still is not quite clear whether the state only flirts with the church and tries to exploit its authority, or whether it really sees the church as one of its mainstays.

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<sup>28</sup> In his letter to Gorbachev Ayatollah Khomeini wrote: “Your country’s chief problem is not in the sphere of economics, or in the absence of freedom, or in ownership. Your chief problem is that you don’t believe in God.”

<sup>1</sup>Work on the “Fundamentals...”, started back in 1994, included sections entitled: “The Church and Politics”, “The Church and the State” and “The Church and the Nation.”

<sup>2</sup>At the same time, the desire of some politicians, including high-placed ones and the President himself, to demonstrate their adherence to Orthodoxy often evokes people’s irritation with the none-too-popular ruling establishment and the church which serves its interests.

The fact that the ROC is close to the power structure, the repeated declarations by ruling politicians of their loyalty to Christianity, and the persistent statements of Russian nationalists to the effect that Russia can and must be an Orthodox power and the patron of the Orthodox believers all over the world (such statements were particularly frequent in connection with the Balkan crisis), coupled with the “Islamic threat” thesis which has become one of the dominant themes in Russia’s foreign policy – cannot but arouse the concern of the Muslim clergy.

Muslim churchmen, who in the early 1990s were still afraid to criticize those in power, became more vocal later on. In one of his speeches Ravil Gainutdin, the Chairman of the Council of the Muftis of Russia, remarked that Islam and all other religions had every right to enjoy the same goodwill of the ruling establishment as the Orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> Muslims are particularly resentful of the statements made by certain ROC leaders who enjoy the covert support of the secular authorities and who openly contrast Islam with Christianity. For instance, Gedeon, the Metropolitan of Stavropol and Baku, has stated that it was possible “to wrest the majority of the Ossetian population from the fanatical paws of Islam only thanks to the superhuman efforts of the Russian Church.”<sup>4</sup> Remarkably, these words, written by a high-placed church official who works in a region where relations between Islam and Christianity are strained to the utmost, have drawn no reaction from the ROC leadership.

Today, there is no meeting of minds among the Muslim clergy about how dialogue with the ROC should be conducted. While considering it necessary, the Russian imams differ as to the general approach. Some insist on the principle of equality of Islam and Christianity, pointing out that the dominance of one religion over the others is incompatible with a democratic social and state system. This view is held by Ravil Gainutdin, Nafigulla Ashirov, the head of the Religious Administration of the Asian part of Russia, Omar Idrisov, the Mufti of the Nizhni Novgorod Region, and many other churchmen who constitute the majority of the Muslim clergy.

Some others, led by Talgat Tadjutdin, the head of the Central Religious Council, are prepared to achieve a compromise between Russia’s two chief confessions by recognizing the dominant role of Orthodoxy. Talgat Tadjutdin maintains close ties with the Moscow Patriarchate and has relations of goodwill with it.<sup>5</sup> In turn, the ROC’s sympathy for him and his associates helps them to keep nearer to the ruling establishment. Furthermore, Talgat Tadjutdin is known to be a kind of “Islamic ecumenist” because in his speeches and sermons he lays emphasis on the unity of general human values in all monotheistic religions, including Islam and Orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup> This arouses the anger of a part of the Muslim community. In 1998, after the opening in Naberezhnye Chelny of a mosque called “Tobeh” whose architecture included stained glass windows containing some elements of Christianity (the cross) and of Judaism (the six-pointed star), Talgat Tadjutdin was accused of violating the Islamic tradition. Later on, his opponents smashed all the stained glass windows...

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<sup>3</sup> Ravil Gainutdin. *The Spiritual and Moral Potential of Islam*. Published in: *Islam in Russia: Traditions and Prospects*. Moscow, 1998, p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> Metropolitan Gedeon. *The History of Christianity in the North Caucasus Before and After Joining Russia*. Moscow-Pyatigorsk, 1992, pp. 180-181.

