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# Russia's Islam: Discourse on Identity, Politics, and Security

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

RUSSIA'S ISLAM: DISCOURSE ON IDENTITY,  
POLITICS, AND SECURITY

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

by

Simona Emanuela Merati

2015

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts and Sciences

This dissertation, written by Simona Emanuela Merati, and entitled Russia's Islam: Discourse on Identity, Politics, and Security, having being approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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Date of Defense: March 24, 2015.

The Dissertation of Simona Emanuela Merati is approved.

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Florida International University, 2015

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband Nino Treusch, who suggested that I enroll the Master program at FIU in the first place, and to my daughter, Anna. Without their constant support, patience, and love – in all these years and across two continents – I would have not been able to succeed in this endeavor.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION  
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POLITICS, AND SECURITY

by

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Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

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Despite the long history of Muslims in Russia, most scholarly and political literatures on Russia's Islam still narrowly interpret Muslim-Slavs relations in an ethnic-religious oppositional framework.

In my work, I examine Russia's discourse on Islam to argue that, in fact, the role of Islam in post-Soviet Russia is complex. Drawing from direct sources from academic, state, journalistic, and underground circles, often neglected by Western commentators, I identify ideational patterns in conceptualizations of Islam and reconstruct relational networks among authors. To explain complex intertextual relations within specific contexts, I utilize an analytically eclectic method that appropriately combines theories from different paradigms and/or disciplines.

Thanks to my multi-dimensional approach, I show that, contrary to traditional views, Russia's Muslims participate in processes of post-Soviet Russia's identity formation. Starting from textual contents, avoiding pre-formed analytical frames, I argue that many Muslims in Russia perceive themselves as part of Russian civilization – even when they challenge the status-quo.

Building on my initial findings, I state that a key element in Russia's conceptualization of Islam is the definition, elaborated in the 1990s, of traditional Islam as part of Russian civilizational history, as opposed to extremist Islam as extraneous, hostile phenomenon. The differentiation creates an unprecedentedly safe, if confined, space for Islamic propositions, of which Muslims are taking advantage. Embedded in debates on Russian civilization, conceptualizations of Islam, then, influence Russia's (geo)political self-perceptions and, consequently, its domestic and international policies.

In particular, Russian so-far neglected Islamic doctrine supports views of Islamic terrorism as a political and not religious phenomenon. Hence, Russia interprets both terrorism and counterterrorism within its own historical tradition, causing its strategy to be at odds with Western views. Less apparently, these divergences affect Russian-U.S. broader relations.

Finally, in revealing the civilizational value of Russia's Islam, I expose intellectual relations among influential subjects who share the aim to devise a new civilizational model that should combine Slavic and non-Slavic, Orthodox and Islamic, Western, and Asian components. In this old Russian dilemma, the novelty is Muslims' participation.

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## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ATTS SNG	Antiterroristicheskii Tsentr gosudarstv-uchastnikov Sodruzhestva Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv (Counter-terrorism Center of the Commonwealth of Independent States)
CCSBMNC	Coordinating Center of Spiritual Boards of Muslims of North Caucasus
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
DUMC	Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Ukraine
MID	Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del Rossiiskoi Federatsii (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation)
RMC	Russia Mufties Council
ROC	Russian Orthodox Church
PCIR	Presidential Council on Interethnic Relations
TSDUM	Central Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Russia
SAMEUS	Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the European Part of USSR and Siberia
WRPC	World Russian Popular Council

## I. INTRODUCTION

Today, Islam is the second most important religion in the Russian Federation, after Christian Orthodoxy, and Muslims represent a consistent minority of the population. Estimates vary between 12-20 million, although according to most commentators the correct figure is 16 million. The most important historical communities are Tatars and Bashkirs in the Volga-Ural region, of Turkic heritage, and Muslims of the North Caucasus, belonging to diverse Caucasian ethnic groups. Additionally, significant Muslim communities are present in major cities, notably Moscow and St Petersburg.

Despite this significant presence, the general image of Russia's Muslims is of exogenous elements in a monolithic Slavic-Orthodox civilization. In fact, Muslims have lived on Russian territory for centuries. Generally identified as "Tatars", Muslims belong to Russian popular, literary, and political imagery. Yet, most scholarly and political literatures on Russia's Islam still narrowly interpret Muslim-Slavs relations as defined by an ethnic-religious opposition. The reality, however, is much more fascinating.

### **Muslims in Russia, Muslims of Russia**

Early Russia's exposure to Islam began in the 9th century and continued under their submission to the Tatar Empire (13th -14th centuries). After fighting for their independence from the Tatars (the "Golden Horde"), the Slavic tsars, who had founded the reign of Muscovy, directed their expansion eastward. The Russian conquest of Muslim-inhabited territories in Siberia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus began in the sixteenth century with the victory over the Kazan' Khanate, and ended only in the nineteenth century, on the verge of the October Revolution. Throughout this uneven, but

uninterrupted expansion, the Russian Empire acquired significant numbers of Muslim subjects.

Surrounded by potential Islamic enemies – the Islamic Ottoman and Persian powers – and under the influence of the Orthodox Church, the tsars grew suspicious of Muslims in Russia, and they were considered potential allies of foreign powers. However, both elite and popular cultures held mixed views on Russia's Muslims and their communities. For example, Tatar leaders were still valued as loyal subjects, and all that was required from the Tatar notables to be granted the permission to live at the tsar's court was to convert to Orthodoxy, at least nominally (Figs 2002).

Although the socio-political supremacy of the Orthodox Slavic majority was undisputed, the tsars were aware of the importance to avoid social conflicts in their vast and composite dominions. They attempted to create a cohesive empire through an extensive "Russification", that is, the harmonization of cultural (especially linguistic), social, and administrative practices according to one imperial (Slavic) model. From Catherine the Great onwards, they also increasingly – if irregularly – replaced repression of ethnic minorities with toleration. The Empire officially acknowledged the ethnic and religious differences among its subjects, and employed more or less effective actions to assign a proper place for each of them within the highly codified imperial hierarchy.

In this rigidly regulated social structure, each individual knew his or her rank, which came with specific duties and rights attached. The Orthodox Slavs stood solidly at the top, followed by the Catholics, and then the Muslims. Below them on the social ladder, other groups enjoyed progressively less rights until some, like many Orthodox sects, were classified as illegal. While Orthodoxy and, on a lower step, Catholicism (but

not Protestantism) were “official” religions, Islam was “tolerated” – a legal term that imposed certain obligations and granted certain rights, although more limited than those of official cults (Codevilla 2008; Crews 2006).

As a way to incorporate Islamic communities into the imperial construction, Catherine II founded the first Islamic Council in Ufa, to secure the cooperation of Muslim elites (Van der Oye 2010; Hunter 2004; Khalid 1998). Muslim leaders, despite local resistances and a general tendency to keep their communities separate from Slavic ones (a relatively easy task, given the extension and scarce population density of the Russian territory), Muslim leaders proved willing to cooperate and adapt their existing social structures to the imperial requirements (Crews 2006; Frank 1996).

### ***The Empire, the Church, and Islam***

The tsars’ vision of themselves as masters and protectors of all peoples of the empire contrasted with the Orthodox Church’s fundamental conception of Russia as Christian champion (*defensor fidei*), whose historical mission was to perpetuate Christianity’s expansion after the fall of Rome and Byzantium. As some recent research shows (Van der Oye 2010; Crews 2006; Werth 2002), while the tsars strove to fulfil their idea of the Empire as a “multi-ethnic, multi-religious” state (with a strong privilege for Orthodox Slavs), the Church was much more intolerant of Islam than the tsars. In particular, it was worried with the difficulties encountered by Christian missionaries in the central and eastern provinces of the empire, where Islam boasted a much higher number of conversions among the local heathen populations.

Initially, the bigger success of Muslims was attributed to similarity in language and habits between Muslim Tatars and other peoples of the region. It was believed that,

in the absence of such affinities, Islam would not have been a threat in the conversion of other peoples of the empire (non-Tatar pagans, Orthodox sectarians). Werth (2002) attributes to the appointment of the Russian priest Nikolai Ivanovich Il'minskii as head of the Orthodox missions the Church's ideological turn to hostility against Islam. From then on, Werth notes, Islam was considered a fierce enemy of Christianity. In the Church's view, Islam not only constituted an attractive religious alternative for pagan potential converts, but it also actively encouraged its followers to openly despise Christianity, accusing it to be an obscure and irrational religion. Il'minskii realized that, in order to respond to the threat coming from Islam, it was not enough to call it vaguely a "wrong" religion. He advocated the necessity to defeat Islam on its own doctrinal terms. On this purpose, a missionary academy was set up in Kazan' to study oriental languages and Islamic theology. However, very few missionaries completed their education, and even fewer went out to the field to try to convert Muslims and pagans. Eventually, the academy was closed (Werth 2002).

The different approaches of the tsars and the Church toward Islam and Muslims expose a crackle in the allegedly symbiotic arrangement between secular and religious powers in Russia. For the Church, Islam was an aggressive enemy that had to be fiercely contrasted. For the Empire, Russia's Muslims were, above all, its subjects. While Orthodoxy was the official religion, to the state the "social peace" (Catherine the Great, quoted in Hunter 2004) achieved by a policy of toleration was more important than theological disputes.

The foundations of Russian "symphonic" model, which theorized the perfect accordance of intents and actions between the Church, embodiment of Christianity, and

the tsar, its temporal champion, were crumbling. Some observers note that, in fact, “symphonia” had really worked for very short intervals in Russian history (Bodin 2012; Codevilla 2008). The ontological legitimation given to the Russian state’s power by the Orthodox Church is a very important point of contention still today. While there is no doubt that the Church had a primary influence on the origins and development of Russian culture, the exclusivity of such heritage, and especially the political rights that it would grant to the Moscow Metropolitan even today, are contested (Solodovnik 2013; Bodin 2012; Bennet 2011; Laruelle 2009; Codevilla 2008).

Concerning Russia’s Muslims, the differences in tsars’ and Church’s visions were perhaps more visible in the ambiguity with which Muslims were treated. The strong religious sentiment of Russia’s Muslims, which in most cases was entrenched in their traditional customs and in their ethnic or community affiliations, rendered many Slavic elites suspicious about the loyalty of Muslims as subjects of the Empire. Muslims maintained frequent and regular exchanges with the rest of the Islamic world, even after the Russian conquest of the Kazan’ and Bukhara khanates (which had been important centers of Islamic authority in the Middle Ages). The ties of Russia’s Muslims to the world *ummah* could generate in the former a potential conflict of interests on what mattered most – being Russian subjects or followers of Islam. The Slavic majority kept a mostly skeptical attitude toward Muslims, who were generally believed to despise being subjects of a Christian Empire.

### **Russian Orientalism**

Edward Said (1979) defines Orientalism as

the *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; [...] an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction [...] but also of a whole series of interests; [...] a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different [...] world. [It] has less to do with the Orient than it does with “our” world.” (Said 1979: 12, italics in the original)

Although much of this definition also applies to Russian Orientalism, Said’s conceptualization does not fully account for Russia’s view of the Orient. For Russia, differently than Europe, the Orient has never been a very distant world. In Russian perception, the Orient is, above all, Muslim Eurasia. Throughout its history, Slavic Russia has been in direct and virtually uninterrupted contact with the Islamic world: Muslims lived along its internal and external borders; the Golden Horde had been its suzerain for two centuries; and Russia kept expanding into Asia. Tatar elite members married into Russian noble families, and many Tatar words, habits, and administrative structures remained in Russian culture and state. Yet, Russia has always struggled with the “Asian” component of its identity, in a constant oscillation between a certain affinity with the East and the burning aspiration to belong to the Western world, perceived as modern and powerful, and *not* Oriental.

In the case of Russia, Said’s “elaboration of interests” is not conducted through a confrontation with an alien, “different” world. On the contrary, Russian Orientalism is an operation of self-reflection on Russia’s own identity, both the origin and the result of a constant confrontation with its own geographical, ethnic, religious, and cultural multiplicity. While the European Orientalism analyzed by Said did not necessarily attempt to “incorporate” the Orient, Russia’s history testifies of a constant struggle to come to terms with the state’s variety – politically and, if possible, socially. The

establishment by Peter I of the Kazan' school, Catherine II's legal "tolerance" of Islam and her creation of the Spiritual Board, the numerous initiatives to regulate Muslim community rules in the nineteenth century (Crews 2006) are manifestations of the necessity of the Empire to come to terms with its Orient.

This internal tension is reflected in Russia's intellectual history, notably in the debates between Westernizers and Slavophiles that have divided Russian *intelligentsia* since Peter the Great's modernist reforms. Westernizers considered Russia to be a European power and advocated a massive, top-down modernization. Slavophiles, on the contrary, emphasized the uniqueness of Russian blend of European and Asian (Tatar) traits. The Westernizers-Slavophiles dispute has never found a lasting solution. After the dominance of Soviet ideology, which was fiercely modernist, but not pro-West, the debate about Russian identity re-emerged. The elites' embrace of Western liberalism, strongly supported by President Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, gradually left ground to a resurgence of neo-Eurasian views. As I show in this dissertation, it was at this point that Russia's Muslims have seen an opportunity to contribute to processes of identity formation (Gavrilov and Shevchenko 2010).

The persistent dilemma about the "true" Russian nature is reflected in the different assessments of Russian Orientalism given by scholars and commentators. The Dutch historian Schimmelpenninck van der Oye (2010), in his organic account of the history of imperial Russia's relation with the East, notes that Russian Orientalism has been benevolent toward Muslim-Tatars. Contrary to the European approach described by Said, van der Oye claims, Russians have shown their willingness to accept – at least to a degree – their Asian heritage. Conversely, the Russian scholars Gatagova (2005) and

Ryzova (2005) represent the opposite view, which over-emphasizes the pressure of the Slavic majority's domination, which attempted to impose on all imperial subjects a single, homogeneous identity based on the Orthodox religion.

The Soviet regime tried to accomplish a similar project of social engineering, but with the aim to shape a completely new identity for Russia. The project envisioned the formation of a new "Soviet man" ("*homo sovieticus*") through the eradication of existing ethnic, religious, and political affiliations and the inculcation of Communist-internationalist values into Soviet citizens. This purpose was subject to various modifications and amendments, notably by Stalin's nationalities policy (which opportunistically emphasized ethnic affiliations) and the resistance of "bourgeois" habits, such as religious sentiments.

However, both Orthodoxy and Islam suffered under Lenin's ideological modernism that despised religion as illusory and dangerous. Russia's traditional ambivalence toward Muslims and the East persisted. On one hand, Soviet Oriental studies, heavily dominated by Ljucian Klimovich's derogatory and aggressive positions (Kemper 2009), became a tool to demonstrate Muslims' backwardness and legitimize the regime's forceful actions of secularization and modernization (Kemper 2010, 2009; Sartori 2010; Khalid 2007, 1998; Ro'i 1984; see also Bodansky 1984).

On the other hand, the Soviets boasted about being a "Muslim country", in which Muslims enjoyed the benefits of modernization and economic development, with the intent to gain influence in the Third World – with less success than they had hoped (Westad 2005). In the words of Michael Kemper, "Red Orientalism" not only resembled

the paternalistic, “bourgeois” Orientalism of the empire, but it “reinforced [it with] an equally essentialist class approach” (2010: 476).

***Russia’s Muslims and imperial foreign policy***

The increasing menace of the Sublime Porte, pressing at the Russian Empire’s borders, contributed to the rise of the “Islamic factor” as an issue of Russian foreign policy. Werth (2002) observes that Islam clearly appeared as a major political factor in Russia only three centuries after the conquest of Kazan’. In his view, it was the Crimean war (1853-56), during which half a million Crimean Muslims accepted the protection of the Ottoman Empire, to show how religious affinities might become political weapons. In fact, Catherine the Great, a century earlier, had already been aware of it. She had consistently proclaimed Russia a safe haven for Muslims, inaugurating a fight with the Ottomans over Muslims’ patronage that intensified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the two Empires’ military confrontations in the Caucasus (Crews 2006; Vitale 2006).

To be sure, Slavic Russians, including the elites, maintained a sense of cultural and political superiority over Muslims, inside and outside the Empire (Figs 2002). However, Russia had also found that its considerable Muslim population could actually be of some advantage in international politics. Thanks to their knowledge of Middle Eastern languages and their mastering of “Asian shrewdness” (van der Oye 2010), members of the Tatar community were regularly employed as envoys to Muslim states, or as counselors to the Tsars for generically “Oriental” issues.

Peter the Great, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, established an Orientalist school in Kazan’ for the specific linguistic, cultural, and political education of bureaucrats who were supposed to deal with Muslims within and outside the empire (van

der Oye 2010). The Kazan' institute's main objective was to mold Russia's Muslims into imperial bureaucrats. However, it was also conceived as a research venue for oriental languages and cultures. As such, it revealed itself a place in which Muslim and Slavic scholars could meet, with mutual benefits. The institute remained the most authoritative (and only) higher education establishment of this kind in imperial Russia until, about two centuries later, the Oriental Faculty in St Petersburg, which had a more academic and less "technical" curriculum, diverted most of Kazan's prestige.

### **Soviet Orientalism**

The establishment of a harmonious, modern multi-ethnic state was also the purpose of the Soviet regime, which often claimed to have fully succeeded in its intent. Its apparent triumph, however, could not conceal the strong prejudice of Soviet elites about the "backwardness" of the Muslim peoples of the Union, which was at the origin of harsh campaigns for the eradication of traditional customs, including, of course, religious beliefs (Kemper 2010, 2009; Ro'i 1984).

Soviet Orientalists openly despised the backwardness of the regions with a strong presence of Muslims (especially in the Soviet Central Asian Republics). The "development" and "modernization" of these areas and their populations were both an implicit duty of Communism and an opportunity to display Soviet efficiency to the (Muslim) Third World. The accelerated development of Soviet Muslim communities was accomplished through a series of violent campaigns of modernization. "Sovietization" – a parallel to imperial "Russification" – took place with a series of impositions, from the mandatory adoption of the Cyrillic alphabet to the prohibition of wearing headscarves,

the forced emancipation of women, and the prohibition of every public expression of cult (Kemper 2009; Ro'i 1984).

Domestic and international political factors, similar to those faced by the Empire, induced the Soviet regime, from time to time, to relax its rigid atheist stance, and to allow very few local Islamic institutions to operate legally, even if not freely (Kemper 2009; Khalid 2007a, 1998; Ro'i 1984). By doing so, the Soviet Union aimed to create a tighter social cohesion among its Muslim citizens. At the same time, a more accommodating policy allowed the Soviet regime to appear in front of Muslim countries as a friendly power. However, while some observers note that the Soviet approach was, indeed, part of a process of decolonization from Russian Empire's dominance (Khalid 2007), Soviet Orientalism maintained, in its theorizations, a very aggressive and derogatory stance toward Muslims and their "backwardness" (Kemper 2010).

### **Muslims in post-Soviet Russia**

Toward the middle of the 1980s, the new policy of socio-political transparency (*glasnost'*) inaugurated by then-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev created a safe environment for Muslim communities in Russia to (re)discover their religious heritage and affirm their specific identities. After the Soviet collapse in 1991, freed from the regime's religious repressions, post-Soviet Russia, as a whole, has experienced what has been defined a religious renaissance. Official cults, old sect, and "new" spiritual movements enjoyed an extraordinary diffusion. In the course of the 1990s decade, both the Orthodox Church and Islamic institutions emerged as the most influential religious organizations in the country (Filatov 2007; Hunter 2004).

The emergence of nationalist movements in various former Soviet republics caused the secession of all of them, including Muslim Central Asian and South Caucasus ones, and generated separatist movements elsewhere, notably in Tatarstan and the North Caucasus. The numerous terrorist attacks conducted on Russian territory since the mid-1990s were also frequently reclaimed by, or attributed to (generally Muslim) separatists. Because of these factors, Russia's Muslims are often still object of skepticism and outright racism.

Compared to the past, however, Russian discourse about Islam has visibly shifted from a discussion of solely ethnic-religious oppositions, to be a multi-dimensional debate. First, Islamic traditional religious organizations (*muftiats*) openly and consistently reject allegations to be encouraging or supporting separatist claims. They firmly condemn any form of Islamic-inspired terrorism, and reassure about their loyalty to the state. Indeed, many Muslim leaders are actively advocating for the acknowledgment of Muslims' historical and cultural contribution to Russian civilization.

Second, the Russian government legitimizes the *muftiats* by authorizing only the form of Islam historically developed in Russia, and by blaming foreign extremists for terrorism. Third, and unprecedentedly, Russia's Orthodox Church and Muslim leaders joined efforts against secularization and "non-official" cults. Renewed Islamic studies, after decades of prohibition, foster reflections about the place of Islam in Russia's political system, and Muslims are still put in charge of Russia's relations with the Islamic world. Calls for community cohesion or more autonomy still exist but do not challenge the state's unity. More controversial are (small) groups that denounce the violation of Muslims' human rights and, of course, the deeds of terrorists and separatist activists in

the Caucasus. As is evident, the discourse about Islam involves actors as diverse as scholars (of Islam), philosophers, sociologists, politicians, mass media, religious leaders, both “authorized” and “extremists”, and private citizens.

### **Purpose of study**

Surprisingly, most academic and public commentators, especially in the West, do not capture the evident diversification of Russian perceptions of Islam. Instead, they continue to apply the traditional categorization of Russian Muslims as possessors of a “split identity” – as believers and as citizens. According to this view, Russia’s Muslims are always potentially influenced by other Islamic communities, or Muslim states, to act against the Russian state. The constant tension that ensues between Muslims and non-Muslims, in this perspective, causes the outburst of conflicts, even violent ones, among communities and with the state.

Although this is a very important aspect of Slavic-Muslim relationships in Russia, it is often interpreted within an essentialist “ethnicity/security” model that misses the complexity of Islam in Russia. It is, instead, my contention that the discourse about Islam should be conceived as part of a broader process of self-reflection on a new identity, which involves Islam, Orthodoxy, and secularism as potentially competitive models for Russia. In this way, the discourse affects Russia’s (self)-positioning in the world and thus influences the conceptualization and implementation of state policies, especially security and foreign ones. An effective analysis of Russia’s discourse on Islam, therefore, should broaden the traditional, univocal ethnicity/security scheme to offer a multi-dimensional interpretative framework that unveils the links between discourse and policy.

This work intends to conduct such analysis and has three main objectives:

1. Demonstrating that the Russia's discourse on Islam reflects the complexity of the role of Islam in Russia's society, culture, and politics, re-elaborates historical conceptualizations of Islam, and creates new ones to face contemporary challenges like globalization and secularism, thus going well beyond the binary opposition "ethnicity/security" that is the general approach of the existing academic and political literature.
2. Identifying the intellectual, political, and institutional networks of Russian religious and secular authors who shape Russian discourse on Islam, while drawing from – and contributing to – internal and global debates.
3. Explaining the mechanisms by which Russia's discourse on Islam significantly influences processes of identity formation of a "new" Russia that determine its (self)-positioning within the world order, especially with respect to the Muslim and Western worlds, and therefore has direct and indirect effects on Russia's security and foreign policies, at the domestic, regional, and global levels.

### **Literature Review**

After the demise of the Soviet Union, many Russian ethnic groups, including Muslim ones, have proclaimed their political autonomy. Such ethnic-nationalist enterprises required the reconstruction of lost identities and peoples' histories. For Russian Muslims, this has meant the retelling of national narratives (Khurmatullin 2010; Chabutdinov 2003) and the rediscovery of transnational ideas like pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism. In this process, Islam proved to be a powerful motive, which has induced many scholars to equate religious with ethnic identity.

Several elements appear to corroborate this interpretation: initiatives to revive the Tatar language (Wertheim 2005), attempts to substitute the ethnic “Tatarism” with the territorial “Tatarstanism” as a unifying factor (Yuzeev 2005), calls for school reforms and the teaching of Islam in the local languages, and the anti-Russian conflict in the Caucasus, to name a few. In surveys showing the disaffection of Russian Muslims for consistent religious practices, Islam appears to be rather a sign of cultural and identity affiliation, than a religion (Stepanjants 2003; Lehmann 1997).

The value of Islam as prevalently social practice has been investigated by Russian studies of local communities, which have shown the capability of Islamic traditions to create social cohesiveness, and their adaptability to different, local contexts (Michaleva 2011; Nazukina 2011). The high political visibility that Islamic (nationalist) movements and Islamic leaders have enjoyed in the 1990s has urged the creation of a new analytical standpoint. Many observers, both in Russia and abroad, have interpreted the emphasis given by many local leaders to their own Islamic identity primarily as an attempt to exploit popular religious sentiment to maintain or acquire power (Azamatov 2005; Laruelle 2005; Mukhametchin 2005; Yuzeev 2005; Hunter 2004). “Instrumentalization of religion” quickly became an analytical category readily applied whenever a political project or a public figure appeared associated with Islam.

It is true that many political actors who had been Soviet high bureaucrats and proclaimed secularists (or even atheists) accentuated or “rediscovered” their Islamic identity. This operation was eased by the fact that, in Soviet times, often individuals kept their religious identity secret. Additionally, in the post-Soviet space the definition of “ethnic Muslim”, which has little anthropological meaning, has become a current term to

indicate the members of historically Muslim communities, further blurring the line between sincere believers and opportunistic ones. However, as Johnson (2005) notes, the fact that local elites recur to Islam to secure political success clearly hints at the possibility that, in fact, religious identity may be more than a secondary marker of ethnicity.

### *Narratives of national security and geopolitics*

The allegedly “split identity” of Russian Muslims has often generated mistrust among ethnic Russians. The emergence of separatist movements and the series of terrorist attacks of the 1990s and 2000s have reinforced these suspects. In order to deal with the necessity to contrast violent actions, without demonizing Russia’s whole Muslim community, in the mid-1990s the Russian government introduced a conceptual differentiation between homegrown (“good”) and foreign (“bad”) extremist Islam, and by making the latter a matter of national security (Yemelianova 2010a, 2010b; Tsygankov 2006; Hunter 2004; Herman 1996). Although noted by several observers, this distinction has been generally dismissed as artificial and ineffective. In fact, as I reconstruct in details in this dissertation, it has now become a pillar, albeit not always visible, of Russia’s doctrines on terrorism, security, and geopolitics, and is going to affect Russia’s relations on multiple levels.

The ignorance of the complex view of Islam in Russia and the tendency to homologate it to the Western prioritization of the “war on terror” are probably responsible for the narrow, security-centered perspective taken by observers of Russia’s Islam. In particular, the actions of separatists in the Caucasus, who perform terrorist attacks elsewhere in Russia, mix Islamic precepts with nationalist slogans, and belong to

transnational groups, induce many analysts to study Russia's Islam in a geopolitical perspective. Under scrutiny is especially the alleged influence of Middle East states (Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey) on Russia's Muslims. The reappearance of versions of pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism, which do not necessarily carry a subversive message, but do create space for "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991), detached from the Russian state, has also raised the preoccupations of commentators (Dannreuther and Luke 2010; Yemelianova 2010a, 2010b; Malashenko 2007; Malashenko and Filatov 2007; Hunter 2004; Eickelman 1993).

Even within this geopolitical perspective, the limitations of existing explanatory models are evident. With few exceptions (Koolae 2010; Mesbahi 1997, 1996), the literature offers conventional descriptions of transnational connections among extremists (Yemelianova 2010a; Malashenko 2007; Malashenko and Filatov 2007; Eickelman 1993). The main narrative consists primarily of an updated version of the "Great Game" that, in nineteenth-century Eurasia, saw the interests of the British, Persian, and Russian Empires compete through complex foreign policy moves. Today, the "New Great Game" could involve the U.S., Russia, and China (Rumer et al. 2007).

The "hot" areas in Northern Caucasus (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and other territories) occupy a privileged place in the literature. The large amount of works dedicated to conflict in these areas has fostered a more sophisticated analytical paradigm. Contrary to basic narratives, Islam is no longer considered as the sole, or even the main, cause for conflict. Instead, ethnic-based claims, post-colonial dynamics, and socio-economic hardships are also considered. Indeed, the latter's relevance has grown to become the generally acknowledged main cause of terrorism in the area (Malashenko

2007; Malashenko and Filatov 2007; Hunter 2004; Malashenko and Trenin 2004; Yemelianova 2002). The Russian state, through a series of official documents and informal declarations, also supports this interpretation (Campana 2013).

Against this backdrop, the few treatments of questions of Islamic political theory appear commendable, even when they prove inadequate to the task (Stepaniants 2003). A specific version of the geopolitical approach is represented by (Neo) Eurasianism. Drawing from emigration discourse of the 1920s, it asserts the uniqueness of Russian identity as simultaneously European and Asian. Its emphasis on the ethnic element and on Russia's geopolitical particularism (Dugin 2007) sides it with the Russian right, and it is being treated in the literature accordingly (Umland 2009; Laruelle 2008; Wiederkehr 2007).

One strain of Eurasianism, however, diffused especially in Tatarstan, emphasizes the civilizational contribution of Islam (Khakimov 2003). Although observers have noticed how that it has lost political momentum (Khurmatullin 2010; Khabudtinov 2005; Laruelle 2005), the conceptualization of a common Orthodox-Islamic civilization still finds authoritative proponents (Gavrilov and Shevchenko 2010). Thanks to this latter literature, Islam-Eurasianism partakes to the discourses on identity, religion, and secularism of the state. As a civilizational discourse, it also falls into the broader debate on the parallelisms between Islam and Christianity (Bulliet 2004; Lewis 2002).

### ***Russia's Muslims' views of Islam***

The interest of the Russian elites for their Muslim co-citizens seems not to have been always reciprocated, at least not in the Russian language (Sartori 2010). Russian Muslims, though, did and do reflect on their relationship with the central state. In the

nineteenth century, European-inspired nationalistic movements forced Russian Muslims to choose between affiliation to the state (citizenship), or to the nation (ethnic). The ensuing dilemma was linked to issues of modernization and secularization. For example, Gasprinski and other *jadidists* denounced the lack of national pride of Russian Muslims, and advocated for more cooperation with the state, especially in education and the role of women (Kurzman 2002; Khalid 1998). Discussions on Islam were inevitably tampered by the Soviet regime.

Only in 1991, freed from oppression but in socio-political disarray, Russia's Muslims explored again their relationship with Islam. Two important aspects of the renewed debate concern the legitimacy of Russian traditional practices and the authority of Russian *muftis* (religious leaders). Russian *muftis* are criticized by Middle Eastern Muslims and by young Russian Muslims educated abroad for deviating from strict Islamic precepts and rules. The *muftis*, who have received a relatively poor Islamic education in Soviet times, reject the critiques as non-pertinent to the Russian situation.

They claim that Russia's Muslims have developed their own versions of Hanafi Islam and Sufism, and that local religious leadership requires the mastery of traditional practices. Russian *muftis* argue that foreign organizations covertly aim to take control of Russian institutions and disrupt the traditional customs of Russian communities. They contend that Russian Muslims educated abroad after 1991 are too young and too detached from the reality on the ground and/or are agents of "fundamentalist" Muslim states.

Finally, revivals of pan-Islamism and (especially in Tatarstan) pan-Turkism have been popular in the aftermath of 1991. The encouragement that they often received from Turkey and Iran has been often interpreted, by state authorities and commentators alike,

as a foreign intrusion in Russia's internal affairs. As emerges from this overview, the same questions that preoccupied Russia's Muslim communities in the nineteenth century – ethnic versus state identity, loyalty to the state and to the *ummah*, and the nature of Russia's Islam – are still at the center of today's discourse (Michaleva 2011; Nazukina 2011; Wertheim 2005; Antonenko 2003; Chabutdinov 2003; Agadjanian 2001).

### ***Contemporary Russian Oriental Studies and Islam***

In 2007, Vladimir Bobrovnikov, a prominent scholar of Islam at the Institute of Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg, published a critical review of scholarly works on Russia's Islam. His comments, in particular in reference to interpretations of Islam and security, provide an insight on the main analytical currents and testify of the degree of academic sophistication that Russian specialists had achieved by the mid-2000s, which, with the exception of few authors, is overlooked by Western observers. Bobrovnikov declares that “every month” dozens of works on Islam are published in Russia. By this rate, Bobrovnikov's account, dated 2007, may result very partial. However, it is still very illustrative of the mechanisms by which much of the scholarly debate trickles into Russian public discourse.

The author identifies three fundamental traditions in the research on Islam that influence today's perceptions: academic studies of Islam; Soviet scientific atheism; and the Western tradition. For Bobrovnikov, the Soviet Orientalist school was dogmatically hostile to Muslims and geared not to study Islam, but to expose Muslim elites' (alleged) “ignorance, self-interest and hostility” (Bobrovnikov 2007: 10). Western “Cold-War Sovietologists” (experts of Soviet affairs), led by Alexandre Bennigsen, exposed the alleged “falsification” of Soviet atheist scholars. However, because of Soviet censorship,

they were compelled to conduct their analyses on the same sources – even if Bennigsen came to opposite conclusions than Soviet scholars (10). Bobrovnikov notes critically that, fundamentally, Soviet and Western analysts of the Cold War maintained the same “cliché” that depicted Russia’s Muslims as fundamentally hostile to the empire and reluctant to cooperate with it (Bobrovnikov 2007: 11).

This “cliché”, Bobrovnikov observes, has been exposed by the American Islamist Devin DeWeese, who has criticized the whole work on post-Soviet Islam by the Israeli scholar Yaakov Ro’i. Bobrovnikov notes that even some very talented scholars, like the French Olivier Roy and the Russian Arabist Dmitrii Makarov, in their works still apply analytical categories devised by Bennigsen. While Bennigsen and his contemporaries were justified, because operating under some attenuating circumstances, Bobrovnikov criticizes young scholars. He complains that, in Russia, they just compile lists of references while, in the West, scholars of Islam lend themselves to political sciences or propaganda journalism.

Bobrovnikov notes that, in the best cases, scholars simply report the innovations of recent times, such as the issue of *fatwas* over the internet, the calling to prayer through megaphones, or Sufis’ use of portraits of *sheiks* during their meditation, in search of a spiritual connection, without appropriately contextualize their behaviors within the Islamic tradition. Unfortunately, he observes, the level of analysis by international political scientists is not deep either. For example, he rejects Yaakov Ro’i’s argument that the Soviet *mullahs* were ignorant of Islam because they could not translate the Qur’an in their local languages:

this is not less absurd than, for example, to pretend from the Party secretary of the *kolkhoz* to know Marx's "Capital" by heart in German. (Bobrovnikov 2007: 12)

Bobrovnikov finds that works conducted "in the style of classical academic Islamic studies" are generally of good quality. Especially commendable are the works of specialists on Maghreb: Robert Grigorevich Landa, Aleksey V. Malashenko, and Aleksander A. Ignatenko, even if, he complains, they are not very accurate in their methods: Ignatenko does not quote the location of his sources, while Landa makes factual mistakes – and his work is little more than a list of issues. Malashenko's books are more solid (Bobrovnikov 2007: 14). However, his focus on "professional politics" seems to prevent him from following the dynamics within the Islamic movements in Russia – for example, all but one of the groups he describes have disappeared from the scene.

Finally, Bobrovnikov takes position on Islam and security. In his judgment, the Russian political analyst Aleksandr Ignatenko is the major responsible for the exaggeration of the meaning of Islamic extremism. Although Bobrovnikov admits that Muslims "are not to be idealized", and that there have been terrorist acts and violent Muslim leaders, like the Chechen Basaev, he observes: "it is not these people who shape the face of Islam in Russia" (Bobrovnikov 2007: 14).

Although Bobrovnikov acknowledges the relevance of political Islam, he also notes that, from scientific point of view, it is more important to analyze the relations, in Russia, between Islamic knowledge and power (Bobrovnikov 2007: 15). In his opinion, much has been done by Russian and foreign Islamic studies about Islam in Russia. The recent research suggests that, in the last two and half centuries, Muslims have had a voice in the dialogue between Russian society and central authority.

In particular, Bobrovnikov praises the work of the German Orientalist Michael Kemper, who is revealing the existence of an Islamic “discourse” held not only in Persian, Turkic, or Arabic, but also in the languages of Central Asian communities. Texts (treatises, articles, letters etc.), written by Russia’s Muslims in Soviet and pre-Revolution times are being translated. From their contents, Bobrovnikov re-evaluates Soviet policy on Islam. For him, it is incorrect to consider the Soviet time as completely negative for Russia’s Islam. For example, the Soviet rule had allowed the switch from Arabic to Russian and to local idioms as languages of cult, which today is beneficial (Bobrovnikov 2007: 15).

### **Theories and Methods**

Conceptually, this study shares with Social Constructivism within International Relations the emphasis on the role of values, interests, beliefs, and ideas as primary causes of political change (Kubálková et al. 1998; Onuf 1989). For social constructivists, constant social interactions make negotiations on values and ideas inevitable. Such negotiations occur through speech acts that, at length, produce rules able to influence agents’ behaviors. Communication (discourse) is defined not only as a way of transmitting a message, but also as a fundamental process by which rules are constantly produced and modified. As such, it influences normative arrangements, decision-making processes, and state policies, including policies of security and foreign relations (Campana 2013; Tsygankov 2006; Hopf 2002; Herman 1996; Katzenstein 1996). Of particular relevance for this study is Kubálková’s argument (Kubálková 2003) that the attention given by Social Constructivism to “meaning” makes it particularly suitable for the discussion of religious ontological foundations of a society.

Although Social Constructivism provides the general framework for my analysis, the complexity of my object of study requires that, for its full comprehension, I recur to a range of theories from different paradigms and/or disciplines, in the spirit of the analytic eclecticism of Sil and Katzenstein (2010). Their pragmatic approach purports to analyze “real world” questions – poorly explained by one theory alone – in a way that makes the outcomes meaningful at both the academic and policy levels.

For the purposes of my analysis, I have identified five themes that recur in contemporary Russian discourse on Islam:

1. *Identity*: discussions on the identity of Russian Muslims as “Russians”.
2. *Religious institutions*: the institutional role of Islamic organizations.
3. *Security*: discussions on the (perceived) existential threat by Muslims to the State that may require military response (for example, religious terrorism).
4. *Islam and politics*: the place of Islamic (political) doctrine in a modern, secular state.
5. *Geopolitics*: the issues that arise from Russia’s assessment of its role in the international system, in particular the conceptualization of its geopolitical situation in Eurasia and its reaction to the presence of Muslims at its internal and external borders.

Each of these issues requires the support of one or more theoretical approaches. On identity, Russia’s debate on Islam moves along the lines of citizenship- and ethnicity-based nationalism (Smith 2006; Anderson 1991), and within the linguistic-philosophical discussion on ethnic and religious myths (Smith 2006; Bakhtin 1993; Barthes 1970). At a deeper conceptual level, the fundamental question about the nature of Russian identity

(European or Asian) has reemerged two decades after the demise of the Soviet Union. In particular, the traditional philosophical discourse on the “Russian idea” (Berdjaev 1947) is being revamped, especially, but not exclusively, among ultra-nationalists and Neo-Eurasianists (March 2012a; Laruelle 2008; Wiederkehr 2007).

The study of historical primary sources (Berdjaev 1947) reveals the multiplicity of possible interpretations of the Russian idea in the construction of Russian identity throughout Russian history. An adequate understanding of the Russian idea, and of its fundamental role in the elaboration of Russian self-identity throughout history (Strada 1991), is necessary to comprehend the present discourse on Russian civilization, including civilizational nationalism (March 2012a, 2012b). Several contemporary re-elaborations of the Russian idea also envision a role for Islam within a broader Russian civilization. On this instance, the civilizational discourses held both in the West and in the Muslim world (Esposito and Voll 2008; Bulliet 2004, 1993; Lewis 2002) serve as backdrop for comparison with their Russian counterparts (Gavrilov and Shevchenko 2010; Silant’ev 2008, 2007, 2006).

The traditional influence, also political, of religion in Russia makes the international debate on secularism (Habermas 2011; Taylor 2011, 2007) relevant for Russia, where contentions about cultural, social, and political power underlie the relations between the state and religious institutions. Hence, debates about the ontologically foundational character of Islamic political theory (Euben 1999) reverberate in the suggestions by some Russian authors to include broad Islamic principles in Russia’s laws (Siukiianen 2010).

Buzan and de Wilde's Securitization Theory (1998) can help to explain the dynamics of the "Islamic threat" by looking at Russia's debates about real and perceived danger – and can be effectively integrated with the literature on religious terrorism (Juergensmeyer 2003). Constructivist models of the political value of ideas highlight the influence of public opinion, interest groups, and the government on each other and on policy (Wendt 1999, 1992, Katzenstein 1996; Holsti 1962). Critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail 1996) and critical security (Booth 2007) set Russia and its perceptions of globalization and power relations among states in the global context, while at the very important (for Russia) regional level, the need for security at the borders and the related geopolitical concerns are well captured by the Regional Security Complex Theory of Buzan and Wæver (2008).

Studies of discourse in the post-Soviet space have been already conducted through textual and/or socio-political analyses, with good results (Campana 2013; Gatagova 2005; Wertheim 2005; Hopf 2002). Methodologically, I have structured my work according to Fairclough's theorization of discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003). A communication act in written, oral, and video form is a "text" (Fairclough 2003: 35). Texts do not stand alone, but are part of a multi-level system of at linguistic, textual, and social meanings. The interactions of these three levels determine the meaning of the text itself (Fairclough 2003: 11). Located at the "intermediate" level of textual analysis, midway between the pure structural (social) and the pure syntactical (language) levels of texts, "discourse" is defined as

the particular view of language, [...] an element of social life which is closely interconnected with other elements. (Fairclough 2003: 3)

Fairclough argues that an effective discourse analysis cannot be only the study of the linguistic elements of even complex texts, but must include the evaluation of their social context (Fairclough 2003: 2). Particularly relevant for discourse analysis are the concepts of “intertextuality” and “assumptions”. Intertextuality is the interaction of the text with other texts (directly or indirectly). Similarly, assumptions indicate that relations with other texts are present, but do not specify to which texts they refer to (Fairclough 2003: 40). Both concepts provide an analytical roadmap within a discourse, which is usually made up of identifiable and hidden authors, clear concepts, cross-references, and vague ideas.

Because of its emphasis on the importance of historic and social contexts for the comprehension of discourse, Fairclough’s method has proved particularly appropriate for my work. My research focuses on discourse about Islam conducted in the so-called “Putin era”, which goes from the appointment of Vladimir Putin as Boris Yeltsin’s Prime Minister in 1999, to the present day, with a special emphasis on the years after the “official”<sup>1</sup> conclusion of the second Chechen war in 2005. As I explain in my work, this event represents a watershed for Russia’s Islam, at the conceptual and institutional level, but most of the literature has not captured the changes occurred in the last ten years.

Despite my attention to contemporary texts, however, I have had to account for the fact that, as Bobrovnikov (2007) notes, many traits of Russian contemporary discourse on Islam are rooted in the recent and distant past. Therefore, I have drawn on my academic background and training in Russian language, culture, and history, to

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<sup>1</sup> Moscow declared to have won. In fact, the conflict continued beyond that year in form of policing interventions, terrorist attacks, and Special Forces operations.

appropriately assess the value of texts in their specific historical contexts, and their possible meanings in contemporary discourse.

The main sources for my dissertation have been texts in the Russian language about Islam in Russia, produced by authors from the state, religious institutions, academia, local communities, public media, and unofficial and underground organizations and groups. Following Fairclough, I define *text* in a broad sense, which accounts for differences both in forms (written, oral, and video documents), and in ways of communication, for example statements (one-way) and interviews (two-ways; see Fairclough 2003: 35). Taking advantage of some of the largest archives of East European materials in Europe, the Bayern State Library in Munich, Germany, the Virtual Library Eastern Europe, I have consulted primary sources in printed form (books, journals, magazines, and newspapers).

The characteristics of contemporary social communication, which takes place via virtual networks of communities and individuals, have imposed that at least an equal amount of materials be found on the World Wide Web, in online editions of large mass media, official institutional websites, and blogs. The availability of virtual sources also outside of Russia has reduced the need to conduct field research in the country – at least for the purposes of this study, which does not intend to provide an exhaustive index of Russian sources, or even themes, on Islam.

The selection of the relevant sources and the assessment of their importance relative to other sources and to the contexts are two major challenges in discourse analysis. In my study, I have started from those authors whom I have encountered in the literature (for example, Malashenko), or whose works are so immediately visible that

cannot be ignored (for example, articles in the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*). I have proceeded by systematically identifying, for each text, eventual references to other texts (intertextuality) and to the context (assumptions), in order to both establish affinities/oppositions and to estimate thematic and authorial influences on the discourse. The frequency of intertextual references testifies, to a certain degree, of the significance, in the discourse, of a given topic or author. In addition to the tracing of networks of intellectual relations, by way of indirect quotations or argumentative references this procedure helps to compensate for eventual paucity of materials related to significant authors.

### **Significance of Study**

The intended contribution of this study to the scholarly work is manifold.

1. The main purpose of this dissertation is to provide an account of Russia's discourse on Islam that reflects the diversity of the authors, texts, and themes that constitute Russian thinking about Islam. It intends to close the gap in the scholarly and political literature that tends to identify Islam solely as a marker of ethnic identity and/or a cause of security concerns.
2. With my research, I have devised a composite method of analysis of the complex subject that is Russian discourse on Islam. This work shows how an analytically eclectic approach consents not only the identification of key issues and their relations, but also an adequate explanation of single topics and their context.
3. Further, this study aims to contribute to the subfields of religion and security in International Relations, by showing the development of contemporary Russia's

conceptualizations of key issues like religion in a secular state, inter-religious relations, and domestic and international religious security.

4. Finally, I provide scholars and commentators of Islam in International Relations with a compelling case study, thus undermining their assumptions of Russian exceptionalism and its subsequent absence from their comparative literature. As Dannreuther (2010) points out, this is a task long overdue.

## CHAPTER II

### THE IDENTITY OF RUSSIA'S MUSLIMS

*Scratch a Russian, and you will find a Tatar.*<sup>2</sup>

Despite its claims of Europeanness, Russia *was* a Eurasian Empire, multiethnic and multi-religious. Russia's desire to belong to the clique of European great powers was frustrated by this same clique's perception of Russia as "oriental" and thus extraneous, if at times exotically attractive. In fact, the contradictions of its own self-conception dominated much of Russia's intellectual history and concretely affected the Empire's strategies in foreign policy.

Even the Soviet Union, which had intended to sever all ties with the imperial past and create a new society, communist, modern, and atheist, could not solve this fundamental dilemma. Despite the intense and often ferocious zeal with which Soviet authorities and bureaucrats pursued their task of replacing tsarist imperialism with socialism and multi-nationalism, traces of the pre-revolutionary mindset survived in social habits and, especially, in the citizens' consciences. They found expression mostly in the secrecy of private spaces. Paradoxically, despite the Soviets' emphasis on the novelty of their political idea, much of the internal (and external) rhetoric of the USSR recalled the imperial, messianic idea of Russia as a predestined world power. Indeed,

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<sup>2</sup> The expression was actually coined by the Marquis de Custine, a French aristocrat who traveled in Russia in the 19th century. Originally intended to expose the Russians' glossy, but superficial European identity, it has since then entered Russian popular culture, with ambivalent meanings: either to expose ethnic Russian's racism, or the opposite.

since the time of Stalin's rule, and especially since World War II, it was expressed in various forms of Soviet "nationalism" (Laruelle 2009).

Under both the Romanovs and the Soviets, the Orient has remained a constant in self-conceptualizations of Russian people and state – through its presence as well as through its absence. The idea of an Oriental Russia was criticized in the campaigns of modernization fiercely conducted by Peter the Great, Alexander II, and various Soviet governments; it represented Russia's mythical heritage for the nineteenth century's Slavophiles; finally, it was the implicit enemy in Struve's and Stolypin's early-twentieth-century's efforts to bring Russia to an industrial par with England. Even the Russian emigrants in Paris engaged with the Eurasian question in the 1920s.

The discourse on Russia's identity, of course, could not be completed without the participation of the Orthodox Church, which had fundamentally contributed to the shape of Russian culture, society, and politics, and which held an even more ambiguous stance. Throughout the centuries, the efforts of so many parties involved have only brought temporary agreements. Indeed, the definition of what Russia is and where it should belong appears to be extremely elusive, even to Russians themselves.

### **Geography of identity**

In this search for identity, what remains constant is the oscillation between two geographical poles – Europe and Asia – and the civilizational implications that belonging to the one or the other carries. The apparent impossibility to opt for one by excluding the other induced many Russians to envision a unique Russian character, an idea of Russia that would actually combine the best elements of Europe and Asia. According to this vision, in the same way that Russia's territory determined Russians' squinting

geopolitical perspective, it also conferred on Russia a pivotal role in the world. Geography determined civilization. For Russians, it proved the uniqueness and importance of Russia's civilizational mission, of its special place in history, and of its future as pivotal world power. It is not therefore a surprise that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the invalidation of its ideological certainties, and its crumbling as a world great power, the majority of citizens remained deeply disoriented; not knowing their place in the world anymore, they were at loss in their own country.

One model to look at was, of course, the West, which had prospered while Communism had failed. Yet, the failure of the liberal reforms promised by Yeltsin and his ministers and the excesses of capitalism – which in Russia had been interpreted as the triumph of business shrewdness, opportunism, and “survival of the fittest” – quickly left the great majority of the population in miserable conditions. Thus, Yeltsin's initial enthusiasm for Western liberalism, sustained by the United States, failed to plant Western values on the Russian “national” soil (Laruelle 2009). Soon enough, a strong wave of anti-Western attitudes grew among Russians, who gradually turned away from the United States as an economic and, especially, cultural model and began to look inwardly for alternatives.

### **The Religious “Renaissance”**

In the 1990s, once repressed religions emerged and blossomed, offering individuals both immediate consolation to endure hard times and, if they needed one, a new basis on which to build individual and collective self-identities. For Christians and Muslims alike, as well as for all those following the other religions and the numerous spiritual

movements that blossomed in the 1990s, there was an opportunity to express alternative existential, social, and political values.

Against this backdrop, the nostalgia for the tsarist epoch, which had lingered in Soviet times, also grew, and in the 2000s became even stronger. This positive imperial image is reinforced by the prestige that pre-Revolution Russia enjoyed in the world community and, in only apparent contradiction, by the status of “great power” even more prestigiously held by the Soviet Union (Laruelle 2009). Indeed, a significant debate among commentators, in Russia and abroad, has developed about the “imperial” character of post-Soviet Russia’s, especially Putin’s, foreign policy (Trenin 2011; Laruelle 2008). Although the recall of past imperial glory, in nationalist movements, is more a vague sentiment than a re-proposal of tsarist values – also because it is mixed with nostalgia for Soviet-era prestige – it may have contributed to the birth and success of what Marlène Laruelle (2009) calls “Putin’s nationalism”: a mixture of economic Westernism, Russian exceptionalism, and political pragmatism. Not all Russians, though, agree with Putin.

The search for a satisfying definition of Russia’s new identity, in fact, is far from being completed. Once more, the state, the Church, and the intellectuals are attempting to determine the self-perception of Russians as a nation and, subsequently, their conception about what their place in the world should be. Differently from the past, though, today another group intends to participate in this crucial discourse: Russia’s Muslims.

As will become clear in the course of this work, many Muslims are constructing their arguments within the traditional Russian dichotomies of modernity and tradition, East and West, and – now – globalization and particularism. For many, to find a national

identity requires some elaboration of a (new) “Russian idea”. Only apparently paradoxically, Muslims also appeal to this all-Russian concept. Their motivations, and the bases for their claims, become apparent through a close examination of what actually the “Russian idea” is supposed to be.

### **The Russian idea as identity foundation**

In Russian discourse about Russia, in conceptualizations of Russia’s place in the world, as well as in discussions of foreign and security policies, the absence of an ideological cohesion that would properly place Russia and guide its actions: a “new ‘Russian idea’”, is often lamented. The expression refers to a general conceptualization of Russian identity elaborated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More specifically, *The Russian idea* is the title of a very significant essay published in 1946 in his Parisian exile by the Russian philosopher Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdyaev (also Berdiaev or Berdjaev). In his work, Berdyaev (1947) embraced and further elaborated the thought of the influential nineteenth-century philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev, and summed up general sentiments shared by many of his contemporaries.

According to Berdyaev, the “Russian idea” was the true glue that held together the vast and diverse Tsarist Empire. It had a strong religious component, which was Christian-based but not necessarily embodied by the Orthodox Church and its doctrine. Rather, it was theorized by Berdyaev as an ideal of shared community values, mutual respect, and, above all, a deep sense of Russia’s uniqueness, substantially consisting in Russia’s destiny as the world’s savior of truth against evil, of Christianity against paganism. The Slavic Orthodox Christian Church, though, proved inadequate to fulfill such mission, either practically or ontologically. The “idea” was a general and all-

embracing theological-philosophical concept of harmony among civilizations. Russia's historical destiny was to achieve such peace. Proof of its mission was Russia's nature, at the same time European and Asian.

***The Asian element in Berdyaev's idea of Russia***

Berdyaev's essay is the account of the evolution of the Russian idea throughout the history of Russia and its civilization. Fundamentally, for Berdyaev the identity of Russia was Christian. Yet, although he considered Russia's "Asianness" the heritage of "barbarian" times, he underscored that it was exactly the Asian element that distinguished Russia from the rest of Europe and put its historical mission above all others. Exhibiting a perhaps Orientalist self-image typical of many Russians, especially of noble heritage, he romantically praised "Asianness" as the most worrisome, savage, adventurous, and brave side of the Russian soul (Berdjaev 1947; see also Figs 2002, esp. Chapters 5 and 6).

Indeed, the Asian (Tatar) element appeared in the essay in few but significant remarks. At first, Berdyaev spoke derogatorily of it. He called the years spent under the Tatar yoke "barbarian" times. Then, he complained about the Muscovy tsardom (the reign of the first tsars, between the end of the Tatar domination in the fifteenth century and the ascent of Peter the Great at the end of the seventeenth century) being still "too Asiatic". Further in his account, though, Lenin is presented as belonging to Russia's historical evolution, the significance of which transcends Empire and Church. Despite having been himself expelled from the Soviet Union, in fact, Berdyaev spoke with a certain admiration of Lenin. Namely, he saw the Bolshevik project as in line with Russia's historical mission:

Marxism was adapted to Russian conventions and was Russified. The messianic idea of Marxism, which was connected with the mission of the proletariat, was combined and identified with the Russian messianic idea. [...] But the communist revolution which was also the actual Russian Revolution was a universal messianism. (Berdjaev 1947: 249)

For Berdyaev, the Russian soul is Christian, even when it is communist, and Lenin was “an admirable theoretician and practitioner of revolution; he was a *characteristic* Russian with an alloy of Tartar [*sic*] traits” (250, italics mine). It seems that Berdyaev, like many Russians before and after him, was in search of an elusive balance between Europe and Asia, East and West. Like many others, he could not come to final terms with the Oriental side of the “Russian soul”, although differently from many others he did not deny its centrality.

#### ***Civilizational interpretations of Berdyaev’s “Idea”***

It would seem undeniable, then, that “Asianness” belongs to the Russian idea, even within the fundamentally Christian interpretation that Berdyaev gives to it. From here, it is a short step to take a civilizational, rather than exclusively religious, perspective, and to interpret the nature of Russia as multi-ethnic and multi-religious all along. It is possible, therefore, to construct a Russian identity that relies heavily on the country’s history and composite population, rather than on its Christian Slavic roots. In this process, even the religious communities (Christianity, *ummah*) take secondary roles.

I will examine the details of Russian institutional Islam and its relations with Orthodoxy and with the Islamic world in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. Here, it is relevant to mention that, historically, Russian Orthodoxy has been dismissive of other Christian confessions, especially Catholicism which is a direct rival to Moscow’s claim

to be the “third Rome”. This hostility went as far as making the Orthodox Church less hostile to Islam than to Catholicism (Christiakov 2005; Werth 2002).

Conversely, Muslims in Russia have traditionally cultivated very close relations with the *ummah*, also in consequence of the great prestige that Kazan’ and Bukhara had enjoyed as doctrinal centers in the Middle Ages. Today, though, Russia’s Muslims are critical of the “Arabic” form of Islam and defend their own traditional (“customary”) Islam. For Russia’s Islamic and Orthodox authorities, the centrality of autochthonous religious institutions and doctrine has superseded the ideal of a religious world community (at least in practice). They motivate their arguments with the uniqueness of the Russian civilization. Their similar pretensions about the key role that religion plays in the Russian character have led them to ally on specific topics, even against the secular power. To succeed in their work, they are willing to accept each other’s cooperation. Despite the inevitable difficulties that such joint efforts carry, they also contribute to the shaping of an identity much more *inclusive* of religious, ethnic, and geographical diversity than its traditional definitions.

### ***The role of myth in the “Russian idea”***

Accounts of national identity that, like Berdyaev’s, attempt to uncover the ontological roots of a nation have a strong mythopoeic quality. For some scholars, the creation of myths is a narrative work about the pre-history of a certain community – or of all humankind – that is presupposed to have existed, but of which there is no longer any factual knowledge (Jung and Kerenyi 1969). For some observers (Bakhtin 1993; Barthes 1970) the creation of myth is a linguistic process, a speech act that maintains its ontological validity even if it may be untrue. The revision of myths simultaneously

presupposes and originates a change in the ontological foundations of a society. Since myths may lie about the “true” history of a nation (Barthes 1970), conflicts may arise when different mythological narratives meet within a broader discourse.

What Russia’s Muslims are attempting to do today is re-interpret key events and facts that mark fundamental passages in Russia’s civilization. Thus, the inevitability of the conversion of Vladimir to Christianity in 988, which in Russian national sentiment marks the destiny of Russia as heir to Rome and therefore the world’s ultimate savior, is contested. Muslims recall how, in fact, the foundational chronicle (*povest’*) of Nestor explains Vladimir’s choice for Christianity over Islam with rather shallow, non-doctrinal motives (appreciation for alcohol, admiration for Byzantium’s riches). Analogously, they point out that the symbol of Russia’s power, the crown of medieval prince Monomakh, is actually Tatar.

How true a mythological account is perceived to be is directly connected to its normative effect. It is a two-way road because, if the myth is perceived as truthful, then the precepts that it implies are to be followed; and, if normative actors are authoritative enough, then every normative account can potentially be transposed into myth. In rectifying allegedly misleading accounts of early Russian history, Muslims contest the general conceptualization of Russia as a uniquely Orthodox Slavic nation. Their intention is not to replace the Christian account with their Islamic counterparts. Most Muslims, instead, intend to stress the centuries’ long coexistence of Muslims and Slavs within the Russian empire, and to appreciate the contribution of *both* groups to the development of Russian civilization.

On their part, Orthodoxes strive to reinstate the Church's authority in the face of the state's secular official character and citizens' tendency to keep religion in their private sphere. To sustain their claims, both Orthodox and Islamic speakers appeal to civilizational arguments. It is within these (re)conceptualizations of the traditional ambiguities of Russia's (self) identity that a new, inclusive identity may find its shape – even through the re-elaboration of the Idea.

### **Religious components in contemporary conceptualizations of Russia's identity**

The atheism imposed by the Soviet Union has left a strong legacy in the secularism of state and citizens in Russia. Yet, although some observers note that today the different versions of the “Russian idea” may be based on either a Soviet or an imperial narrative, or a combination of both (Vujačić 2009), their religious components remain strong. Not only does it appear in theoretical discussions about nationalism and in more general philosophical disquisitions, it also often constitutes the analytical premise for considerations of more pragmatic nature.

For example, the materials of the 2010 international conference on *Russia's national security issues in the 20th and 21st centuries; lessons of history and modern challenges* (a collection of essays by scholars from all over Russia) treat as issues of national security, along with military and economic factors, questions of the building of national identity through religion. In particular, B.V. Aksiumov (from Stavropol'), in his essay *National Idea as a Foundation of the Russian Security amid the Conflict of Civilizations*, complains that after the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia has not (re)gained international relevance. More regrettably, it has not developed a new “national idea”. This absence is particularly important in today's “conflict of civilizations”, a

“meta-cultural conflict of the contemporaneity” (Aksiumov 2010: 10), that is, Russia’s civilizational conflict with the West. This unjust weakness of Russia is the result of the lack of a (renewed) national idea, because

[...] in the national idea the whole purpose, the whole meaning of a civilizational development are formed, which unite the partial world conceptions that have gone astray into a sole national conception of the world. (Aksiumov 2010: 10)

Therefore, Russia’s new idea should equip the country with the civilizational strength to reclaim its rightful “first-class role” in world history.

Classical arguments for Russia’s exceptionalism and its messianic mission are updated to respond to new geopolitical circumstances. Thus, Russia’s enemies are not only “Western globalization” and the USA’s desire to govern the world, but also China’s intrusion into Russia’s Far East. Interestingly, similarly to Berdyaev, Aksiumov denies that Christianity alone may represent such a national idea, despite his numerous references to (Orthodox) Christian values. He has no suggestions as to what might complement or substitute his vague Christian-inspired assertions, but he is certain that the new “Russian idea” shall express Russia’s unique, elected destiny.

In the same collection, L.A. Boikov (from Krasnodar’) is more precise. In *The Idea of Spiritual Identity of the Orthodox-Slavic World in I. A. Ilyin’s Philosophy of History* she points to religious (Orthodox Christian) and ethnic (Slavic) indivisible affiliation as the basis of the national survival of Slavic peoples. Indeed, for Boikov the belief crisis among the Slavs explains today’s disadvantageous geopolitical positions of Slavic countries. Boiko notes how one of the essays of the Russian conservative philosopher Ilya Ilyin, *Toward the West we are neither pupils nor teachers. We are God’s*

*pupils, and teachers of ourselves*, explains that the crisis of Orthodox Christianity stems from the confrontation with European Christianity. Russia does not belong to that confession and it must find its own new creative idea, built from Christianity, without looking at Europe.

Like Aksiumov, Boikov sees in (Slavic) Russian particularism the source of its historical destiny and its salvation. Employing a messianic language and an apocalyptic imagery, she draws a parallel with the early twentieth century, when “spiritual Russia” stood against a “malicious force” (Boikov 2010: 50) – a rather ambiguous statement that confirms the tendency of many in Russia to look back at a golden age of imperial power. The vision of a pan-Orthodox community of Slavs, especially between Russians and Ukrainians, is not new, nor surprising. Recently, Russian President Vladimir Putin has reaffirmed the vision of a spiritual union of Orthodox Slavic peoples, which might eventually lead to a geopolitical alliance of some sort (Trenin 2013).

In such a context, it would appear difficult for other ethnic and religious groups in Russia to have their voice heard outside their communities, let alone at an acceptable political level. Many authors who look at religion and the “Russian idea” ignore Islam as a component of it, or Muslims as possible contributors (or opponents) to its conceptualization – much as when Muslims were kept out of mainstream philosophical discourse in imperial Russia.

Yet, in one essay about the presence of xenophobic and anti-Semitic tendencies within the Orthodox Church, Father Georgii Christiakov, a respected religious commentator, observes that “[p]seudo-Orthodox (*okolopravoslavnaja*) xenophobia appears exclusively in relation to the West, and above all to America” (Christiakov 2005:

59) – that is, Islam is not included in this conflict of civilizations. As a matter of fact, many studies of Russian nationalism or even patriotism deal almost exclusively with ethnic Russian groups and their conceptualization of the Russian state (March 2012a; Laruelle 2009, but not 2008). It is exactly the breadth and vagueness of the religious-founded, Euro-Asian character of the “Russian idea” as it is conceptualized by Berdyaev that provides an opportunity for Muslims to enter the discourse, sometimes through unexpected gates.

### **Neo-Eurasianism**

In one of its most eloquent forms, Russian particularism today is heralded by Neo-Eurasianism, a philosophical current founded in the 1980s by Aleksander Andreevich Prokhanov which has its official outlet in the weekly *Zavtra* (formerly *Den* ). Today, its most famous and influential exponent is Alexander Dugin. Drawing from the thoughts of 1920s’ Eurasianists, a group of Russian émigrés in Paris led by Prince Trubetskoi, Neo-Eurasianists highlight the uniqueness of Russia as a bridge between East and West. Over the centuries, Russia has been called to fulfill this crucial purpose, and even after the demise of the Soviet Union, contemporary Russia holds a key place in the international system. Neo-Eurasianists stress the centrality of Russia’s geopolitical position, from which it derives its mission of countering the West’s hegemony, in particular that of the United States. Elaborating on Trubetskoi’s original thought, the neo-Eurasianists came to hold an inclusive view of Russia’s identity:

The Eurasian soul of Russia united itself with a multiplicity of races, cultures, national beliefs, and histories. Still today, [the Russian soul] is open to Turks, Uyghurs, Mongols, Slavs, all heathens, who have united in a multi-faceted, hundred-colored history [...] And it, this history, will continue the joint historical action and creation, once it has passed

through today's chaos. (Prokhanov 1991-1992: 1. Quoted in Wiederkehr 2007: 232)

### ***Islam and Neo-Eurasianism***

Even if at the level of nationalist discourse and even if in direct political action neo-Eurasianism may have lost the élan of the 1990s (Laruelle 2009, 2008; Laruelle and Peyrouse 2005), in Russia's discourse by and about Muslims its inclusive, hybrid civilizational approach is still a fundamental one. Mixed with historical geopolitical conceptions similar to Mackinder's heartland pivot and of Russian (imperial) regional centrality, it is also a very powerful analytical backdrop for Russia's conceptualizations of international security, geopolitics, and foreign policy (Sangupta 2012; Markov 2010; Laruelle 2008; Dugin 2007).

In Dugin's complex intellectual construction, the Islamic component of Russia's civilization, although present, plays a rather secondary role (Dugin 2007; 1997). Indeed, much more influential in this respect has become the work of one of Dugin's initial followers, Geidar Dzhemal', a Muslim son of an ethnic Russian mother from a prominent family and of an Azeri father. Dzhemal' began his political activity in the ranks of extreme Russian nationalism and joined the *Pamiat'* movement, of which Dugin was one of the leaders. He soon started developing a geopolitical-centered interpretation not only of Russia's Islam, but also of its role within the largest international arena. Thanks to his distinctive character, which makes him "one of the most original post-Soviet Russian Islamic thinkers" (Laruelle 2008: 146), Dzhemal' has gradually come out of Dugin's and Neo-Eurasianism's shadows.

Now president of the *Islamic Committee (Islamskii komitet)* and one of the most vocal, if controversial, commentators on political Islam in Russia, Dzhemal' has become a key figure in the Russian intellectual panorama, especially in matters of geopolitical conceptualizations. For this reason, his theoretical stances will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 of this dissertation.

### ***Neo-jadidism, Euro-Islamism***

Among Russians, probably the most widely circulated contribution to Muslim Eurasianism, the so-called Euro Islamism, belongs to the former advisor to the President of the Russian Republic of Tatarstan, Rafael Khakimov. His booklet, *Where is our Mecca? Manifest of Euro-Islamism (Gde nasha Mekka? Manifest Evroislama)*, published in 2003, is often cited by Muslims and non-Muslims alike as a manifesto of the adherence of Russia's (Tatar) Islam to the idea of a Russian state. It is perhaps the most famous attempt by Russian Muslims to participate in the discourse about a Russian inclusive, "Eurasian" identity that would include Slavs as well as Tatars. In fact, it follows almost exemplarily the footprints of classical Islamic modernism.

Khakimov himself effectively summarizes his argument in an article published in 2007 by the online portal *Interlos* (Khakimov 2007). He starts, in the modernist tradition, with the rejection of any allegation of Islam's intrinsic backwardness in respect to Christianity and the Western civilization – a clear, albeit implicit, critique to Bernard Lewis's influential booklet *What went wrong?* (Lewis 2002). Contesting the "theologians' fear of modernization", Khakimov affirms that, instead, the Qur'an allows the full participation of Muslims in scientific and economic progress. He then recalls the moments in Tatar history in which religious authorities have hindered modernist stances.

In fact, he notes, Islam cannot be frozen by the limited interpretations of a group of traditionalist religious figures. Islam is “broader than its legal schools” and, indeed, can accommodate the developments of scientific knowledge and even the idea of democracy.

On one hand, Khakimov admits that (customary) Islam, through its preservation of language, religious and social traditions, has saved Tatar civilization “from assimilation” (by the Russians). On the other hand, he points at the crucial moment at the end of nineteenth century when Tatars faced the “new task not merely to survive, but to develop”. He praises the *jadidist* movement (a reformist-through-education movement that flourished in imperial Turkestan (today’s Central Asia) across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) as an example of a successful Tatar path to reform and modernization – and notes how, indeed, “Tatars became strong competitors [in international markets] and marked huge cultural advances”.

On these premises, and citing the influential nineteenth-century Islamic thinker al-Afghani as support, he then calls for a sort of new *jadidism* that appreciates the importance of education and information to flourish in the twenty-first century. Khakimov does not wish Tatars to copy the West – this would be a “new *Taqlid*” (condemnable imitation of the past). Instead, he underscores how both the West and the Islamic world can and must find their own way to welcome scientific progress and enjoy the economic and cultural development that comes from it.

Against this doctrinal backdrop, Khakimov then describes the specific situation of Tatars who, “being at the border between West and East, not only geographically, but also on a cultural level, developed their own sub-civilization”. Consequently, he claims Tatars’ rightful belonging to the Islamic *ummah*, the legitimacy of their living under

conditions of “abode of peace” or *Dar as-Salam (oblitel’ mira)*, and their simultaneously legitimate belonging to the Russian civilization. With a message that seems to address both non-Russian Muslims (especially Saudi Arabians) and ethnic Russians, he then affirms that

Russia’s [life] conditions for Muslims are neither imposed nor constraining, [Tatars] were just born in this country; they perceive it as their own, not as foreign. This country is neither worse nor better than Muslim states, it is just different. This is our destiny and our predetermination: to develop the experience [*vyrabotat’ opyt*] of the pious path under these conditions. Saudi Arabia does not suit us, and we will hardly become Christian Europe. We are just as we are. The desert palm does not grow on Russian soil. (Khakimov 2007)

Khakimov refuses the teaching of foreign (Saudi) Muslims, who have no experience of living under non-Islamic laws. He rather compares Tatars with European Muslims, similar “islands in a Christian world”, who have also been hit by globalization and have seen their traditional condition change. Indeed, Europe “will always be the source [of Tatars’] wisdom and knowledge”. Therefore, Tatars’ Islam is bound to become “Euroislam”. Khakimov also notes that an “Islamic globalization” is occurring, and exhorts Tatars to profit from it. They should look ahead and find within Islam the proper way to benefit from the conquests of progress without aping the West. Thus, the role of Tatars is not to isolate themselves in a national “reserve”, but to follow the European model and serve as a bridge “between religions, between different interpretations of Islam, between Islam and Christianity”.

### ***The Tatar component of Euro-Islamism***

Khakimov’s article is crucial because it contains all major issues that are still current in the debate among Tatars and between them and ethnic Russians. First, he confirms the

loyalty of Tatars to the Russian state. He provides reasons of various nature: birth, civic duty, and religious doctrine. This argument is similar to those advanced by other authoritative commentators, such as the dean of the Islamic University in Kazan', Rafik Mukhametshin, and the renowned expert in Islamic law Leonid Siukiiianen. They maintain that Muslims belong by history to Russia. Further, they advance the suggestion that the new Russian socio-political arrangements can and should be shaped in a way that is fully acceptable under an Islamic doctrinal point of view. Details of such proposals will be examined later in this dissertation, but their theoretical premises and practical implications are already visible in Khakimov's argument.

Second, Khakimov contributes to the still unresolved dilemma about Russia being Asian or European. As far as Tatars are concerned, he decidedly chooses Europe. This is a somewhat surprising affirmation, given the traditional Oriental character that Tatars hold in Russia's imagery. Yet, it directly links today's Tatarstan national sentiment to their golden age at the end of nineteenth century and to *jadidism*. It also reflects Tatarstan's traditional independence in commercial activities, and even in foreign policy under the Soviet regime – a relatively unknown aspect of Soviet republics' management (Goble 2013).

Finally, in this article Khakimov responds to those, both in the Middle East and in the West, who for opposite reasons attribute to Islam a conservative, immutable character. Instead, he highlights the adaptability of Islam to geographical, political, and historical conditions, and praises its doctrinal flexibility in accommodating progress. By so doing, he joins a group of commentators, Muslim and not, who highlight Islam's

dynamic, adaptable spirit and praise the variety and legitimacy of its doctrinal and customary interpretations outside of Saudi Arabia (Esposito and Voll 2001; Bulliet 1993).

### **Russia's Muslims and nationalism**

In his discussion about the new Russian idea and its role in shaping Russia's foreign attitudes through nationalism, Luke March (2012a, 2012b) identifies three types of nationalism in Russia: official, cultural, and political. In particular,

“Russian cultural nationalism is principally the mainstream intellectual and media discourse that employs symbols that aim to reinforce the historical, moral and social aspects of a distinct Russian ‘national’ way of life” (March 2012 b: 403)

For March, the cultural nationalism crafted by the media is of “civilizational” nature (412). He readily acknowledges being not the only one to hold this vision. Indeed, “civilization” is a word that is liberally used by Russian authors whenever they come to reflect upon their country's identity. They too strive to identify the Russian way to the future. As in the past, when various interpretations of the Russian idea have influenced political decisions, so also today the parts involved are not just engaged in a mere philosophical dispute, but are searching for the leading principle that would guide Russia into its future. Since it remains unclear what the “distinct Russian ‘national’ way of life” should be, authors today still struggle to provide a univocal definition of “Russian civilization” – and vice-versa.

### ***Civilizational nationalism of Muslims***

Muslims see in this conceptual vagueness, which is still sufficiently fluid and permeable to diverse inputs, an opportunity to participate in the foundational debate. In particular, they join those who look backward in time to re-construct the history of Russia – and of

Muslims within it. The core of the discussion is how the cultural and economic exchange between Slavs and Muslims, under Tsarist and Soviet rules, actually worked at the civilizational level.

Until recently, the version commonly accepted in Russia (and outside) was that Muslims were simply subjected to Slavic dominance; they were excluded from significant public life outside their communities, and prevented from providing any sort of contribution (apart from a few Tatar words and merchant caftans) to the Russian civilization. In fact, new studies, especially in the West, have demonstrated that there has been much more interaction between Muslims and Slavs, even at the institutional level (Crews 2006; Allen 1996). It is therefore possible to conceive of Russian civilization as the product of a much deeper interaction among communities than was thought until now. It is indeed possible – and here is the key argument of many Muslim authors – to see Russia as a new civilization that embraces both Orthodox-Slavic and Muslim traits.

Thus, in the introduction to her book *Islam I gosudarstvennoe stroitel'stvo Rossii (vtoraia polovina XVI – fevral' 1917g.) (Islam and the building of the Russia's state (second half of XVI century – February 1917))*, which is intended for “students in programs of training and re-training for state officers; teachers; researchers; doctoral students; state and municipal employees”, the authoritative Muslim scholar Elena Barkovskaia starts by defining Muslims one of the core nations (“*korennye narody*”) of Russia (2006: 2-3). Further, she observes how the century-long coexistence of Muslims and Orthodox Russians reveals a “deeper basis of the unity of these two nations” (3). Indeed, one must speak of

[A] spiritual vicinity and coincidence of national mentalities, formed on common doctrinal principles and practices of the Russian Orthodoxy and of “[all]-Russia’s” [*rossiiskogo*] Islam, of mutual influence and production of national cultures” (Barkovskaia 2006: 3)

In her *Conclusion*, Barkovskaia further observes that the construction of Russia’s imperial state was a lengthy process in which the cooperation of the Muslim communities had been essential. She highlights how Muslim practices (*adat* and *Shari’a*) could be integrated in the tsarist system, not only at the bureaucratic but also at the normative level (103). With her work, she claims to rectify untrue “mythological” accounts of Russian (Muslims) history and thus to support a contemporary inclusive state building, void of stereotypes.

#### ***A summa of traditional and new arguments***

Analogously to Barkovskaia, Iuri Gavrilov and A. Shevchenko, two scholars from the Russian Academy of Sciences, in *Islam i pravoslavno-musul'manskie otnosheniia v Rossii v zerkale istorii i sotsiologii (Islam and Orthodox-Muslim relations in Russia through the mirror of history and sociology* (2010)) also advance a civilizational argument. They lament the absence of a new “Russian idea”, similarly to authors like Aksiumov and Boikov. In Gavrilov and Shevchenko’s vision, geopolitics and history are central. It is unsurprising, therefore, that for them the new idea must come from “those spiritual bases that historically determined the civilizational unity of the political space of Northern Eurasia” (Gavrilov and Shevchenko 2010: 7). Much more interesting, instead, is that

[in addition to] these bases it is necessary to highlight above all two religions that played a decisive role in the ethnogenesis and formation of the socio-cultural view of the Russian peoples: Orthodox Christianity and Islam. (Gavrilov and Shevchenko 2010: 7)

Gavrilov and Shevchenko decisively reject an alleged “high potential for conflict of Islam as religion and of the Muslim world in general” (Gavrilov and Shevchenko 2010: 7) as the possible cause of spreading inter-religious and inter-confessional conflicts in the world. Instead, such troubles are attributable to the loss of influence of traditional factors of stability, and especially of the religions of the world, which in the past had offered guidance and fostered peace. In their view, Islam’s nature is revealed by the history of Muslim-Christian relations, which has been characterized more by long periods of peaceful coexistence, mutual solidarity, and “joint historical creation” (“*sovmestnyi istoricheskii tvorchestvo*”), than by conflict. In particular, Russian history offers a very significant example of such positive interaction, and of its fruitful results. On Russian territory, Orthodoxy and Islam not only coexisted “side by side” for “more than a thousand years”, but “exactly the character of the Orthodox-Muslim relations in the Northern Eurasian space became decisive for the subsequent destiny of the Russian civilization” (Gavrilov and Shevchenko 2010: 8).

To prove their claim, Gavrilov and Shevchenko conduct a thorough analysis of the discourse about Orthodox-Islamic relations in history. They comment on some arguments that are among the most discussed in post-Soviet Russia. For example, they find the Eurasianism of Trubetskoi full of rhetorically well-developed arguments, but with very little practical consequences. Perhaps logically, not a word is spent on Neo-Eurasianism, besides the acknowledgement of its influence on certain Muslim discourse.

Noteworthy, instead, is their choice of one of the most influential Orthodox Christian thinkers of modern Russia, Ivan Ilyin (the same one invoked in Boikov’s essay

on national security)<sup>3</sup>, as provider of their foundational argument. Gavrilov and Shevchenko recall Ilyin's paradigm: if a "spiritually leading nation" ("*dukhovno vedushii narod*") finds in its "bosom" a "spiritually led" ("*dukhovno vedumyi*") nation, it must not superimpose itself on the latter, but "give it the possibility to join the [self-creating] spiritual act and the spiritual culture of the leading nation and thus receive from it creative fertilization and animation" (Gavrilov and Shevchenko 2010: 11). The result of this encounter would be that the "spiritually led nation" could find its origins within the "leading nation", and would end up feeling to belong simultaneously to what, originally, were two nations – the spiritually leading and the spiritually led.

The subsequent cultural syncretism ensures that the "led" nation keeps the perception of its distinct self-identity, while at the same time it also accepts to absorb certain traits of the "leading" nation. Gavrilov and Shevchenko maintain that this intricate pattern of relations is typical of the Russian empire: "These were exactly, as a rule, the relationships of the Russian Orthodox nation [as leading nation] with the other inhabitants of historical Russia" (12).

Gavrilov and Shevchenko, though, do not place Islam at the same level of the other non-Slavs peoples of the Empire. Muslims did *not* start as a "led nation", and indeed the development of the Slavic Orthodox and Muslim (of the Volga) nations occurred simultaneously. Their mutual relationships, in fact, followed Ilyin's scheme in a different manner. In the early centuries, starting with the Tatar domination, the Muslim nation developed more quickly. At that time, the Russian culture absorbed certain traits

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<sup>3</sup> Ivan Ilyin's thought is enjoying a great influence in post-Soviet Russia. Allegedly, Vladimir Putin himself, through his friendship with the Orthodox Archimandrite Father Tikhon, has been exposed to Ilyin's philosophy as well (see the footnote at p. 201 of this dissertation for a more thorough discussion).

of the Islamic one: some words, literary and artistic forms of expression, and government and administrative structures. Later, with the liberation from the Tatar yoke, it was the Orthodox culture to develop more quickly. Muslims became the recipients of this superiority. In any case, and this is the core message of the authors, both peoples contributed to the formation of the Eurasian civilization of Russia.

The authors offer a series of examples of key points in history in which Muslims and Orthodoxes cooperated and jointly built the Russian state and culture. In general, there was a very good acceptance by the politically dominant Russians of Russia's Muslims; there was a certain pride in showing off the nobility's Tatar origins; the Tatar nobility was fully accepted and introduced into the tsarist elite; and, indeed, more resistance and hostility came from the Church. It is noteworthy that these comments by Gavrilov and Shevchenko have also been variously confirmed by Western scholars (Van der Oye 2010; Figes 2003; Werth 2002).

### ***The purposeful role of contradictions***

Muslims in the Russian empire lived undisturbed and were allowed to pursue their religious and cultural developments, which, Gavrilov and Shevchenko note, is in sharp contrast with what happened in the rest of Europe and in reverse, with what happened to the "infidel" Christians and Jews in the Middle East. Russian Muslims enjoyed the same status as citizens as the Orthodoxes. Indeed, this is a rather bold affirmation. Among the many Orthodox privileges that Gavrilov and Shevchenko fail to mention is the fact that, while Muslims were not obliged to convert, they could not proselytize – an important activity that the Orthodoxes not only could, but were also encouraged to pursue (Codevilla 2008; Crew 2006; Werth 2002).

The omission is not the only one in Gavrilov and Shevchenko's account. In their praise of the precursor of *jadidism*, the Crimean Tatar Gasprinski, they recall how, in the second half of the nineteenth century, he had advocated the necessity for Russia's Muslims to overcome their traditionalism (and consequent backwardness) through the embrace of the European model of development. In truth, Gasprinski was also a vocal advocate of an alliance of all Turkic people of Eurasia against their oppressors and for their own self-determination (Kurzman 2002; Khalid 1998; Bennigsen and Wimbush 1979). The Turkic nationalistic perspective went under the name of pan-Turkism; it advocated the political union of all Turkic people and, in Russia, it was rather hostile to the Empire. In forgetting Gasprinski's pan-Turkism, Gavrilov and Shevchenko follow the approach of many Tatars today. *Jadidism* is revalued as model for an education- and technology-based development of Tatars and Tatarstan, but it is deprived of its politically oppositional contents (see also Laruelle 2008).

The result is a reaffirmation of Tatar pride and socio-religious habit, centered on customary Islam, without the nationalist-separatist stances of the early 1990s. What Gavrilov and Shevchenko seem to value, in fact, is rather Gasprinski's contribution to the formation of an all-Russian (all-Tatar) self-identity, which rejects the mix-up of Russians with "foreigners", but values ethnic interconnection within Russia as a factor that strengthens the cohesion of the country and reinforces its uniqueness.

Similarly, Gavrilov and Shevchenko highlight how Cossacks, the proud defenders of the motherland Russia, even against its own rulers, when they were deemed too despotic, and symbol of the "real" Russian soul (valiant horse-riders of the steppes, fierce warriors and proud defenders of Mother Russia) were in fact equally constituted by

(Tatar, Muslim) Golden Horde and (Slavic, Orthodox) Russian militia. Interestingly, the Cossacks are being used as an example by different groups to confirm or contest the inclusive nature of Russian identity. Thus, while some Muslims underscore the mixed character of these elite troops, the Orthodox Metropolitan Kirill has supported the project of resettling a specific Cossack community, known to have historically been hostile to Muslims, to the ethnically Russian areas in the North Caucasus (Gobles 2013b).

Kirill's suggestion has been contested by many commentators as inappropriate, and may be seen within a broader attempt to reinstate a certain "imperial" dominance over the troubled South (Vatchagaev 2013). As such, it testifies to a counter-civilizationist argument or, rather, to an Orthodox-based civilizationist view of past and future Russia.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RUSSIA'S MUSLIM COMMUNITIES**

It is important to note that the inclusive civilizational argument occurs most often by and about the Tatar Muslims of the Volga regions. They are the ones who can claim to have had the longest contact with Russians, and to have shared their political and territorial vicissitudes. Indeed, Tatars are very careful in distancing themselves from the Muslims of the Caucasus, who show a much more controversial attitude towards Moscow.

Rafik Mukhametshin (2013), in a recent interview on the situation in Tatarstan, constructs an argument very close to Khakimov's position on the uniqueness of Tatars' civilization and interpretation of Islam. Mukhametshin openly distinguishes Tatars from Muslims of the Caucasus – ethnically, historically, and doctrinally. The Caucasus, he notes, hosts a different tradition of Islam – Sufism instead of the Hanafi Sunni School – but, above all, its inhabitants reject more vehemently what they see as a colonial Russian domination. It is a distinction that appears generally clear to all Russians and that is being reinforced by mass media and authorities alike.