<sup>5</sup> There are all sorts of curious stories which become known to ordinary Muslims. For instance, they say that Talgat Tadjutdin once tried on the robes of an Orthodox priest and that his own ritual clothes are made at a sewing shop which belongs to the ROC. It is also known that he likes to demonstrate publicly his “informal” relations with the Moscow Patriarch.

<sup>6</sup> Talgat Tadjutdin. *To Cherish the Traditions of Mutual Understanding*. Published in: *Islam in Russia: Traditions and Prospects*. Moscow, 1998, p. 80.

Curiously, while stressing the general human nature of religious values, Talgat Tadjutdin sides with the Moscow patriarch in regard to his negative attitude to the influence of Catholicism in Russia, including on relations between Islam and Orthodoxy. For instance, he has voiced approval of the ROC's refusal to receive the head of the Roman Catholic Church in Russia.

The differences within the Muslim clergy affect the dialogue between the Muslims, on the one side, and the ROC and the state, on the other. At times, the state exploits the internal Islamic contradictions by supporting the group of priests who show greater loyalty to the power structure and who are prepared to make concessions. One sometimes gets the impression that the state deliberately maintains tension within the Muslim religious elite in order to prevent the consolidation of the Russian Muslims.

Historical experience shows that practically not a single country, where there are coexisting Muslim and Christian communities, has managed to avoid inter-confessional contradictions. Russia is no exception in this respect. Actually, such contradictions are impossible to overcome completely. However, in conditions of a civil society, even with the two above-mentioned confessions being politically committed, there is the possibility of softening their contradictions. How the situation will develop in Russia, it is difficult to say. In any case, without conducting an inter-confessional dialogue, achievement of an overall national consolidation will be highly problematic.

The problem of having a "dialogue" – between Islam, Orthodoxy and the state – is a political problem and not a purely religious one. Just like their Orthodox counterparts, the Muslim clergy are also politically engaged: they participate in the work of Islamic parties and movements and make statements regarding the actions of the authorities. Photographs showing muftis beside Russian politicians, including the President, are more than mere symbols: they are a real reflection of the political life in present-day Russia.

### **The Islamic factor is being exploited**

The Islamic factor is being exploited by different political forces, both on the federal and regional levels. A new confirmation of that were the 1999 parliamentary elections during which secular political grouping tried to enlist the support of the Muslims. This was especially evident in the case of the "Unity" movement, dubbed "Medved" ("Bear") in the mass media, which supported the then Prime Minister and future President, Vladimir Putin. Also in 1999, not long before the elections a new socio-political movement was established. Called "Refakh" and sponsored by the Kremlin, it was headed by A.-V. Niyazov<sup>7</sup>, the former Deputy Chairman of the Council of the Muslims of Russia, who immediately declared his support of "Unity." This ensured "Refakh", which was on the same ballot as "Unity", as many as nine seats in the State Duma. In the words of one Moscow journalist, "the Bear had brought Islamic democrats to the Duma."<sup>8</sup> And so, for the first time since 1906, the Russian parliament included deputies who

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<sup>7</sup> In 1997, a year before "Refakh" was established, Niyazov made an attempt to put together a united Muslim party of Russia, called "Ittifaq al-Musulimin" ("Muslim Alliance"). He invited several prominent Muslims, people who held high posts in the political and military establishment, to be the party's leaders. Among those invited were: Ramazan Abdulatipov, the former Chairman of the Soviet of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation and future Minister for the Nationalities' Policy; General Vladimir Semyonov, the former commander of the country's land forces and future President of the Karachai-Cherkess Republic; and Abdullah Mikitaev, Chairman of the Commission on Citizenship under the President of the Russian Federation. At the time, the "Muslim Alliance", lacking the Kremlin's support, did not come into being.

<sup>8</sup> Yevgeni Komarov. Noah's Ark of "Unity": Late-Comers Missed It. An article in *Noviye Izvestiya*, Moscow, March 2, 2000, p. 4.

purported to express the interests of Russian citizens belonging to a particular confession. For a secular state, this is a really remarkable fact.