#### **The special character of Islam in the Caucasus**

To be sure, Russia's major separatist organizations are based in the North Caucasus. Their intention is to create an Islamic Caliphate in the region, which would then be united to a larger, world Islamic state. The most vocal organization, which has also reunited and reorganized the various, scattered smaller groups active in the 1990s until mid-2000s (end of the second Chechen war), has aptly called itself "*Imarat Kavkaz*" ("Caucasian Emirate"). It has virtually re-designed the borders of the North Caucasian territories,

assigned them new, non-Russian names, and appointed local (Islamist) leaders. Like the other major organization in the region, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, it has international contacts and regularly issues anti-Russian and anti-Western proclamations. In view of the Winter Olympics in Sochi in February 2014, it has also begun again to support terrorist attacks involving civilians (*Kavkaz Uzel/Caucasian Knot* 2013).

Many religious organizations in North Caucasus, though, do not (publicly, at least) support the project of separatism, let alone an Islamic emirate. On the contrary, they have initiated a process of dialogue with the more moderate ones among the Salafi groups, and with the authorities. Especially in Dagestan, these initiatives have brought some success. For example, a clear condemnation of Islamic terrorism and fundamentalism has been issued (*Islam Today* 2012).

Perhaps it is within this conciliating and rather pragmatic perspective that the work of an authoritative Islamic scholar from the Caucasus, A.K. Aliev, must be interpreted. In his co-authored book, *Religiozno-politicheskij ekstremizm i etnokonfessional'naia tolerantnost' na Severnom Kavkaze (Religious-political extremism and ethnic-confessional tolerance in the North Caucasus* (2007)), he begins by equating the situation of Russia's Islam with that of Islam in Europe. The common trait is the presence of a large Muslim population (Aliev factors in both North Caucasus and the Volga region) in non-Muslim states. Moreover, after the demise of the Soviet Union, he notes, Russia is "surrounded" by Muslim states – including those in former Soviet Central Asia.

The geopolitical situation of Russia, for Aliev, turns Islam into a "factor" of internal politics as well. To resist the potential interference (threat) of foreign actors, it is

imperative to preserve and protect “traditional Russian Islam”. He even goes as far as to compare the preservation of Russia’s customary Islam with the maintenance of the Russian language. What seems to be a secondary point, in fact, links Aliev’s argument to post-Soviet nationalistic stances in many Republics (including Tatarstan) for the abandonment of Russian in favor of the national languages, the survival of which had been threatened by the Soviet policies.

At a deeper level, with his comparison Aliev connects Islam more broadly with the Russian culture. The Russian language is a fundamental cohesive element, and indeed many Russian nationalists insist on its preservation throughout the post-Soviet space. Furthermore, the question of the language touches on the past and present role of the Orthodox Church. Orthodoxy had provided Russian with its written form and with its semantic. Since both lay Russian and Church Slavonic languages have developed from the early Slavonic, they share a very deep connection.

The origins of the Russian language are often brought up by Russian nationalists in their arguments in favor of a restoration of the Church’s traditional role of guarantor of the Russian soul (Bennet 2011). By insisting on the unifying role of the Russian language for all Russia, Aliev and others who state similar points (for example, Mukhametshin 2013) acknowledge the unity of culture and language in Russia, while simultaneously proclaiming Muslims’ share in it.

Contrary to many Tatar authors, Aliev does not distinguish between Caucasian and Tatar Islam; he is more interested in separating Russia’s traditional forms of Islam from foreign “Wahhabism”. Although he affirms that Wahhabism has spread especially in the Northern Caucasus in the 1980s-1990s, he claims that the economic and socio-

political crisis in the region has greatly favored its growth. Thus, the quick diffusion of Wahhabism is not the result of a predisposition of Caucasian Muslims toward Islamic extremism, but rather of external conditions.

Indeed, many commentators, including Western ones, indicate economic disarray as one of the triggering factors for the spread of fundamentalist Islam in North Caucasus, similarly to the situation in the Middle East. In their fundamental book on the Chechen war, Malashenko and Trenin (2004) have explained how the religious Islamic factor has radicalized in consequence of the mismanagement of ethno-historical conflicts.

### ***Skepticism toward Caucasus Islam***

Both the Russian public opinion and many commentators are still skeptical of, if not hostile to, Muslims from the Caucasus. The hostility can be explained by the contrast between what is highly visible (terrorist attacks, hostile proclamations by Salafites, military activities, and economically-motivated protests – “stop feeding the Caucasus” is a popular and populist slogan against economic interventions from Moscow – and what happens at the local level (cooperation among non-extremist religious groups, the population’s resistance to extremists’ actions and to exploitation by separatists, etc.).

What appears evident is that, while Tatars are working with a certain success toward the re-conceptualization of their identity as part of Russia, Muslims in the Caucasus still struggle for integration. Because of their considerably diverse ethnic and community composition, they also constitute a much less cohesive group when dealing with the central government and the non-Muslim communities of North Caucasus. On the one hand, extremists’ calls for the establishment of an Islamic government, Emirate or Caliphate, and their use of violence against authorities and citizens alike do not find

support from the majority of Muslims. On the other hand, a recurring discourse in the region labels the Russian presence in the Caucasus a (post)colonial occupation. Although such perspective may be more articulated and historically more founded than the Russian official view, it too often crystallizes in populist slogans that do not offer a shared definition of the identity of Muslims in the Caucasus – let alone a viable platform for eventual negotiations with Moscow.

Undoubtedly, works like those examined above would have been unthinkable under the Soviets or the tsars. Their appearance today, although in the form of scholarly publications, reflects a new national sentiment of a part of the Muslim community of Russia. It also testifies to the complexity of the ongoing research for a new Russian identity, no longer dominated by Orthodox and/or ethnic Russians. Finally, the centrality that religious affinities between Islam and Orthodoxy hold in many debates by exponents of both communities hints at the broader issues of the place of religion in Russia, of the potentialities and pitfalls of inter-religious dynamics, and of state-religion relations. These crucial topics will be examined in Chapter 4.

### **Muslims in an Orthodox world**

Aleksei Malashenko, co-chair of the *Religion, Society, and Security Program* of the Carnegie Moscow Center, is one of the most prominent authors on Islam in Russia. His work is extensively published both in English and in Russian, and he is a referent for many scholars and commentators. He is particularly interested in the origin and diffusion of extremist Islam in Russia, and its consequences for social and security issues. Usually, Malashenko's works in English discuss Islam almost exclusively as a potential

destabilizing factor, fundamentally extraneous to Russia's culture and society, especially in its extremist form.

In his works in Russian, though, he allows for a slightly more articulated treatment of Islam within discourses on religion, society, and Russian identity. In a recent co-edited collection of essays by Russian authors translated into English, and specifically addressed to non-Russian readers (Heinrich, Lobova and Malashenko 2011), he seems to combine these two perspectives. In the introduction, Malashenko (2011a) interestingly highlights the multiplicity of the forms of Islam in Russia – whereas usually he only distinguishes between extremists and traditionalists. Because of this diversity, Malashenko notes, it is more correct to speak of “Islam in Russia” than of “Russian Islam” – although further in his essay he himself uses the expression “Russian Islam” when he juxtaposes the “traditional” Islam of Russia to the “orthodox” Islam championed (for Malashenko, erroneously) by Saudi Arabia.

Malashenko's perspective about Islam in Russia is hardly new. It actually follows the official line, suggested by then-Ministry of Foreign Affairs Evgenii Primakov in the mid-1990s that distinguishes between a Russian form of Islam, or “customary Islam”, and a foreign version of it, generally denoted as “Wahhabism”, which is usually depicted as extremist and threatening. The dichotomy customary = true Russian /foreign = fundamentalist is at the basis of Russia's security conceptualizations and policies.

Malashenko leaves up to Muslims the burden of choice:

[f]or Russian Moslems, Islamic globalization is primarily a problem of identity. The realization of belonging to the world ummah comes into conflict with the urge to protect the inherited ethno-cultural version of Islam. (Malashenko 2011a: 19)

The potential for a conflict between Muslims and ethnic Russians is clearly ascribed to the Islamic communities. Yet, there is a subtle but important element in this vision. Russia's Muslims are supposedly no longer in doubt whether to be loyal to the Russian state or to Islam: They are torn between an idealized "orthodox" Islam, allegedly professed by the world *ummah*, and the Islamic *Russian* tradition. It would seem that, if a Muslim of Russia opts for customary Islam, she also confirms her Russian identity.

To be sure, for Malashenko Islam still is a matter of security: An eventual preference of Muslims for the "global ummah" would endanger their loyalty to Russia. Yet, he seems to have developed a more nuanced vision of "Islam of Russia" and to address his mistrust rather to "foreign Muslims". These can and must be contrasted with adequate doctrinal instruments – that is, with the support and defense of the traditional forms of Islam in Russia. Again, this is an argument that has been largely used by the Russian government since the times of Primakov, and that will be thoroughly discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation.

Yet, perhaps persuaded about the resistance of Russia's Islam to foreign extremist messages (Malashenko 2011a: 20), Malashenko moderates his past tones on the threat that Islam would represent to Russia's security. He foresees the necessity to find a new social arrangement in Russia that should include Muslims. Sure, he points at how Russia's Muslims have traditionally looked at the international *ummah* as a defense against "the complex of the 'younger brother' " – thus implying that Muslims' loyalty is unreliable and that Islam is culturally inferior (a clear echo of Ilyin's influence) to

Christian Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, he advocates the necessity to overcome old relations of power and encourages the negotiation of new arrangements:

It may sound paradoxical, but precisely the recent contradictions and conflicts on Russia's territory provide compelling evidence for sustaining inter-religious harmony. Even those Russians who shared the idea of a clash of civilization avoided direct mutual abuse on religious grounds. And even the most aggressive leader of Chechen separatists, Shamil' Basaev, regarded Russia not as a religious opponent or an alien civilization, but as a political enemy. (Malashenko 2011a: 18)

Indeed, Malashenko had always judged the conflict in the Caucasus as having mainly historical-political, and not religious, motives, at least initially (Malashenko and Trenin 2004). Here, though, he goes beyond the simple tolerance of Muslims as somewhat exogenous members of the Russian polity. He seems to suggest that Muslims, in fact, are part of Russia, and he goes so far as to recommend

the splendid book of Il'dus Zagidullin 'Islamic institutions in the Russian Empire' in which the dialectics of confrontation and the search for common grounds between Islam and the state are analyzed. (Malashenko 2011a: 18)

Further, Malashenko speaks of a Muslim "subject-ness" (30), intended as the perception of many Russian Muslims not to have an autonomous public voice. In particular,

the wish to imagine Islam as a concrete "subject" within the boundaries of a civilization is understandable. [A]t issue is the integration of Muslims on a religious basis, the elaboration of a uniform ideology (a collection of stated beliefs) and, simultaneously, a re-vamping of the entire Russian Muslim community. (Malashenko 2011a: 30)

For Malashenko, "Muslims themselves" realize that the danger of an excessive inwardly cohesion of their community is self-"ghettoization". Interestingly, here he contradicts the analysis of another prominent commentator on Islamic organizations in

Russia, Roman Silant'ev. In a series of controversial but very popular statements in the mid-2000s, Silant'ev, an orthodox Islamist close to the conservative areas of the Moscow Patriarchate, had exposed the fragmentation of Islamic communities in Russia. He underscored the consequent weakness of the official organizations, which he accused of representing a tiny fraction of all the Muslims in the country. He exposed numerous struggles for power among Islamic leaders, in great part aggravated, in Silant'ev analysis, by ethnic-based rivalries (Silant'ev 2008, 2007, 2006, and 2002). Less than ten years later, the situation has changed, to the point that Malashenko observes that the Russian Mufties Council, which he defines “the most powerful Islamic organization in Russia”, is indeed right when it recommends that:

Muslims have to present themselves as Russian citizens. Muslims can participate in the activities of secular political parties; they are obliged to observe the Constitution, which in principle provides the possibility to act in accordance with an Islamic lifestyle. (31)

Here, Malashenko mirrors – without mentioning them – the arguments already proposed by commentators like Mukhametshin and Siukiiianen, who advocate for the compatibility of Islam and the secular character of contemporary Russia. Thus, Malashenko too conveys the issue of the identity of Muslims into the broader issue of (new) Russian identity. Further, and perhaps most importantly, he acknowledges the fundamental role that, for Muslims and Orthodoxes alike, religion holds within society, even if they accept some important limits to it – and even if they are not practicing their respective faiths. Indeed, Malashenko concludes that, in the future, “it is clear that [in Russia] an absolute secularism is out of question” (38).

The novelty in Malashenko's declaration is not so much that Islam or Christianity (or their institutions) may have a political role in contemporary Russia. Instead, it is the allowance and even the encouragement to *both* religions to partake equally of such role. So far, however, it has been the political influence, or the aspirations to it, of the Church to capture the attention of scholars and commentators (Solodovski 2013; Filatov 2007).

The possibility for Islamic institutions to participate actively and on par with the Church in political life has been considered by a minority among Muslims (Mukhametshin 2013; Siukiiianen 2007a), and by very few non-Muslims in Russia – the latter almost exclusively with negative connotations (Silant'ev 2008; Filatov 2007). The complex relations among Russia's Orthodox and Islamic organizations and the state will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. Here, it suffices to note that the importance of religion in Russia is being repeatedly affirmed also by the State, which has confirmed the "traditional" religions<sup>4</sup> as the only "true" Russian confessions. Yet, Malashenko's contribution may be one of the most certain signs that the consideration of Islam in Russia may be actually shifting from "otherness" to inclusion, even if on certain conditions.

In the 1990s and until the mid-2000s, the discourse about Islam in Russia centered on the possibility for Muslims to be tolerated in Russian society and, especially, on the potential threat that they represented. Now, the discussion is increasingly about the degree of interaction and interconnection between Muslims and Slavs, starting from their shared history.

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<sup>4</sup> These are: Christian Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Lamaist Buddhism.

## **Islam vs. Muslims in the popular view**

Another Russian author whose work is known in the West, Aleksander Verkhovskii, seems to confirm this shift. In Malashenko's cited collection of essays, Verkhovskii (2011) offers a perspective that softens the supposed conflict of civilizations between Slavs and Muslims. The head of the Moscow-based SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, he acknowledges Russia's strong internal racism, especially toward the peoples from the Caucasus and Central Asia, who are for the most part Muslim (121). Yet, he blames the mass media for the (mis)formation of public opinion. Commenting on the pitfalls to a correct interpretation of social surveys, he notes how

[Russians' opinion toward the country's Muslim communities and Islam is] not only shaped by some events, but also by the subsequent debates which may be conducted for a long time and develop a dynamic of their own. Different actors influence this dynamic and it is not always easy to ascertain which actors contributed what. (Verkhovskii 2011: 124)

Although he astonishingly states that "homegrown Muslims" are the result of the first "direct encounter" of Russians with Muslims that had occurred during the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya (124), he argues that while the mass media tend to polarize their audience, society's attitude is much less *trenchant*:

the Chechen separatists themselves transformed into jihadists, and that could be perceived clearly by the man in the street, since the mass media permanently commented on this transformation and not infrequently exaggerated it. (Verkhovskii 2011: 125)

In fact, Verkhovskii claims,

[t]he Chechen wars did not generate mass Islamophobia, if one understands by this term a negative attitude towards Islam, and not towards Muslims. (Verkhovskii 2011: 125)

For Verkhovskii, Russians distinguish very well between Islam and Muslims, and are only mistrustful of the former, while they do not perceive Muslims citizens as threatening. Verkhovskii argues that the close and long-term interaction in everyday life between ethnic Russian and Muslims generates familiarity. One may interpret this observation as a version of an inclusive civilizational (as defined by March (2012b)) argument. It may mirror an increase in the degree of inclusion granted by Russians to Muslims – but only to those who share important element such as language and habits (the “everyday neighbors”).

A similar attitude is indeed developing in the Russian population, especially in reference to immigration debates. Immigration from the former Soviet regions is becoming a priority of both labor and a security concern. In particular, the large number of newcomers from Central Asia and the Caucasus (North and South) is seen by many as a competition for jobs and, above all, as a threat of terrorism, Islamic radicalism and, simply, social unrest.

### ***The influence of mass media***

The role of the mass media as shapers of public perceptions about Islam is acknowledged by many observers, and not only in the case of extremism or terrorism. Diliara Akhmetova, director of the Russian press agency DUMER and chief editor of the website *Muslims of Russia (Musul'mane Rossii)* openly admits that Muslim media often refrain from diffusing news that may stir up social confrontation, like for example the announcement that the construction of a new mosque has been authorized. She approves of such practice, in her opinion justified by the necessity not to hamper the increasing harmonization of social relations (Batrishin 2013). Indeed, the question of mosque

construction, that is, the presence of concrete symbols of religious authority, is a fundamental one in many countries with a non-Muslim majority and Russia is no exception. Verkhovskii observes how, far from being divided by an alleged fundamentalist character of Islam, Russians are “only” in conflict over “the construction of mosques [and] problems of Russian national identity” (135).

Geidar Dzhemal’ too denounces the negative role of the mass media in fostering Islamophobia. In Russia, he observes, the situation of the Islamic communities is comparable to Europe, but also different, because Muslims in Russia are “autochthonous” (Dzhemal’ 2006). He adds, though, that the post-Soviet multi-ethnic and multi-religious social relations have become the field on which psychological uneasiness is resolved in the form of social tension. The mass media do not help in this regard, on the contrary they can do harm. Dzhemal’ mentions the treatment by the popular TV program *Pozner* of the case of the assassination of the Dutch movie director Theo Van Gogh as an example.

In his discussion about the status of Islamic studies in Russia, Vladimir O. Bobrovnikov, one of the most authoritative contemporary scholars of Islam in Russia, criticizes the formation and diffusion of “parasite words” by political scientists and commentators, some of whom, like Malashenko and Ignatenko, are very popular (see Chapter 1 of this dissertation). In this way, he claims, they just slur over complex concepts of Islamic life, which they do not understand. Some of such words are “fundamentalism”, “Islamic extremism” and “classical Islam” (Bobrovnikov 2007: 17). The media, Islamic and non-Islamic alike, contribute to the confusion, out of their own ignorance or, on the contrary, of “cunningness”. As example of the latter, Bobrovnikov

cites an interview by the popular Islamic journalist Maksim Shevchenko with Sheik Said Chirkeisk. According to Bobrovnikov, Shevchenko “polemically asked” the Sheik about the (Sufi *tariqa*) Nakshbandi rules and their compliance with *Shari’a*, even if the answer could only have been very critical, since Chirkeisk actually belongs to another *tariqa* (the Chalidiia-Shaziliia) that is an opponent of Nakshbandi’s.

### **Russia to the Russians**

Not everybody in Russia speaks of integration or civilizational proximity (let alone equality) between ethnic Russians and Muslims. On the one side, many Russians hold a rather ethnic-based conception of their identity that, if not always accurate, clearly excludes Muslims (along with other groups like the Jews, for example). On the other side, not all Muslims want to “belong” to Russia.

In the first group, which is of course by far the more conspicuous, the most vocal opponents to integration are the far-right nationalists. The majority of Russian nationalists have a strong relation with Orthodoxy, sometimes associated with monarchical sympathies. Even if the claims of nationalists often do not correspond to doctrinal precepts, and are ambiguously reciprocated by the Church, they offer no space to other confessions and sometimes not to secularism either (March 2012b; Laruelle 2009). Their point of view is clear and straightforward, even if it may be not straightforwardly elaborated.

Analytically much better constructed, instead, is the scholarly expression of one of the mainstream views about Islam in Russia. Sergei Filatov, in his contribution to Malashenko’s edited book (in Russian) *Religion and Conflict* (Malashenko and Filatov 2007), denounces the diffused civilizational discourses about Islam and Orthodoxy as a

political maneuver of Muslims to advance their community's interests, such as the building of mosques – a privilege that, notes Filatov, Protestants and Catholics (the other most significant, but not “traditional” non-Orthodox religions in Russia) can only dream of (42). In his brief discussion about the role of Islam in Russia, especially as official religion, Filatov draws a parallel between ethnic Russians and Muslims, noting that for both groups religion is above all a marker of national identity (Malashenko and Filatov 2007: 41).

The reason why Muslims declare themselves so keen to support democracy and, in general, the Russian state is not, according to Filatov's analysis, a true belief in these values but, more pragmatically, a way to acquire political influence. He denounces projects like “Eurasianism” as intended just for this purpose. In order to achieve their objectives, Muslims of Russia have been ready and willing to legitimize a form of Islam that is unique to them. Through their affiliation to traditional Islam, they have been able to appease Russia's fears of the Islamic factor. Geopolitically, they have successfully isolated themselves from other, more radical, Muslims of the Middle East. Internally, they have demonstrated their belonging to Russia.

About Filatov's argument, there are two observations to make. On one side, he contrasts theories of Islamic studies, such as Bulliett's (1993) that, instead, register as common phenomenon the confluence of traditional, often pre-Islamic, habits and of more canonical Islamic knowledge into local Islamic practices. Such “hybrid” or “peripheral” forms of Islam are as legitimate as the ones expounded by Middle Eastern communities that claim a theological superiority, such as Saudi Arabian ones. On the other side, Filatov attributes the definition of Russian traditional Islam entirely to the Muslim

communities, whereas it was in fact the Russian government, in the person of Evgenii Primakov, who introduced and encouraged such an interpretation. On the verge of a conflict with separatists in the Caucasus, Primakov, a trained specialist of the Middle East, advanced the claim that Muslim subversive elements in Chechnya were actually foreign extremists who had infiltrated Russian communities. Primakov's interpretation has remained the official line of the Russian government ever since.

Roman Silant'ev, in his enormously popular books on the history of Islam in Russia and its present features, published in 2006, 2007 and 2008, also offers a scholarly analysis of the dynamics that have led Islam's development until today. His approach is more ambiguous than Filatov's, but he adds a slightly derogatory nuance to his comments, although he does recur to analytically founded resources. Silant'ev's combination of erudition and criticism is the reason why his books have encountered both a great success and an equally vehement opposition. Despite his contested approach, though, Silant'ev has been one of the first scholars to offer a systematic account of contemporary Islamic groups' activities, their leaders, and their purposes. His contribution to the debate is especially relevant when it comes to discuss the inter- and intra-organizational dynamics of Islamic institutions, and their relations with Church and State.

### ***Resistance from the Muslim communities***

Not only Orthodox and ethnic Russian nationalists reject a communality of identity with Muslims, in every degree, and consider undesirable their coexistence. Opponents to the Russian state within the Muslim community stem from two main groups. The first are the Tatar nationalist circles. They claim the independence of Tatarstan, the revamp of Tatar

culture, significantly its language, and the re-establishment of Tatars' place within the Islamic *ummah* and the world community in general. Especially strong in the years immediately preceding and following the demise of the Soviet Union, today Tatar nationalism, especially in these maximalist forms, has lost appeal. Rather, what worries security forces and Tatar leadership alike is an apparent spread of Islamic fundamentalist movements (Amelina 2013).

The appearance of extremist groups among the Tatar youth has been connected by some to the recently revamped project of a Caliphate, advanced by Islamist organizations in the North Caucasus. The most prominent of them, the *Imarat Kavkaz* ("Caucasian Emirate") suggests already in its name its role as founding element (or Emirate) of a Caliphate that should stretch from North Caucasus to Central Asia, passing through Russia's southern territories. The idea is to restore the historical Islamic state, governed under Islamic principles and law (*Shari'a*). After the second Chechen war, in 2007 *Imarat Kavkaz* has been able to reunite under its umbrella most of the separatist organizations operating in the North Caucasus. Now it has spread (clandestinely) in the whole region, in which it rejects any cooperation with the Russian authorities and with non-fundamentalist Muslim communities and organizations (*Kavkaz Uzel/Caucasian Knot* 2013). By rejecting the forms of Islam traditionally practiced in that area, including especially Sufism, and embracing a fundamentalist, "Salafist" (as it is often called by observers of the region) Sunni Islam, *Imarat Kavkaz* not only distances itself from Russia and ethnic Russians, but also from a large part of Russia's Muslims.

### **An Islamic “Russian idea”? The *Russkie Musul’mane* movement**

An interesting version of the debate is developing under the surface of official media, especially in discussions held in the social networks. It is a theoretical dispute between the exponents of certain currents of Russian nationalism and the leaders of a particular group of Russian converts to Islam, the *Russkie Musul’mane*. The name translates “Russian Muslims”, but the use of *russkie* (adj. = of ethnic Russians) instead of *rossiiskie* (adj. = of Russian citizens) is an ideological statement. The members of this movement, in fact, are ethnic Russians who have converted to Islam. They have no or little relation to the ethnic Muslims of Russia – and advance different arguments. Instead, their arguments are very close to those of ultra-nationalist groups, from which some of the members of *Russkie Musul’mane* come. However, in this case their different religious affiliations are proving a strong hindrance to cooperation.

An exemplary exchange of blog posts illustrates the positions of both sides. The exchange has been sparked by Aleksandr Nikitich Sevast’ianov (2013), one of the leaders of the nationalist movement, who attempts to explain the (wrong) choice of his former protégée, Vadim Sidorov, to convert to Islam, then to adhere to the ethnic Russian Muslims movement and, eventually, to become its leader. In Sevast’ianov’s opinion, Sidorov made this choice out of frustration for the weakness of the influence of Orthodoxy on Russian society, and the lengthiness with which it seemed to set political changes in motion. Partially, Sevast’ianov “can understand” that a young, idealistic man may choose what would seem (to become) a stronger and more aggressive force – that is, Islam.

Indeed, Sevast'ianov here takes the chance to denounce the “crisis of Christianity” that is occurring not only in Russia, but in Europe as well. By doing so, he joins the ranks of those who lament the general loss of influence of Christianity not only as a spiritual force but also, and perhaps especially, as a geopolitical factor. In his analysis, this is evident in the superficial nature of the professed faith of many Orthodoxes who, while declaring themselves believers, are in fact indifferent. Even more to blame is the Church, which is no longer able to embody the values of the Russian nation, to foster and protect them. Nevertheless, Islam, which is “other” and “not rooted (*nekorennyi*)” in Russia’s civilization, is not the right answer. In fact, Islam is a threat to Russia’s true nature, and one day all the ethnic Russians converted to Islam will have to choose between loyalty to “their brothers in blood” or to their “brothers in faith”.

It appears clear that, for Sevast'ianov, Russia possesses a national “core” that must be preserved and that is the only force that can “save” Russia. While Orthodoxy (and, elsewhere, Christianity) still is the foundation that holds the nation and the country together, its institutions are not up to the task. In Sevast'ianov’s articles, it is easy to devise a series of recurring themes. The conceptualization of the fundamentally Christian essence of the Russian nation, of the inadequacy of the Orthodox Church to fulfill its mission and protect this core, and the deriving corruption of Russia’s morality, mirrors classical reflections on the “Russian idea”, especially as expounded by Berdyaev. The civilizational argument is also treated, in a negative connotation, through the explicit rejection of any claims to a particular historical influence of Islamic groups on the Russian culture. Finally, recurring to a common theme among nationalists, Sevast'ianov confirms his skepticism toward Muslims and toward globalization (which fosters Islam’s

growth at the expenses of Christianity). On this last point, it is not by chance that Sevast'ianov highlights the role in Sidorov's conversion of Geidar Dzhemal', who holds a clearly geopolitical vision of Islam in Russia. Linking the demise of the Soviet empire to the spreading of Islam, Sevast'ianov adds that the personal situation of Sidorov, a half Azeri who has fled Baku in 1991, had also contributed to his conversion.

### ***The rejection of the “ethno-cultural façade” of ultra-nationalism in Russia***

Also via a blog post, Vadim Sidorov (Kharun ar-Rusi) responds point-by-point to the accusations of his former mentor and exposes the tenets of his own thought (Sidorov 2013). First, he rejects the allusion to his upbringing in Baku as a factor in his conversion. In fact, Sidorov observes, in Baku he, as a half-Russian, was not in contact with the Islamic community – indeed, he was not even aware of the Islamic groups of the city. Revealing the doctrinal debate internal to Russia's Islam, Sidorov observes that, even today, the Muslim character of the population of Baku in the eyes of a “true Muslim” appears rather an “ethno-cultural façade”. His conversion, he maintains, comes from a spiritual place.

Referring to his militancy as “ultra-orthodox nationalist”, then, he contests this movement's alleged rooting in the Christian religion. In fact, Sidorov notes, it only expounds a superficial and confused knowledge of Christian theology. What nationalists see as the core of the Christian soul of Russia is instead the cult of a “mythological Church”. In Sidorov's analysis, Orthodox nationalists play down the idea that Russia's “historical paradigm” is based on the strength and preservation of its ethnic roots. In fact, he notes, the Russian and Soviet great powers have always followed “an imperial paradigm” – not a “national” one. This illusion of the nationalists has been created and is

being reinforced by “non-Russian”, “external” forces, which are the ones that “have always determined”, and still do, what ideology should prevail in Russia. Such forces intend to control the ultra-Orthodox nationalism, despite some of its exponents, including Sevast’ianov, “verbally” support the unity of Russians and Muslims, and oppose the use of nationalism as a “battering ram” of Judeo-Christianity against Islam.

Sidorov’s choice to convert to Islam, in his own words, has been determined by his rejection of the idolatry of the Church’s mythological image. In a world that has lost its moral integrity, true Islam (as opposed to superficial Islam of many ethnic Muslims) represents the only monotheism. To convert to Islam is not to betray one’s nation.

Instead, for Sidorov

the embracement of Islam is not like a swap of one’s ethnicity [for another], but like an extraordinary, worldview-determining choice of a universal, super-national religion, in which one can and needs to remain in one’s organic ethnic milieu. [...] True nationalism, which we acknowledge, is a real ethnic nationalism, “identarism”, which consists in the fact that we, while being Muslims, at the same time maintain our nationality, we pass it on to our children, and we keep our own clan of fellow believers from its ranks. (Sidorov 2013)

Sidorov notes that other Muslim communities in the world keep their national cohesion while, within the Islamic *ummah*, pursue their own interests. He also clearly states, though, that whenever Islam is menaced, internal nationalistic divisions are overcome in favor of a common front.

### ***Peculiarities of the Russkie Musul’mane movement***

The Russian origins of the followers of *Russkie Musul’mane* are also evident on their official website, where they deal with doctrinal issues that influence everyday life, such as the opportunity for women to drive, and the rules about women’s clothing. In both

cases, for example, the attempt is to accommodate religious precepts to the exigencies of rather emancipated women who, besides having a family, work or pursue an advanced education.

The novel element, and the most interesting, about the *Russkie Musul'mane* Weltanschauung, is that Sidorov does not support a civilizational hybridism. He is very careful in distancing himself from “ethnic Muslims” and points to European converts as examples of “true” Muslims by choice, rather than by birth. Because Christianity, and the Russian Orthodoxy in particular, is experiencing a deep crisis, Islam becomes its substitute. It seems to be the “religion of the future”: it shows greater dynamism and looks better equipped to face Russia’s future challenges. Against this backdrop, the *Russkie Musul'mane* movement seeks to appropriate Islam for ethnic Russians. The embracing of a “theologically correct”, “true” Islam does not at all imply the acceptance – let alone the encouragement – of the mingling of ethnic Russians and ethnic Muslims. Instead, it is a novel form of Russian ethnic-based, religion-determined nationalism – in other words, an Islamic (ethnic) “Russian idea”.

### **Conclusion**

The decade immediately following the demise of the Soviet Union saw the “renaissance” of religions and the formation of various ethnic nationalist groups. Religious belief was often associated with ethnic identity. Especially in regions with a high percentage of Muslim population (the Volga region and the Caucasus), nationalist leaders had employed religious arguments to gain consensus and reinforce their perceived loyalty to their ethnic kin. Thus, Tatar nationalists stressed the historical role of Tatarstan’s customary Islam, and Chechen separatists revamped Sufi *tariqas*. The legitimization of

local forms of Islam was also an important weapon against the penetration of international Islamic actors. Religious and charity organizations from Arab countries (especially Saudi Arabia) and Turkey were often suspected to bring, along with Qur'an books and funds for the Hajj, the meddling of their states in Russia's Muslim affairs. Further, Tatars and Sufis did not like the attitude of superiority with which "proper" Muslims from abroad labelled customary Islam as "spurious". Far from being simply a doctrinal matter, in fact, allegations of unorthodoxy could potentially lead to the loss of authority (and power) of traditional Russian *muftis* in favor of younger, Arab-educated successors.

The already complex situation was further aggravated by the internal disputes and personal rivalries within the religious communities. In the post-Soviet panorama of high social instability, ideological vacuum and general insecurity, the result was a fierce struggle for the determination of the identity of Russia's Muslims, and of its place within the new Russian identity. Within a still unresolved shape of the Russian Federation, in the face of their own fragmentation and the growing assertiveness of ethnic Russian nationalism, of the Orthodox Church, and of the Russian state, Muslims' uneasiness was often expressed through political and social conflicts, and even armed confrontation (terrorism). Most of the literature about Islam in Russia, indeed, has highlighted this conflictual condition (Dannreuther and March 2010; Malashenko 2007; Malashenko and Filatov 2007; Laruelle and Peyrouse 2005; Hunter 2004; Yemelianova 2002).

Yet, starting from the second half of the 2000s, and increasingly accelerating at the beginning of the new decade, the situation has deeply changed – especially in the Russian Federation. The discourse within and about Islam in Russia has taken much more

nuanced tones. It has generally shifted toward a more theoretically informed discussion about the place of Muslims in Russia and their role in the construction of a new Russian identity. In particular, the identity of Muslims of Russia is being more clearly defined by Muslims themselves. Calls for independence tout-court are being replaced with discussions about how to create a social-political environment conducive to a peaceful, multi-ethnic and multi-confessional coexistence. Proposals are even being advanced – at least among scholars – about the possibility to inserting some general Islamic precepts into state norms and social practices.

The probable reasons for these changes in the situation of Muslims in Russia are multiple. First, the struggle for dominance between the major Islamic institutions has found a winner – at least for the time being – in *Mufti* Ravil Gaynudtin (Gainudtin), a Tatar, head of the Russia Mufties Council (RMC). The Council's position is to affirm the relevance of Islam as Russia's second religion, and to work on par with the Orthodox Church in matters of a social, educational, and political nature. The RMC has established good relations with the Kremlin, and its representatives are often involved in Russia's events with Muslim countries (for example, state visits from leaders of Muslim countries). At the same time, the Council is working intensely to educate the Muslim leadership and is contributing to the shaping of Russia's Muslims' identity (see also Laruelle 2008).

Indeed, in the two decades since the demise of the Soviet Union there has been a revamp of scholar activity on Islam and of Islamic sciences – no longer biased by Soviet orientalist stances. Revived studies, in turn, have allowed for the development of an informed discourse less influenced by doctrinal issues. Further, the possibility to come

into contact with external forms of Islam has not only opened the doors to fundamentalism, it has also offered Russians the opportunity to compare different forms of Islam in the world, and provided the legitimation of Russia's traditional interpretations.

The state, which had already always supported customary Islam and traditional institutions against "foreign" instances perceived as real or potential subversive threats, took the chance to support those Islamic organizations that condemn terrorism – and there are many. Moreover, the state is keeping its more or less balanced official position toward Orthodoxy and Islam, stressing the necessity to build a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country. As a result, the early 2010s have shown the strengthening of Muslims' self-perception (or, as Malashenko would say, of their "subject-ness") and, consequently, the consolidation of Islamic organizations and of their actions. From the end of the decade, furthermore, despite the challenges represented by various terrorist attacks and the precarious situation in North Caucasus, it is also possible to identify a certain change in the general attitude towards Islam and, especially, toward Muslims.

## CHAPTER IV

### RUSSIA'S ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND THE STATE

*...it is clear that [in Russia] an absolute secularism is out of question.*

Alexey Malashenko (2011a: 38)

The efforts of Russia's Muslims to have their contribution to Russian civilization acknowledged are not limited to theoretical disputes. On the contrary, with the purpose of effectively influencing state policies and social structures, Muslims are active at many levels. Discussions about the nature of Islam and its followers' place in Russia are held on several platforms, through both public (e.g., mass-media) and private (e.g., blogs) outlets. Often, representatives of non-Islamic confessions, especially Orthodoxy, contribute to the debate. Indeed, a very visible – and a most fertile – terrain of confrontation is offered by official inter-religious relations.

Today, Islamic and Orthodox Christian institutions of Russia are weaving a complex network of relations of cooperation and, at times, of competition. The traditional balance of power between Orthodox Church and Islamic organizations, which in the past had seen the undisputed predominance of the former over the latter, has changed. The reasons are various. In a country that is experiencing an overall decrease in population, Muslim communities in Russia have been growing steadily (Vishnevsky 2009) in consequence of a high birthrate and of a substantial immigration from several former Soviet republics. At the same time, the Russian state, in its tsarist past a firm ally of the

Church, is officially – if not always substantially – relaxing its religious ties: the Constitution of 1993 confirmed the secularity of the Russian state.

The leveling of relative power of Islam and Christianity has favored, mostly under the pressure of the Islamic communities, a revision of their historical relationship. Additionally, the central government is also working to (re)define the “proper” place of religion within post-Soviet Russia’s society. Consequently, a debate is now unfolding, both in public and behind the scenes, between Islamic and Orthodox organizations and the government about their reciprocal positions within Russia’s socio-political system. Further, the (re)negotiations of religious legitimacy, ensuing from such confrontation, hint at the possibility to influence perceptions of Islam as a threat to other religions, to the secular state, and to state security in general. The present chapter seeks to expose the processes by which Islamic organizations, the Orthodox Church, and the state, each with its own conceptualization of Russia’s identity, attempt to (co)determine social and political norms.

### **The Russian Orthodox Church**

For centuries, in common perceptions within and outside Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church has been associated with the tsarist regime. On a conceptual-cultural level, it was identified with the embodiment of a vaguely defined, but specifically attributed, “Russian soul”. In truth, the close alliance of state and Church began only with the help provided by the Church to the Romanov dynasty in the seventeenth century (Curanović 2012; Codevilla 2008). Yet, already the conversion to Greek Christianity of Prince Vladimir (the unifier of Kievan *Rus*’) in 988 CE had a mythical nature in marking the birth of the future Russian state and of its Christianizing mission.

With the establishment of the Muscovy reign in 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian Orthodox Church became a close ally of the monarchy in the so-called *symphonic* arrangement, which established the parity of religious and secular power (Curanović 2012; Codevilla 2008). Church and monarch shared the same imperial vision: the Moscow Patriarchate claimed to be the successor to Rome and Constantinople after the fall of the latter (“Moscow as third Rome”), and the word “tsar” allegedly derived from “Caesar”. In particular, in the symphonic arrangement, the Church guaranteed the spiritual legitimacy of the tsars as the last protectors of Christianity against the (mostly Muslim) “barbarians” who were pressing at the imperial Southern and Eastern borders (Figs 2002). The Church, thus, was the real source of the tsar’s power. The establishment of the Holy Synod by Peter the Great in 1721, though, reversed the balance of power, which since then has tilted more and more toward the secular arm (Codevilla 2008). At a lower level, however, the Orthodox Church, through its village *pops* (priests), often of humble origins, remained deeply rooted in the social structure of the Russian village and deeply influenced its way of life (Figs 2002).

In contrast with its powerful past, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Church emerged from the Soviet regime as a rather fragmented entity, and several local Patriarchates claimed to hold the highest religious authority (Curanović 2012; Codevilla 2008). After a few years of internal rivalries, the election in January 2009 of Kirill as the “Holy Patriarch of Moscow and of the Whole *Rus*’ ” sanctioned the supremacy of the Moscow Patriarchate (Balzer 2010).

The consolidation of its ecclesiastical hierarchy undoubtedly strengthened the Church and benefited its outreaching strategy. In post-Communist Russia, the Orthodox

Church is re-proposing itself as a provider of spiritual values and a guarantor of social stability, and as one of the pillars of (the “new”) Russia. Historical references to the past are recurrent and often used as a conceptual and practice-related bridge to reinstate traditional liturgical and social habits (Curanović 2012). Indeed, observers have denounced the Church’s increasing assertiveness and its return to old, condemnable habits such as an explicit xenophobia, a dismissive (if not hostile) attitude toward other religions, and the attempt to control Russian society (Curanović 2012; Balzer 2010; Filatov 2007). Above all, the Church has been accused to re-acquire its traditional taste for political power and to put ambition above its religious duties (Solodovnik 2013). Patriarch Kirill is often depicted as overly ambitious and politically cunning. His endeavor, though, is being challenged by the rise of other actors on Russia’s religious scene.

### **Islamic organizations**

Today, the actual number of Muslims in Russia is highly disputed and subject to political negotiations. The most accredited estimates range from twelve to twenty million (Hunter 2004). Islam is the second religion in the country, and it is growing. In the 1990s the number of mosques, Muslim organizations and Islamic-oriented or -directed media, such as newspapers, websites, and publishing houses, had increased many times (Hunter 2004; Yemelianova 2002), although some have observed a flattening out at the end of the decade (Dobaev 2010).

Islamic organizations in Russia have traditionally been fragmented, and often in conflict with one another, as Roman Silant’ev, an ethnic Russian scholar of Islam and a public figure, has clearly, and polemically, pointed out (Silant’ev 2008, 2007, 2006). In

his numerous and popular writings, Silant'ev claims that the rivalries among Islamic organizations stem from the competition of their leaders for authority and political power. Yet, it must be added that these divisions also have a doctrinal basis. While Tatars in the Volga region are Sunni belonging to the Hanafi legal school, many (non-Tatar) Muslims in North Caucasus follow the Sufi tradition and often belong to a *tariqa* (Yarlykapov 2010). In addition to strictly religious norms, traditional habits and customs shape distinctive local interpretations of Islam (“customary” or “traditional” Islam), thus further differentiating Muslim communities. Finally, numerous groups of newly converted or “radicalized” Muslims, in Russia generally called “Wahhabis” or “Salafis”, constitute a third Islamic entity in Russia – a minor one, but all the more vocal.

Doctrinal differences already render the establishment of a single religious leadership that would be accepted by all groups very difficult. A further, substantial obstacle is constituted by the heritage of traditional local institutions (for example, Spiritual Boards) that have historically been in charge of specific territories. Almost each of Russia's thousands of registered mosques is led by a local *mufti* (religious leader) who, in turn, loosely reports to a provincial or regional council. Regional or provincial leaders, who had often been appointed in Soviet times, appear reluctant to give up their power and prestige for what they only partially feel as a common cause. Finally, the ambitions of young leaders, or aspiring ones, to reshape Russia's Islam along more “orthodox” lines borrowed from Arab countries, create yet more resistance to change. As a result, the Muslim communities in Russia still lack a unified representative body (Silant'ev 2008; Hunter 2004; Yemelianova 2002).

Many Islamic organizations in Russia enjoy a very small influence, territorially or socially (Silant'ev 2008; Hunter 2004; Yemelianova 2002). Some are even very powerful at the local level, for example the councils in Chechnya and Dagestan (International Crisis Group 2012). Yet, only three have national relevance. These are the Russian Mufties Council (RMC) in Moscow, led by *Mufti* Ravil Gainutdin, a Tatar; the Central Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Russia (TSDUM), based in Ufa, led by Sheik-ul-Islam Talgat Tadzhuiddin, also a Tatar; and the Coordinating Center of Spiritual Boards of Muslims of North Caucasus (CCSBMNC), under Ismail Berdiev. They shape the public dialogue with the Orthodox Church and the state: their leaders sit in the most influential councils and administrative bodies, they officially contribute to interfaith and state-religion policies, and their statements are regularly reported by the most important media. Since this chapter deals with the relations among official religious institutions, it focuses on the positions of RMC, TSDUM, and CCSBMNC.

Until the late 2000s, the Islamic movements' aspirations to exert sociopolitical influence were hindered by their high fragmentation. The three main organizations, though, have been able to strengthen their positions considerably in the past few years. Although their actual representation of the majority of Russia's Muslims is still contested, they have consolidated their status as leading Islamic organizations in Russia. As a further step toward harmonization, the Muslim authorities of North Caucasus, who in the past had tended to pursue their own, distinct objectives, today appear more willing to operate on a shared platform with the other organizations, especially the RMC (International Crisis Group 2012; *Islam Today* 2012a).

Despite some positive signals of rapprochement, though, the unification of the top three entities still seems unlikely. Especially the RMC and the CSBM, which share a basis of Hanafi Tatars believers, are traditionally divided by constant and often harsh hostility. Such rivalry is usually attributed to the political competition between their two Tatar leaders, Gainutdin and Tadzhuiddin, each claiming to represent their community.

The fragmentation of Islamic religious forces is perceived as a weakness, within and outside the community (Curanović 2012; Silant'ev 2010, 2008). Moreover, it comes at a time when a strong Islamic platform would be much needed to counter a revitalized Church. Various attempts have been made to unify the Islamic organizations under a central entity, with no durable results (Silant'ev 2010; Hunter 2004).

An emblematic one occurred in 2009. In his account of the facts, Silant'ev (2010) highlights the self-contradictory behavior of Muslim top leaders. On that occasion, Abdul-Vakhed Nyazov, president of the Islamic Culture Center (an entity associated with the RCM) had allegedly proposed to *sheik* Tadzhuiddin the creation of an organization to coordinate the activities of the RCM, CSBM, and CCSBMNC – only to receive a vehement rejection.

Silant'ev explains this failure with the decline of Ravil Gainutdin's political influence. The Head *Mufti*, Silant'ev argues, had felt too confident about his own authority; in particular, he had bragged about his connections with the government and the privileged “political” position that RMC had allegedly acquired over the CSBM. In fact, his choice of the Head of the Islamic Cultural Center as his envoy to the negotiations – a man whose controversial past is well known in Russia and whom Gainutdin himself

had publicly criticized years before – had been the cause of a series of initiatives of the Ministry of Justice against the Center and the RMC in general.

By reacting so assertively, Silant'ev notes, the government manifested its *de facto* opposition to the unification of the Islamic organizations. The result has been the strengthening of Tadzhuddin's power within the Muslim community, as the preferred partner of the state. Tadzhuddin, though, is not immune from critiques either, especially after his much publicized – and later withdrawn – 2003 declarations in favor of terrorist attacks (Laruelle 2008; Hunter 2004).

Within the Islamic community, the reasons for the failure of the unification were openly acknowledged by Al'bir Krganov, at the time the Head of the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Chuvashia and first vice-president of the CSBM (today Head of the CSBM's Central Region *muftiate*), in an interview given to *Interfax-Religion* published on February 9, 2010. Krganov started by reassuring readers (and authorities) about the loyalty of official Islamic organizations. He confirmed the unity of the major Russian Muslim organizations on doctrinal matters, on the condemnation of extremism, and on their support for the central state. (These last two elements were security-related, “routine” reassurances addressed more to the authorities than to the population). Then, he went straight to the matter of rivalry with the RMC. He highlighted the crucial role of the CSBM for Russia's Muslim communities. Significantly, he enhanced the relevance of CSBM by tying it to the overall contribution of Russia's Muslims to the consolidation of the Russian state:

[The CSBM] is the history of the Muslims of our country, of the thousands of its mosques, the history of the great people who worked under the aegis of CSBM. This is the “gold reserve” of Islamic

spirituality, *its civic sense*, and *its patriotism*. (Krganov 2010, italics mine)

The fact that Krganov justified the preeminence of the CSBM over the RMC for its *historical* contribution and not its *doctrinal* propositions is a confirmation of the political character of Russian inter-Islamic rivalries. To underscore his point, Krganov stated the CSBM's readiness to inter-organizational dialogue and cooperation but, at the same time, he made it clear that it would accept the unification of the Islamic organizations only on its own terms.

Finally, Krganov defended the right of CSBM to unite the Russian *ummah* "without interferences from outside". Here, he may have referred to those non-Muslims who are urging the Islamic communities to find a single official "voice". He may also have referred, though, to certain actors in the international Islamic community that have actively tried to establish their influence in the post-Soviet states, both doctrinally and economically. The revival of religious activity in Russia after 1991 created many opportunities for new organizations. Many Russian Muslims turned outward to the international Islamic community, in search for spiritual and material assistance.

For their part, Middle Eastern Islamic organizations have been eager to support their coreligionists in the former Soviet territories. Russian youngsters have been invited to study in the traditional center of Islamic doctrine, and scholars have gone to Russia to teach Arabic and other fundamentals of Islam to local religious leaders, who had a relatively poor Islamic education. Above all, funds were provided for the building of mosques and the development of Muslim communities in general (Yemelianova 2002).

Most of these resources and opportunities were under the control and coordination of the few spiritual leaders that had survived through Soviet times.

Mufties' authority is now being challenged by those whom Krganov calls the "young generations" of Islamic scholars, who have studied abroad and now demand a responsible role in Russia. Significantly, Krganov strongly defends the legitimacy of the existing leaders who, despite their lack of doctrinal and linguistic (Arabic) knowledge, have "more experience" and are better prepared to face the specific challenges of the Russian environment. Similar comments had been offered also by *Mufti* Gusman Isxakov, the head of the spiritual board of the Muslim republics in his interview given to *Interfax-Religion* of February 22, 2010.

At the turn of the decade, it would seem that Silant'ev's prediction on the growth of other independent Islamic organizations (Silant'ev 2010) at the expenses of always-quarrelling RMC and CSBM has been proved wrong. On the contrary, it appears that the political wisdom and the charisma of Gainudtin, as well as the increasingly oddity of Tadzhuiddin's statements, have gained RMC the leadership on the political scene (Balzer 2010) – and this, although the RMC holds a clearly Islamic position that looks more independent from the government's than the CSDUM's (Curanović 2012; Laruelle (2008), instead, assesses the relation between the two organizations as more equally balanced).

As is exemplified by these comments, Russia's Islamic communities often lament the interference of external factors in their internal disputes over power and authority. Muslims' initial enthusiasm for the opportunities to reconnect with the international *ummah* (and perhaps their hidden hopes to regain their historical role as cultural

authorities) has been replaced by an attitude increasingly defensive of their own traditions. Such awareness of Russia's particularism is one of the most characteristic traits of Russian thought. Interestingly, it belongs to both the Orthodox Church, which distances itself very decisively from the other Christian confessions, and Muslims alike. As will be discussed further in the next chapter, the tendency of Russia's Islamic leadership to affirm its uniqueness within the international *ummah* provides the government with a powerful security argument to isolate Islamic fundamentalist currents and to prevent international "subversive" co-operation.

### **Interfaith dialogue: institutional relations**

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, and especially since the turn of the century, the balance of the Christian-Islamic relations in Russia has changed. The growing political and cultural assertiveness of Muslims and their organizations inevitably leads them to cross paths with the Orthodox Church. Such encounters, though, are not necessarily always antagonistic or even confrontational – although they often are (Curanović 2012; Verkhovskii 2011; Balzer 2010; Filatov 2007). On the contrary, organizations on both sides have been building a dialogue on the role of religious institutions in Russia, their influence on social and political activity, their legitimacy as representatives of the Russian population and, ultimately, the modalities of constructive interfaith coexistence.

The Interreligious Council of Russia (*Mezhreligioznyi Sovet Rossii*) was created in 1998 to facilitate the dialogue among the adherents to four "traditional" Russian religions: Russian Orthodoxes, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists. By far the two major religions are Orthodoxy and Islam, which have been uninterruptedly represented in the Council, respectively, by the Metropolitan Kirill, and by the three Muslim leaders Ravil

Gainutdin (RMC), Talgat Tadzhuddin (CSBM), and Ismail Berdiev (CSBMNC). Initially conceived as a council of peers where the Orthodox Metropolitan would serve as *primus inter pares*, in the assembly of April 22, 2010, Kirill was nominated the council's president, thus becoming "really first above other religious leaders" (NG 2010).

The main mission of the Council is to re-establish the centrality of institutionalized religion in post-Communist Russia. Indeed, one of the main preoccupations of the representatives of the four "traditional" confessions is to confirm their own legitimacy. They do it with two main arguments. On the one hand, "traditional" religions leaders constantly maintain the unique validity of their doctrinal precepts, often in juxtaposition to other currents within their own religions (for example, Old Believers for the Orthodoxy, or Wahhabism for Islam). On the other hand, they emphasize the value of the role that their institutions have played in Russia throughout the centuries (Interreligious Council of Russia, 2009).

Such conceptual premises translate into two main lines of activity. The first one is the advocacy of the centrality of the traditional confessions in defending and promoting the traditional Russian values of family, spirituality, solidarity, and patriotism. The Council's repeated condemnations of the multiple minor spiritual and religious movements, which mushroomed in Russia in the 1990s, can be interpreted in this sense. The leaders of the four "traditional" confessions often warn against the misuse of religious themes in fiction or pseudo-educational literature, which in their opinion confuse the believers and misguide those who are in search of true religiosity. The second line, which follows from the first but is not completely dependent on it, is the attempt to increase the influence of the traditional confessions on Russian polity. Given the

reluctance of the Russian government to share even part of its political power, however, the action of religious institutions is necessarily more effective at the grassroots level.

For both purposes, social issues are an ideal terrain on which to develop Christian-Islamic cooperation. Healthcare, sexually transmitted diseases, prostitution, education, and worsening conditions of life due to economic difficulties are problems felt by many Russians, independently from their faith. Both Muslim organizations and the Orthodox Church promote and sustain as a fundamental value the protection of the traditional family, which is considered central to the social structure. The role of the family is to provide and maintain, with the help of religious institutions, the material and spiritual wellbeing of the individual, especially of children. Occasionally challenging the state's authority for its social policies, the Inter-religious Council has become increasingly vocal in condemning what it deems potentially dangerous social measures and in advocating the reestablishment of traditional values (Russian Orthodox Church, 2010).

The Inter-confessional Conference on AIDS held in 2008 ("Cooperation of the religious communities on HIV/AIDS") is a good example of inter-religious joint action. More importantly, it offered an important platform to define a common approach. The final document, addressed to both the Russian society and the state, condemned the younger generations' unmoral and socially dangerous behaviors (*Kruglyi Stol* 2008). It highlighted the role of education in inculcating "family values and traditions" (Point 7) in the young generations. It stated the existence of a "social pact among religious organizations, government and society" (Point 9) and recalled the benefits brought to the "motherland" by its religious organizations in the course of "many centuries" (Point 8).

Finally, Point 10 reiterated the necessity of interreligious cooperation to teach the “national culture and [the national] tradition” to the new generations of Russians. These recommendations were repeated two years later in the declaration of the presidium of the Interreligious Council of Russia of April 22, 2010. Compared to 2008, the tone had become more assertive. The Council openly criticized the role of “bureaucrats” and advocated for the strengthening of the family “without external” (that is, governmental) “influences” – a role for which, it argued, the religious institutions would be best equipped.

The Council’s insistence on common values and family-oriented education does not surprise so much as its emphasis on Russia’s traditional and historical heritage belonging to *both* Christianity and Islam. The willingness of the Orthodox Church to share with Islam its alleged credit in the formation of Russian identity is unprecedented. In tsarist Russia, Christianity was undisputedly the “national” religion and the Patriarch was Russians’ spiritual father. In Putin’s Russia, the Orthodox Church is striving to regain its past position, but instead of seeing Islam as a competitor, as it usually did in the past, it seems to be willing to accept it as an ally – at least temporarily.

It is true that some signs of impatience occasionally appear on the Church’s side. Thus, for example, the Head of the relations with foreign Churches of the Moscow Patriarchate, Episcopo Ilarion, in a meeting with the Italian ambassador expressed his concerns about the decrease in religious and family values among Russian Christians, which have as direct consequence a decline in “human potential”. Commenting on “widespread” discourse of an “Islamic threat” to Europe, Ilarion observed that it is not Muslims’ high birthrate that is the problem, but Christians’ low fertility. He attributed the

latter to the degeneration of family values among Christians. For him, to rectify the situation is a task for the European Churches and states together; this “will be the reply to the so-called Islamic threat” (Russian Orthodox Church, 2009a). Ilarion’s comments have been reported by an ITAR-TASS note, which highlights his definition of the European demographic challenge as a *Christian* issue (implicitly excluding Muslims from European identity) and his calling for a joint counter-action of states and Churches (ITAR-TASS, 2009).

In the light of Ilarion’s remarks, expressed to the ambassador of a European country, some concerns might arise about the depth and pervasiveness of the Orthodox Church’s commitment to cooperation with Islam – or at least about the authority of Kirill in imposing this line of conduct. The official policy of the Patriarchate is clearly one of cooperation on social issues. Six years after the establishment of the Council, the cooperation of religious institutions at the social level is given for granted. The effects of their activity on the ground are also acknowledged. Thus, for example, the meeting of the Anti-narcotics Commission of Krasnogor (a town in the outskirts of Moscow) in June 2014, in which various religious representatives and government officials participated, dealt with “The experience of the work of the religious associations in the prevention of the abuse of narcotics and in social rehabilitation of drug addicts”. The related communiqué reported the exact lines in the Islamic sacred texts (Qur’an and *Hadiths*) that explicitly forbid not only the consumption of alcohol (and drugs), but also any contact with those who deal with them under any circumstances (trade, exchange, etc.).

The official websites of the RMC and the related Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the Moscow Region (DUMMO) report the integral, official version of the press

statement (RMC 2014a; *DUMMO.ru* 2014, which also reports the *Mufti*'s speech). The Islamic authorities take the time to explain the value of their contribution to the fight against drug addiction, perhaps in the effort to make it more visible to the public. As to confirm these concerns, commenting on an analogous meeting, the youth organization *Mestnye* (which is linked to Putin's party *Edinaia Rossiia* and promotes "patriotism" and "defense of Russian values") acknowledges only "the possibility of an Orthodox influence" on the decrease of drug consumption (*mestnye.ru* 2014), thus revealing the persistence of a strong bias in public perception.

In its long history, the Church of Russia has been a pivotal center of political power. Under the leadership of Kirill, it is attempting to regain at least part of its influence: it remains to be seen if, on political ground, its attitude toward Islam will remain conciliatory, or the inter-confessional dialogue will turn out to be a temporary tactics of the Church to gain an ally in its confrontation with the state.

### **The Russian secular state: contemporary interpretation of Catherine's model**

Partly, the political support given by Russia's Muslims (especially Tatars) to the state stems from the specificities of the Hanafi School, which encourages support to non-Islamic regimes when they allow free profession of the Islamic faith. Partly, though, it may be a reflection of the historical alliance between temporal and religious powers in Russia. Even if this alliance is generally applied to the Orthodox Church, there have been moments when the state has recognized the political role of Islamic organizations as well. Catherine the Great personally disliked Islam, but considered it socially useful (van der Oye 2010; Crews 2006; Hunter 2004), and created the first Islamic Council in Russia.

Centuries later, the Soviets tolerated certain religious structures in Central Asia in order to better control the local population and manage USSR's relations with the Middle East.

The intertwining of religion and politics in Russia is so deep that key historical-religious events are now matter of re-negotiation. For example, Putin's decision to proclaim the conversion of Prince Vladimir to Christianity a national festivity provoked mixed reactions among Muslims. Citizens' comments collected by a reporter of the major Muslim portal *Islam.ru* varied from worries of a Christianization of the state, to indifference, to suggestions to address other, more pressing problems (Kanaeva 2010). Everyone, however, seemed to devise beyond Putin's decision an attempt to re-establish the preeminence of Orthodoxy as Russia's official spiritual guide, if not religion.

Open concerns about the constitutionality of Putin's proposal were expressed even by non-Muslim observers. They were quickly dismissed by some member of the Duma (*Interfax* 2010), though, and the bill passed without opposition (*dp.ru* 2010). Sensing the inevitability of such outcome and in the attempt to prepare the ground for further negotiations, on April 23, 2010, the RMC had issued a communiqué pleading for the revision of the proposal and the pursuit of a "balance" among the different religions.

In the view of the RMC, the approval of the bill would have meant that the state openly supported the Church over other confessions. At the same time, Muslims contested the very myth of Russians' predestination to Christianity. In fact, they reminded, the legend also says that Vladimir was considering Islam as well Christianity, and held the former in very high esteem. (The popular notion is that he allegedly refused because Islam forbade the consumption of alcohol.) This is a significant example of

Russia's Muslims various attempts<sup>5</sup> to "straighten" the way Russian history is told, and to reveal, instead, the important political, social, and cultural contributions of Islamic communities to the Russian identity.

Challenged on its own terrain, the Church seems to proceed cautiously. It has delegated a more polemical role to other organizations, which operate at different levels from the official to the informal ones, and to which the Church shows its support in different degrees (Curanović 2012). One of the most prominent is the World Russian People's Council (WRPC), an "international public organization" accredited at the United Nations, under the direct leadership of the Moscow Metropolitan. Among the purposes of WRPC are the "consolidation of the Russian state and the strengthening of the role of the Orthodox Church in the social life" (point 2 of the Statute), and cooperation with the other traditional religions of Russia.

One of the most visible WRPC initiatives, "Faith and Victory", was a plea to then Russian President Medvedev to reinstate the official celebrations for the 1945 victory over Germany. The Soviets used to celebrate this event as a historical and self-laudatory milestone that showed the unity of Russians against the enemy, under the Communist leadership. Hearing about the intentions of the WRPC, representatives of the Muslim community replied that the "Great Patriotic War" (as World War II is called in Russia) was fought by all Russian citizens; members of Muslim youth organizations joined the WRPC in its event. If Metropolitan Kirill, as it seems (Curanović 2012; Filatov 2007) is

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<sup>5</sup> Another one is the debate on the Tatar origin of the Crown of Monomakh. Prince Monomakh is considered (especially in popular narratives) the greatest of all Kievan rulers, an example of wisdom, and of peaceful and prosperous leadership. His crown, kept in the Kremlin, is perhaps the most venerated piece in Russia's treasure.

aiming to reestablish the Church's traditional role as custodian of Russia's identity, the Muslim community does not intend to remain behind.

Against the backdrop of inter-religious relations, the position of the government is complex, if not ambiguous. Under the Presidency of Dmitrii Medvedev, both he and, to a lesser extent, his Prime Minister Vladimir Putin declared their impartial support to all "traditional" religions. These were collectively depicted as providers of a necessary spiritual support and as true contributors to Russian national identity. A Presidential Council for Religious Affairs was created ("Council for cooperation with religious associations at the Presidency of the Russian Federation"), which all the three major Islamic organizations were invited to join. Religious teaching was introduced in the new school reform, with great satisfaction of the Orthodoxes (ROC 2010b). Medvedev often presided to the inauguration of new mosques. (Interestingly, in a sort of unofficial distribution of tasks, Putin would attend Orthodox events.) Conferences and meetings between the leaders of the four major religions and top governmental officials on specific, social topics became routine.

Apparently, the government continues to maintain a neutral position and to show appreciation for the socially and spiritually positive influence of religion in general. In fact, however, signs of the central authorities' (especially Putin's) preference hint at the higher regard that the Orthodox Church is granted – understandably, for the sheer number of its followers and the undoubtedly significance of its historical and cultural heritage. For example, when Putin was Prime Minister, on the "About religion" page of his official website, the "inspirational" quotations were only taken from his speech celebrating the election of Metropolitan Kirill. On that occasion, Putin repeatedly highlighted the

essential role of the Orthodox Church in the foundation of the Russian state. Most importantly, he observed how in Russia the Church has always been “the source of the government legitimacy” (ROC 2009b) – a role that Islam cannot claim. Another example of uneasy relations with the Muslim institutions is the alternating support given by the state to the one or other of them, both a cause and a consequence of their internal rivalries (Silant’ev 2010). These details seem to indicate a bias of the government toward the Patriarchate, at the expenses of its major competitor.

Yet, the reality is more stratified. For one thing, despite the central position that the Church enjoys in many government statements, the alliance with Muslim leaders is fully appreciated by the state’s high officials. In foreign policy, Russia is taking advantage of the growing relations of its Muslim community with the international *ummah*. Increasingly, Islamic organizations are used as bridgeheads into the Muslim world, and Muslim officers are appointed to political and governmental missions. Russia makes no secret of its renewed interest in the Middle East, where it presents itself as a possible alternative to U.S. and Western hegemony (*Islamic News* 2009).

Indeed, Russian Muslims seem to reinforce the government’s message by proposing the “Russian model” as an alternative for political action of Islamic communities abroad. One of the most important platforms for such initiatives is the “Russia – Islamic World Strategic Vision Group”, founded in 2006, whose members are representatives of Russia as well as of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). In its statute, the Group explicitly affirms how the “consolidation of [the interaction between Russian and OIC Muslims] not only meets the interests of Russia and member countries of OIC but also facilitates strengthening of international security in general”.

More recently, the same opinion has been expressed by the then President of Tatarstan Mintimer Shaimiyev (Wahab and Al-Saadi 2008) and by Medvedev himself. In particular, Medvedev was confident that “this interaction will help create a more equitable system of international relations, conflict situations at global and regional levels” (*Islamic News* 2009). I further discuss the role of the “Russia – Islamic World Strategic Vision Group” in Russian foreign policy in Chapter 7 of this dissertation.

Russia’s Muslim leaders are willing to act in foreign policy on behalf of their country, which increases their prestige within the *ummah* and provides them with some leverage with the government. How powerful (and stable) such advantage may be is yet to be determined, though; the reluctance of the government to see the Islamic communities united is a sign that Putin is very careful in keeping Muslims’ political influence under control.

In drawing a balance on the relations of power among the Orthodox Church, the Islamic institutions, and the state, Alicija Curanović (2012) points out that, among religious institutions, the ROC holds by far the most influence and prestige. The state is the undisputed leader, with the power to dispense authority - and material benefits. In a sort of virtuous circle, the ROC’s preeminence makes it the greatest beneficiary of government funding. In turn, such material resources allow the Church to increase its popularity through social initiatives, and to widen its influence inland and abroad (missions). The much more limited funding received by the Islamic organizations, although proportionate to the smaller number of Muslims in relation to Orthodoxes, also limits their institutional reach.

It is against this backdrop, perhaps, that the delicate issue of the external funding to Muslims in Russia needs to be discussed. The availability of significant sums offered by organizations and governments of states like Saudi Arabia or Turkey constitutes a temptation. With this money, Muslims in Russia may accomplish institutional tasks that would be otherwise difficult (for example, Islamic education, the building of new mosques). Naturally, foreign funds bring along also possible controversies, from the disputes on how to distribute them among the many institutions, to suspicions of illicit influence, to the most extreme accusations of terrorism funding.

The recent attempts by the Russian government to regulate (control) foreign-funded organizations, which also hit Western NGO's, were indeed advertised as countermeasures to subversion and terrorism. However, in the case of Islamic organizations in Russia, the position of the central authorities, starting from 2009/2010 and increasingly after Putin's election in 2012, has evolved. Before, the state's first priority was to contain the spreading of Islamic extremism, and to regulate the growth of registered Islamic organizations. Now, the Russian government, especially in the person of Putin, is developing a new, systemic approach to Islam to be inserted into an organic shaping of Russia's polity. Within this vision<sup>6</sup>, the place of Islam is no longer at the margins as a tolerated entity, but it has its own, specific duty to fulfill. As part of the new Russian construction, Islam must support and encourage the adherence of its followers to the state unity.

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<sup>6</sup>The final shape that Russia should acquire in Putin's vision is contested. Observers' interpretations vary from a re-establishment of the Russian-Soviet Empire to the absence of any organic plan – and everything in between. For the present argument, it is not essential to devise the exact traits of Putin's vision. The only exception would be that he has no vision at all, but I agree with the basic assumption of most of the literature that Putin is following his plan, whatever this may be.

The activities of Islamic organizations, like education and liturgical practices, are no longer hindered or just tolerated. In a way that resembles Catherine's view of state structure and social peace, Muslims have to conform to the Russian system and contribute to its prosperity. Apart from outright terrorist activities, which are still being conducted by specific groups, the big confrontation between the state and Islamic organizations is likely to take place over the adherence of Muslims' way of life to Putin's vision of the new Russia.

### **The functional interpretation of religion and its application in Russia**

The exact nature of the role of religion and of religion institutions in a socio-political system, especially in officially secular states, is still debated (Curanović 2012, esp. 1 – 10; Schuppert 2012). In general, in Western political debate a distinction is made between the influence of religion as system of beliefs on the shaping of a community's identity and its interpretation of reality, and the tasks of the institutions that embody such *Weltanschauung* and that translate the religious message into practice – in short, the *normative* and the *functional* roles of religion (Schuppert 2012).

Schuppert (2012, pp. 56 ff.) postulates for the European states the existence and opportunity of „governance through contracts” („Governance durch Verträge“, 56). This is because, in European secular states, religious institutions (the Church) have a status that is only matched by the state, which is “the only one that can negotiate eye-to-eye” (56) with them. The “un-impartial” position of the state, which is secular, prevents it from being “objective”. Therefore, the religious element that is still present in the society must be represented by religious organizations, which are the legitimate bearers of the “spiritual”.

In Russia, though, the governance through contract is not fully applicable. Although the state is formally secular, and therefore in matters of religion should be just an actor on par with the Church and the Islamic organizations, in practice it has the last word on any aspect of governance. Hence, the state, more accurately Russia's President Putin, determines Russia's religion policy. Indeed, every aspect of Russia's administration seems directed to conform harmoniously to the President's vision. In terms of governance, religious institutions are confined to a subordinate role. They seem to accept the general terms of their cooperation with the state, proclaim their support to the central authority (especially in matters of national security), and limit negotiations to non-threatening issues. Further, they are willing to invest considerable resources in the fulfillment of state's expectations.

It must be noted that the state's current conceptualization of religious institutions stems, at least in part, from the institutions themselves. For centuries, the Orthodox Church has constituted the blueprint of religious life in Russia, so much so that it served as model for the institutionalization and hierarchical (re)structuring of the other religions of the Empire (Codevilla 2008; Crews 2006). Today, many observers of Islamic religious base their works on analytical constructs used to study the Church. Usually, this is a convenient approach, when one deals with different religions in one country. Partially, it is compelled by the absence of original studies of Islam with comparable analytical sophistication. Sometimes, though, the study of Islam is presented as sub-discipline of ecclesiastical studies, to the point that the analytical structure used to describe the latter is used for the former (Silant'ev 2008).

It is probably also for these reasons that the functional interpretation of religion, which Schuppert (2012), eventually, declares inadequate for Europe, well explains the situation in Russia. Russian authorities themselves seem to take this position. Whatever Putin's intentions may be, it is reasonable to assume that state unity is at least a precondition for success. In order to coalesce a geographically, ethnically, and religiously diverse Russia, each political and social actor must do his part, following the leader's directives.

Operationally, the adoption of a functional conception of religious institutions within an all-determining state results in an efficient and straightforward way of action. In contemporary Russia, religious organizations seem to belong (or to intend to belong) to the state. If they want to enjoy the political and social influence that derives from this condition of allies of the government, they must support the central authorities not only in their words, but also with their deeds. They must take over those functions for which the state is ill equipped.

Church and Spiritual Boards can reach their own followers with a capillary efficiency that central authorities do not have. They can also bridge to those groups that are hostile to or wary of the state but recognize religious authority. Finally, and increasingly strategically, they can and must take charge of the new immigrants and their children, and instruct them how to become acceptable residents/citizens of Russia.

### ***The necessity of a governance of religion***

After more than a decade of booming, but confused, growth of religions and their institutions in post-Soviet Russia, the twenty-first century opened onto a somewhat quieter scene (Yarlikapov 2010). The first decade was characterized by two fundamental

processes. On one hand, the second Chechen war dominated the public discourse about Islam. Both in its fought phase (1999-2001) and in the subsequent years of unrest (terrorist attacks), it reinforced pre-existent discriminatory attitudes among the Russian population. A rift was cracking between Muslims and the other citizens (especially ethnic Russians), which opened along lines of religious as well as ethnic divides that were often interpreted interchangeably (Verkhovskii 2011).

The excesses of Islamic separatists, though, – the most impactful being the assault on the school in Beslan in 2004 – gradually cost them the sympathies of most Muslims too. The rejection of Islamic extremism by moderate Muslims was also strongly encouraged by the official Islamic organizations. Terrorism challenged the roles of traditional organizations and moderate Muslims as positive members of society. Forced to justify themselves and to prove their civic loyalty, Islamic leaders scrambled to sharpen their doctrinal arguments. They provided some more accurate definitions of (traditional) Islam in Russia, especially its foundations and purposes. Finally, they elaborated their positions on state-religion relations.

On the other hand, Muslim leaders were able to focus on substantial reasoning also thanks to the second process that was occurring toward the end of the 2000s decade. By then, most of the sharpest contrasts internal to many religious communities were gradually settling. The election of Kirill to lead the Orthodox Church and the unofficial, but *de facto* agreement reached by Muslim leaders on their respective zones of influence created a relatively stable environment, conducive to internal reorganization and strengthening. At the same time, the state was urging moderate Muslims to devise an

effective counter-discourse to terrorism and separatism. All these elements concurred to create a new space in the political debate around Islam.

***The State must take the lead***

The evolution of the self-consciousness of Islamic organizations, their re-conceptualizations of their own place within Russia, and the confirmation of their own legitimacy made Islamic organizations evolve. Pressed by the government to (contribute to) counter the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, but at the same time constrained within the power limits imposed by the state, they reacted in two ways. The immediate response was internal restructuring, as discussed above. Subsequent to it, Muslims began to call on the state to contribute to the establishment of an effective governance of religion.

The state, according to many Muslims, was responsible for the design and regulation of state-religious relations. Of course, the main Islamic organizations would have to participate to this process. Rafik Mukhametshin already in 2004 had lamented the absence of a coherent religious policy, which in his opinion lay at the basis of much disorder. He accused both the state and Muslim Spiritual Boards of inefficiency and inability. In his model for Tatarstan, he envisioned the necessary participation of local clergy and Muslim common citizens, along with Tatarstan's Board and governmental bodies, to the shaping of a meaningful religious policy.

A similar observation was made by Leonid Siukiiänen, a major expert on Islamic law at the prestigious Moscow High School of Economics. He, too, notes that Russia is lacking a proper conceptualization of Islam, intended as system of (political) values, within the secular state (Siukiiänen 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2006). His elaboration on the issue is much more theoretical than Mukhametshin's, although both draw from the Tatar

tradition of *jadidism*. For Siukiianen, the matter is not only how to “place” or “regulate” Islam. Much more broadly (and innovatively), he proclaims the necessity to acknowledge the positive message of Islam as political system, and to adopt its core constituents into Russia’s secular system.

As Siukiianen argues in his works, such an embedment of Islamic values would have positive, desirable implications in Russia’s policies of religion, security, and foreign relations. The latter two issues will be discussed in the next chapters. Here, it is important to note how Siukiianen’s argument fits into the tradition of Islamic modernism, and in particular into the Russian tradition of Hanafi Islam and Tatar *jadidism*. Although he harshly criticizes existent projects of applying Islamic political values in Russia (including what he, derogatorily, calls the “Islamic oppositional movement” of Geidar Dzhemal’), he praises the RMC for offering a “rational” model of cooperation with the state (Siukiianen 2007b: 37).

### **Putin’s new approach to religious policy**

The government has also developed its concept of religious policy. An article published in October 2013 by the government-aligned newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* illustrates such process (NG 2013). The occasion was the meeting of the Council on the Relations among Nationalities (*Sovet po mezhnatsional’nym otnosheniami*), which is presided by Vladimir Putin. The location, the city of Ufa, was already a symbol of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional unity. It was here that Catherine the Great founded the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims (*Tsentral’nyi dukhovnyi upravlenie musul’man – TSDUM*). The place and time of the meeting were even more significant, because of the concurrent celebration of the 225th anniversary of the TSDUM.

The fact that Putin himself had decided venue and time of the meeting had been read by many as a signal of particular significance. As the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta's* journalist notes, Muslims had expected Putin to nominate a “national” leader of the Islamic communities. Many were hoping for such an outcome, as a way to put an end to the still persisting rivalries internal to Islamic organizations.

Interestingly, what a few years before seemed to play into the hands of the central government, namely, the internal divisions of Islamic organizations, has revealed itself an obstacle to state's objectives. Poorly coordinated actions of Muslim institutions have negatively affected efforts to prevent extremism. Lack of standard Islamic education have allowed for “deviant” teaching, and local clergy was often outside the control of central Islamic authorities. Finally, the absence of a sole counterpart has further burdened cooperation with state offices, especially at the local level. The *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (NG), slightly polemically, adds that Russian bureaucrats (“*chinoviki*”) would have expected President Putin to appoint the leader of the Muslim communities, „so that the authorities would have someone to take accountable for extremist events” (NG 2013). To the bureaucrats' great surprise, instead, not only did Putin not nominate a Muslim leader, but he also let a new law enter into force in those same days of October 2013, which held local authorities responsible for any inter-ethnic conflict that might break out in their jurisdictions.

At face value, the new norms may seem a much-needed response to authorities' abuses against Muslims, especially frequent in the provinces. The banning of allegedly seditious mainstream Islamic books and of translations of the Qur'an, or the closure of Islamic religious and cultural centers accused of fostering extremism had provoked

vehement protests not only among Muslims, in Russia and abroad. The state showed its willingness to regulate religious affairs – and demonstrated to have the power to do it.

Concessions to Muslims did not come only in reaction to protests, though. The *Nezavisimaya* article openly admits that the number of inter-religious and inter-nationalities conflicts among Russian citizens have surged. Somewhat surprisingly, it also highlights the general weakness of the state on this matter: “before, it was enough that the authorities would [officially] protect the holders of truth from offence and violence. Today, the country is already too divided along religious signs.” The remark turns out to be a preparatory comment to support Putin’s new course.

Instead of advocating stronger policing forces, the author invokes the establishment of an efficient system of governance of Islam. He laments that Islamic extremist and subversive forces divert attention and resources from this constructive initiative toward security measures. In doing so, it attributes the responsibility of social unrest simultaneously to local, abusive officers, and to religious extremists – shifting it away from the central government and Putin.

The *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* article reveals itself as a shorter, but analytically more sophisticated, version of Putin’s performance at the meeting of the Council on Interethnic Relations (President of Russia 2013). Acting in a way that is rather typical for him in official sessions, Putin first scolds his ministers and officers for their failures in grasping the situation, in sensing the urgency of the measures to be adopted, and in applying them. He, then, requires that all local governments expedite the application of the norms promulgated from the center.

The meeting transcripts confirm that the association of religious and ethnic identity still underlies the positions of many state officers. Yet, they also show that some participants, particularly Putin, are developing a much more sophisticated vision of state-religious dynamics. They seem to be elaborating a new conceptualization of the role of religious organizations in the social order. Compatibly with a functional interpretation of religion, the common purpose of state and religious institutions (even as representatives of distinct ethnic identities) is social stability – which in turn reinforces the state. That such role must follow the directives from the center appears evident in the urge expressed by the influential Muslim journalist Maksim Shevchenko (also a deputy in the Duma and a member of the Council) to counter subversive instances and to consolidate Russian patriotism through mass media “propaganda” (President of Russia, 2013).

***Is Putin in search for Muslims’ support?***

As if following these suggestions, the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* article supports Putin’s decisions in religious policy. The abstention from appointing a single Muslim leader, in the journalist’s opinion, is a proof that Putin understands that Islam is not Christianity, that mosques cannot be structured like monasteries, and that Islamic organizations cannot be dealt with like the Church. Such a sensible perception, it is implicit, makes Putin the appropriate leader to counter religious-based social deviances.

Although the author acknowledges the fundamental differences between Islam and Orthodoxy, he also emphasizes that they are facing similar challenges. Not only Islam is at risk of fundamentalism. The Church, too, must deal with its own score of extremists, many of whom slip from its control. However, the journalist adds, not all extremists may be unwelcome to the ROC. He openly denounces how the Church does

indeed take advantage of the rough actions of some groups unofficially affiliated with it. These groups conduct protests, or worse (typically, the *NG* notes, against the construction of a mosque), and while the Church officially condemns them, it later reaps the fruit of their deeds (no mosque is built). A remarkable ambiguity in the relations between Orthodox activists and the Church has been observed also by other commentators (Goble 2015).

In this scenario, proper to the contemporary Russian situation, is the attempt to balance the influence of Church and Islam, and to keep them under government control. It is not the purpose of the present chapter to discuss the reaction of the Church to the state's strategy. Islamic organizations seem to be accepting, and even encouraging, the fact that the state is taking the initiative in matters of religious policy – on the condition that Muslim representatives participate in negotiations. It is difficult to understand whether they do it based on a conscious doctrinal position (the “rationalism” advocated by the RMC), or because they lack the necessary capabilities. What can be affirmed is that, in general, the willingness of the state to take the lead *and* to involve Muslim leaders enhances the political (policy) influence of official organizations. As a result, the latter may acquire a significant, competitive advantage toward non-official organizations and younger, less connected Muslim leaders who are challenging Russia's traditional Islamic establishment.

Without having to attribute an imperial purpose to Putin's actions, it is certainly possible to argue that, in his Islamic policy, Putin may be attempting a similar scheme to acquire Muslims' support. To be sure, the state has introduced several norms to control

Muslims' and others' organizations, especially those (allegedly) funded by foreigners. Yet, Moscow is also facing growing preoccupations: a demographic scenario favorable to Muslims (within a generally negative growth); the sharpening of unrests involving Muslim immigrants; the unsettled situation at Russia's southern borders. The resolution of all these issues would benefit from a cooperation with Russia's Muslim citizens.

The anonymous journalist of the *NG* chooses her cases from Orthodoxy and Islam, apparently to sustain the plea for a governance of religion. Yet, the whole article treats both religions with equality. Such statements are unprecedented in the official positions of Moscow, and perhaps it is not by chance that they appear first in form of journalistic analysis, as an anticipation of official policies and/or to test public reception.

### **Conclusion**

Inter-religious relations in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Russia present peculiar characteristics. These are determined by a combination of historical-traditional heritage and deliberate strategies of the religious organizations and the state.

With the partial exclusion of the Northern Caucasus, in Russia "official" Islamic organizations and the Orthodox Church are working in close cooperation to address social issues of common concern: the consolidation of family values; the diffusion of religious ethics (broadly interpreted); the safeguard of children; and the establishment of religious education in schools.

At the same time, religious leaders are very careful in avoiding inter-faith doctrinal disputes; on the contrary, they strongly advocate religious coexistence and mutual tolerance. In this context, the same concept of "tolerance" is being explained as a traditional Russian attitude of peaceful coexistence toward the Empire and Soviet multi-

ethnic and multi-religious character – for certain Muslims in Russia, it also implies the acceptance of the Orthodox Slavic historical dominance (Gavrilov and Shevchenko 2010; see also Chapter 2 of this dissertation).

Such a cautious stance does not surprise, since both sides are benefiting from their present alliance. The Church is trying to limit the current erosion of its own membership due to the Slavic population's secularization, disaffection, and demographic crisis. In the face of such difficulties, it also intends to prevent future clashes with a growing potential rival. The joint lobbying action with Muslims on religious teaching and family policies is a good opportunity to make the Church's voice heard by the government, which is not as sensible to the Church's authority as in pre-Soviet times.

The Islamic community, although highly fragmented, is working to achieve a higher political status and full social acceptance. It is also striving to counter the harmful propaganda of Islamic terrorism. Muslims' cooperation with the Church is meant to demonstrate that they feel part of Russian society. Such a behavior may be reassuring for both the majority of Russia's population and for the government itself.

In the middle, the Russian government accords to Christianity and Islam almost equal nominal weight in their contribution to state decision-making. Putin's latest declarations in term of religious policy tend to balance even more the preference given to either religion. While this encourages the interreligious dialogue at the political level, it also ensures that both major confessions are kept in constant rivalry for political preeminence. By periodically shifting its support to each side, the government can foment or soothe such rivalries at its convenience, thus ensuring that neither force becomes too powerful.

It is at the social level, though, that the religious organizations are strongest. Here, they have demonstrated the effectiveness of their cooperation, to the point of carefully avoiding deep confrontations. They have felt strong enough to challenge state policies and influence some of its decisions (for example, in education). Whether their strength on social issues will lead to political power and, further, to open rivalry between Islam and the Church is a possibility that may only be proved in the long term.

The policy of the Russian government resembles in part that of some of its predecessors in that it co-opts the Islamic community to certain power sharing, while keeping it under its control. It is different from other similar policies in the past for its stronger “containment” of the Orthodox Church. While still alluding at it as its “naturally” preferred ally, the government *de facto* has limited the political influence of the Patriarchate. At the same time, it tolerates and even encourages inter-religious cooperation – under its own supervision and limited to the social sphere.

From the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the government and the religious organizations alike have showed a growing concern for a proper governance of religion. Without challenging the secular state, Islamic organizations encourage the establishment of an efficient policy of religion. Some Muslim leaders advocate for the state to take the initiative and determine, top-down, the rules. Others hope that secular power acknowledges the benefit of a doctrinally correct and politically clever embedment of Islamic political values into the Russian state.