Having achieved success in the parliamentary elections, A.-V. Niyazov, unexpectedly to many, set about implementing an idea which seemed to belong to ancient history: establishing a Muslim faction in the State Duma. In the early 20th century such a faction did exist in the State Duma of the Russian Empire.<sup>9</sup> During the late period of Gorbachev's perestroika, it was also the fervent dream of Vali-Akhmed Sadur, the press secretary of the Islamic Rebirth Party. However, the "Unity" leadership resolutely opposed the establishment of a separate Muslim faction in the Duma, and the idea was not supported even by the Muslim deputies.

As for two other Muslim groupings – the "Majlis" movement built in time for the elections and the "Islamic Committee" created earlier – they also tried to form blocs with secular parties: "Majlis" – with former Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin's<sup>10</sup> movement "Russia, Our Home", which later failed miserably, and the "Islamic Committee" – with the national-communist "Movement in Support of the Army", which also turned out to be a failure. Both Muslim groupings remained on the periphery of political life. True, in the late 1990s and early 2000s "Majlis", headed by Leonard Rafikov, tried to activize its work in the southern regions of Russia.

During the elections some of the Moscow politicians sought the support of the secular elite in the Muslim republics. This was typical of the "Fatherland – All Russia" bloc, the chief rival of pro-Putin "Unity." The bloc was headed by Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and former Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov.<sup>11</sup> Seeking the support of the Russian regions, the "Fatherland" leaders attracted to their side such Muslim republics as Tatarstan, Bashkiria and Ingushetia. It is well known that Mentimir Shaimiyev, President of Tatarstan, and Ruslan Aushev, President of Ingushetia, took "a special stand" on the Chechen crisis, distanced themselves from Russia's Balkan policy, and demanded more autonomy for their republics. (The Chechen separatist movement was formed during the period when the national republics were granted greater sovereignty. Particularly prominent among them was Tatarstan which in 1994 signed with the Center a Treaty of the Delimitation of Powers which gave that republic very broad rights, including in the sphere of foreign relations.)

The fact of the regional Muslim elite taking part in the work of the "Fatherland" bloc enabled some PR specialists from "Unity" to accuse Luzhkov and Primakov of conniving with Islamic radicalism and separatism. After "Fatherland" suffered a fiasco the Muslim politicians who had supported it were compelled to demonstrate their loyalty to the winners, first and foremost to Vladimir Putin who in the spring of 2000 became Russia's President.

Unlike this was after the 1996-97 election marathon, when Muslim politicians became less active, after the parliamentary elections of 1999 and the presidential elections of 2000 Islam kept its place on the political scene. Characteristically, the "Refakh" movement developed a new trend: A.-V. Niyazov and his supporters began to advance, cautiously at first, the claim that their movement was empowered to express not only the interests of the Muslims but also of all

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<sup>9</sup> See Dilyara Usmanova's interesting study entitled "The Muslim Faction and Problems of the 'Freedom of Conscience' in the State Duma of Russia (1906-1907)." Kazan, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> In its pre-election statement "Majlis" pointed out that its policy aims and tasks largely coincided with those of "Russia, Our Home." In part, the statement said: "Muslims, Russia is our home!"

<sup>11</sup> Yevgeni Primakov has always enjoyed great prestige in the Middle East. He is also known for his pragmatic attitude to radical Islam.

ethnic minorities in Russia. In the 2000-01 period “Refakh” tried to cooperate in that area with the “Assembly of the Peoples of Russia” headed by the well-known politician Ramazan Abdulatipov.

In 2001, in pursuance of this idea, A.-V. Niyazov formed, on the basis of “Refakh”, a Eurasian Party of Russia (“Yevrazes”). Its ideology was founded on the idea of a “congregational Eurasian statehood” which, in its turn, was based on “dialogue between Islam and Orthodoxy, and on love of one’s country.” The “Yevrazes” leaders declared that by the year 2003 the party’s membership will reach 200,000 and that the party will have branches all over the Russian Federation.

Set up some time earlier in Moscow was an all-Russian political public movement called “Eurasia.” It was headed by Alexander Dugin, an adviser to Gennady Seleznyov, the State Duma Speaker. The movement was joined by several of Niyazov’s rivals, including Talgat Tadjutdin. As a matter of fact, however, both the programs of the new organizations and the phraseology of their leaders were very similar.