Common to all parties involved is the need to establish an official framework of organized religion, one that would supplement and complete the concept of “traditional” confessions. The political advantages of such specific definition seem clear. For the

religious organizations, it would be a way to consolidate their official status and benefit from a privileged position. The state would have the double advantage of controlling the dispensing of political favor to religious leaders, and to justify on legal terms its actions against extremism (on all religions).

From the discussion conducted so far, it emerges that the dynamics of inter-religious and state-religious relations have an immediate and deep influence on security issues. Some of these effects, like the direct prevention of terrorist acts, are predictable. Others are achieved through indirect measures (Islamic teaching). Finally, a few are unexpected, but may bear the fruit of desecuritization. The discussion of some of the most significant issues of Islam and security in contemporary Russia will be conducted in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **ISLAM AND SECURITY IN RUSSIA**

The topics of the following three chapters: Security, Terrorism, and Geopolitics could have been placed at the beginning of this dissertation, so crucial are they in the treatment of Islam in Russia. Indeed, most literature on Russia and Islam, both academic and political, generally focuses on, and is limited to, these three issues. As will be discussed in the following pages, however, although this approach has historical and analytical bases, it provides only a partial, rigid interpretation of various phenomena related to Russia's Islam. It is based on a Western conceptualization of Islam in a non-Muslim state, which presupposes an oppositional stance of Muslims on cultural and ethnic, more than religious, grounds. This "standard" perspective is increasingly unable to account for the significant changes in Russia's unique relationship with Islam, and subsequently to provide satisfactory explanations for apparently contradictory phenomena.

Although ethnic-based confrontations and transnational threats play a significant role in Russian security, Russia's most sophisticated observers of Islam refrain from displaying "easy" dichotomies. Reflections on Muslim and Russian identity, on the nature of the current (and future) Russian state, and on the role of its citizens heavily influence conceptualization of the place of Islam and Muslims in Russia. The complex, and sometimes contradictory, character of these reflections reverberate in the public discourse, including in the definitions of security threats, geopolitical priorities, and in the means to address them.

The premises of such conceptualizations have been examined in the first three chapters of this dissertation, which have identified the philosophical, cultural, and historical bases of Russia's discourse on Islam. It has been shown that both old and new conceptualizations, like the "Russian idea", are coming together to build a new Russian identity. Elements that have been marginalized, like the "Tatar" elements of the "Russian civilization" or, in the Soviet period, the institutional role of religion, have now come to the foreground of discussions among the state, religious institutions, and political and ideological leaders. The following chapters follow this same methodological approach of discourse analysis. They identify the specific traits of Russia's discourse on the relation of Islam with security and geopolitical issues, its main spokespersons, and its recurring themes. Drawing from the insights of the early sections of this dissertation, the final chapters offer a novel explanatory framework to understand Russia's security and geopolitical concepts, which distance themselves from models based on Western parameters.

Compared to other states, in Russia domestic and foreign issues of security and politics are more closely interconnected, with a clear priority given to the internal dimension (de Haas 2010; Tsygankov 2006; Herman 1996). Further, Russia's conceptualizations of security threats are elaborated in a geopolitical perspective that takes into consideration at least the Eurasian regional level and the United States (Buzan and Wæver 2003). This is even more so in the case of Islam, due to the international character of the *ummah*, the global reach of separatist groups, and the overwhelmingly Muslim emigration to Russia from the former Soviet Union, among other factors.

Despite their unquestionable interdependence, though, some issues are more markedly domestic, while others originate outside of Russia's borders. For this reason, the chapters' topics have been organized along a domestic/foreign line. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the comparison of different approaches to Islam and security in Russia; it outlines the process of re-definition of Russia's Islam and its effects of the subsequent, partial desecuritization of "good" Islam; and it highlights the recent changes in the Russian preventive approach to Islamic extremism. Chapter 6, starting from the official definition of Islam, discusses more in detail the issue of Islamic terrorism. Adopting a novel perspective, it frames Islamic terrorism within Russia's history and discusses the way terrorist threats act on popular fears of unrest and revolution. Finally, Chapter 7 examines the actual influence of an "Islamic factor" on Russia's geopolitical choices.

### **Islam and security in Russia: conventional interpretations**

The identification of Islam as a threat to the state has been a constant, albeit not always equally relevant, element in Russian history. Several factors have contributed to this perception, diffused especially among the Orthodox Slavic population, but also in many elite circles. First, virtually all Muslims of the Empire were ethnically non-Slavs, whose territories were forcefully annexed to Russia; they were considered second-rank imperial subjects, unless they converted to Christianity. Second, the Orthodox Church made no mystery of its disdain for other religions, and of its firm intention to proselytize all the populations of the Empire. Taking advantage of its political and spiritual influence, the Church worked to spread the same diffidence among its followers and at the Court. In turn – third – the combination of ethnic and religious oppositions, paired with an often

unequal social status, generated in the Muslims of Russia a general diffidence for their Slavic rulers.

As a result of all these elements, the Slavic majority came to consider Muslims unreliable and, through their connections to the international *ummah*, also potential agents of Russia's enemies. In fact, Russia's political elite (the tsars) often showed a more positive attitude toward their Muslim subjects, if only for the sake of social stability. Yet, despite recent research that has evidenced a significant cooperation of Muslim communities and their leaders with the tsarist regime, especially in the nineteenth century (Yemelianova 2010b, 2002; Crews 2006; Werth 2002), the stereotype of the "untrustworthy Muslim" has proved hard to eradicate.

Historically, Muslims' reluctance to be second-rank subjects (or just subjects) of the Empire has been expressed in different ways. The most radical one was armed rebellion or resistance against Russian power, for example in the Caucasus. Less belligerently, some exponents of pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic movements developed in nineteenth-century Russia advocated the emancipation of Muslims without necessarily calling for uprising. The modernist movement of *jadidism*, too, was principally focused on the development of Russia's Islamic community, in order to match the achievements of the Slavic and, especially, European cultures (Khalid 1998).

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Russia's Muslim elites had reached unprecedented levels of self-confidence. Many Tatars still consider it a "golden age". Bennigsen and Wimbush (1979) argue that, in pre-Revolution Russia, Muslims decided to join the Bolshevik movement for strategic, not ideological, reasons. Elaborating on those elements of the Communist ideology that stressed its liberating effects and its

international character, Muslims, in fact, had hoped to free themselves from Russian dominance and, in perspective, to lead a Socialist liberation movement throughout the colonized Asian world. At the very minimum, they wanted to share state leadership with ethnic Russians. None of these expectations went fulfilled.

The Soviet regime revealed itself even more Russo-centric than the tsarist Empire (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1979), so that what many Muslims had feared, the replacement of a Slavic Russian tsarist colonizer with a Slavic Russian Soviet colonizer, was indeed occurring. Muslims in the USSR had to experience the harshness of Soviet Orientalism, which despised their traditional customs as backward and their local economy as inefficient. The Soviet regime decided to make an example of the benefits of Communism for the modernization of “its own” Muslims, and it violently imposed on them a series of changes that went from forced secularization to the disruption of traditional social and economic structures, to the imposed emancipation of women (Kemper 2009; Khalid 1998; Ro’i 1984).

Throughout their works, Bennigsen and his co-authors (Wimbush, Broxup, and Quelquejay) have argued that the antagonism of Muslims and ethnic Russians was strong throughout Russia’s history, although it could be expressed in different ways. Bennigsen and Wimbush (1979) noted how Islamic opposition continued to exist, albeit secretly, in the Soviet Union and predicted that a confrontation of some sort was due to take place by the end of the twentieth century. Due to lack of other available sources, Bennigsen had to rely on official Soviet documents. From them, he inferred the significance of Islam mainly as a security threat that informs his analysis. At the same time, Bennigsen had been able to read through the lines and had the great merit to scratch under the surface of

Soviet propaganda. Today's scholars of Islam in Russia, who have access to a much more extensive material, point to Bennigsen's somewhat constrained analysis, even if they fully acknowledge his fundamental contribution to the study of Islam in the Soviet Union (Kemper and Conermann 2011; Bobrovnikov 2007).

Bennigsen's predictions seemed to prove right when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Many minority groups proclaimed their (actual or desired) political autonomy from the USSR successor states, in particular from the Russian Federation. After decades of Soviet social engineering, these ethnic-nationalist enterprises, to be successful, required the reconstruction of peoples' identities and their own stories, which had been lost in the all-encompassing Soviet narrative. Among Russian Muslims, both national narratives (Khurmatullin 2010; Chabutdinov 2003) and transnational ideas such as pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism were re-discovered (Zenkovski 2008). In this process, Islam proved to be a powerful tool to unite groups often very different from each other in language, ethnicity, and history.

Many Muslim leaders, albeit in effect secular, used the "Islamic factor" as an additional element to raise support from the masses. In traditionally Muslim areas of the post-Soviet space, especially Central Asia, Tatarstan, and the Caucasus, thus, Islam soon became a necessary attribute of all political leaders, and not only of those belonging to Islamic parties (Azamatov 2005; Laruelle 2005; Mukhametchin 2005; Yuzeev 2005; Hunter 2004). The association of Islam and ethnicity with instrumental purposes proved useful to explain the success of political actors in these areas. The neglect or even denial of the religious dimension of Islam was encouraged by an overestimate of the effects of secularization on Soviet Muslims.

It was generally accepted that the inadequacy of the Islamic teaching imparted during Soviet times, and the force of the Soviet repression had virtually annihilated the relevance of Islam as a religious faith. The numerous signs of a “renaissance” of Islam among Soviet Muslim communities, evident already under Gorbachev’s “*glasnost*”, were interpreted as elements of ethnic separatist (national) movements. Although the success of Islamic political parties proved volatile (most of them disappeared after 2004), the consideration of Islam as a marker of ethnic identity within an increasingly secularized Muslim community – instrumental in an opposition to the Slavic majority – constitutes the basis of conventional analyses of Islam in post-Soviet Russia.

Several elements have sustained this view: the attempts to revive the national languages, first and foremost Tatar (Wertheim 2005), the proposal to substitute the ethnic-based “Tatarism” with the territorial-based “Tatarstanism” as a unifying factor for Tatarstan’s citizens (Yuzeev 2005), the requests to introduce the teaching of Islam in schools, and the anti-Russian movements in the Caucasus – to name a few. Surveys conducted in the first two decades after the Soviet demise showed the disaffection of professed Russian Muslims (as well as Christians: Johnson 2005) for actually practiced religion (Mosque visits, etc.). Islam thus appeared to be a sign of cultural, rather than religious, identity (Stepaniants 2003; Lehmann 1997).

### ***Scholarly visions on Islam and security in Russia***

Most works on Islam in Russia start from the implicit or explicit premise that the secularization process, which had begun with the Soviet anti-religious campaigns, would continue even after the demise of the USSR. Under Boris Yeltsin’s presidency, in the 1990s, the Russian government and much of Russia’s population had the declared intent

to transition from a Communist, semi-dictatorial regime to a liberal democracy on the Western model. The heritage of Soviet modernization, with its heavy industrialization and its rigid, inefficient organization of labor, was listed as a major hindrance to Russia's further economic development (Åslund 2007). However, Soviet imposition of official atheism was considered a positive element that would help Russia catch up with Western societies.

Although a so-called "renaissance" of religion and spirituality in 1990s Russia was observed and highlighted, it was interpreted as a re-appropriation of cultural stances that had been repressed by Soviet homogenization, rather than a resurgence of traditional religious values and practices. Despite signs that a crisis of the traditional, Enlightenment-inspired secularization was appearing even in the West (Taylor 2007) – precipitated by the encounter with Muslim immigration – the possibility that a similar crisis might happen in semi-liberal, post-Soviet atheist Russia was not considered. Western observers maintained their assumption that Russia was following (at least in its intentions) a path to Westernization. While it lagged behind on economic and structural terms, it was on track in the conceptualization of religion as a cultural element belonging to the individual's private sphere. Several surveys supported such an interpretation. Some more specific studies were dedicated to the resurgence of the Orthodox Christian Church, which was experiencing a staggering comeback on the social and even political scene. Yet, even this was often interpreted as an attempt by the clergy to reacquire political power. In any case, if religion was to become again a relevant force in Russian society, it was thought to be, once again, Orthodoxy.

The interpretation of secularization tendencies within the established framework of Russia as follower of the West has induced observers to exclude or minimize the signs of religious renaissance in Russia. Especially in the case of Russia's Islam, also given its instrumental role in political processes (discussed above), observers have limited its relevance to issues of ethnic confrontation and therefore of security – especially terrorism and separatism threats. Yet, such perspective, albeit important, does not capture the extension of the discourse on Islam, nor the nature of Russia's Islam itself.

As has been shown earlier in this dissertation, in the post-Soviet years the vision of Islam in Russia has developed along a unique path. In fact, Russian society as a whole has changed its approach to religion in the opposite direction from what was expected in the early years after the Soviet demise. The most recent polls by the Levada-Center (2013), the most authoritative – and independent – survey institute in Russia, show a significant increase of religiosity, *both* among Orthodoxes *and* Muslims. As has been shown in Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation, some Russian analysts had already captured this trend. Several scholars, in local research centers, had drawn parallels between the consequences of Muslim immigration in Europe and similar effects in Russia. Even Aleksey Malashenko, one of the most vocal of those alleging a potential subversive role of Islam in Russia (Malashenko and Filatov 2007), recently observed that Russia will never be a completely secular state (Malashenko 2010).

The foundational themes about the place of Islam in Russia and its role in the formation of Russian identity have been examined in Chapters 2-4. They constitute the premises also for our discussion on security and will be specifically recalled, whenever relevant. However, there is a fundamental debate on the nature of Islam that is crucial to

understanding the evolution of the conceptualization of Islam as a (non)threat: the identification, and definition, of Russia's "traditional" Islam. Formulated in the mid-1990s, it has been considered by many observers (especially outside of Russia) mostly as a tool of foreign policy, or as a formal, ineffective expedient to deal with some security issues (Kanet and Piet 2014; Tsygankov 2006; Herman 1996). In fact, the concept of traditional Islam has deeper roots, and its introduction more ambitious objectives, than a simple policy expedient. In the course of almost twenty years, this argument has been at work in the official discourse and in popular discussions. Today, it has come to determine diffused perceptions of security, securitization, and geopolitics, as the following discussion will show.

#### **Primakov's fundamental differentiation of Islam in Russia**

Bennigsen called "parallel Islam" the form of Islam that had survived in the Soviet Union. He explained how the underground Sufi *tariqas* in the Caucasus had ensured the preservation of Islamic practices and their transmission to believers. Through their network of brotherhoods, which covered the whole country, they also sheltered Muslims outside the Caucasus, in the Volga and Ural regions. In this way, the Sunni Hanafi traditions, typical of Tatars and Central Asian populations encountered the more "extremist" stances of Caucasian Muslims – "extremist" because historically anti-Russian/Soviet. In the analysis of Bennigsen (and of his Soviet sources), it was the coexistence, in the Sufi *tariqas*, of nationalist and religious ideas, and their propagation to quiescent Tatar areas, that made Sufism a major threat to the Soviet regime.

The "renaissance" of Islam in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR, accompanied by the resurgence of nationalist separatist movements, challenged the – by

then Russian – authorities. The two most relevant issues were the Tatar nationalist movement and the violent separatist groups in the North Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia being now independent, sovereign states). In many ways, the issues were different: doctrinally (Sufis and Hanafi Islam), ethnically (Tatars, Chechens, Dagestanis, and a myriad of other groups); and culturally (modernist Tatars and tribal Caucasians). In common, though, these movements had an open hostility toward the Soviet (Russian) dominance, perceived as colonialist, and the use of religion as a tool to gain support from the Muslim population (Laruelle 2005).

Although almost all groups claimed Islam as their motivational force, they referred to different forms of it. Following a rather sharp generational rift, the Muslim youth generally appeared more antagonistic toward the Russian regime and more open to Islamic influences from abroad. The older generations, instead, seemed more interested in recovering the traditional forms of Islam that combined pre-Islamic habits (*adat*) and Islamic precepts. They were also more inclined to find an arrangement with Moscow. Many factors acted simultaneously on Muslim communities. The ideational disarray after the collapse of communism left a vacuum that needed to be filled, or replenished; the economic depression into which Russia had fallen, and the failure of the governments much-advertised, Western-sponsored liberal reforms; and finally, the penetration into the formerly Soviet space of the major Islamic powers in the region. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf Emirates – all, in different measures and with different success, flooded Muslims in Russia with money, educators, instructional materials. Often, they offered to have young Russian Muslims trained in the most prestigious Islamic centers in the Middle East.

Of course, such generosity from foreign states could not go unnoticed by Russian authorities and in general by Russian society. Soon, old suspicions about Muslims' loyalty arose again. Foreign educators were soon attacked as subversive agents, Russians who had studied in Egypt or Saudi Arabia encountered resistance to their subsequent attempts, once back in Russia, to rectify what they thought to be a misguided form of Islam. Indeed, Saudi versions of Islam, more rigid and less tolerant of pre-Islamic traditions, began to spread in Russia and especially in the North Caucasus. The most (in)famous of them was Wahhabism, the diffusion and aggressive character of which led to the popular use of "Wahhabism" to indicate any kind of Islamic extremism in Russia.

The Russian government, preoccupied with pressing problems of economic crisis and regime transition, initially paid little attention to the ferment in the Caucasus, to the point that an allegedly independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria could be (self)proclaimed in 1991 (Russia never recognized it). Toward the middle of the 1990s, several elements induced the Russian government to turn its attention to its Muslim regions and to the "Muslim question". The proclamation of the Republic of Ichkeria, and in general the increase of separatist and terrorist attacks, were the most immediate ones. At the same time, Russia was disappointed by the West, which had relegated Russia to a minor role in the international system. Western (especially U.S.) advisers had persuaded Yeltsin and its team of liberals to initiate a drastic process of economic reforms that had brought the country to its knees, with little or no benefits. The nomination of Evgenii Primakov as Foreign Minister first (1996-1998) and Prime Minister shortly after (1998-1999) marked a turn in Russian foreign and security policies (Kanet and Piet 2014; Tsygankov 2006).

Primakov was a trained Orientalist, familiar with Russia's historical diplomatic relations with the Middle East, and a former Soviet diplomat in that region. As Foreign Minister, he decided to re-orient Russia's sphere of interest from the unreliable West to a region where it had more chances to play a determinant role. The question of Russia's Muslims became, then, a primary concern. Aware of both the Islamic heritage and the strategic importance of Russia's Muslims in the relations with Muslim countries, Primakov accentuated the Russian historical distinction between authorized and unauthorized Islam. The versions of Islam, Sunni Hanafi and Sufi, traditionally followed in Russia include a strong component of pre-Islamic customs and habits (*adit*). Additionally, the Soviet repression, by preventing the proper transmission of religious knowledge between generations and across state borders, had caused the emergence of further changes like, for example, a strong cult of shrines and formal irregularities in the completion of rituals. Therefore, Russia's Islam has assumed a peculiar shape, and may be formally very different from Islam as it is practiced in Arab countries (Yemelianova 2010b; Tsygankov 2006; Hunter 2004; Herman 1996).

Primakov appreciated the opportunities opened by the establishment of a "Russian version" of Islam. He inaugurated a doctrine that accentuates the juxtaposition of Russia's customary Islam to "foreign" religious schools. The former was declared the only version of Islam legally authorized in Russia. Foreign Islam, on the contrary, was condemned as intrinsically hostile and suspected of working toward the social and political disintegration of Russia (separatism). Since the mid-1990s, the fight against foreign influence on domestic faith became one of the leitmotifs in Russia anti-terrorism policy – and of Russian foreign policy in general.

### *The effects of Primakov's conceptualization of Russia's Islam*

Primakov's conceptual model was successful for several reasons. First, it provided a way to frame the objective security threat represented by Islamic terrorism, without blaming Russia's Muslim substantial minority. Second, and related to this, it offered the possibility to the "official" Islamic organizations to participate to public life by siding with the government. Their growing authority allowed Muslim leaders to provide an umbrella under which moderate Muslims could safely practice their religion. At the same time the government, which had kept control over the legitimizing criteria for all authorized religions, could secure the loyalty of official Islamic institutions (see Chapter 4 of this dissertation for a detailed discussion of this matter).

Finally, another explanation for Primakov's success is less immediate, but perhaps more powerful. The identification of a peculiar Russian trait in customary Islam's nature inserted itself in the debate on the identity of Russia and the components of its unique civilization. The stress on "Russia's" Islam not only served to dispel ordinary citizens' mutual diffidence. Equally importantly, it could contribute to support the idea of a Eurasian, Russian civilization. The latter was unique in respect to Islam, just as it was in respect to Christianity. Further, on the authority of its century-long history of coexistence, Russia could claim a leading role as an example of successful multi-religious society. Philosophically, Russia's Islam could mirror Orthodox Messianism and present itself as a paragon for moderate Muslims in non-Islamic states, with the objective of achieving world peace. As will be further discussed, there are contributors to the discourse about Islam that hope of this outcome.

Primakov himself had envisioned the further developments of his conceptualization. As a foreign policy expert, he had well in mind the potential benefits of attracting the international moderate Muslim community, while being able to isolate and fight extremisms. Many observers have interpreted his policy as a move to reach out to Russia's Muslim neighbors, in the attempt for Russia to acquire influence in the (Middle) East and compensate for its loss of political weight in the West. As will be further discussed in Chapter 7, the effects of this geopolitical framing are still visible today.

Mohiaddin Mesbahi has been one of the first (and very few) scholars who noticed the formation of the Primakov doctrine and correctly placed it within a broader process of identity formation of Russia, ensuing the disillusionment of the (failed) pro-Western policy adopted by Yeltsin and the Westernizer elites. As Mesbahi (1997) observes, Primakov's conceptualization of Islam both reflected and reinforced the then-emerging neo-Eurasianist movement, which strongly advocated the existence – and the power – of a unique Russian civilization that had developed across the two continents and was bound to dominate them. Although the neo-Eurasianist movement has increasingly bent to extreme right positions with a strong Orthodox component (Laruelle 2008; Wiederkehr 2007), some of its leaders (first of all, Aleksandr Prokhanov) continue to envision a role for Islam in the past and future of Russia (see also Chapter 2 of this dissertation). Indeed – and somewhat surprisingly – in the course of two decades, the ties of extreme right-wing activists with exponents of Russia's political Islam have become ever closer and more explicit. This is a fundamental element in Russia's political panorama, and it will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

Gradually, the “new” definition of customary Islam was applied to all forms of Islam practiced in Russia. Because of the role played by Sufi *tariqas* in the opposition to the tsarist and Soviet regimes – a role that they maintained for more than a decade after 1991 (Malashenko and Trenin 2004) – initially Sufism was considered intrinsically antagonistic to the Russian state. Yet, as Malashenko and Trenin, among others, also acknowledge, Russia soon found itself in a position of exception with respect to the broader Muslim world. In general, in the Sunni community outside of Russia, Sufism is often considered with suspicion as a form of mysticism bordering on heresy. Accordingly, those Muslims from Russia (especially the Caucasus) who had gone abroad to receive their religious education after 1991, or who had been exposed to other forms of Sunni Islam in the Afghan war, upon their return harshly condemned local Islamic practices, in particular Sufism.

Local communities reacted to such criticism, and a rift began to open between Muslims educated abroad and Muslims who followed the traditional practices, characterized by a great influence of Sufi and/or pre-Islamic (*adat*) elements. This division usually mirrored a generational distance, with the youth following the “foreign” and the elderly the “traditional” forms of Islam. Far from being important only in religious matters, the change, in North Caucasus, of the character of Sufism from subversive to conservative, has determined a fundamental change in governmental policies. It also favored the rise of a new “enemy”: Wahhabism.

### **Wahhabism and Russia’s contemporary discourse on Islam**

The shift of Sufism from being “parallel Islam” to official Islam occurred gradually in the 1990s and was accomplished with the second Chechen conflict in the mid-2000s.

Terrorist and separatist organizations have distanced themselves from Sufi *tariqas*. Instead, they look for affiliations in the broader extremist Islamic scene, most notably with Al-Qaeda. Today, separatist organizations like *Imarat Kavkaz* openly challenge the traditional establishment of Sufi leaders, who in turn are becoming more reliable allies of the government (*Kavkaz Uzel/Caucasian Knot* 2013; International Crisis Group 2012; see also Chapter 4 of this dissertation). In Russian discourse, the term “Wahhabism” has replaced Sufism as the standard label for extremist Islam. At first, in the 1990s, it was rather inaccurately applied to any practice of Islam unfamiliar to Russian believers. In particular, it indicated those forms of cult that had come to Russia through Islamic teachers sent by Arab countries to help the local communities, or through veterans of the Afghan war, who had come into contact with radical movements abroad (Yemelianova 2010a).

The opposition between “traditionalists” and “fundamentalists” or “radicals” found a favorable terrain in the reluctance of many Muslims of Russia to accept the new “Arab” customs, which intransigent Islamic extremists intended to forcefully impose on them. The rejection of “foreign” interpretations of Islam was to be expected in the Volga-Ural region, where the Tatar community had a strong sense of its Islamic heritage, and was more willing to cooperate with the Russian regime. However, it played a crucial role even in the conduct of the war in Chechnya, in which Sufi leaders openly condemned separatists (Vecheganski 2005; Malashenko and Trenin 2004).

The necessity of discerning among various Islamic practices and of establishing the degree of their “extremism” fostered the appearance of more accurate descriptions of Wahhabism, which appeared in Russian in political and scholarly works, as well as in the

media (Shevchenko 2012; Bobrovnikov 2007; Malashenko 2007; Ignatenko 2005).

Russians are now much better informed about the history, purposes, and contemporary manifestations of Wahhabism and its affiliated doctrines. Also the distinction between Wahhabism and Salafism, which is equally diffused in the North Caucasus, is clearly made in public discourse – although, in the end, they are again lumped together as “extremist”.

Today, historical accounts stress the local, unique character of the Islamic practices in the Caucasus. They extensively report on the contributions to Islamic and Russian cultures made throughout the centuries by Caucasian communities, and praise the high level of doctrinal competencies boasted by the Dagestani communities (Bobrovnikov 2002). Russian studies of local communities claim that Islamic traditions are effective in creating social cohesiveness, and describe how they adjust to local contexts (Michaleva 2011; Nazukina 2011).

The attention given to Wahhabism, to its history, and to its ties to other forms of fundamentalist Islam such as Salafism was both a consequence and a cause of the strengthening of the association of Islam and security. Differently from the past, though, when such association was indistinct, the simultaneous presence of traditional and non-traditional narratives has circumscribed the security discussion to “Wahhabism” and other extremist interpretations of Islam. The vehement remarks of the Russian state and of Islamic official organizations about the incompatibility of “Wahhabism” with Russian traditions, have subsequently made it possible to gradually deprive traditional Islam of any intrinsically negative, subversive trait.

Thus isolated from mainstream practice, extremist Islam could be easily securitized – and it has been, both domestically and internationally (Malashenko and Filatov 2007). The “Islamic factor” is evoked, now, only in conjunction with subversive activities, with specific extremist groups, and within a certain frame of geopolitical relations, as will be further discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. An important consequence of this process of distinction of traditional/non-traditional Islam is that, now, extremist Islam can be safely rejected not only by Russian state authorities, but first and foremost by the whole Muslim community, Hanafi and Sufi alike.

The division of traditional and foreign, of good and bad Islam, however, does not dispel the shadows of ambiguity in the treatment of Muslim individuals and communities. In the political and policing practice, the boundaries of what is subversive are rather blurred. Russian law is very harsh against extremists and potential terrorists, including propaganda activists. A “black list” of forbidden books and other materials is regularly updated by the Ministry of Interiors, and any kind of public organization, including religious ones, must meet very strict criteria. The power of judgment lies in the hand of local authorities, whose frequent incompetence causes the ban of mainstream books, or the imprisonment of religious activists. In the most outrageous cases, public opinion has requested, and often obtained, a revision of the sentence, but many other instances, especially in the provinces, go unnoticed or unresolved (the non-profit organization *Forum 18* provides a useful, constantly updated list of such cases at [www.forum18.org](http://www.forum18.org)).

### **The (partial) desecuritization of Russia’s “traditional Islam”**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 have marked a fundamental watershed in the approach of many states to Islamic terrorism. Although Russia had experienced terrorist

attacks on its territory before that date, the government led by President Putin took the opportunity to declare a “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) – a condition of extreme danger for national security, in which state top leaders act beyond the limits of their legal mandate. Under the flag of the fight against international terrorism, Moscow adopted a series of legislative and especially military measures to crush the opposition in Chechnya. In the case of Russia, it has been established (Mesbahi 2013; Omelicheva 2009; Tsygankov 2006; Malashenko and Trenin 2004) that Putin has exploited the necessity to counter international counter-terrorism to justify extreme violent interventions of Russian forces and numerous military actions that went beyond international conventions on war. Further, in order to justify its harsh military policy in North Caucasus, Moscow directly associated the Chechen revolt with (Islamic) terrorism, thus coating the originally ethnic-nationalistic causes of the conflict with a political “extremist” motive.

In its approach to separatism and the conflict in Chechnya, Moscow acted within a framework of securitization of Islam. The process of securitization, as theorized by Buzan and Wade (1998), occurs when an issue is declared a matter of national security. Securitization is successful when the security threat is identified by an actor legitimate to do so (for example the President) and the audience of the message (for example, the citizens) accept such identification. As a consequence, the issue is taken away from the realm of ordinary political negotiations and discussions, and receives special treatment (politically, militarily, and/or socially). The state and the organs legitimated to tackle the issue are allowed to take extraordinary measures to defeat the threat. Like Russia, many countries, first of all the United States, have adopted a similar securitization policy of Islamic terrorism after the September 11 attacks.

In Russia, though, the previous introduction of the Primakov's doctrine on Islam had created the premises for a different development of the discourse on Islam. The "state of exception", while harshly affecting "extremist" strains, at the same time allowed "traditional" Muslims to take the initiative in the discourse on moderate Islam and its place in contemporary Russia. Protected by their non-threatening status, Muslims found some openings for suggestions that, in normal conditions, would have sounded audacious or utopic. Further, they found that they could become influential in Russian society. The first to take advantage of this opportunity were the official religious organizations.

As has been observed in the previous chapter of this dissertation, the cooperation between the Orthodox Church and Islamic organizations in Russia was unexpected, and relatively new. Although contingent factors, like the necessity to counter secularization, the increasing threat posed by competing religions and spiritual movements, or the joint efforts to acquire power *vis-à-vis* the state, have played a significant triggering role, some effects of such cooperation are unexpected. One of them is the desecuritization of traditional Islam.

Securitization requires that the speaker be legitimized to do so, and be recognized as authoritative by her audience. In Russia, the government is a powerful actor, yet it is not the only one that possesses a strong authority in matter of religion-state relations. For centuries, the Orthodox Church has provided the foundational legitimacy to the tsar by delegating to him the right to exercise political power, as executor of the Church's mission to preserve Christianity after the fall of Constantinople. This symphonic arrangement of Church and Tsar, originally, tilted in the Church's favor (Codevilla 2008). Despite the progressive shift of power from the Church to the state, culminating in

the persecution of religion by the Soviets, the Church still retains (or claims to retain) its fundamental ontological role in the legitimation of any Russian state. The Church feels entitled to participate to the political debate – and expects to be listened to.

After the demise of the Soviet Union, the Orthodox Church has attempted to regain what it deems to be its rightful place in the new state, but its success has only been partial. The mostly secular character of Russia is not only expressed in the Constitution but is also evident in the government's political decision-making process and, albeit somewhat confusedly, in the population's orientations. At the same time, Putin has been the only politician whose approval rate among Russians is higher than the Church's (Curanović 2012), and who can thus rival the Metropolitan. All this constitutes a powerful hindrance to the Church's political role.

The lack of adequate (in the view of the Church) support by the state has induced the Church to seek the cooperation of some Islamic organizations, on their part interested in acquiring social acceptance and political influence. The constant positive messages expressed by the Church on this subject (which have been examined in detail in Chapter 4), and in particular the insistence on the essential, albeit smaller, contribution of Islam to the constitution of Russia's identity – and thereby on the right of official Islam to participate to state building processes – represent a novelty in the Church's self-positioning in the public sphere. Reassured by the Muslims' proclamations of loyalty to Russia, Orthodoxy can safely acknowledge the importance of Islam in Russia, as a religion and as a sociopolitical force. Together with the Islamic organizations, the Church can constitute a stronger "religious front" to counter the power of the secular state.

Given the legitimacy that the Church still enjoys inside and outside Russia as the depository of Russian identity and closest ally of the state (Curanović 2012; Bennett 2011), its affirmations hold a high level of authority – sufficient to utter a (de)securitization speech. Equally strong may be its appeal to the referent audience – that is, to the Russian population – which is the same audience of the state as securitizing actor. Dismayed by the state’s downplaying of its historical and especially political weight, the Orthodox Church is creating a new public space for itself (Curanović 2012; Solodovnik 2013; Balzer 2010). In doing so, among other things, it is reaching out to Islam and instituting a public inter-religious dialogue that appears overwhelmingly veered to the positive. Of course, the authority of Muslim organizations is more limited. Nevertheless, they reciprocate by confirming the importance of the Church’s position in Russia and by granting their cooperation. The association of Orthodox and Islamic authorities in public view (for example, during state ceremonies) also broadens the latter’s audience, and possibly confers them more respectability among the public at large.

Considered from a securitization theory’s perspective, Islam in Russia represents three issues (referent objects): religion as a cult, religion as a way-of-life (political role), and identity. In respect to each object, and also to the interactions of all three, Islamic organizations, the state, and the Church contribute to processes of securitization and desecuritization of Islam. The distinction of traditional and non-traditional Islam creates two environments in which these discourses develop. In one environment, Islam is securitized; in the other, it is not. The state’s influence is heavier in the former, where extremist Islam is part of an overarching conceptualization of terrorism as an ideology.

The details of this process will be examined in the next chapter. Conversely, in the sphere of non-securitized or desecuritized Islam, the official religious institutions cooperate with the state in constructing the discourse in which debates on Russia's identity and "the Russian idea" are conducted.

Although still partial and imperfectly applied, the desecuritization of traditional Islam may be an attempt by the state to prevent the spreading of extremist religious movements. By seconding the ambitions of Russian Islamic organizations, the government has ensured that a moderate, non-threatening interpretation of religious-state relations be developed and supported, and that it be offered a political outlet. This process has been possible, among other factors, also thanks to the long history of Islam first in tsarist Russia and then, under more difficult conditions, in the Soviet Union. The state has taken advantage of non-confrontational and even cooperative positions already existing in the Muslim community, especially among Tatars. State support to selected "official" organizations has further tighten the latter's relations with the central authority.

The Russian state and Russia's Muslim leaders are being increasingly criticized for their instrumental use of Islam for political purposes (Curanović 2012; Solodovnik 2013; Filatov 2007). To a certain degree, these observations are justified: Those Islamic organizations that have accepted the official doctrine on religion – just like the Orthodox Church – have also benefited from economic, social and even political advantages. However, several Islamic institutions have managed to maintain a certain degree of self-determination. In fact, after two decades of internal rivalries and mutual dissent among Muslim groups, it seems that the Moscow-based Russian Mufties Council has acquired the status of leading Islamic organization – the one, among official Islamic organizations,

that more assertively advocates a distinct identity of Russia's Muslims as rightful members of Russia's society (Curanović 2012; see also Chapter 4 of this dissertation).

Gradually, traditional Islam has become part of Russia's religious panorama (much more than Judaism or Buddhism), and Islamic organizations have established themselves as fully legitimate. As such, in accordance to the state's functional interpretation of religion (Schuppert 2012; see also Chapter 4 of this dissertation), they are required to contribute to the official vision of Russian society, especially in those areas in which the state does not want to, or cannot, take the initiative. For Muslims, two issues are central: Islamic education and the immigration of Muslims from the former Soviet space. In particular, Islamic education is directly correlated to the process of desecuritization of traditional Islam and to the prevention of Islamic extremism. As such, it offers a good introduction to the more specific treatment of terrorism that will be conducted in Chapter 6. For this reason, it is discussed here.

### **Islam, education, and state-building**

Until the late 2000s, the teaching of religious subjects in Russian schools was controversial. Education is one of the fields in which Soviet atheism has left an heritage of pervasive secularism. Even the Orthodox Church has encountered significant obstacles to its efforts to reintroduce Christian education in public schools. In order to pursue its objective, the Church had introduced it at the regional level school by school, until in 2007 Vladimir Putin curtailed the autonomy of local administrations in matter of school curriculum (Fagan 2014). A similar pattern was visible in Russia's Muslim regions, although they seem to have enjoyed a broader autonomy and for a longer time if, as denounced by Roman Silant'ev in 2010, Muslim communities in Russia (especially in the

Caucasus) had established *de facto* Islamic enclaves with *Shari'a*-inspired, unofficial (“illegal”) rules, such as polygamist marriages and Islamic religious education in schools.

The question of religious teaching, for a long time lingering in public discourse, has been then extensively discussed within the broader debate about the reform of the Russian school system, which has occupied most of the decade of the 2000s. Contrary to the official position of the early years after 1991, when the secular Russian state was reluctant to support religious teaching, now the government is in favor of the reintroduction of religion as a school subject. Vladimir Putin, in particular, has supported the teaching of Christian Orthodoxy as part of a more general “Russian patriotism”. For Putin, it was not religiosity that needed to be revamped, but religion as one element of Russian “civilization”. Because patriotism pertains to the state, in Putin’s vision it is the state’s duty to ensure that it is correctly taught. As such, the leadership of the Church as primary source of religious education was threatened and, in fact, the school reform finally approved in 2012 assigns the teaching of religion in school to staff appointed by the state, and not by the Church (Fagan 2014).

The Church’s calls for the reintroduction of religion in school has been widely criticized as an attempt to take advantage of Putin’s personal support for Orthodoxy and (re)impose the religious and cultural supremacy of Orthodoxy on Russia’s society. These fears, at least in most public schools, have turned out to be unfounded; not only are teachers dependent on the secular state, but the learning materials have been classified by Western organizations as “even-handed”. Further, the majority of students (or their parents) opt for “secular ethics” instead of religion classes (Fagan 2014).

Nevertheless, as the July meeting of the Presidential Council on Interethnic Relations (PCIR) once again confirms, Putin insists on the fundamental role of education in the formation of a patriotic conscience in Russian youth. Further, he holds a very inclusive vision of Russian identity, when he emphasizes

the irreplaceable role of literature, history, the Russian language and the languages of other peoples of Russia in educating the younger generation (President of Russia 2014e).

On the same occasion, the Russian President himself makes the connection between education, patriotism, and security:

I find it necessary to also consider improving the implementation of the state program for *patriotic education*. [...] our priorities in the state youth policy [...] should be directed at the overall development of a harmonious personality, at bringing up Russian citizens as mature and responsible people who combine love for their country and their home, their national and ethnic identity, and respect the culture and traditions of the people who live around them.

I would like to ask [the Education Ministry] to speed up their work and to give special attention to *the prevention of extremism among students*. A single system of monitoring interethnic relations and preventing possible ethnic conflicts should be of great help here. The Government is to launch it before the end of the year. (President of Russia 2014e; the italics are mine)

Islamic teaching, as part of the school curriculum, is also part of this project. However, as will become clear in the following sections, it is not religion *per se* that is at stake here.

### ***Islamic teaching and Russia's security***

In the years immediately following the demise of the Soviet Union, Islamic religious education in Russia was viewed with suspicion by both public opinion and the state.

Against the backdrop of the ethnic-nationalist conflicts of the 1990s that were assuming an increasingly religious extremist character, the teaching of Islam was considered a dangerous attempt by Muslims to substitute their all-Russian (*rossiiskii*) identity with an

Islamic, hostile one. At a minimum, it threatened to isolate Muslims from, rather than integrate them in, Russian society. The confused relations among Muslim groups, Islamic organizations and Muslim leaders, whose religious affiliation was often unclear, contributed to generate diffidence. The construction of mosques and Islamic schools, especially in traditionally non-Muslim areas and in Moscow and S. Petersburg, was often opposed, at times violently.

Gradually, a correlation between certain Islamic teachings imparted to young Russian Muslims by “foreign” actors, abroad or at home, and security threats was made. This subsequently sparked a reflection, by government and Muslim leaders alike, on the actual educational needs of the Muslim community. Such process was also favored by the level of sophistication on doctrinal knowledge that many Muslims, in particular Tatars, had achieved. The “safe haven” of traditional Islam and the concurrent re-organization of the institutional environment, with the establishment of the leadership of the Russian Mufties Council (as it has been discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation), had allowed more energy to be devoted to the development of theological and doctrinal arguments. Russia’s Muslim leaders have become more aware of their place in the Islamic world. The necessity to counter the lure of Arabic “orthodox” Islam sparked an intense discussion of the characteristics, instead, of Russia’s “true” Islam (in particular, Hanafi Sunni and Sufism). Within this lively doctrinal debate among Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers, the role of Islamic education as it was imparted in the official *madrasah* acquired great relevance. In determining their curriculum, religious leaders became less and less obliging to public expectations.

Thus for example, Rafik Mukhametshin, the Director of the prestigious Russian Islamic University in Kazan', when asked directly about the necessity to modify the *madrakah* curriculum in order to prevent the formation of extremists (a frequent question from the public), denied such need (Mukhametshin 2012). In his opinion, Tatar religious institutions were correctly imparting a thorough knowledge of Hanafi Sunni Islam, adequately framed within the general Islamic traditions of legal schools. Instead, he pointed at the necessity of forming a proper layer of religious teachers, who could correctly follow the official institutional guidelines. Such teachers had to come from the Tatar community, because they had to be able to harmonize the practices of Russia's traditional Islam with the general precepts of the sacred texts.

On this point, Mukhametshin is very clear. One important cause of social conflict among Muslims and of the insurgence of extremist stances, in his opinion, is the failure of foreign-educated young Muslims (including teachers) to grasp the specific character of Russia's Islamic traditions. Unable to understand and accept the "spurious" (in their eyes) faith of the elderly, Mukhametshin notes, many young believers reject their family ties. Without proper guidance in a "very delicate" phase of their lives, when "they want to put their ideals into practice", these young Muslims will find an outlet for their aspirations outside of their traditional community – in religious extremism.

The role of educators in inculcating the "correct" version of Islam is underscored also by Mukaddas-khazrat Bibarsov, *mufti* of the *oblast'* of Saratov, "one of the most active spiritual leaders of the country" according to a journalist of *Islam Evrazii*. In a 2014 interview given to that portal, also reported on the RMC website (RMC 2014d), Bibarsov concedes that, often, members of the religious establishment are not adequately

trained. Further, they need to be more proactive and “reach out” to young people. Like Mukhametshin, Bibarsov believes that young Muslims like all young people are good, idealistic, and want to change the world for the better. Unfortunately, he continues, often they do not possess the right knowledge to pursue this objective in a proper, positive manner and can be easily misguided by false masters. In Bibarsov’s opinion, a proper and correct Islamic education is a necessity, and to provide for it is a task not (only) of Islamic organizations, but first and foremost of the state.

#### *Russia’s government and Islamic education*

It is not by chance that Bibarsov calls Islamic education a duty of the government. His interview appears to be referring to a specific discussion held at the Presidential Council for Interethnic Relations (PCIR) a few months earlier, in October 2013. On that occasion, Vladimir Putin had confirmed his belief that a proper religious teaching is one of the most effective tools to prevent extremism – of any sort. Through education, Putin envisions the formation of a new generation of Russian citizens, united under the patriotic flag. Accordingly, the school curriculum must be so designed as to foster the allegiance of pupils to a “multi-ethnic”, “multi-religious” motherland. In the October 2013 session of the PCIR, Putin reproached many of its members for their inadequate zeal in accomplishing the plan he has explained in many occasions. He specifically indicated the necessity of improving the quality of the teaching of Russian language and history – but without neglecting the other “core” cultures, which all contributed to the Russian civilization (a concept that he repeated, again, in the Council’s meeting in July 2014).

The October 2013 session of the PCIR has proved very significant for Islamic education, and Putin’s observations have been promptly welcomed by Muslim official

institutions. In an interview to the online newspaper *Vsglyad.ru* (2014), also reported by the RMC official website (RMC 2014e), the rector of the Moscow Islamic University, Damir-khazrat Khairetdinov, comments positively on Putin's willingness to create an official standard of Islamic teaching. He observes how a faulty, uncontrolled teaching is deleterious for the development of young Muslims into extremist activists. He also sharply criticizes foreign education, even in prestigious institutions like Al-Azhar, when it is conducted under unfavorable conditions – for example, when Russian pupils are sent without the supervision of the Spiritual Boards. In those cases, Khairetdinov notes, often the students do not qualify for the official classes and are easy prey of ambiguous “spiritual masters”. The only way to prevent these dangerous situations, in Khairetdinov's opinion, is to develop an adequate educational system at home.

The risks of a foreign-controlled educational system appeared clear after the treatment of the Gülen schools that were mushrooming in the post-Soviet Muslim space (including Russia) in the 1990s. Gülen was long considered a strategic ally of Turkish Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with whom he shared the vision of a Turkish renaissance. In his schools, he was heavily inspired by his own master, Said Nursi, a moderate Islamic thinker, whose books, though, are (controversially) banned in Russia as extremist. Gülen's schools were suspected on the double account of serving the purposes of Turkey and propagating a dangerous religious stance. In fact, it is also probable that they did not conform to the government's project of “patriotic education”. On charges of conducting foreign intelligence operations, the Gülen schools were closed in 2002, and the Movement definitely banned from Russia in 2008.

With time, Gülen's relations with Erdogan badly deteriorated, allegedly over political rivalry. The Russian authoritative commentator on Islam and university professor Vitaly (Vitalii) Naumkin points out how this change in alliance has strengthened the relations between Turkey and Russia, also over a potentially controversial issue like Crimea (Naumkin 2014b). In fact, the long-term developments of Russo-Turkish relations are yet to be fully assessed, as for example, Turkish Muslim leaders are being expelled by Crimea (Corley 2014b, 2014c). This element pertains to a broader geopolitical strategy in which Islam and Muslims play a significant role in Russia's foreign policy. For the present discussion, it is relevant to note that the role of foreign schools as potential security breach intertwines with Russia's vision of education as fundamental to building a new national identity.

### ***Religious authorities and security threats***

The October 2013 session of the Presidential Committee on Interethnic Relations has been commented on also by the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (NG), a newspaper generally supporting the government. An editorial published soon after the meeting (NG 2013) not only provides a nice summary of the official (Putin's) position but – most noteworthy – places it into a broader context. The article starts from the coming into force of a law that makes local bureaucrats directly responsible for any inter-religious clashes that may burst out in their jurisdictions (a reminder that Putin also makes during his introductory speech to the PCIR session). It, then, continues by criticizing the indecisiveness of Russian central authorities in deciding what strategy to adopt to prevent such conflicts.

To contrast to this administrative inadequacy, the author praises President Putin's firm belief that a proper Islamic education is essential in preventing any deviant influence

on Muslim youth of extremist groups (“Wahhabis”). However, she continues, not only bureaucrats are to blame; religious authorities are responsible as well. This is a recurring argument between administration and religious powers, in which each side is willing to take a part of the blame, but attributes the greater fault to the other side (admittedly, the Islamic authorities are more willing to denounce their own shortcomings).

Unsurprisingly, the first half of the article is a mere repetition of Putin’s much-heard vision. Then, the discussion takes an unexpected turn.

On the one hand, the article notes, it is unacceptable for an *imam* – and his supervisors – to neglect his responsibility to oversee the activity of mosque-goers, let alone to take “subversive” initiatives. On the other hand, it continues, it is unreasonable to expect that the much-praised unification of all Islamic organizations under one umbrella would maim their extremist fringes. After all, not even the, much better structured, Orthodox Church can claim control over Christian fundamentalists “entrenched in the *taiga* [surrounding] Perm”. The association of Orthodox Church and Islamic organizations in terms that are negative *for both* is a relatively rare image, especially when discussing Islamic education. In part, it is a recognition of the level of legitimacy and authority achieved by official Islam, which is now on par with Christianity.

Additionally, however, it is not unreasonable to assume that the article, written by an anonymous author and published on a pro-governmental, national newspaper, was anticipating or disclosing the conceptual bases of Vladimir Putin’s reasoning on extremism and religion. In this conceptualization, extremism is a form of opposition to the model of Russia that is envisioned by the state. Since religion is an essential element

of this model, all “deviant” forms of religious doctrine that do not conform to the characteristics of Russia’s “official” identity are potentially subversive. It is, therefore, a duty and a necessity of the state, and not of religious bodies, to make sure that only those religious principles and practices that support the “motherland”, as it is envisioned by the state, are allowed and encouraged. One of the primary means to achieve this result is the strengthening of state allegiance through the construction of a shared sense of common history, mutual cultural influence, and ethnic equality – what Putin calls “patriotic education” (also a common practice in many nationally composite countries, including the United States of America).

Implicitly following this path, the *Nezavisimaya*’s article drew the necessary conclusion that there is a fundamental connection between security threats and not only religious teaching but also religious authorities – including the Church. Vladimir Putin himself officially made the same connection in the conclusion of the 2014 meeting of the PCIR, where he noted how patriotic education must be a primary tool to counter also “the revival of Nazi ideology and the glorification of Nazi criminals” (often professing Christian faith, see Mitrofanova 2005).

The teaching of traditional Islam must be seen within Putin’s attempt to build a unified civilizational model for Russia. Each element that, historically, concurred with the formation of Russia’s identity, including Islam, must be framed and sustained within this model. The role of education in the formation of a specific, “desired type” of citizen is not new, nor necessarily negative. Certainly, it is not unusual for much of Russian society, which had experienced the Soviet attempts at social engineering. Whether Putin intends to re-create a similarly highly codified society is unclear, even in view of his

alleged nostalgic glance at the Soviet Union as the “true” version of Russian power. What can be observed, instead, is the progressive standardization of educational institutions and programs. In 2014, for example, the major Islamic institutes of higher education (Islamic universities) have obtained the same legal status as state universities, meaning that their graduates hold the same-level academic title as their counterparts in secular institutions.

***Islam as a counter-ideology to terrorism***

It appears clear that the central authority holds religious institutions accountable for taking their part in neutralizing security threats, both in form of religious education and of direct control over their associates. Therefore, the article in the *Nezavisimaya* publicly condemns the behavior of the Church, which would not reveal whether some extremist nationalists are active within its hierarchy. It goes even further by publicly exposing the Church’s ambiguous position toward Christian (right wing) extremists. The journalist notes that, while the Patriarchate criticizes “uncontrolled” extremists for their actions, such as protests against the construction of a mosque in Moscow, it is undeniable that – in the end – the Church profits from them.

The equation of the functional roles of Church and Islamic institutions has been possible thanks to the distinction of “traditional” and “foreign” Islam. Initially rejected as “unfamiliar”, in the official discourse non-traditional Islam has been later labeled as “inappropriate” and, finally, as doctrinally “wrong” – even in respect to non-Russian forms of Islam. By this conceptual shift, extremist Islam has been gradually deprived of its religious element and, instead, classified within the broader, ideology-based phenomenon of “terrorism”. This re-positioning of extremist Islam is perhaps one of the most significant shifts in Russia’s conceptualization of security, with direct policy

consequences. Its main implication is that, if extremist Islam is an ideology, its origins are intellectual, and, consequently, it is best fought with intellectual weapons.

In the past, in Russia and the Soviet Union, Islam was considered a religious or a cultural attribute of certain groups of subjects (or citizens), and was in the best case just tolerated. In twenty-first century Russia, instead, traditional Islam occupies a legitimate place in the political, cultural, and social spheres (see Chapters 2-4). Islamic official institutions propagate the moderate, “positive” forms of traditional Islam. This positive “ideology”, in the government’s vision, can represent an effective counter-ideology to extremism that can and must be inculcated in the Muslim youth to counter the spread of “wrong” knowledge.

Leading educational figures like the aforementioned Mukhametshin, Bibarsov, and Khairetdinov point at the necessity to integrate Russian traditional Islamic practices with Arabic-based teachings. This, in their opinion, is essential to prevent the formation of false knowledge and oppositional tendencies, and can be best accomplished in Russian institutions. However, Khairetdinov’s explanation of the causes of terrorist behavior presents a novel element. Elaborating on the responsibility of teachers, Khairetdinov confirms the necessity of adequate training. Yet, he also admits that there might be another cause of extremist behavior:

It is difficult to say what is in the heads of those people [terrorists]... If one is crazy, then he might be studying even at the MGU [Moscow State University, the most prestigious in Russia], and then go try to demonstrate that the faculty taught him correctly! The moment is very delicate, we cannot blame school programs and teachers, if from the beginning [this person] was sick in his mind [sic], how can we track this? We cannot certainly ask a psychiatric certificate of every student. (*Vsglyad.ru* 2014)

By suggesting that there might be a pathological cause for terrorist behavior, Khairetdinov may just want to discharge Russian educators from an excessive responsibility for the acts of their pupils. This is a demonstration of confidence by an Islamic leader, and testifies of the institutional status achieved by official Muslim organizations.

However, his observation may also involuntarily expose a more subtle, but no less pervasive, Russian thought about terrorism – namely, that it may not be at all connected with a specific *religious* motive, but coming from elsewhere in Russian history. The study of Russia’s most recent discourse about Islamic extremism, terrorism, and state security indeed shows increasingly significant signs that old fears of violence are being revamped. This is an important element that has been so far neglected in the literature about Russia’s Islam (and about contemporary Russia in general, for that matter). Therefore, the whole Chapter 6 will be dedicated to its discussion.

### **Conclusion**

The desecuritization of Islam in Russia that ensues from the differentiation of traditional and non-traditional Islam is a relatively understudied phenomenon. Most commentators prefer to highlight the challenges that the Muslim community, like almost all other components of civil society in Russia, faces under Putin’s semi-democratic regime. As I have mentioned several times throughout this dissertation, a skeptical, if not hostile, attitude toward Islam and Muslims in Russia does persist. State authorities (especially at the local level) as well as the media and common citizens express concern about religious extremism and its violent consequences – the more so after an attack has been conducted.

However, the purpose of this dissertation is not to repeat or update these analyses. On the contrary, this work intends to compensate for the often too narrow focus of conventional views on Islam, especially in its relation to state security. Perhaps constrained by their traditional analytical frames, in which Islam in Russia always represents a potential threat, observers often limit themselves to discussions of conflictual events and do not include in their discussion areas of cooperation and potential rapprochement. Because of this oversight, they miss an important part of the discourse about Islam that may offer a useful interpretative key to the evolution of Russia's polity. Further, the study of Russia's attempts at finding an inclusive solution to potential inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts – as ideologically driven as they may be – may offer valuable insights for the understanding of similarly composite societies.

## CHAPTER VI

### ISLAM, TERRORISM, AND REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA

The distinction of “traditional” and “extremist” Islam, conceptualized in the 1990s by then-Foreign Minister Evgeny Primakov to counter Russia’s excessive and frustrating submissiveness to the West, was often dismissed as a superficial expedient serving contingent purposes. In fact, twenty years later, it seems to have become the normative approach of both the state and institutionalized Islam. In Russia, from the point of view of security, “traditional”, official Islam no longer represents a threat and has been desecuritized. The treatment of “extremist” Islam, instead, has followed a different path.

The concept of Russia’s traditional Islam designates the Islamic practices followed by Russia’s Muslim communities, which entail pre-Islamic customs (*adat*). The cultural stagnation of tsarist times and, especially, the complete severance, during Soviet times, of contacts with external Muslim communities fostered the development of peculiar religious practices among Russia’s Muslim communities. Although based on the teaching of the Hanafi School, Russian “traditional” Islam resulted in a unique combination of pre-Islamic, “classic” Arabic, and “underground” (in Soviet times) religious practices.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, relations with Muslims outside Russia were quickly restored. The compliance of Russia’s Muslims with the Islamic precepts, though, was contested by members of the international *ummah*, especially followers of Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia. Many Saudi religious organizations helped the much needy Russian Islamic institutions and communities by providing

financial, educational, and personnel support, and foreign teachers were highly critical of local habits and dismissed the religious authority of Russian *mufties*. Because foreign scholars were often backed by official organizations from the donor countries, they were soon questioned about their “real” purposes. They were accused to pit the younger generations against their fathers and great-fathers in the attempt to gain intellectual and, ultimately, political influence over Russian Muslim communities.

As discussed in Chapter 5, gradually all forms of Islamic teachings and practices that had been introduced in Russia after 1991 were derogatorily lumped under the name of “Wahhabism”, to identify any form of Islam of foreign origin and, therefore, alien to Russia’s civilization. As such, “Wahhabism” is considered intrinsically antagonistic not only to Russian traditional Islam, but also – and most importantly – to the Russian culture, society, and state. In Primakov’s definition, this is the “extremist” Islam that represents a threat to Russia and that must be eradicated.

Most of the literature on Russia’s Islam, especially outside of Russia, shares the assumption that oppositional Islam is the expression of deeply antagonistic, separatist, and nationalist stances developed historically under the Russian and Soviet colonial regimes. The ensuing conflicts, therefore, are almost exclusively attributed to *ethnic-religious* nationalist contrasts. Yet, in Russian history, violent opposition has not always come from those who wanted to exit the Russian system. On the contrary, several groups adopted terrorist techniques to achieve political objectives. It is noteworthy that history-based explanations of contemporary Islamic terrorism in Russia have overlooked a significant practice in Russia’s political struggle that was employed by Orthodox Slavs against the tsars. The possibility that violent opposition to the Russian state may come

from within society, from individuals who feel an affiliation with Russia as fatherland, but not with its government, is seldom considered by political analysts.

It is possible, in fact, to consider contemporary Islamic terrorism as an element of continuity with a pre-existent, and historically significant, practice of political fight. This perspective integrates the interpretations of conflicts as essentially nationalist advanced by the literature. As an at least partially endogenous phenomenon, Islamic terrorism both follows pre-existing routes and, thus, induces counter-terrorism agents to recur to historical models and expertise. The accurate study of the interplay of old and new conceptualizations and methods, both in terrorist and counter-terrorist strategies, adds a further layer of analytical complexity to the study of Russia's Islamic terrorism and prospects a more effective explanation of Russia's security dynamics.

Among the few scholars in the West who have sensed the relevance of historical continuity in Russia's approach to terrorism is Marya Omelicheva (2009). In her view, Western observers, who find it difficult to explain why Russian authorities heavily recur to almost exclusively military counterterrorism strategies that prove ineffective, overlook an important element of Russian history. Omelicheva notes that, in fact, the Russian government's reaction to Islamic extremism mirrors that of the tsarist empire against nineteenth-century-terrorism. In both cases, terrorism is perceived as a fundamental threat to the same existence of the state and must be annihilated by any means – especially by force.

Omelicheva's argument, expressed in a short academic article, is limited to the critique of counterterrorism methods and does not question the assumption that Russia's Muslims would prefer to be outside the Russian state. Yet, the author rightly suggests

that, in order to understand Russia's approach to Islamic terrorism, commentators must broaden their historical span. A more comprehensive analytical perspective is necessary. The continuity between past and present concerns not only the permanence, or reappearance, of ethnic-nationalist oppositions.

It is my contention that, in fact, the conceptual roots of Russia's approach to Islamic terrorism can and must be searched for in Russia's political and ideological history. The heritage of both the tsarist and the Soviet past strongly influences Russia's interpretation of the contemporary "Islamic threat" in its territory. Although it is not always openly acknowledged, reminiscences of the past are shared by large strata of Russian society, from state and religious authorities to common citizens and, most significantly, to regime opponents and even terrorists themselves. A thread connects different political, religious, and intellectual circles, and creates unexpected networks. These connections reveal that at stake is not only the future religious status of Russia, but the definition of its identity, the accomplishment of its historical mission and, ultimately, its own survival.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this chapter is to trace the conceptual trajectory of the Russian discourse on post-Soviet Islamic terrorism, from the notion of religious terrorism to that of terrorist ideology, and to discuss its far-reaching consequences. Going beyond the most apparent traits of Russia's approach to terrorism, I will examine the deep conceptual roots of Russia's policy on security and on Islamic terrorism as a political act. Further, I will discuss the ideological debate around political Islam – which in Russia is acquiring a meaning distinct from "extremist" Islam – through the analysis of two opposite arguments. Throughout the debate, a common threat seems

to linger underneath the discursive surface: Revolution. Its subtle, but pervasive, influence on authors and audience alike will also be discussed.

### **Conceptual roots of Russia's vision of terrorism**

It is often overlooked by political analysts that Russia's relationship with terrorism did not begin with the actions of Islamic extremists after September 11, 2001, or with the 1990s attacks on Russian soil, mainly related to the Caucasus conflict. In fact, as one scholar has noted,

[...] throughout Russian history, violence has been *acknowledged* and *articulated* as a central problem, whether in the realm of theology, ethics, or politics. (Levitt 2007: 5, italics mine)

Although a similar statement may probably apply to many pre-modern states and their societies, in the words of another historian

Russia can claim pride of place as the first in a long line of countries where *terror* became a recognized, and *feared*, expression of *political opposition*. (Brower 2007: 91-92, italics mine)

Against this backdrop, it is noteworthy that most analyses of Russian terrorism look to history only to explore the ethnic-nationalist roots of today's opposition. It is generally acknowledged that the reminiscence, and rejection, of the historical colonial domination of the Orthodox Slavic Russian Empire is one of the major causes of the conflict in North Caucasus and of nationalism elsewhere, for example in Tatarstan. In view of the active participation of Chechen and Dagestani groups in international terrorist operations, significant research efforts have been conducted to identify the commonalities between Russian and Arab Islamic extremism. Thus, similarities have been found in activists' motivational claims (the conduction of *jihad*) and fighting methods (the use of terrorist attacks, the establishment of networks of small groups or "cells").

In fact, all this had already existed in Russia. In the absence of political analysts' interest, it was scholars outside security studies who searched in the Russian past, in particular the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for striking similarities with the contemporary situation. Specialists in Russian history and Russian social movements have drawn detailed comparisons of contemporary terrorist groups with the major terrorist movements that succeeded one another on imperial Russia's underground scene: first, the Decembrists; then, the Populists; the Nihilists; the members of Land and Liberty movement; and, eventually, the Bolsheviks (Brower 2007; Geifman 2007, 1993; Levitt 2007; Trigos 2007).

Today, the inspirational character of such figures is widely visible among Orthodox right extremists and ultra-nationalists. Particularly noteworthy, therefore, is the fact that influential Muslim activists as well seem to draw from this all-Russian framework. Even the popular, if controversial, Muslim philosopher and exponent of political Islam Geidar Dzhemal' identifies "Fyodor" (calling Dostoyevsky by his first name) as one of his fundamental spiritual mentors (Shevchenko 2012)<sup>7</sup>.

Scholars of nineteenth-century terrorism, in various degrees, suggest that the political terrorism in Russia of that era may well be the precursor of contemporary terrorist movements, including the Islamic ones – if not in all their ideological contents,

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Dostoyevsky is considered a key figure to understand the political and human motives of Russian terrorists of the Empire. Both his works and his characters have been read, alternatively, as keen analytical studies or inspirational figures. The literary critic Nora Straus (2006) finds many similarities in the personality traits and mutual social relations of Dostoyevsky's conspirators from his novel *Demons* and *al-Qaeda* male-dominated structure.

certainly in their methods and in their iconography<sup>8</sup>. Russian terrorism of the 19th century, although undoubtedly a secular phenomenon and often critical of the Church, in fact presented distinctive religious traits. The first “official” Russian terrorists, the Decembrists<sup>9</sup>, acquired a mystic aura because of their sufferings, which resembled those of martyrs. A “model” for a “generation of revolutionaries”, as Trigos (2007) defines them, their influence was felt throughout the century and into the following one, when

[the Decembrists entered] the Bolshevik revolutionary martyrology, as part and parcel of the new regime’s creation of its own saints. (Trigos 2007: 43)

Their wives, who followed them into exile to Siberia, were also revered as high examples of dedication and feminine spirit. (Trigos 2007: 47)

Even the practice of suicide attacks, the modern codification of which is commonly associated to the Japanese Kamikaze in World War II or to Tamil rebels in the 1980s, had already been theorized and sporadically, but increasingly, put in practice by Russian conspirators, in particular those active after 1880: Nihilists and members of the

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that, while most authors acknowledge the unsurpassed value of the Italian scholar Franco Venturi’s work on Russian populism and terrorism, he himself warns against the diffused tendency to interpret such movements through literature: “There is very little to learn from Dostoevsky for those who want to understand Nechaev”. (Venturi, 1952, Vol. 1: xiv, translation mine). Serghey Nechaev, a ruthless terrorist, is the symbol of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian terrorism and a morbid, almost devilish, figure of Russian imagery.

<sup>9</sup> “The Decembrists (Russian *Dekabristy*) [were] the Russian revolutionaries who led an unsuccessful uprising on Dec. 14 (Dec. 26, New Style), 1825, and through their martyrdom provided a source of inspiration to succeeding generations of Russian dissidents. The Decembrists were primarily members of the upper classes who had military backgrounds. [T]aking advantage of the brief but confusing interregnum following the death of Tsar Alexander I, they staged an uprising, convincing some of the troops in St. Petersburg to refuse to take a loyalty oath to Nicholas I and to demand instead the accession of his brother Constantine. The rebellion, however, was poorly organized and easily suppressed. [...] An extensive investigation in which Nicholas personally participated ensued; it resulted in the trial of 289 Decembrists, the execution of 5 of them [...] the imprisonment of 31, and the banishment of the rest to Siberia.” (adapted from *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Decembrist,” accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/Ebchecked/topic/155016/Decembrist>). The case shocked the Russian society – and many foreigners – for the severity of the punishments. Additionally, the executions were conducted in semi-secrecy, which contributed to the creation of a “mythical” aura around the event.

Land and Liberty movement. They, too, supported and venerated as martyrs those who would sacrifice themselves to free the people from tsarist tyranny. To legitimate their empathy, the ideologists of terrorism strove to elaborate an effective ethical-philosophical justification and a code of conduct for lethal and suicide attacks. Although free of the God-sanctioned messianism of religious extremists, terrorists and their supporters resorted to similar arguments. Thus, the ethical dilemma of killing innocents (family members of aristocrats and officers, bystanders, etc.) was resolved with the invocation of the superiority of their motives: “A noble cause justified ugly deeds” (Bower 2007).

***Russia’s conceptualization of Islamic terrorism: from religion to ideology***

The victory of former-terrorists Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution did not put an end to the practice of terrorism in the newly created Soviet Union. On the contrary, the incumbent regime employed terrorist practices on a large scale to combat its (real or alleged) internal enemies (Geifmann 2007). It is likely that, under these circumstances, the conceptualization of terrorism as an instrument of political struggle in Soviet, and then Russian, socio-political perceptions has been further reinforced. Against this backdrop, a connection could be made, in some Russian intellectual circles, between contemporary Islamic terrorism and other forms of violent political opposition that had occurred throughout Russia’s past.

Evgeny Primakov, formerly Russian Foreign and Prime Minister, then personal advisor to Vladimir Putin, and now a political commentator, exemplifies this interpretative process. He begins his discussion (Primakov 2004) of contemporary international Islamic terrorism by placing it in a world historical perspective, with particular reference to the past two centuries:

[Terrorism] has occurred since ancient times. But this book will focus on terrorism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an aid to understanding contemporary terrorism in its most virulent form...(Primakov 2007: 2)

Most importantly, Primakov clearly conceptualizes Islamic terrorism within a political framework:

In reality, terrorism is a specific form of political activity that seeks to achieve its ends by assassinating political figures or targeting a civilian population. (Primakov 2007: 2)

Primakov was intellectually justified in writing of terrorism without even mentioning its religious component, in force of the differentiation of “true” and “false” Islam that he himself had introduced in Russia in the mid-1990s. At the time of his writing in 2007, the shaping of the consequent official perspective was being effectively completed. As discussed in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, the definition of Russian traditional Islam that has allowed the desecuritization of official religious practices, at the same time has consented to cut off Islamic extremism from the realm of religion and relocate it into that of ideology.

Within this framework, Russian authorities may picture today’s Islamic terrorism in Russia as yet another episode in a recurring conflict between the state and its political opponents. As such, it may be treated as a political, ideological phenomenon – the manifestation of an “ideology of terrorism”. Accordingly, the religious principles invoked by the extremists are considered not doctrinal precepts but ideological tenets that qualify and distinguish this type of terrorism, much the same as class struggle did with Bolshevism. For the state, to counter this ideology is methodologically still challenging,

but conceptually much easier, for example through “correct” Islamic education (see Chapter 5 for a longer discussion on this topic).

From this conceptualization derives also the interpretation of Islamic extremism not as oppositional to Russia’s religious condition (Christian Orthodoxy), not even to its Slavic component (at least, not per se), but as a reaction to socio-political and economic inadequacies. This perspective is confirmed – and partially supported – by different observers (*Vestnik Kavkaza* 2013; International Crisis Group 2012; Malashenko 2011b; Malashenko and Trenin 2004), who point to diffused corruption and economic inefficiency as fuel of terrorist acts in the North Caucasus. The central government supports the socio-economic explanation of the causes of terrorism and dissent in general. Several programs have been implemented to improve the general conditions of the region, especially to foster the creation of jobs for young adults. Despite the great publicity given to these programs by Moscow and local authorities, very small results have been obtained so far, and the region continues to depend on direct funding from the center (International Crisis Group 2012).

The reasons for failure are almost unanimously identified in the very high level of corruption of local authorities that, by considerably reducing state capitals eventually available for their intended uses, hinders the effective implementation of any economic initiative. As a result, it is noted, jobless young Muslims, disappointed by the state, join extremist and “bandit” groups, often harming moderate Muslims in the area (International Crisis Group 2012).

This interpretation has become the official narrative of the Russian central state as well<sup>10</sup>. Aurélie Campana, in her recent analysis of Russia's official discourse on terrorism (Campana 2013), has found that the “cultural-religious” context is considered the least significant of four identified causes for terrorist activity. The essay shows that economic malaise – mostly due to authorities' corruption – is presented as the major cause of resistance and armed opposition. Additionally, Campana notes the attempt of the Russian government to associate Islamic extremists with organized crime and, thus, present them as common “bandits”, more interested in robbery than in religion. Indeed, to depict Islamic extremists as dangerous criminals is a strategy that Moscow had already employed during the Chechen conflict (Malashenko and Trenin 2004).

The association of separatists with bandits is another way to deprive the conflict of its religious components and to shift it on the level of criminal behavior. It also carries the advantage, for Moscow, of classifying counter-terrorism raids as “policing missions”, which are subject to less regulation than military actions – and can be presented on the international scene as domestic routine initiatives. However, the evident ambiguity of this approach has provoked many protests among Russian and foreign observers. The ensuing need for more sophisticated counter-terrorism doctrine and practices, the already existing imagery of historical terrorist movements, and Primakov's definition of extremist Islam concurred to the elaboration, in Russia, of the concept of “terrorist ideology”. As the next sections will evidence, the labeling of Islamic terrorism as an ideology has borne far-reaching consequences in Russian domestic and foreign policies.

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<sup>10</sup> Under Putin's and Medvedev's presidencies, corruption, and the fight against it, has become a central theme in government discourse concerning all Russia. It is, therefore, a narrative that associates, rather than separates, the North Caucasus to the rest of the country, although here it is considered particularly vicious.

### *State policies and Islamic terrorism*

According to the Russian official view, Muslim terrorists are not terrorists because of their religious belonging – indeed, they are not even “true” Muslims. Instead, they are considered exponents of a specific “ideology of terrorism” that may or may not be accompanied by religious instances. Once detached from traditional religion, extremist Islam has been heavily charged with issues of security: terrorism, subversion, separatism and, ultimately, sheer violence.

Gradually, the wider official discourse on Islamic terrorism has conformed to this posture. The documents of the Institute for Counterterrorism (IC) of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), which was created in 2005 and is now based in Moscow, consistently refer to an “ideology of terrorism” (Sodruzhestvo Nezavisimyykh Gosudarstv 2013). The detailed list of counterterrorism measures that should be implemented on the Russian territory does not contain any open reference to Islam. Instead, it seems that the IC has been preoccupied with devising a framework broad enough to accommodate the struggle against any kind of terrorist activity – including that of right-wing extremist nationalism. In the opening speech at a recent CIS meeting, the Head of the IC, the Colonel-General of the Police Andreii Novikov (ATTS SNG 2014) warned against a “broadening of the spectrum of the terrorist threat”. Although he clearly referred to the ISIS as a newly ensuing “theocratic state”, he qualifies it as “totalitarian”, and not Islamic, and highlights as a novel, serious security concern the risk that terrorists may acquire, and use, nuclear and other radioactive materials.

Novikov notes that terrorism is now a “global geopolitical threat”, characterized by the “involvement of mercenaries in local conflicts”. Confirming Russia’s concerns on

the consequences of American troops' departure from Afghanistan, he observes that nuclear materials may be smuggled through Central Asia to conflict zones, along the already established routes of drug and narcotics traffic. Novikov's reference is an indicator that, in Russian discourse, terrorism is acquiring an overwhelmingly international character, as will be more extensively discussed in the next chapter.

Analogously, the websites *Zhurnalisty i bloggery protiv terrorizma* (Journalists and Bloggers against terrorism) publishes articles, news, analyses, and blog entries that deal with terrorism in its various manifestations, from Islamic *ihadists*, to Irish IRA, to Hamas. A recent article significantly entitled "Terrorism and neo-Fascism" (JBAT 2014) offers a definition of terrorism as a violent tool of political action. The article distinguishes between the definitions of terrorism in Russia and in the USA:

In Russian law, terrorism is defined as an ideology of violence and as a practice of influence on the social consciousness, on the decision-making of the organs of state authority, of the organs of local autonomy or of international organizations, combined with the frightening of the population and/or with other forms of violent illegal activity.

In the law of the USA [terrorism is defined] as a deliberate, politically motivated violence, perpetrated against the civilian population or objects by sub-national groups or by agents acting underground, usually with the purpose of influencing the sentiment of society. (JBAT 2014)

Four possible purposes of "individual" or "organized" terrorism are then indicated and briefly described: nationalistic, religious (with examples of intra- and inter-religious conflicts), ideological, and simply "terror". Finally, the article makes a veiled reference to Ukraine, where by popular protest the elected President has been overturned and a new government has been formed by some members of the Parliament. Russian authorities consistently denounced the activity of Ukrainian "fascists" in the 2013-2014 so-called

Maidan revolt and, after that, elsewhere on Ukrainian territory. Hence, Russia categorizes the fall of former President Yanukovitch's government as a right-wing-inspired, undemocratic coup. It also supports Crimea's secession as the expression of its ethnic Russian majority's will to escape persecutions by Ukrainians. This position is in open contrast with that of European countries and of the U.S., which consider Ukraine's new government legitimate, condemn what they define Russia's annexation of Crimea, and accuse Russia to covertly send military support to Ukrainians secessionists.

By associating terrorism and neo-Fascism, the article seems to have been published ad hoc, possibly to support Russia's official rejection of the accusation of Western countries that Ukrainian pro-Russian separatists in the Donbass region would be "terrorists". On the contrary, the article seems to suggest, the real terrorists are the "fascist" promoters of the Maidan violent revolt, and the illegitimate, non-elected Ukrainian new government. The interpretation of international terrorism and the implications that the fight against it entails are key elements of Russian foreign policy and will be discussed thoroughly in the next chapter of this dissertation. Here, it suffices to note that, once again, the (geo)political relevance of terrorism, rather than its religious contents, is highlighted.

The use of mass media to counter terrorist propaganda (or, like in this case, anti-Russian propaganda on terrorism) is a strategy that, in Russia, has been both theorized and implemented with increasing sophistication. The already mentioned 2013 session of the *Presidential Council of Interethnic Relations* (President of Russia 2013, see also Chapter 5 of this dissertation) had affirmed the willingness at the highest (presidential) level to effectively monitor, steer and, if necessary, censor the activity of mass media in

Russia. At the very same time, the IV All-Russian Theoretical-Practical Scientific Conference on the “Role of the media of mass information and Internet in the prevention of terrorism” was organized.

It is noteworthy that, while the general documents on terrorism do not identify it solely with Islamic extremism, at the practice level the discourse becomes more targeted. Sometimes, the two levels are very close and only a fine line separates them. This is evident in the materials of the Conference. For example, only Islamic extremist organizations are mentioned in the speech of E. P. Il'in (2013), first vice-director of the organization of the Russian National Committee for Counter-terrorism. However, very little is said about Islam as a religion, except that it is a “religion of peace”. On the contrary, it is explicitly maintained that so-called Islamic extremists have nothing to do with the true Islam.

As is to be expected, the lines of the discourse get more blurred the closer observers are to the front line. One such commentator is the Russian blogger with the nickname “Hard Ingush” (now active under the pseudonym of “Molonlabe”). A self-identified member of the Russian Special Forces active in North Caucasus, he posts his popular notes on Russia’s major blog portal, *Live Journal*, every day except when he is (allegedly) on a mission. His entries offer first-hand accounts of active engagement on the ground. There, “terrorists” are always “Muslims”<sup>11</sup>. Yet, even he acknowledges that, in North Caucasus, the majority of the population does not have subversive intentions.

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<sup>11</sup> Generalizations of the enemy into an us-versus-them, simplified categorization are not uncommon in combat operations. For example, in the account of his experience in the Russian special forces in Chechnya, the Ukrainian-Siberian writer (who uses Italian as his literary language) Nicolai Lilin explains that all enemies – independently of their nationality or ethnicity – were called “Arabs” by the Russian soldiers (Lilin 2010).

Further, he reports on his encounters with moderate Muslims, thanks to which, he writes, he has learned to appreciate Islam as a religion of peace (Molonlabe 2014, 2013).

Interestingly, in his speech at the already mentioned Conference on the role of mass media, V. A. Fronin, editor-in-chief of *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, highly praises Hard Ingush's blog but not, as it could be expected, because he offers a fair assessment "on the territory" of Islam and Muslims. Instead, Fronin sees in the hard-core Russian elite soldier a winning role model for young Russians, an example of a patriotic public servant. Fronin even declares "not to care" whether Hard Ingush is a real person or, like some claim, an invention of the secret service. In Fronin's view, Hard Ingush's mission, to counter the terrorist propaganda of a violent, oppressive Russia, is what counts, and it is being highly successful (Fronin 2013: 41).

The government's pressure on the mass media to spread the notion of a united Russian culture, in which traditional Islam is also a part, shows some results. In particular, the sensationalist tones about the aggressive character of Islam as a religion seem to have been dimmed. At the same time, the official approach to terrorism as a political, social, but not strictly religious phenomenon is being adopted also by the major media. To speak of an "ideology of terrorism" is no longer a characteristic of government specialists, and the terminology has entered the major mass media. For example, an article published by the agency *Ria* in 2014, in commenting a security issue related to *mufti* Tajuddin, applies the "ideology" frame to Islamic terrorism, without feeling the necessity to explain it to the reader.

However, the popular perception is still often skeptical of Islam and Muslims, including those communities who have been present in Russia for centuries (Verkhovskii

2011, see also Chapters 2-3 of this dissertation). Uncertainties about the “true” nature of Islam and the “real” purposes of Russia’s Muslims were still widespread in 2012, if a debate conducted by Maksim Shevchenko (2012) on *First Channel*, Russia’s government-controlled public network, focused on these fundamental questions, is any indication.

### **Russian visions of political Islam**

The ideological character of extremist Islam, in Russia, carries an absolute negative connotation, is associated with violent political opposition and, as such, is deprived of its religious content. Yet, Islam as a religion does offer a political view. Most importantly, such view must not be necessarily antagonist to a non-Muslim, even secular state. Several examples in history (Piscatori 1986) confirm the possibility of envisioning and successfully implementing a political regime that is supported by all its religious constituencies (including Muslims). Conversely, the examples of Islamic theocratic regimes, both actual (contemporary Iran) and theorized (for example, in the works of Qutb (Euben 1999)), present an intransigent, autocratic character. In Russia’s history, opposite phenomena such as *jadidism* and the Basmachi revolution have proved that either arrangement is possible.

Today, political Islam constitutes a complex political project that aims to integrate, modify, or radically change the existing polity and, as such, expresses a political theory (Euben 1999; see also Tripp 2006). Despite the contradictory and often controversial nature of ‘such theory’, in post-Soviet Russia the clear attribution of extremist Islam to the realm of terrorism, which is defined as a violent tool for political action, has opened up a space for discussions on Islam-inspired, non-violent change. The

notion of political Islam in Russia has developed alongside that of extremist Islam but, due to the precedents of political involvement by Russian Muslim communities (Crews 2006), it has followed a distinct path.

In Russia, exponents of political Islam have advanced proposals that vary from a full integration in the existing system, to a full rejection of it. The following section examines two of the most authoritative voices on this matter. Their views are at the opposite extremes of the integration-revolution spectrum. By the mid-2010s, it seems that the most radical projects have gained in visibility and popularity. This is not by chance, as will be discussed in the second half of the chapter.

### **Islamic doctrine as guarantor of security: a normative proposal**

Taking advantage of the relative freedom accorded to official Islam, some Russian Muslim leaders offer sophisticated arguments to demonstrate the positive role that Islam can have for Russia. In particular, the introduction, in Russian legislation and policies, of selected Islamic principles would contribute to the strengthening of social cohesiveness, thus reducing social friction, especially between Muslims and non-Muslims. Ultimately, it would improve the general security situation.

The novel element in such conceptualizations is the claim that a similar strategy would be beneficial to Russian society as a whole. It differentiates itself from flexibility measures already implemented at the local level, where authorities often accept or tolerate Islamic-specific behaviors or practices (Silant'ev 2008). Based on the extensive examination of Islamic legal principles and sophisticated argumentative structures, these proposals have a strong theoretical component. They mostly circulate among the Muslim

elites (especially in Tatarstan, where the *jadidist* tradition is still very strong) and in the academic world.

Some of the most respected and articulated thinkers, though, have the power to reach the mainstream media. One of them is Leonid Siukiianen. Professor of Islamic law at the prestigious Moscow High Institute of Economics, he has repeatedly (2010, 2008, and 2006) explained that Islam is not just a religion, but also the carrier of a socio-political model. An expert on *Shari'a*, Siukiianen, while agreeing that the secular state should remain “neutral” in terms of theological precepts, explicitly encourages the Russian government to take active note of Islamic conceptualizations of politics. In fact, Siukiianen argues, Islam’s fundamental approach to the state is of cooperation and support, and not of opposition. In his view, it is therefore possible, and even desirable, to introduce some fundamental principles of Islam into a democratic system.

The core of Siukiianen’s argument lies in the *Shari'a* “crucial” concept of “moderateness” (*umerennost'*). In his words, it must be understood as “prudence, temperance, equidistance” and, as such, it expresses Islam’s true vision of politics (Siukiianen 2006). Indeed, Siukiianen notes, *umerennost'* is already embedded in Tatarstan’s *jadidism* and Northern Caucasus’s *tariqat* system. The immediate consequence of *umerennost'*, he claims, is to render Islam perfectly compatible with democracy, which is not an enemy of Muslims but, in fact, a desirable regime in the contemporary world. Here, Siukiianen follows the classical modernist discourse on Islam and, in particular Russian *jadidism*.

Siukiianen reminds his audience that Islam is inextricably bound to Russian history and culture. A correct comprehension of Islamic fundamental political precepts is,

for him, necessary for the prosperity of Russia. Moreover, he adds, the concept of *umerennost'* is being progressively adopted by the Islamic world in general and, in particular, in Kuwait. As these examples show, Siukiianen explains, a series of benefits would come from the adoption of *umerennost'* by both Russia's Muslims and the Russian state.

The immediate effect would be the enhancement of security, which would benefit from the general inclination to moderation and the subsequent rejection of any form of extremism. The second advantage would be the enrichment of Russia's internal civilizational dialogue and civic coexistence. Finally, the empathy with the Islamic doctrine would upgrade the nature of Russia's relations with the Muslim world outside of its territory (including Muslim states). Such relations would improve from the current level of "dialogue" to that of full "understanding" – a much more promising scenario.

Siukiianen's argument is very dense, often legally very specific, and its detailed analysis exceeds the scope of this work. For the purposes of my discussion, two elements are particularly noteworthy. The first, and most provocative, one is the claim that an Islamic fundamental legal concept may be equally important for the legislation of a secular state. Additionally, the acceptance of Islamic principles is supposed to benefit significantly the whole population, not only its Muslim component. This argument not only supports the multi-confessional character of the Russian state, which is advanced by state and Muslim authorities as well, but it also seems to support the idea of a unique Russian civilization. According to this view, Russia's identity is the result of many, heterogeneous cultural, ethnic, and religious components that in the course of the centuries have given their original contribution to create a common Russian civilization.