In turning to the “Eurasia idea” Muslim politicians pursued a purely pragmatic purpose: to preserve their presence near the Kremlin. Both of the above-mentioned organizations appeared at a time when Moscow, gravely concerned over the globalization idea, was looking for an alternative to the “unipolar world” concept. The “Eurasia idea” seemed a weighty and very attractive argument justifying the “multipolar world” thesis, so close to Russia’s official policy. Besides, the above idea may be employed by Moscow as the ideology of post-Soviet integration – something which Putin is striving for and in which he has the support of some of the leaders of the former Soviet republics, particularly Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

### **At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

At the turn of the 21st century Islam’s influence on the political life in Russia has become a stable factor. The main reasons for that are: the existence of a multimillion Muslim community in the country; the Muslims’ awareness of their specific interests; conflicts taking place in the Muslim regions as well as in areas where Islamic and Christian communities border on each other; influences from abroad. In the past decade Islamic political groupings have sprung up in Russia, which are active both on a federal and regional level. Some of them try to cooperate with the authorities; others, being opposition-minded, act from positions of nationalist-religious convictions.

The secular political forces exploit Islam in their own interests. That is what the authorities do in the Center and what the regional elites do in the Muslim-inhabited regions of the Volga Area and the North Caucasus.

A gradual radicalization of Islam is taking place in the country. This process is determined, on the one hand, by the religious form of expressing social protest, which is natural for a part of the Muslims, and, on the other, by the fluctuating ethnic and political tensions in the Muslim-inhabited areas.

By bringing into Russia ideas and behavioral standards which are not traditional for the Muslims of this country, their advocates try to foist a stricter form of Islam on the Muslim believers here. This is resented by a majority of the Muslim clergy, but meets with the approval of a certain part of the Muslim youth.

The politicization of Islam in Russia has not led to the consolidation of the Russian Muslim community. If anything, it has increased contradictions within this community and produced a greater conflict of ambitions among its religious leaders. There are reasons to believe

that the state is interested in preserving disunity among the Russian Muslims because then it is able to manipulate different groupings which continually turn to it for help and support. A united Muslim umma, on the other hand, can become politically independent, which is bound to affect the correlation of forces within Russia.

The attitude of the Russian ruling establishment to Islam is rather reserved. The Kremlin wants a conformist Islam and reacts negatively to any deviations from conformism, particularly since in the 1990s Islam served not only as the banner of the Chechen resistance, but was also employed by the opposition in the Muslim regions.

The terrorist attacks carried out against the United States in the autumn of 2001 and the following antiterrorist operation launched by the United States and its allies produced a dual reaction among the Russian Muslims. On the one hand, they sincerely sympathized with the victims of the attacks in New York and Washington. But, on the other, many saw those acts of terrorism as a kind of retribution on the Americans for the policy pursued by their country. By the way, this opinion was held by 45% of the Russian citizens polled on September 21-24, 2001, who believed that the attacks were caused by hatred for the United States, while 50% of the respondents said that the Americans had “got their just deserts” for their country’s inordinate geopolitical claims.

It is a fact that some of the Russian Muslims, particularly in the North Caucasus, reacted gleefully to the terrorist attacks. They expressed their feelings publicly, which was in accord with the reaction on the part of some Muslims in New York’s Brooklyn and of many Palestinians.

At the same time, the Russian Muslim community was scandalized that in their publications and statements the mass media and politicians, in describing the acts of terrorism, nearly always used the word “Islamic.” Once more it was said that Islamophobia was on the rise in the country and that Islam was regarded unequivocally as a threat to the stability of Russian society. In this connection, Ravil Gainutdin, the Mufti of Central Russia, noted that “lately the mass media and the para-scientific circles have often expressed the idea that terrorism is directly

Another viewpoint, a somewhat unexpected one, was expressed at a seminar headed “Muslim Response”, which was held in October 2001 at the Moscow Carnegie Center. Speaking at the seminar, A.-V. Niyazov, head of the Eurasian Party of Russia, alleged that, following the terrorist attacks against the United States, the popularity of the Muslim religion in Russia increased and a growing number of people, including many of Slavic origin, had converted to Islam. In a sense, he implied that, aside from Islamophobia, many Russian citizens felt added respect for Islam whose followers were almost the only ones who dared to challenge the most powerful country on earth.

related to Islam which immanently embraces the idea of sacrifice and martyrdom.”