As extensively discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation, this interpretation of the “Russian idea” is shared by many Muslims and non-Muslims, even in the state leadership.

The second element to be highlighted in Siukiianen’s proposal is the connection that he makes between conceptualizations of political Islam in Russia and in the rest of the Islamic world. In particular, Kuwait is identified as a successful model, and, as such, it frequently appears in similar comparisons with the Russian system. These arguments show that Russia’s Muslims have restored their historical relations of exchange with the international *ummah*. In their renewed position, they do not limit themselves to doctrinal confrontations on the legitimacy of their traditional practices. They show interest in “best practices” of governance and are willing to offer their original solutions (RMC 2006).

With his scholarly accurate and legally grounded argument, Siukiianen makes a strong pledge for Islam’s positive contribution to Russian polity. His explanation of the concept of *umerennost’* represents an authoritative, and appropriate, counter-argument to the alleged theological stances of Islamic extremists. As such, it offers a strong doctrinal basis to counter-terrorism and security policies. Yet, the deprivation, by the official doctrine of the religious character of extremist Islam may have weakened Siukiianen’s doctrine-based contribution. Further, his proposal may have been too complex to be immediately translated into an effective legislative or practical measure. As a result, his influence seems to have faded. Instead, at the turn of the 2010s another interpretation of political Islam is receiving growing attention on the Russian scene — one that is far more belligerent.

## **Political Islam, Revolution, and the Geopolitical Order**

Since the shock of the Soviet demise in 1991, contemporary Russia has intensively elaborated on its own past. The idea that today Russia could, or should, embody a new version of the Empire has soon spread among certain social and political circles – and has generated a series of anti-imperialistic reactions. This it is not the place for a discussion of these tendencies, to which an extensive literature has been dedicated<sup>12</sup>. Here, it is important to note that, for both supporters and opponents of historical nostalgia, the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century constitutes a crucial period. Those were the times when some timid attempts to create a liberal regime within the tsarist empire were made and then crushed, and when popular dissatisfaction reached its peak. They were also times of uncertainties and diffused violence, which only soared with the outburst, in sequence, of World War I, the October Revolution, and finally the Civil War. Many Russians still look at that period with unease, to say the least, and would never wish it to repeat itself. Some, however, notice fundamental resemblances with the situation in the country one century later. They see in potential similar unrests, including revolution, an opportunity for the new Russia. Geidar Dzhemal' is one of them.

The founder and president of the *Islamic Committee of Russia*, in his early political career Dzhemal' had joined the extreme right circles and was close to Aleksandr Dugin and the Eurasianist movement<sup>13</sup>. In particular, he seemed to share Dugin's

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<sup>12</sup> A good place to start for a review of the arguments in favor and against the idea of a post-Soviet Russian Empire is Trenin 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Dugin is an influential philosopher and thinker – in his own words, “the discoverer of Geopolitics [as a doctrine] under Soviet Communist Russia” (Dugin 2013). Starting from the study of Mackinder's theory of heartland, Dugin, by his own admission, elaborated its implications for the Soviet Union, and later for Russia. According to this theory, by its nature Russia was the “pivot” of the world order (Dugin 2013;

attention to geopolitics. Even if he distanced himself from the Eurasianist movement in the late 1990s, Dzhemal' continued to further elaborate his own position on Russia's geopolitical status in the Middle East and in the Islamic world.

Far from being penalized for leaving Dugin's patronage, Dzhemal' has been able to create a space for himself in Russia's intellectual scene. His visibility to the great public has been particularly enhanced by his closeness to the popular journalist Maksim Shevchenko. Today, Dzhemal' regularly appears on the most important Russian mass media, television or radio programs, often in polemical opposition with other prominent political actors or commentators. His arguments have a deep, if eclectic, theoretical foundation, and focus on the interconnection of (Islamic) religious and political factors.

### ***Dzhemal's intellectual framework***

Dzhemal's theoretical structure reveals a variety of intellectual influences. Accordingly, his network of connections spans across the intellectual and political scene, both public and underground, in Russia and abroad (especially in Iran<sup>14</sup>). After leaving the Eurasianist circle, with which he had formed the Islamic Party "Resurgence" (*Vozhrozhdenie*), Dzhemal' has elaborated an even more articulated doctrine of politically engaged Islam. With the extreme right nationalism, among other elements, he shares the highly evocative language. His constant use of ambiguous, often obscure terms like "spirit", "meaning", "God-man connection", and the like, strongly reminds of the

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2007; 1996). As a result, Dugin conceptualized the neo-Eurasianist intellectual and political movement, especially active on the Russian scene of the 1990s (see also Chapter 2 of this dissertation and related bibliography). Later, Dugin became an unofficial advisor to Vladimir Putin, and now he is a popular professor of geopolitics at Moscow State University.

<sup>14</sup> Dzhemal' (whose father is Azeri), by his own admission, visits Iran regularly and is familiar with the political situation there, and so his loyalty to Russia is denounced as at least ambiguous by his political opponents (*NTV* 2013; Solov'ev 2011).

analogously “mystic” language of neo-Eurasianist leaders, like Dugin and Alexander (Aleksander) Prokhanov. It also clearly resembles the imagery of the Russian terrorist movements of the nineteenth century examined earlier in this chapter.

Like many other public commentators in Russia, Dzhemal’ divides his work into two fields. On one side, there is an accessible, mostly geopolitically-oriented analysis of Russia’s place in the international scene, which he exposes on popular media outlets. On the other side, his work is made of heavily theoretical, complex discussions about Islamic ideology, civilizational interactions, and international political dynamics. These discussions are less immediately visible to the general audience, but for those interested, they are widely available on the World Wide Web. In particular, Dzhemal’ directly manages several websites, especially *Poistine* (In truth – [www.poistine.com](http://www.poistine.com)<sup>15</sup>) and his most recent portal, *Kontrudar* (Counterstrike – [www.kontrudar.com](http://www.kontrudar.com)). On these sites, Dzhemal’ publishes his theoretical and geopolitical articles as well as texts by other commentators (usually, on geopolitical issues), and videos available on *YouTube*.

Through the analysis of such materials, it is possible to follow the evolution of Dzhemal’’s theoretical construct. Initially, the core of Dzhemal’’s arguments was a central interest in Russia’s geopolitical condition, which made his positions close to Dugin’s and neo-Eurasianism. Increasingly, though, in a series of articles, speeches, and videos, he appears to have progressively sharpened his original philosophical thought, or at least his exposition of it. These had probably always been the theoretical premises of his analysis, which he now constructs in what may be defined an ontology of Russian

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<sup>15</sup> In the course of 2014, the availability of *Poistine.ru* has changed from time to time. At the time of last check, on November 25, the website had been shut. Most probably, it is due to the opening of the new website, *Kontrudar*, although the reasons for the move of location are not known to me.

political Islam. His position combines Islamic, revolutionary, and Soviet communist elements in a conceptually original, and rhetorically suggestive, way.

Like Siukiianen, Dzhemal' too identifies a concept in Islamic doctrine that holds a universal meaning, the application of which would solve the tensions of contemporary societies. For Siukiianen, this concept was *umerennost'* – “moderateness”. For Dzhemal', it is *spravledivo* – “justice” (Dzhemal' 2013). To reveal the function of *spravledivo*, Dzhemal' leads his interlocutors through a complex theological-philosophical discussion, the details of which go beyond the scope of this work. However, it is important to identify and retrieve its main tenets, as they form the bases of Dzhemal''s entire conceptual construct, including his political project.

According to Dzhemal', after the collapse of the Soviet Communist ideal, world societies share a condition of “enslavement” to economic forces. “Those who understand” how the new financial and economic mechanisms of “exploitation” work at global level, sit at the apex of an international socioeconomic “pyramid”. They sustain the perception that in the liberal system, as has been “proclaimed by Fukuyama” and others, conflicts are over. In fact, Dzhemal' notes, 90% of humanity is “mere biomaterial” - a condition, he adds, quantitatively and qualitatively worse than at the time of the Soviet Union.

Today, Marxism is no longer adequate to play the same role as it did a century ago; it “does not constitute a tool for protest” Dzhemal' claims (2014: 6:29), because the issues it deals with (class relations and economy) are not the crucial ones – today, “the most essential protest is the protest about the religious [*po religiozami*]” (Dzhemal' 2014: 7:47). For Dzhemal', civil movements that criticize capitalism and liberalism are not

adequate either: They merely pursue a “better life”, intended as better economic standards of living (Dzheaml’ 2014: 10:04).

Equally unfit to counter the dominance of the mainstream are the other religions “of the Book” (Judaism and Christianity). Drawing from Islamic doctrine, Dzhemal’ argues that Christianity and Judaism modify the message of God through their interpretation. By precluding humanity a direct knowledge of the Divine, they have actively aimed at preserving the “pyramidal” structure that has been imposed on world society since the times of Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, they still work to preserve the “pyramid”, or “matrix”, in place (Dzhemal’ 2014, 2013).

Islam’s fundamental characteristic, instead, according to Dzhemal’ is to “open a break” into the “mainstream” conceptualization of social structure. Dzhemal’ juxtaposes the systemic “matrix” (which regulates social coexistence through a strong normative system) to a “spirit” (*dukh*) that is free from the matrix – and always against it. The spirit represents the essence of religion, it “belongs to God” (2014: 27:00) and, as such, is “meaning” (*smisl’*, 34:35): Islam provides the channel through which human beings can connect to God, and therefore discover the meaning of their own existence.

Dzhemal’ denies that the golden age of Islam had been the Middle Ages, or the Caliphate. The cultural and economic flourishing of those centuries, in fact, were only intended to benefit a “secular Caliphate”. For him “Islam is not about the good life, it is about simplicity” (2014). To achieve the purpose of Islam, that is, the revelation of the connection between the spirit and human existence, a complex “matrix” is not necessary. Dzhemal’ notes how the *Shari’a* is enough to regulate the relations among people.

Subsequently, he juxtaposes community (which abides by the *Shari'a*) to society (which, instead, constitutes the “matrix”).

Because Islam preserves today the same characteristics of its origins, when Muhammad and his companions were alive and “fought against Byzantium and Iran” (Dzhemal’ 2014: 37-38), it is the only force that can free humankind from its new form of enslavement.

The meaning is the basis of justice. This is the core message of the Revelation of the prophets. They speak of this. And this is the fundamental significance of political Islam. (Dzhemal’ 2013)

Most importantly, Islam is a revolutionary force:

[i]n these conditions of widening [social] gap, the struggle between the top and the bottom trespasses the borders of class (as Marx intended it) – the class struggle for the redistribution of the means of production of a society – and moves to the level of an eschatological struggle, where the flag of the oppressed can only be the solidarity in the name of a sacral and metaphysical understanding of justice. But justice lies only in Islam. (Dzhemal’ 2013)

In Dzhemal’’s analysis, every religious protest is about the formation and nature of the system – not about external formalities such as obtaining legal permission to interrupt daily activities to pray five times a day. In truth, Dzhemal’ explains, “the whole European history” until Marx has been the history of a “religious struggle” against the matrix. Even the initial concerns of Marx were in an “undisclosed, implicit” way religious in nature (Dzhemal’ 2014: 24:00). Only later did he turn to economic matters. This, in Dzhemal’’s view, is the reason why politicians avoid defining protests “religious”, and label them “extremism, terrorism”: they fear the formidably subversive nature of the protest. Dzhemal’ openly rejects the official security position, which deprives Islamic terrorism of its religious character. Instead, Dzhemal’ insists on the deep

Islamic nature of the upcoming revolution – although his vision of political Islam is much more comprehensive than the crude *jihadism* of *al-Qaeda*.

Dzhemal' (2014) claims that, like in the early twentieth century, one hundred years later the situation in Russia is both universal and unique. He notes that, at the end of the nineteenth century, Russian theorists moved away from Social Revolutionary and populist movements to embrace Marxism, because the latter “gave access to a much larger reservoir of revolutionary ideas”. The international Marxist movement, especially as it was spreading in Europe, allowed Russian revolutionaries to share a common intellectual ground with their Western counterparts. Yet, in the end, the situation of Russia was too specific to allow real cooperation, he observes.

Today, Dzhemal' announces, through Islam Russia can — again — be connected to the global forces that stir the “mainstream”. Indeed, he claims, independently from the level of self-awareness, every individual who is somehow “against the matrix” has “his or her heart beating with a religious beat”. More importantly, this individual “sooner or later takes to revolutionary struggle” (Dzhemal' 2014: 1:00). Islam, Dzhemal' concludes, will rule the political process that, he notes, sooner or later will unfold in London, Paris, and all over Europe “the same way it did in the former Yugoslavia. [...] Tomorrow, Muslims will be the organizers of the political process. The Westerners will be fined for their hindering of the truth” (Dzhemal' 2014: 1:10).

### ***Intellectual roots of Dzhemal''s thought***

Dzhemal''s praise of the “true” Islam of Muhammad's times, and the condemnation of the “corrupted” Islam of the legal tradition, is the same of Islamic fundamentalists

(Salafis) and of *jihadist* groups like *al-Qaeda* or, in Southern Russia, *Imarat Kavkaz*<sup>16</sup>.

The simultaneous presence of political-economic requests and of a religious-based ontology is another trait common to most Islamic “fundamentalist” and “extremist” movements. Yet, it would be too simplistic to dismiss Dzhemal’s conceptualization of political Islam as yet another version of international *ihadism*, like the U.S. political analyst Gordon Hahn is inclined to do (NTV 2013).

In fact, Dzhemal’s conceptualization of political Islam reveals a composite, sophisticated intellectual background. The definition of Islam as the instrument both to reveal the existence of the divine and to enable the connection of humankind with God, and thus to justify political action has been, in the twentieth century, exhaustively expounded by the influential Egyptian *ihadist* and activist Qutb. As Euben (1999) argues, Qutb’s *Mileposts*, in which he claims to hear God speak to him, is in fact the frame of a complete political theory, constructed on different foundations than Western ones. Similarly, Dzhemal identifies in Islam’s doctrinal, religious nature the source of its political strength.

Another core element of Dzhemal’s concept, the “matrix” or “pyramid”, as the expression of the connivance of sacerdotal and political great powers had been indicated – and condemned – by the Iranian Islamic intellectual Ali Shar’iati, prior to the Iranian revolution (Shar’iati 1981: 15 and following). Similarly to Shar’iati, Dzhemal associates

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<sup>16</sup>Islamic “fundamentalists”, or Salafis, like *ihadists*, advocate the application of Qur’anic and early *Hadith* precepts as they were followed by Islamic early communities, when Mohammed was still alive. One of the biggest difference between fundamentalist and *ihadists* is that the former do not necessarily call for an armed struggle. Also because of this important difference, Evgenii Primakov invited to distinguish between fundamentalist and extremist Islam.

the critique of the Bible with constant references to Western philosophy, starting from the ancient Greeks.

However, the truly interesting characteristic in Dzhemal's position is the explicit, direct connection to Russia's past and present. The association of Marxism and Islam had already been made, again, by Ali Shar'iyati, among others. However, Shar'iyati was discussing Marxism in its intellectual formulation, rather than in its empirical implementation. Dzhemal, instead, specifically refers to the Soviet regime – even when it does not mention it. In his analysis, although no longer adequate, Soviet Communism has been a positive element for Russia. For him, like for many others, the Soviet regime has had the great merit to affirm Russia's value on the international scene.

By praising the Bolshevik and Social Revolutionary movements, Dzhemal suggests that he adheres to a tradition of political opposition, of subversive methods of “resistance” - ultimately, to classic Russian terrorism. As noted, his mystic, often obscure, and evocative language simultaneously reminds one of religious thinkers, of nineteenth-century terrorists, and of certain Russian extreme right, for example the neo-Eurasianists Prokhanov and Dugin. The intellectual bedrock of Dzhemal's thought is the conceptualization of a strong, unique, Russia, destined to play a pivotal role in world history. To have such mission acknowledged and to provide a theoretical-philosophical basis for its implementation seems to be Dzhemal's purpose.

The “patriotic” emphasis on Russia's geopolitical prominence also constitutes a practical – if not always ideological – platform on which Dzhemal builds his alliances: When specifically asked why, in the early years of his political activity (around 1997), he had joined Aleksandr Dugin and others in the *Pamiat'* extreme-right nationalist

movement, Dzhemal' replies that he "saw the possibility of a political union" with "true patriots". Even if, by his own admission, some people in *Pamiat'* were "excessive" and "on the far right", Dzhemal' observes that "they were all true patriots" (Shevchenko 2012b: 23:46).

### ***The resonance of Dzhemal''s ideas in the public sphere***

The polyhedric character of Dzhemal''s activity as public commentator and engaged philosopher, combined with the intellectual qualities of his works, allow him to address different audiences with equally strong impact (both in positive and negative terms). In general, his calm posture, his intellectual skills, and his vast knowledge – united to a sharp mind – render him an appealing, seemingly non-threatening figure, and a welcome guest in television and radio programs. An American journalist so commented on his meeting with Dzhemal':

Interviewing Geidar Dzhemal [sic] is no easy task – enjoyable, yes, but not easy. He is a national treasury of knowledge and information and produces names, dates and figures faster than Google. His knowledge of history seems almost boundless and beyond the capabilities of a single Dictaphone battery supply. (Bridge, without date)

The French scholar Marlène Laruelle had already defined him "one of the most original post-Soviet Russian Islamic thinkers" (Laruelle 2008:146).

The openness of Dzhemal' in exposing his vision about Russia and the role of political Islam, together with his numerous, increasingly visible, public appearances have made him object of criticism and of skepticism about his real allegiance. In particular, a television program on the NTV network, which suggested that Dzhemal' supports Chechen separatism (*NTV* 2013), has provoked the reaction of Dzhemal' and, interestingly, of Maksim Shevchenko. In one video, Shevchenko (2013) feels it necessary

to reassure his audience about Dzhemal's patriotism. The latter's statements, in which he allegedly supported Islamic fighters in Chechnya, had, in fact, generated an outrage in public opinion. His personal contacts with many Muslim leaders in the North Caucasus and beyond were seen as a proof of his secret subversive plans. Shevchenko, instead, claims that in 1990s many Russians, now eminent political analysts and politicians, had contacts with separatists everywhere. Additionally, he assures about Dzhemal's anti-liberal, anti-American, and pro-Russia position – for him, and increasingly for many Russians, is a sure sign of patriotism.

### **The fear of any revolution**

How powerfully Dzhemal's evocation of revolution resonates in Russia's collective sentiment was evident in the debate between Geidar Dzhemal' and Gennadii Zhirinovskii<sup>17</sup>. The debate was moderated by popular TV host Vladimir Solov'ev in his successful program *Poedinok* ("Duel") (Solov'ev 2011)<sup>18</sup>. Guests of the program were not only the two "duelists", but also a series of experts on Islam and the Middle East, who commented on the topic at hand – the Arab Spring and its possible effects in Russia.

Dzhemal' starts by claiming, "the Arab revolutions are bad for the regimes, but are good for the people [*narod*]", including the Russian one. In Dzhemal's opinion, "Russia in the last decades has been cut off from international politics" and the Islamic revolution would allow it to reconnect with the rest of the world, in particular with Europe and, of course, the Middle East. By this reference, it appears evident how, already

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<sup>17</sup> Zhirinovskii, a very famous politician, former member of the Soviet Communist Party, is now President of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia and speaker of the *Duma*.

<sup>18</sup> A Jew from an intellectual family, Vladimir Solov'ev is an equally popular, strong public figure. He authoritatively moderates several programs on major TV channels, in which he tackles the most pressing domestic and foreign issues.

in 2011, Dzhemal' considers Islam the successor of Bolshevik-Marxism. His struggle with his terminology, although signaling a yet incomplete elaboration, fully reveals his intention to espouse Islamic thought and Russian tradition: when asked by Solov'ev to clarify what is the "meaning" of life that should be unveiled by an Islamic revolution, he replies: "it's Islamic Marxism under the name of *jihad*" (Solov'ev 2011: 16:25)<sup>19</sup>.

Dzhemal's admission to *jihad*, albeit in a qualified form, puts him on the edge of political Islam and on the border with extremism. What Dzhemal' proposes is no longer a cooperative intellectual stance, similar to Siukiianen's position, but an openly subversive idea. However, he distances himself from *jihadist* movements like *al-Qaeda* by refraining from harsh tones against Russian non-Muslims. Instead, he uses a persuasive argument that, in his intention, should enlighten people about their existential condition and make them aware that Islam is their best option. It is this mixture of disruptive scenarios (revolution) and compassionate tones that characterizes Dzhemal's discourse, especially on public media. It allows the unrolling of an articulate dialogue with his counterparts and enables Dzhemal's most radical arguments to enter mainstream discourse.

On his part Zhirinovskii, a renowned populist with a powerful rhetoric that effectively appeals to the masses, also interprets public sentiment toward revolution. He takes on his opponent's reference to Russia to evoke a disastrous scenario:

We [Russians] know what a revolution is, we know how it ended up.  
*We do not need another one!*" (Solov'ev 2011: 5:22, italics mine)

Later in the debate, after a lengthy discussion about the "Islamic factor" in Russia's geopolitical position, Zhirinovskii repeats the official – and by now established

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<sup>19</sup> It is noteworthy that one of the fundamental accusations against Ali Shar'iyati was to be a "Marxist".

– distinction between foreign and domestic Islam. He notes that to be against the spread of revolution does not mean to be against Islam *tout court*. Yet, he adds, we must pay attention to the fact that “in the twenty-first century” revolutions are conducted under the Islamic flag.

Zhirinovskii’s argument seems to strike a chord in Russian public opinion, whose concern is immediately summarized by the program host, Solov’ev: “How to forget the whole of the 1990s?” (when the conflict in the North Caucasus caused several terrorist attacks and dominated public concern). Dzhemal’ attempts to dispel fears of chaos by assuring that a proper Islamic regime will not allow “bandits” to act violently “under the green flag”. Pressed by the Solov’ev, he also denies that the main Chechen separatist leaders, including Shamil Basaev, were “actual Muslims”. Instead, he claims, they were “Soviet kids”, ignorant of Islam and driven by secular, ethnic-based motives. Finally, in surprising contradiction with one of the most characterizing claims of Islamic extremists, he declares that suicide terrorists are not true Muslims. Rather, he affirms, they are being “maneuvered” by not better identified “anti-Islamic forces”.

Noteworthy, in Dzhemal’’s comments, is his dismissal of Chechen separatists as either “bandits” or “false” Muslims. There are clear doctrinal and theoretical justifications for these assessments; however, they also reflect the government’s official position. As I will discuss later in this chapter, this affinity may not be casual and is one of the reasons why Dzhemal’, despite his incendiary scenarios, continues to be a public figure, not only tolerated but an integral part of Russian politically engaged intellectual scene.

## **Counterterrorism, Fascism, and (Soviet) Communism**

In the 2011 debate with Dzhemal', Zhirinovskii's words remain unspecific; they are meant to be evocative and not analytical. His argument becomes more precise, although paradoxically more ambiguous, a few years later, when he advance his proposal to end the "plague" of terrorism. In 2013, new suicide attacks have revamped the preoccupations for what has become, again, a major security threat. Zhirinovskii takes the occasion of another *Poedinok* debate, still hosted by Vladimir Solov'ev (2013), to advocate the introduction of a "limited citizenship" for the inhabitants of North Caucasus. According to his proposal, every North Caucasian would have to demonstrate his or her non-adherence to any terrorist ideology, in particular Islamic extremism. Additionally, the families of extremists will be held responsible for their actions. Zhirinovskii cites Israel as the model for his vision.

The reaction of his opposing "duelist", Maksim Shevchenko, is equally radical. A member of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation and of the Presidential Council on the Relations among Nationalities, Shevchenko ever more often appears to share, and support, the "patriotic" vision consistently outlined by Putin. This commonality of intention, together with Shevchenko's own popularity, is probably the reason why he enjoys relative freedom of speech on Russian media, including the government-controlled main television outlets, despite his critics accuse him of being a "fundamentalist", an anti-liberal, and an "enemy" of Israel (he acknowledges both the last two definitions).

In the debate with Zhirinovskii, Shevchenko labels his opponent's proposal as "fascist" and compares its treatment of Muslims to Nazi Germany's approach to Jews. He

also moves the critique away from Islam, which Zhirinovskii had associated with terrorism. Shevchenko notes that, in fact, the same factors that in North Caucasus foster Islamic fundamentalism – especially corruption – at the same time generate other forms of extremism (fascism) in other parts of the country “and in Western Europe”. As it appears clear, also in this regards Shevchenko shares the government’s interpretation: Extremist Islam is the local version of a social, political, and economic protest.

Zhirinovskii’s proposal is harshly criticized also by the political analyst Leonid Polianov, present as commentator, who reminds how it closely resembles “Soviet terror”. A few minutes earlier Zhirinovskii had just associated today’s Islamic extremists to Russian political terrorists in history: “they have killed tsars, ministers, and all [...]. Today, they are Muslims”. His ambiguous references to Soviet practices may indicate that, also for him, today’s terrorism has deep roots into Russian history, and that the measures to counter it may equally be found in the past.

Interestingly, Zhirinovskii seems to find the support of the audience at home (viewers can vote for either duelist) and of some commentators in the theater, including a young member of the *Duma*. Although controversial, Zhirinovskii’s evocation of Soviet times proves to be, more than twenty years later, a powerful tactic. Former General Anatoly Kulikov, formerly active in North Caucasus and an expert of terrorism, is asked by Solov’ev to comment the whole debate. The General criticizes both duelists, but then proposes what he defines a “third way”, which, in truth, corresponds to Zhirinovskii’s proposition: to restore the Soviet system of managing the demographic distribution of the country.

The materials examined above confirm the close, if not always evident, relation that, in Russia's popular perception, the fundamental security threat of Islamic extremism has with the broader, historically loaded concepts of terrorism and revolution. They show that, for example, the Arab Spring, in the immediate popular sentiment, may not identify fully with an Islamic threat. Nor does it associate only to the possible loss of territorial integrity, as much as this concerns many. Rather, it is the fear of general instability, of diffused violence, and of the uncertainty (despite Dzhemal's claims) of its outcome that dominate popular perception.

**“All good patriots”: elective affinities of ultra-nationalist and Islamic groups**

Despite its sophisticated theoretical construction, Dzhemal's argument undoubtedly presents an aggressive character. Nevertheless, Dzhemal is not only allowed to speak in public (with a few, isolated exceptions), but in the last few years he has gained in visibility and popularity. In a state like Russia, where central control over public communication is very strong, it may appear surprising that a potentially subversive figure enjoys virtual freedom of speech. Paradoxically, the explanation may be that Dzhemal, with all his revolutionary élan, in fact operates with the central authority, and not against it.

Since his first presidency, but especially in recent years, Vladimir Putin has been working hard to codify his idea of post-Soviet Russian identity into a “patriotic ideology” that comprises the preservation of the Russian multi-ethnic, multi-religious civilization, the international acknowledgment of its pivotal role, and the preservation (possibly, the restoration to Soviet borders) of its territorial integrity (PCIR 2014). Dugin and Dzhemal have even admitted having attempted to save the Soviet Union “as an idea”. With this

statement, they show to agree with Putin when he talks about the Soviet Union in nostalgic terms, recalling the “great power status” that it enjoyed, and which he believes is the rightful embodiment of Russia’s historical role (*President of Russia* 2014; PCIR 2014).

Whereas Putin has been already attributed a tendency to impose his own vision of history (Lipman 2014), since his third mandate he seems to have both sharpened his conceptual framework and accelerated its implementation (*President of Russia* 2014; PCIR 2014, 2013; see also Chapter 5 of this dissertation). A general diffusion of Putin’s ideas, in different form, for different audiences can only play in his hand.

It is true that Dzhemal’ does not represent Russia’s Muslim mainstream – the official Islamic organizations advocate this role for themselves. Instead, he shares with Russia’s mainstream a strong patriotic stance. In the already mentioned interview to Maksim Shevchenko (Shevchenko 2012b), Dzhemal’ explains to have worked politically with the nationalists because they were patriots like himself. Dzhemal’’s patriotism, though, is not simply the support of present-day Russian state. Like that of many ultra-nationalists, it looks back into history and evokes an image that is half worshiped, for the power that Russia and the Soviet Union could project, and half feared, for the numerous dark sides of both regimes – from authoritarianism to secret police. Dzhemal’ is well aware of this. He also knows that he must clarify his position for the larger public. Thus, he reveals that the Islamic party *Vozrozhdenie*, which he co-founded in the 1990s, was a “party to keep the Union”, at what point an astonished Shevchenko asks “the Soviet Union?”, “Yes”, replies Dzhemal’, who immediately specifies, “not its political form – its territory!” (Shevchenko 2012b : 24:07).

By mentioning the territorial integrity of Russia, Dzhemal' knows to be striking a sensitive chord. Concerns for Russia's borders are widespread among the Russian population. The already mentioned NTV's program "Who wants to divide Russia?" (NTV 2013), through a series of interviews to public figures, listed all Russian territories that, in popular view, may be at risk of detachment: North Caucasus, Karelia, East Siberia, the Arctic, and Tatarstan. It does not matter that most of these fears are rather unlikely to come true. Many Russians still struggle to accept the present territorial downsizing from the Soviet Union borders. Indeed, according to Western and Russian commentators (Kanet and Piet 2014; Trenin 2011), territorial disaggregation is the main preoccupation of the Russian government too.

Significantly, like Dzhemal' other public figures enjoy high visibility, despite current (or past) controversial positions, thanks to their casual or purposeful alignment with state patriotism. The journalist Maksim Shevchenko is one of them<sup>20</sup>.

As member of the Duma and of the Presidential Council on Interethnic Relations, Shevchenko now supports the government's initiative to strengthen patriotism and social cohesiveness through the mass media (President of Russia 2013). He also intervened in support of Dzhemal' to confirm his patriotism. Indeed, Shevchenko and Dzhemal' share many intellectual affinities. Dzhemal' started his political activity in the company of Dugin. Today, Shevchenko is a member of the neo-Eurasianist and nationalist *Izborskii Klub*, led by Aleksander Prokhanov. According to Andreas Umland, the *Izborskii Klub*

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<sup>20</sup> Maksim Shevchenko was one of the first commentators to focus, in the 1990s, his public activity on Islam, on both domestic and foreign issues. He was the founder of the religion section of the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, in the late 1990s, thus spreading the public debate on the place of religion in Russia. He was often contested as a supporter of Palestinians against Israel, and allegedly close to Islamic extremist groups. Later, he expanded his analytical perspective to geopolitical questions, in particular on Russia's relations with the West and, from 2013, on the Ukraine-Crimean issue (part of his family is originally from Ukraine)

presents several extreme nationalist traits. Additionally, both Dzhemal' and Shevchenko belong to another intellectual club, the "Florian Geyer", that Umland decisively denounces as a barely disguised neo-fascist intellectual group (Umland 2013)<sup>21</sup>.

Not only formal affiliations, but also content references reveal the affinity between Dzhemal''s political Islam and Russian nationalists. Thus, Dzhemal' in one of his essays (Islamnews 2014) quotes (positively) the famous nationalist, former right-wing activist Eduard Limonov, who had founded the National Bolshevik Party, now illegal but still existing<sup>22</sup>. He had also had close relations with Dugin<sup>23</sup>. Here, it seems to be a common idea of equality and justice that unites Dzhemal' and Limonov. Most important, though, is the fact that Dzhemal' quotes Limonov as an authoritative intellectual, without any additional, qualifying comment.

Naturally, Dzhemal''s arguments also resonate among Muslims. Particularly interesting is that his view of Islam as a vehicle to successfully project Russia into the world recalls the comments made by Vadim Sidorov (Kharun ar-Rusi). Sidorov is the

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<sup>21</sup> In 2013, Umland was not sure about the state of activity of the Florian Geyer. In the summer of 2014, its website was active and new videos of Dzhemal''s lectures under the organization's flag were uploaded. In November 2014, the website homepage announced its closure due to unpaid hosting rights to the internet provider. This may reveal a substantial lack of support for the club, as well as a decision by its members to (temporarily?) abandon it.

<sup>22</sup> Dzhemal' article contested the affirmation of Valerii Zor'kin, Head of the Russian Constitutional Court, who had praised the practice of slavery as having been beneficial for Russia's development in history (Zor'kin 2014). In particular, it would have provided security to the imperial subjects (including the slaves). Dzhemal' (Islamnews 2014) quotes a "booklet" by Limonov in which he describes the miserable conditions of aluminum workers in the "oligarch-capitalist epoch".

<sup>23</sup> Today, Eduard Limonov is still a public figure, although his direct ascendance is on a very small audience. Nevertheless, throughout his life and political path, he has come into contact with much of the ultra-nationalist guard – with mutual influence and, at times, contrasts. His biography by Eduard Carrère (2012), although not always reliable on single events, provides a good introduction to the Russian nationalist scene, and shows the network of relations among many of its exponents, from Dugin, to Dzhemal', to Prokhanov, to the writer and journalist (also for Anna Politkovskaya's *Novaya Gazeta*) journalist Zakhar Prilepin. Prilepin is a member of Limonov's National Bolshevik Party and an admirer of Prokhanov as a writer. He has published a collection of essays by various Russian intellectuals, including Prokhanov, about their idea of Russian "nation" (Prilepin 2009).

leader of the *Russkie Musul'mane* organization, whose members are ethnic Russians converted to Islam. As noted in Chapter 3, Sidorov, also a former ultra-nationalist from Dugin's circle, had converted to Islam after meeting Dzhemal'. With his former mentor, Sidorov shares the belief that Islam is destined to become the future "universal" social and religious force.

All these ideologues, from the extreme right-wing nationalists to ethnic Russian Muslims, support the belief that Russia is destined to exit from its dormant, humiliating condition following the demise of the Soviet Union. They advocate the geopolitical centrality of Russia, and the necessity to preserve (or restore) its "imperial" territorial integrity. Although they hold different notions about what force will provide the necessary impulse to shake Russia from its present impasse and project it in a brilliant future, they seem willing to supersede their divergences and support each other in the name of Russia's "greatness". Dugin is a popular professor, Shevchenko a prestigious journalist-commentator, Prokhanov an appreciated writer, and Dzhemal' a very welcome guest on the mass media: They all contribute to the strengthening of Putin's patriotic "Russian idea".

### **Conclusion**

In Russia, extremist Islam, once expelled from traditional, official forms of cult, has undergone a further conceptual elaboration. This has allowed state authorities to operationalize Islamic terrorism into the much more manageable frame of "ideology". Several elements have contributed to this result. With the doctrinal contribution of religious organizations, "proper" religious traits have been progressively sifted away from extremist theoretical and methodological tenets. At the same time, the international

approach to the war on terror has contributed, at least for a certain period, to isolate the political-military character of Islamic extremism. Finally, Russian history provided the backdrop against which an ideological, secular conceptualization of terrorism could be elaborated into a theoretical and methodological framework.

The juxtaposition of traditional versus foreign Islam has found immediate support by Tatars, who have a long tradition of cooperation with the central state (Bennigsen 1983; Crews 2006). In addition, Sufi brotherhoods in the Caucasus have gradually become more cooperative with Moscow and more hostile to extremist separatist groups like *Imarat Kavkaz*. The possession by Russia's Muslims of a "Russian identity" that has emerged throughout the present dissertation legitimates the question whether Russia's Islamic terrorism may fall into a "Russian" pattern of political action. Not only Russian authorities, but even many exponents of political opposition, and the general public, seem to have answered positively, with different degrees of awareness. The frequent references to nineteenth-century terrorist movements and to Dostoyevsky's work testify of this.

For its part, the government has increasingly modified its discourse about Islamic opposition: The key definition is now "terrorist ideology", and terrorists are the enemies to combat – be they Muslims or not. In this way, it is possible to (announce) restrict state harshness to a definite circle of criminals, whose common denominator is not religion but ideology. To be sure, such a new conceptualization still presents blurred lines, but it also offers the double advantage of isolating extremists from the Muslim community at large. Further, it provides a universal methodological basis to counter other, non-Islamic "extremists", such as right-wing nationalistic and/or Orthodox activists, whose numbers are increasing.

Within Russia's official Islam, Islamic political theory is not an immediate security concern when it deals with the constructive adoption into the Russian legal system of Islamic principles that would contribute to its stability (indeed, it could be a de-securitizing item). It is, instead, a security threat when it replaces, in the contemporary setting, pre-Revolution Communism and its terrorist mold. At this moment, it is difficult to assess the real impact of such underground and often obscure arguments. Yet, the popularity of some of its proponents, the delicate historical moment that Russia is living, constantly pulled between the West and, increasingly, a Russian civilization, and the particular appeal of certain "romantic" ideas reverberating throughout Russian history suggest that they will be an important part of public discourse, at least in the immediate future.

The ambiguity about Dzhemal's and others' positions and the debate that ensues from popular and political reactions to them are directly linked to the other fundamental issue of Islam and security in Russia: the international reach of terrorism, its connections within the Russian territory, and the present and potential consequences for Russia's stability and territorial and social integrity. They also relate to the possible spread of revolutions in the Russian South following the Arab Spring. Further, as Muslim immigration from the former Soviet states contributes to social unrest and economic disarray, Russia's response takes an increasingly international perspective.

The presence of a significant Muslim community on its territory causes the central government some headaches, like social unrest and terrorist acts. It also provides invaluable connections with the Muslim world outside its borders, though.

In times of wobbling relations with the West, and of dramatic events in the neighboring Middle East, Russia holds a singular geopolitical position, which it feels exceptional for the privileges it may bring, and dangerous for the infiltrations it favors. Finally, the specter of the Revolution may remain, as now, just a ghost of the past. Yet, in Russia's public discourse, it colors much of the debate about terrorism, about extremist Islam, about the Arab Spring and the possibility that it spreads to Russia, and about a diffused rise of extremist (religious, fascist) movements, in Russia and elsewhere.

All these preoccupations combine to determine Russia's geopolitical self-positioning, and guide many of its actions in the international arena. In turn, external factors also affect the treatment of domestic issues. Together, internal and external elements about and around Islam influence Russia in defining itself on the international scene "a Muslim state" (Crews 2006).

## CHAPTER VII

### THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL VIEW

It is widely acknowledged, by scholars and practitioners alike, that Russia's foreign policy is very much dependent on domestic issues, in particular security concerns (Kanet and Piet 2014; Haas 2008; Tsygankov 2006; Hopf 2002; Hermann 1998; Rieber 1993).

Kanet and Piet (2014) express a diffused view when they observe:

[various scholars demonstrated that] at the core of Russian foreign policy is a sense of *national inadequacy* and a concern about *honor* that virtually demand that others recognize Russia as a major world power and can result in in policy choices that, from the perspective of others, *especially in the West*, may seem “irrational” or counterproductive. (Kanet and Pier 2014: 2, italics mine).

I have already noted, throughout this dissertation, how Western analytical categories often prove themselves inadequate to provide a satisfactory explanation of Russia's behavior. On the contrary, my approach has taken *Russian* conceptualizations of its own identity as interpretive key to Russia's policies. By maintaining the same openness in regard to international, as well as domestic, issues, it is possible to find the “consequent” and the “necessary” where others see the “irrational” and the “counterproductive”.

In the previous chapters, I have shown how Russia's search for its own identity has involved the re-elaboration of the place of Islam and Muslims, significantly affecting the broader public discourse and, in the end, domestic policies. Analogously, Russian self-representation directly affects its self-perception on the international scene and, ultimately, its choices.

Under Putin's presidency, and especially since his third mandate, geopolitics has increasingly provided the overarching guidance to Russia's international and domestic behavior. Russia's foreign policy has acquired a historical-messianic character, which mirrors a similar development on the domestic front (Trenin 2014). As discussed in Chapter 6, such course has been often attributed to the growing influence of Aleksandr Dugin and other nationalist intellectuals<sup>24</sup>.

As I have noted elsewhere in this dissertation (Chapters 2, 3, and 6), as philosophical concept, Dugin's geopolitics sets Russia as a Eurasian power. As such, the doctrine claims, Russia's historical mission is to play the pivotal role of bridge among civilizations. Imbued with Russian religious-based messianism, in its several elaborations neo-Eurasianist geopolitics does, however, accommodate for a Muslim component of Russian civilization. Thus, some neo-Eurasianists, some nationalists (Muslim and not), most Muslim official leaders and, above all, Russian President Vladimir Putin strongly support the "multi-ethnic, multi-religious" national model for Russia.

The employment of Russia's alleged civilizational-messianic drive as explanatory category is not new, and has been employed with controversial results (Legvold 2007; McDonald 2007; Rieber 2007, 1993). In particular, Alfred Rieber (1993) exposes it as "myth", at the basis of an enduring, but "ahistorical" theory of Russian foreign policy. Rieber considers, instead, that the "geocultural" dimension of Russian history is the

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<sup>24</sup> Trenin (2014) highlights Putin's closeness with Father Tikhon Shevkunov, an Orthodox Archimandrite (abbot) who is allegedly his confessor. Trenin notes that Putin has befriended Tikhon in the time between his second and third mandate, although the two men had reportedly already met at the end of the 1990s (Clover 2013). Apart from Tikhon's role in Putin's private life, he may have made him acquainted with Christian philosophy. It is useful, here, to recall the influence of a major Orthodox theologian and political thinker, Ivan Alexandrovich Ilyin, on contemporary discourse on Russian identity – as discussed throughout Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

source of the “continuities” that observers note – but are unable to fully explain– in Russian foreign policy<sup>25</sup>.

I have already discussed the ontological character of civilizational and national myths, which in a sense renders their veracity secondary (Chapter 2). However, I agree with Rieber that a mere messianic impulse does not suffice to explain Russia’s foreign policy. Following Mesbahi (1997,1992) I contend that geocultural *and* geopolitical considerations are necessary to provide a multi-layered analytical approach that responds to the complexity of the issue at hand. As this chapter will show, in view of the influence, in Russia, of domestic preoccupations on foreign relations, of the new place of Islam and Muslims in Russia’s polity, and of the developments on the international scenes, the “Islamic factor” has grown into a key element of Russia’s foreign policy. Yet, in mainstream analyses, references to Islam are limited to issues of extremism and separatism – with the limits that I have highlighted in the previous chapters.

In the present (and final) chapter, I intend to fill the research gap on some of the most compelling aspects of the “Islamic factor” in Russia’s geopolitical perspectives. To do so, I will build on the novel key analytical findings that I have identified and elaborated in the previous chapters: the place of Muslims in Russia’s conceptualizations of its own identity; the official role of Islamic organizations; the fundamental separation of traditional and extremist Islam; and the definition of an ideology of terror that evokes fears of a never-forgotten revolution.