After the start of the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan anti-American feelings among the Muslims became more widespread. The U.S. operation came to be regarded as an intervention against a Muslim country; much was said and written about casualties among peaceful civilians. And when the plans for extending the “act of retribution” to some other Muslim countries – Iraq, Iran, Somalia and Yemen – became known, it was feared that, owing to the West’s ill-considered moves, the antiterrorist operation might take on the character of war between civilizations. (That rekindled interest in the almost-forgotten theory of Samuel Huntington).

Muslim politicians were obviously worried by President Vladimir Putin's one-sided pro-Western orientation. They regarded the Kremlin's decision to take advantage of the situation and draw closer to Europe and the United States as a sign that the importance of the Muslim world for Russia would inevitably be diminished and that so would their own importance in the life of their country. Indeed, because of the rapidly rising European orientation of the Russian leadership, the Eurasian rhetoric on which the Muslim upper crust banked in the 2000-2001 period gradually subsided.

Instead, in September and October of 2001, Moscow began to talk, more actively than ever, about the imminence of an Islamic threat countering which was nearly the central task of Russia's strategy. In fact, Moscow tried to pose as the main barrier in the way of this threat, which gave Russia the chance to become a strategic partner of the United States and Western Europe.

The guardedly negative reaction of the Muslims to Moscow's actions caused them to cooperate more closely with the radical left. In October 2001 the Eurasian Party of Russia (that is, actually the Muslims) announced that a "peace march" would be held, together with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, in the center of Moscow, next to the Red Square. The purpose of that action was not so much protest against terrorism as demonstration of displeasure with the U.S. ambitions to create a one-pole world, a critical attitude towards globalism, etc. Eventually, the action did not take place at all because the EPR leaders and the high-placed Muslim clergymen who cooperated with them decided not to aggravate their relations with the Kremlin. However, the very attempt of their holding a joint "peace march" is quite symbolic.

Later on the upper crust of the Russian Muslim community refrained from public political activity, preferring to wait and see how the situation in the Kremlin would develop and what tendencies would predominate. Thus in the country's domestic policy the Islamic factor became firmly attached to its foreign policy course – to the evolution of the Russian-American and Russian-European relations.

Evidently, the Russian Muslims may become active again in connection with a possible escalation of the antiterrorist operation and its extension to the territory of some other Muslim countries, primarily Iraq. If this should happen, the attitude of the Russian Muslims towards the United States will be sharply critical, especially because their stand will be practically identical with that of Moscow, for many of its politicians believe that a war against Iraq will result in the disintegration of the antiterrorist coalition.

Furthermore, Moscow has stable relations with Iran which has become its strategic partner. Here, too, the Russian and the Muslim official positions practically coincide.

It is interesting to see what will be the attitude of the Russian Muslims towards the U.S. presence in Central Asia. So far, they have shown no anti-American feelings – simply annoyance with the Russian leadership who have actually given up Russia's special role of "patron" in the region, ceding all of that role to the Americans.

Nevertheless, much remains unsettled in the relations between the Russian state and the Muslims. The post-Soviet society and its elite are still learning how to build their relations with the Muslim community inside Russia and trying to determine their policy with regard to the Muslims abroad. So far, only one thing is absolutely clear: because of the country's geopolitical situation, especially the peculiarities of its historical and cultural development, the Islamic factor will be exerting a sustained influence on Russia's internal situation and, to a certain extent, on its

foreign policy. In either case Russia, relying on the experience of democratic countries, will take into account the specifics of its own relations with the Muslim world.