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<sup>25</sup> Rieber identifies four “persistent conditions” that “share a set of characteristics that can best be defined as geocultural, that is, they relate to those aspects of human activity – the environment and clusters of attitudes and beliefs – that change slowly over time and cannot be easily transformed by political authority no matter how omnipotent its claims.” (Rieber 1993: 322). Three of Rieber’s conditions: “permeable frontiers”, “multicultural state and society”, and “cultural marginality” are particularly relevant for our discourse on Russia’s Islam.

## **Islam and Russia's conceptualizations of geopolitics**

Aleksandr Dugin consistently claims to have been heavily influenced by classical geopolitics (Dugin 2014; 1997). However, his and his followers' theories add a strong geocultural element to Mackinder's vision. In Russian contemporary geopolitical discourse, conceptualizations of Islam appear to both contribute to and result from geopolitical-geocultural postures (see Chapters 2 and 6). The key influence of Russian assessments of the international Islamic threat had been exposed by Mesbahi in several analyses of Russia's policy in Central Asia, and of Russia-Iran relations (1997, 1993, and 1992). In particular, Mesbahi (1997) highlighted the emergence of a conceptual, and therefore political, differentiation among Russian elites.

As shown in his account, "Euroatlanticists" (Yeltsin and his presidential circle) shared the Western identification of political Islam as security threat, and supported Western-led strategies. They dominated Russian decision-making processes until toward the end of 1990s, which is reflected, for example, in Russian position in the Tajik civil war (Mesbahi 1997). At the same time, an emerging current of "Neo-Eurasianists", a major exponent of which was Yevgeny Primakov, started elaborating a more nuanced interpretation of political Islam and its implications for Russia. The growth of Primakov's political weight, and then the fall of Yeltsin and the rise to power of Putin, much more skeptical of (and today antagonistic to) Western influences, caused a major shift in Russia's self-positioning internationally – including toward Islam (as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6).

Analogously to the domestic context, also in Russia's foreign policy the separation of traditional and extremist Islam is fundamental. This distinction is often

underplayed or even ignored by most Western commentators of Russian foreign policy – similar to what I have emphasized about domestic mechanisms. Analysts, instead, explain Russian behavior toward Islam and Muslims within a general framework of imperialism, revanchism, loss of honor, or simple (selfish) pragmatism. This approach causes uncertainties and even puzzlement in front of Russia’s inexplicable behaviors (Kanet and Piet 2014, quoted above).

In fact, mainstream comments neglect the important fact that Russia’s conceptualizations of Islam affect at both the ontological and epistemological levels Russia’s actions and reactions on the international scene. As Mesbahi (2013) notes, after the initial, possibly opportunistic acceptance of the Western “masternarrative” on Islamic terrorism<sup>26</sup>, upon the U.S. invasion of Iraq, in 2003, Russia soon (re)adopted its “historically more nuanced narrative of differentiation, flexibility and duality” (Mesbahi 2013: 6), that better conformed to its historical experience with Islam and Muslims – and reflected the adoption of Primakov’s definitions of traditional vs. extremist Islam. The reaction to the invasion of Iraq is probably the first major occurrence in which Russia openly elaborated in the international dimension the same dualistic conceptualization of traditional/extremist Islam that it was applying domestically.

***Russian foreign policy and the “Islamic factor”: an overview.***

The definition of extremist Islam as ideology of terrorism has led Russia to adopt a different stance than the West’s in its reaction to Islamic terrorism (see Chapter 6). As Mesbahi (2013) notes, Russia’s eventual rejection of the Western “masternarrative” was

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<sup>26</sup> In Mesbahi’s definition, such “global masternarrative” about Islam is “a narrative about the universality of the Islamic threat which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, and which was qualitatively reinforced and enriched in the post-9/11 era, primarily by the United States and its allies” (Mesbahi 2013: 2).

visible also in Russia's posture in its traditional sphere of influence – post-Soviet Central Asia. In this region, however, the shift in perspective has been less complete. For example, in Russia's discourse on Afghanistan after the departure of U.S. forces, Russia's preoccupations are about the trafficking of narcotics, weapons, and human beings into its territory, as well as about terrorism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, conversely, which had been set in 1999 with the mission to counter "separatism, subversion, and extremism", was clearly addressing religious extremism and ethnic-religious nationalism (separatism). The co-membership of the Central Asian republics and China, that maintain a specific anti-Islamic-extremism language, may be one of the reasons why the SCO has not followed the evolution of Russia's counterterrorism doctrine.

While Western discourse maintains strong oppositional or skeptical overtones that produce mixed results in relations with the Muslim world, conversely Russia's official acknowledgement of traditional Islam as part of Russian civilization – backed by Muslim leaders' support (see Chapter 4) – opens many doors for Russia. Because Muslims are recognized as rightful members of Russian society, Russia can (and does) proclaim itself "a Muslim state". This quality provides the legitimation for Russia to partake of international Muslim organizations, like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), in which Western representation is very limited or absent.

Finally, at the ideational-civilizational level, Russia's Muslim community presents itself to the world as a success story of participation to a secular, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious state. An accurate study of the (re)established official and unofficial relations of Russia's Muslims with the international *ummah* reveals theological and ideological exchanges that go far in space and time.

Western analyses of the international connections of Russia's Islam focus narrowly on the influence of Arab Wahhabism and on the tracking of terrorist networks. Other levels of relations have been significantly understudied – if noticed at all. The Russian discourse is more articulated. Certain circles, especially political analysts, follow the developments of extremist currents within Russian territory and across the borders. Muslim intellectuals highlight theological and doctrinal exchanges, as well as confessional ties. The broader public discourse, instead, shows an increasing interest in cultural and political relations – for example the renewed Russia-Iran relations.

The discourse is very ample and, at times, repetitive. Some aspects of it, however, deserve particular attention. The study of various texts reveals the Soviet origins of some arguments that often combine Communist internationalism, religious eschatology, and political militancy to produce aggressive geopolitical views. Even more noteworthy are the intellectual and personal connections between Islamic thinkers and Russian (ultra) nationalist groups sharing similar geopolitical perspectives. Not surprisingly, often these individuals and groups are the same ones who share analogous views of Russia's domestic condition – and whom I have identified in Chapter 6.

It is impossible, here, to dedicate adequate space and attention to each of the numerous areas in which the Islamic factor plays a more or less influential role. It is also true that some issues are more significant than others in their impact and/or long-term implications. Therefore, I will dedicate the remaining sections of the chapter to elements from two sets of issues. One better reflects the interdependency of domestic and international factors, and falls within a broader shift in Russia-West relations. The other set of issues are those that work at the civilizational/ideational level. They are the attempt

at coopting Crimean Tatars into Russian civilizational model, and Russian dialogue with Iran. Although so far generally neglected, they must be exposed and their impact assessed, in order to understand the on-going process of Russia's self-(re)positioning on the international arena.

### **Russia, Islam, and international security**

The conceptual separation of traditional Islam from an Islamic ideology of terrorism not only affects Russia's position toward international terrorism, but has become a fundamental element in its foreign policy in general. In fact, it has always been. The central role played by Soviet conceptualization of world religions has been rarely discussed beyond its most apparent trait of atheism. Mostly, studies have examined the relationship of the Soviet regime with different Churches, notably the Russian Orthodox Church and the Vatican (Kirby 2003). Even more seldom have studies of the nature of Soviet relation with Islam as an ideology been conducted. Alexandre Bennigsen has been one of the few who have turned their attention to the ideological-ontological debate between Soviets and Muslims (see also Chapter 5 of this dissertation).

After Bennigsen, the centrality of the Islamic factor in Soviet and post-Soviet Russian foreign policy has been highlighted by Mohiaddin Mesbahi. In a series of journal articles and book chapters dedicated to the dynamics of Soviet-Iranian relations, Mesbahi advocates the necessity to add to the "classical" series of foreign policy elements (energy, security, military) also the religious factor. The acknowledgment of the importance of Islam as ideological drive of the new Iranian Republic, and of the Soviet reaction to it, allows Mesbahi to provide a powerful explanation to Soviet behavior during the Iran-Iraq war. Further, it also frames Soviet-Iranian relations within a broader geopolitical and

strategic perspective, which includes extra-regional agents (but with high stakes in the region) like the United States.

In Mesbahi's analysis, the fear of the spreading of the Islamic revolution brought together USA and USSR in – at times contradictory – support of Iraq. Similar preoccupations persisted throughout the 1980s and, partially, the 1990s decades. The release of the Afghan pressure on the Soviet Union was soon substituted by the spreading of Islamic separatism and inter-ethnic clashes in the newly independent Central Asian republics. They found their most dramatic expression in the Tajik civil war of 1992-1997. Here, too, the Islamic factor played a pivotal role in bringing together international actors to facilitate a negotiated end to the conflict (Mesbahi 1997).

In Tajikistan, the two major mediators have been Russia and Iran. Their cooperation revealed their communality of interests in ensuring stability in the region. It also revealed, at a deeper level, the effects of a change in both countries' stances to each other and to world order in general. Perhaps unexpectedly, Islam was at the center of them. Mesbahi (1993, 1992) notes that, at the end of the Iran-Iraq war,

[...] recent Soviet commentaries suggest the growing awareness by Soviet leadership of the significant role played by non-western and especially Islamic traditions in shaping intellectual consensus on the global level. [...] the Soviets cautiously, but surely, have shown signs that they are willing to test the possibilities of an intellectual discourse with the Islamic World. [Gorbachev] expressed the significant role of [renowned Islamic philosopher] Termezi's ideas, 'in solving the moral and ethical problems of our time', and the 'role of Islam in the implementation of the idea of values common to all mankind'. (Mesbahi 1992: 276)

### *The new Western-Russian relations*

The refusal of the Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, in October 2013, to sign an already negotiated cooperation treaty with the European Union sparked an escalation in internal socio-political relations in the country. Popular protests started in Kiev, but the “Euromaidan<sup>27</sup>” upheaval soon escalated and split the country along two fundamental oppositional lines: pro-EU (and against Russia’s influence) and pro-Russian (and anti-Western). Euromaidan caused the ousting of the incumbent Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich by the Parliament –illegally, by Ukrainian laws.

During the months of fierce contrasts between pro- and anti-government groups, other major events followed suit throughout the country, which dramatically affected the international system of state relations. The major ones were the proclamation of a referendum for secession and annexation to Russia, in Crimea, and the establishment of a self-proclaimed, openly pro-Russian independent state, in the southeastern territories of Donbass. Contrary to what happened in Crimea, violent clashes between government and separatist forces (suspected to be flanked by Russian troops) characterize what has been called the “War in Ukraine” - still ongoing at the time of writing.

In Crimea, the Parliament of the Ukrainian Autonomous Republic – a region with an overwhelming majority of ethnic Russian citizens – called for a referendum to secede from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation. As justification for this self-proclaimed referendum, illegal by Ukrainian law, the Parliament adduced the necessity to escape the consequences of what they saw as a neo-fascist political coup in Kiev, and to put an end

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<sup>27</sup> The name refers simultaneously to the central square in Kiev (Maidan Nezalezhnosti, “Independence Square”), where protesters convened, and to the movement’s initiators’ support for the European Union.

to decades of discrimination by the Ukrainian central government against the local Russian population. In the name of the self-determination of peoples, and reminding the example of Kosovo, in March 2014 Moscow welcomed Crimea as its new territory.

The Ukrainian crisis has significantly affected Russia's position in the international arena, especially its relations with the United States and the European Union. With the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbass, what seemed to be an internal affair of Ukraine has now entered the global agenda. Allegations of Russia's direct military support to separatists in the Donbass – rejected by Moscow – led to the establishment of economic sanctions by the U.S. and EU against Moscow. Although less effective than expected, the sanctions are being felt by the Russian economy. Yet, they have also provoked a reaction of Russian elites, who claim that Western assessments of Russia's position in the Ukrainian and Crimean situations are flawed. More significantly, the hard line chosen by the Western countries has comforted Russia in its sense of being encircled because of its unwillingness to bend to U.S. hegemonic ambitions, and generated a very bold reply (*President Rossii* 2014a, 2014b). Consequently, the positions of both sides, U.S. / EU and Russia, have further stiffened.

It is beyond the scope and purposes of this dissertation to discuss the events leading to the Euromaidan and its effects at large within and outside Ukraine. However, at least two of its consequences are directly relevant to the discourse about Islam. One is the amplification of West-Russian differences in approaching international crises, especially those involving state sovereignty, self-determination, and stability. They were already evident with regard to Islamic terrorism, but now they find a much broader expression in Ukraine. The other field in which Islam is significant is more closely

related to Russia's domestic arrangements. It regards the role of Russia's Islamic official institutions in support of the state, and their willingness to perpetuate the Russian/Soviet tradition of sending Muslims as envoys to foreign Muslim communities – this time, to Crimea. Both issues will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

***International fight against terrorism: from cooperation to confrontation***

An immediate consequence of Russia's conceptualization of Islamic terrorism as a fundamentally political, and not religious, phenomenon is its increasing reluctance to participate in the global anti-Islamic discourse. It is true that, immediately after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Vladimir Putin had declared himself ready to join the "War on Terror" proclaimed by U.S. President George W. Bush. Russia's support was tangible especially in Central Asia, where it either offered the support of its military bases, or facilitated the lease of Central Asian bases to the Western coalition.

It is also widely observed that Putin, while genuinely concerned for the spread of international terrorism, had assumed an equally belligerent posture on the domestic front. Claiming to counter Islamic extremism infiltrated from abroad, he engaged in a violent confrontation with separatists in the North Caucasus, during what is known as the second Chechen war (Malashenko and Trenin 2004). Commentators in the West and in Russia have often accused Putin to use the "global war on terror" as a sham for a ruthless use of force against separatists and political opponents in the south. In fact, the Russian official narrative on the Chechen opposition soon overlapped Islamic rebels on organized "bandits", corrupted local officials, and simple criminals (Campana 2013; Omelicheva 2009; Malashenko and Trenin 2004). In this way, the Islamic religious component was gradually, but increasingly, brushed off the narrative on the identity of Chechen rebels.

The motives, details, and controversies of the conflict in North Caucasus have been extensively discussed in the academic, policy-making, and journalistic literature (for example, Sakwa 2005; Malashenko and Trenin 2004; Hunter 2004; Politkovskaia 2004). This is probably the single topic concerning Russia's Islam to have received the close and sustained attention of Western commentators. To conduct yet another thorough analysis of this issue would be an unnecessary redundancy, and is beyond the scope of this dissertation. What is important to note, for my present discussion, is that Russian discourse on Chechnya – from religious to political opposition – paralleled the general shift in Russia's position on international terrorism.

#### **At the origin of the divide: the invasion of Iraq**

The watershed event has been the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In his analysis of the event, Yevgeny (Evgenii) Primakov (2009, originally published in Russian by the official government newspaper *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* in 2006) starts by presenting the behavior of the United States about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction as at least hypocritical. He recalls how, after the falsity of its government's initial accusations was exposed, the U.S. "sought to justify its actions by insisting that it was embarking on a mission to spread democracy" (Primakov 2009: 358). However, the Middle East expert notes,

this was an American model of democracy that had pretty much nothing in common with the historic or religious traditions of the Arab nations, nor even with their present-day socio-economic situations or ways of thinking. (Primakov 2009: 358)

In fact, Primakov accuses, "the American invasion actually helped fuel the spread of terrorism" (Primakov 2009: 358), because it had diverted troops from areas of true emergency, like Afghanistan.

Primakov blames the disruption of the religious balance in Iraq. In fact, he notes, Saddam Hussein had created a secular regime that, with all its condemnable authoritarian flaws, had succeeded in establishing a high degree of stability. Primakov attributes to the elimination of the Ba'ath party by the U.S. the resurgence of conflicts among Iraq's groups: Shi'ias, Sunnis, and Kurds (not to speak of non-Islamic religions) – with overemphasized religious notes. In this way, he observes, “after the U.S. occupation, Iraq became a “faith-based state”. He confirms his previous statements about Islam not being an intrinsically aggressive religion (see also Primakov 2004). However, he adds,

in a modern setting, a state built on the basis of faith – be it Islam, Christianity, or Judaism – and with all its branches of power run along theological lines, can hardly be said to be on the road to democracy (Primakov 2009: 360)

While these remarks reflect Primakov's modernist position, they do not seem to influence his firm belief in a definition of Islamic terrorism as a political, ideological, but not religious movement:

[The] supposed polarization [of the world along Huntington's civilizational lines] is understood to be the result of the emergence of international terrorism, which is allegedly linked directly to the religion of Islam. There is plenty of evidence to show how erroneous it is to conflate the two in this way. [O]nly ignoramuses or spiteful Islamophobes could equate one of the oldest and most widely practiced religions in the world with terrorism. The reality today is that many terrorist organizations, primarily al-Qaeda, do indeed wrap themselves in the flag of Islam [...]. (Primakov, 2009: 382-383)

For Primakov, it is “vitaly important” (Primakov 2009: 383) that the world understands the distinction between fundamentalist Islam, intended as a true attachment to Islamic faith and habits, and extremist Islam, which recurs to the “use of force to impose Islamic rule over a state or a society” (Primakov 2009: 383). As such, extremist

Islam loses its true religious character and manifests itself as violent tool of international politics. Primakov points to the incapability of the “Wise Men’s Group” led by Kofi Annan to both properly identify the nature of terrorism’s threat and, consequently, to provide internationally binding guidelines, that has led to the catastrophic Western invasion of Iraq (Primakov 2009: 359).

Primakov claims that, because the West has adopted a “wrong” definition of terrorism, its interventions in local religious dynamics, of which it ignores origins and characteristics, are ineffective, or even harmful. Today, Primakov’s argument still lies at the basis of the Russian critique to international interventions in the Middle East and elsewhere. Several Russian authoritative sources not only replicate Primakov’s words, but start from his analysis of the situation in 2003-Iraq and the Middle East in general to build their critique of contemporary events. It is remarkable how, today, the whole structure of Russian position on the Islamic State (ISIS) is supported, in almost identical formulations, by Primakov’s analysis of Iraq.

The renowned Russian scholar Vitalii Naumkin<sup>28</sup> analyzes the situation in Syria and Iraq in a recent paper prepared for the Valdai Club (Naumkin 2014a). He notes how

The blitzkrieg launched by the [...] Islamic State, was as sudden as it was *predictable*. The current surge of jihad sentiment in this part of the world is rooted in the recent past, *which began when the US and its allies invaded and occupied Iraq without UN sanction*. (Naumkin 2014a: 2, italics mine).

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<sup>28</sup> Vitalii Naumkin is the director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. He is also professor and chair at the faculty of world politics, Moscow State University, and president of the Moscow-based Center for Strategic and Political Studies. He writes extensively on the Middle East, especially on Israeli-Palestinian relations, and on geopolitical dynamics in the region.

Naumkin identifies “three major mistakes” of US policy in Iraq that collectively were intended to dissolve the state institutions: political, military, and bureaucratic. He attributes these actions to U.S. fears that Iraq might revert to the old regime. Yet, he notes

While Saddam Hussein was undoubtedly a cruel dictator [...] these decisions destroyed the state institutions that had supported what had been a *secular* nationalist regime. (Naumkin 2014a: 2, italics mine)

In addition to disrupting the secular state, the American intervention, in Naumkin’s as in Primakov’s view, is accused of having wrongly re-igniting relations among religious groups, without being able to provide a satisfactory substitute for the stability once offered by Hussein’s regime. Instead, Naumkin notes, today the Islamic State – although also a terrible regime – “has created a semblance of order [...]. There is fear but also stability”. Naumkin does not positively comment on the “stability” provided by the IS, and it is clear throughout the paper that he strongly condemns it, but his provocation intends to highlight the contrast between the purposes of Western intervention, its inability to choose the right scenario (secular stability over sectarian juxtaposition), and their unintended consequences.

The official journal of the Russian Army, *Kraznaya Zvezda*, in an article published in 2014 (Kuzar’ 2014) on the Islamic State traces the origin of the conflict back to the Sykes-Picot agreements. The author implicitly suggests that the greed and incompetence shown by the Western colonial powers at that time still led their behavior before, during, and after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In particular, U.S. misjudgment of internal relations had led to Western military training and support of groups that have then moved to Syria to fight against Assad’s regime – and then returned to Iraq to join the IS.

Putting the official view into the international context, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov lament the negative effects of Western initiatives in the Middle East (MID 2014). In his view, after the setback in Iraq, U.S.-led mismanagement of the terrorist threat has led to the crises in North Africa and Syria, and to the strengthening to the current level of the Islamic State. The West is accused to have wrongly, or intentionally, supported certain Islamic groups to overrule what they labeled dictatorial governments. In fact, Russian observers note, those secular regimes had been able to ensure religious stability in highly fragmented societies. The collapse of legitimate governments during the Arab Spring, instead, brought the mid-term effect of re-ignite inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts that, in absence of a strong, legitimate authority to control them, have only precipitated the region into chaos (MID 2015, 2014; Naumkin 2014a; Kuzar' 2014; Primakov 2009).

### **Differences in counterterrorism tactics**

Conceptual and strategic differences on the nature of terrorism are reflected in divergent policy and military approaches. At the society level, Russia places a high value on the preventive effects of a “proper” Islamic education that should conform to “patriotic” lines (see Chapter 5 of this dissertation). This is in contrast with Western usual calls for a secular education that would limit the influence of religious precepts.

Politically, Russian observers lament the unwise dependency of the Western forces on reluctant or scarcely transparent local allies. One of the most frequently cited cases is the ambivalent position of “American ally Saudi Arabia” that has “spent millions of dollars over decades to propagate this extremist ideology in the Muslim world and continue[s] to do so even now” (Naumkin 2014a: 4). Kuzar' (2014) goes further, and puts

Saudi Arabia's direct financing of IS combatants within a regional strategic context. The journal points to Saudi intention to counter Iran's influence in Iraq.

Another allegedly unreliable partner is Turkey. Naumkin (2014a) highlights that Turkey's primary interest may not be the overturn of the Assad regime in Syria, or the elimination of the IS, but rather the liquidation of the Kurdish question. In turn, Kurdish groups in Iraq (which are on the U.S. and Turkish lists of terrorist organizations) have been armed against IS. Naumkin prospects a longer-term scenario when he mentions the possibility that the Kurds may eventually turn against Ankara – well equipped with Western weapons.

On the military level, Russia has repeatedly expressed concerns about the U.S. decision to employ exclusively airborne forces to combat the Islamic state. In the opinion of many Russian military and civilian leaders (MID 2015; Kuzar' 2014), instead, it is necessary to infiltrate the IS ranks. The (Jewish) President of the Middle East Institute, Evgenii Satanovski, calls for the return of U.S. ground force to Iraq (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 2014). He accuses President Barack Obama of reluctance to admit his own "incompetence" in withdrawing from the country without having stabilized it.

Particularly significant is the involvement of Ramzan Kadyrov, the Head of the Chechen Republic (and a close ally of Putin's), in this regard. Confident of his own (controversial) expertise in countering separatists in the North Caucasus, Kadyrov goes at length to explain the rationale beyond his suggestion to infiltrate the terrorists' ranks. He adds that, in fact, Russians have already many undercover agents among IS troops. Indeed, Kadyrov may have a broader impact than it would appear at first sight if, in June 2014, the King of Jordan, Abdullah II, visited Chechnya (but not Moscow) allegedly to

ask for his advice to counter terrorists, and his example may be followed by others (Saunders 2014)<sup>29</sup>.

### **Islamic terrorism and civilizational dialogue**

Primakov (2009) identifies in the interruption of the dialogue between civilizations the real cause of the spreading of Islamic terrorism. He calls for the international community to restore inter-civilizational relations beyond the limits of technological and economic globalization. Rather, Primakov argues, it is the mutual knowledge of cultural and social factors that brings reciprocal respect and may defuse the threat of terrorism. In policy terms, for Primakov this translates into an agreed-upon definition of terrorism, officially approved by the international community at the United Nations.

By contrast, Primakov indicates an example of civilizational dialogue in the Russia-Islamic World Strategic Vision Group, which had met at least twice, in 2006 in Russia (the meeting Primakov mentions) and in 2008 in Jeddah. It was composed of representatives of Russia and Muslim countries, including Iranians. During the Group's meetings, Russian Muslim leaders advanced post-Soviet Russia as model of integration (*Muslims.ru*, without date; Wahab and Samir 2008; see also Chapter 4 of this dissertation). Tatarstan's President Mintimer Shaimiyev boasted that Muslims of Russia enjoy a high level of security, stability, and social participation. Primakov adds how the fact that, in Russia, Muslims are "part of the indigenous population" has created "a very

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<sup>29</sup> Saunders (2014) also notes that Chechen guerrilla troops loyal to Kadyrov may well have been deployed in 2014 Crimea, against the new government in Kiev (he reports the official news that Kadyrov himself has been awarded a medal "For the Liberation of Crimea"). Indeed, Kadyrov's social media accounts (*Twitter*, *LiveJournal*) show his close interest for the situation in Ukraine, including the Donbass, about which he supports and reinforces Russia's anti-Western line of arguments.

special community”. Additionally, he concludes, “Russia enjoys a unique position as bridge between Europe and Asia” (Primakov 2009: 384).

Despite Primakov’s reiterated invitations to create a shared conceptual and policy-related platform to address international terrorism, Russian authorities and commentators continue to lament the opposition to, or oversight of, their position by the Western community. The lack of a common conceptual platform to fight terrorism is considered by the Russian leadership the main cause of the general failure of international initiatives, first of all, because it hinders joint actions.

### ***Russia and the Arab Spring***

Russia’s stance about Iraq and Syria is consistent with what is often presented as its increasingly strong resistance to U.S. (ambitions of) world hegemony. On several occasions, both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev have expressed their disagreement with the idea of a U.S.-led unipolar world. Instead, in Russia’s view the post-cold war system should be characterized by a more balanced multipolar arrangement. This is at the basis of Russian foreign doctrine, and plays a significant role in its calls to UN supervision and international cooperation in counterterrorism.

For example, the contradictory position of Moscow that, while conceptually calling for a global dialogue and mutual “civilizational” understanding, at the policy level criticizes the Western states’ approach to link cooperation in counterterrorism to the resolution of the contention about Ukraine, may be seen in this perspective. For Russia, the international community should constitute an overarching platform to address issues

of common concern. It should not be affected by bilateral relations, nor, more importantly, be dominated by the interests of the United States.

Consequently, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov insists on the necessity to set aside divergences on specific, apparently unrelated issues to focus on the international “priorities” of “terrorism, growing drug trafficking, and organized crime” (Lavrov 2014). In his words, terrorists do not quarrel with each other, know no boundaries, and are constantly on the move. The same should do Russia and “its Western partners”. Lavrov repeatedly points at the negative consequences of the “freezing” of coordination in counterterrorism that, he emphasizes, has been decided by the West – not by Russia (MID 2015, 2014).

At this point, it is evident how the “Islamic factor”, even when it is not explicitly mentioned, affects the perceptions of the parties involved and, ultimately, their positioning toward one another. It is obviously more relevant in case of direct involvement of Islamic terrorists or activists. This is the case of the Arab Spring revolutions, and of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Malashenko (2014) notes that in the Concept of the Foreign Policy of Russia (2013) there is a reference to Islam as cause of disorder in the Middle East. However, this does not imply a fundamental change in the official interpretation of extremist Islam as “ideology” and not religion. On the contrary, it confirms Russian official interpretations of the IS and of the Islamic opposition to Syrian President Assad as forms of political activity.

Russia’s position on the Arab Spring events follows its assessment of the invasion of Iraq: The ultimate culprit is the West, which, partly out of incompetence, partly out of interest, has supported the ousting of stable, secular governments by stirring potentially

explosive relations among domestic groups. The same accusation is made by the Grand *Mufti* of Al-Azhar (on December 4, 2014).

While Russian insistence on country stability is presented as if in the interest of the country's populations, many commentators note that Russia's reluctance to overturn Saddam's, Qaddafi's, and now Assad's governments reveals Putin's fears of a possible spread of revolutionary movements within Russia against his own rule. This interpretation contains much truth, although it may be incomplete.

Putin is not the only one to be concerned for his own position. I have already highlighted the sensitivity of both state leaders and citizens to revolutionary instances (see Chapter 6). More specifically, in the case of the Arab Spring revolutions, at the time when they were still rolling, an intense debate developed on Russian public outlet. In the television duel (Solov'ev 2011) between Zhirinovskii and Dzhemal' analyzed in Chapter 6, one of the guests is Rajab Safarov, head of the Center of Contemporary Iranian Studies, a renowned expert of Iran and a public figure. Reassuring the audience, after Zhirinovskii's and other guests' concerns about the possibility for an Islamic regime to be established in Russia, he notes that, although Russia "must live" with Muslims on its territory, this does not mean that a theocracy or a Caliphate must be created. In fact, he reminds that

in the Islamic world there are examples of secular systems in which Muslims defend the interests of the states. These states [...] are able to maintain very good relations with their neighbors. (Solov'ev 2011)

In his opinion, the fact that "the dictatorships that have been disrupted [Gaddafi's, Saddam's, Mubarak's] had been initiated and supported by the West, especially the

United States” (37) would save Russia from being victim of the clear anti-Western sentiment expressed by the Arab spring.

It is impossible to overlook the strong anti-Western bias of much of Russian debate on international events. Even contradictory interpretations of the Arab revolutions, presented either as fomented by the West to oust incumbent regimes or as genuine popular movements against regimes perceived as Western puppets, lead to the same conclusion – that the West is to blame. This narrative has soon joined Russia’s foreign policy discourse to reinforce Russia’s allegations of an aggressive policy of the U.S. and its partners, aimed at the control of vital resources and of Muslim societies. With the deepening of the rift due to the Ukrainian crisis, these allegations have escalated to become a steady part of Russian mainstream analyses – both professional and popular – of international events.

### **Russia, Iran, and the (unexpected) ways of the “Islamic Factor”**

Primakov’s (2009) call for a civilizational dialogue closely resembles the “Dialogue of Civilizations” speech made in 1997 by the then-president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mohammad Khatami. Khatami affirmed that, “in our world, dialogue among civilizations is an absolute imperative” (quoted in Esposito and Voss, 2003: 250)<sup>30</sup>. Although the date of Khatami’s speech falls around the time when Primakov was implementing his new vision of Russian foreign policy (and of Islam), there is no certainty of a direct intellectual influence of either one on the other. What appears evident, however, is that both leaders share the same concern for a lack, or inadequacy, of a civilizational dialogue

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<sup>30</sup> In the words of Esposito and Voss (2003), Khatami has since become “one of the major advocates for the dialogue of civilizations in the contemporary world”.

that should not result in the defamation of one civilization by another, on the contrary, should enhance mutual knowledge and trust.

It seems surprising that two leading exponents of such diverse traditions like the Russian/Soviet and the Iranian could come to the same conclusion. In fact, years before Khatami, Ayatollah Khomeini had elaborated a similar vision of world arrangements. Having abandoned the idea of an outright exportation of Islamic revolution, after the Iran-Iraq war (Mesbahi 2011, 1993), he sent a friendly letter to then-Soviet Union President Mikhail Gorbachev (Khomeini 1989). In that letter, the ayatollah stated the, by then proved, inadequacy of the Marxist ideology to fulfil the needs of the Soviet people. Instead, he made a surprising proposal to the PCUS secretary:

let me call on you to study Islam earnestly, not because Islam and Muslims may need you, but because Islam has exalted universal values which can bring comfort and salvation to all nations and remove the basic problems of mankind. A true understanding of Islam may *forever release you from the problem Afghanistan and other similar involvements*. We treat Muslims of the world as Muslims of our own country and will ever share in their destiny.

[...]

I declare outright that the Islamic Republic of Iran, as the greatest and most powerful base of the Islamic world, *can easily fill the vacuum of religious faith in your society*. In any case, our country, as in the past, honours [sic] good neighbourhood [sic] and bilateral relations. (Khomeini 1989, italics mine).

Gorbachev, a self-declared Soviet patriot, proved to be receptive to Khomeini's opening:

[...] recent Soviet commentaries suggest the growing awareness by Soviet leadership of the significant role played by non-western and especially Islamic traditions in shaping intellectual consensus on the global level. [T]he Soviets cautiously, but surely, have shown signs that they are willing to test the possibilities of an intellectual discourse with the Islamic World. [Gorbachev] expressed the significant role of

[renowned Islamic philosopher] Termezi's ideas, 'in solving the moral and ethical problems of our time', and the 'role of Islam in the implementation of the idea of values common to all mankind'. (Mesbahi 1992: 276)

The Soviet cautious exploration of Khomeini's ideational terrain took place in a moment of great internal intellectual disarray. The sudden demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent strong inclination toward Western liberal stances are probably one of the reasons why the Russian-Iranian dialogue did not take a more articulated form.

The images of civilizational relations envisioned by Khomeini, Khatami, and Primakov share not only a positive perspective of dialogue, but entail potential competing assumptions. Khomeini is explicit in predicting the ultimate victory of Iranian Islamic paradigm as ontological, epistemological, and existential model for humankind. In the case of Khatami, Esposito and Voss (2003) observe that

[d]ialogue with the West, in this perspective, becomes an important way of strengthening Islam, because, as the West evolves and possibly decline, there is the opportunity for Islam to regain its position as the leading progressive world civilization. (254)

In his turn, Primakov prospects the model of the World Vision Group, in which the Russian example is particularly praised. Each of these models contains the conviction (or hope) to be the one destined to prevail, in the end. Mesbahi (1992) had already noted it in the case of Soviet-Iranian relations:

Both the Soviet and the Iranian leadership have continued to emphasize the superiority of their respective socialist and Islamic model. The dialogue and interaction between Soviet new thinking and Islam, both as an idea and polity, will take place in the context of Islam's presumed universal claim to hold the essential truth. Thus, a note of tension in the relationship between the two would be unavoidable. (Mesbahi 1992: 278)

The awareness of these competing scenarios are partially responsible for the caution with which both Iranians and Russians expound these arguments in the public sphere (Mesbahi 2010).

***Russian-Iranian contemporary ideational relations***

Much more effective, at least for the moment, in boosting Iranian-Russian relations are common stances on regional issues. Both states agree on the regional priorities (Islamic State and drug trafficking), against the Western strategy. Iran's highly problematic relations with the United States and part of the Western community is an additional facilitating condition, in view of the growing tensions between the latter group and Russia.

However, the recognition of common adversaries, in addition to shared interests, has developed gradually. It is not the place, here, to dig into the long and complex history of Iran/Persian and Russian/Soviet relations. It will suffice to say that reminiscences of old dynamics are still vivid in the memories of both countries. Again, the Dzhemal' – Zhirinovskii debate in Vladimir Solov'ev's program (2011) testifies of the permanence of contradictory perceptions.

While the participants talk about the possible spread of Islamic revolutions to Russia, inevitably the role of Iran is examined. To Solov'ev's observation that, in Iran, Russia is called "the little evil" (while the U.S. is the "great evil"), Safarov replies that this definition belongs to the (near) past, and emphasizes Iran's availability to tighten relations with Russia, also with an anti-Western purpose. Zhirinovskii insists on the danger that a "revolutionary" regime like Iran's may acquire the atomic bomb. Safarov, then, claims that "even a pro-Russian atomic Iran is better than a pro-West Iran", because

Iran is central to the region and it is in Russia's interest to have friendly relations with it – an argument that, exemplarily, advances geocultural as well as strategic considerations.

It is not by chance that the relations of Iran with Russia are called into cause during that specific debate. In Chapter 6, I have already highlighted the intellectual closeness of Geidar Dzhemal' with some of the most prominent Iranian thinkers. According to his own official biography (available on his website *kontrudar.ru*), he is close to Khomeini's son and has spent a few years in the Shi'a holy city of Qom, in Iran. By his own admission, he has a high regard for the role of Iran as Islamic revolutionary regime.

At the same time, Dzhemal' is one of the most influential intellectuals of contemporary Russia, a leading member of the circles of prominent right-nationalists (or "patriots") like Aleksander Dugin, Aleksandr Prokhanov, and Maksim Shevchenko. The intellectual glue that unites individuals with partially very distant positions is their "patriotism". Even more noteworthy, they place the origins of their national idea in Russian imperial and, especially, *Soviet* models. They do not want to replicate the Marxist-Communist ideology, but they advocate the restoration of the Soviet *idea* of Russia as Eurasian nation with a great destiny. The concept of Russia's uniqueness as a bridge between Europe and Asia, by definition entails the possibility of a civilizational dialogue. Additionally, the pervasive messianic tone of Eurasianism reveals its ambition to establish a universal civilization, a model of peaceful coexistence based on shared values.

To an attentive observer, it is apparent that, contrary to what many have claimed after 1991, the heritage of Soviet ideology and practices has not been dispelled in the

post-Communist euphoria. Nor is it expressed in the words of so-called Soviet nostalgics who aspire at a restoration of the Soviet regime *tout court*. From the Soviet ideology, it retains the strong geopolitical perspective, – although it is not a “neo-imperialistic” project. Rather, it consists in the vision of an unspecified, but powerful, effect of a Russian-led civilizational reform of the relations within humankind.

The search for a model of polity that could enable Russian messianic action is evident in the “patriotic” discourse of ultra-nationalists and Eurasianists. The same ambition is claimed by the Iranian ideational model prospected by Khomeini and Khamenei. Through the Soviet heritage, on one side, and the turn in conceptualization of Islamic revolution, on the other one, these two traditions might find a common ground. The work of Geidar Dzhemal’, focused on political Islam, justice, and revolution, already embodies an attempt in this direction.

The dynamics briefly discussed above are significantly understudied, especially outside Iran or Russia. Even less attention is paid to the historical-ideational (and ultimately, ontological) terrain on which they take place. A notable exception is Mohiaddin Mesbahi’s work. In particular, in one of his essays on Russian-Iranian relations (Mesbahi 2010), he notes how Iran’s renewed attention to Eurasia (its “Eastern orientation”) finds, in fact, its deeper roots at the time of the Iranian revolution. Retracing the development of the relations between the Islamic Republic and USSR/Russia, Mesbahi underscores the alternating of hopes and disillusiones of the Iranian elites in building a relationship with Moscow based on “potential ideational bridges” (Mesbahi 2010: 180), and highlights the affinities that, on these same premises, Tehran seems to have discovered, today, with Putin’s government.

It is too early to evaluate how the possible (re)encounter of Russian and Iranian ideational ambitions may develop. Nor can it be predicted whether, like many other times in the long history in the relations of the two states, mutual mistrust and contingent prevailing interests will eventually brush ideational discourses away (Mesbahi 1992). It is not this the place to fill the research gap in Russia-Iranian relations. However, the crucial place of both Russia and Iran in contemporary international relations makes it all the more necessary.

### **Russia's Muslims as envoys of the state: the case of Crimea**

On March 21, 2014, the Annexation Treaty of the (until then Ukrainian) Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation was ratified. In subsequent remarks, Russian President Vladimir Putin highlighted the vital importance of Crimean historical and cultural link to Russia. He went as far as to declare that, for Russia, Crimea is like Temple Mount in Jerusalem for Jews and Muslims (Gashkov 2014). However, despite Putin's observation, Russia's strategy to facilitate the integration of Crimea does not depend on the Orthodox Church.

In fact, for a great part, no integration measures are necessary. The present demographic composition of the peninsula is characterized by a great majority of ethnic Russians. Due to Russian and Soviet deportations, the original Tatar population has been reduced to a small minority (about 13 per cent). The overwhelming Russian character of Crimea is among the factors that originated the call of the separatist referendum in early 2014 and determined its outcome. Citizens of Russian origins were complaining about the discriminatory treatment endured from Kiev, although Crimea and the city of Sevastopol did enjoy an "autonomous" status. They welcomed their "return" to Russia,

after the Soviet Union President Nikita Khrushchev had donated Crimea as a friendship gift to the fellow Soviet Republic of Ukraine in 1954.

The reaction of the Crimean Tatars, instead, was not so overwhelmingly positive. The history of Russian-Crimean Tatars relations is complex and controversial. The Russian Empire conquered Crimea in 1783. One hundred years later, it fought (and lost) on its territory a war (critically depicted by Lev Tolstoy<sup>31</sup>) against an alliance of European and Ottoman powers that heavily hit the local population. Interestingly, Werth (2002) considers the Crimean war the starting point of Russia's view of Islam as a powerful political factor, when half a million of its Muslim subjects fled to the Ottoman Empire (and many fought, or plotted, against Russia from there).

After imperial Russia's conquest, Crimean inhabitants were subject to the same rule as the other subjects of the Empire. Yet, the generally well-educated and cosmopolitan Tatars formed a particularly cohesive and active group (Ryzhkov 2014; Yarosh and Brilov 2011). The modernist and reformist influence of the Crimean Tatar intellectual Ismail Gasprinski (Gaspirali) spread throughout the Russian Empire, sparking similar reflections in other Muslim communities, in particular in imperial Turkestan. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, Gasprinski's intellectual heritage is still prominent today, notably among the Volga-Ural Tatars in their self-identity conceptualizations.

The Crimean Tatars supported the White Army during the post-Revolution Civil War (1919-1923), which made them suspicious to the Bolshevik regime. During World

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<sup>31</sup> In the three *Sebastopol Sketches* (1855), a fictional elaboration of the author's first-hand experiences in the conflict. The tales became soon best-sellers (also praised by the tsar Aleksander II) and contributed to form Russian public opinion on the war, Crimea, and patriotism.

War II, Crimea was occupied by Nazi troops. After the Soviet regained control of the territory, the Tatars were accused of collaborating with the enemy and, on these charges, about 250,000 of them were deported to Soviet Central Asia, mainly Uzbekistan. After Ukraine acquired independence in 1991, the Tatars still held the status of a small minority. This gave them little political leverage even at the local level. The Tatar language was abolished as an official language of the Autonomous Republic, while their traditional religious institutions had to compete with Kiev-based Muslim organizations for influence (Yarosh and Brilov 2011).

### ***Attempts to mend a broken relationship***

Although they share their name, there are very little connections between Crimean Tatars and Tatars of the Volga-Ural regions. Both groups speak a Turkic language, but these are not very similar<sup>32</sup>. The two groups established intellectual contacts at the turn of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries (pan-Turkism, *jadidism*), but their relations were framed within general Muslim-Turkic commonalities (pan-Islamism, pan-Turkism), rather than along nationality lines. Indeed, probably the strongest element that these two groups have in common is their past as Muslim subjects/citizens of the Russian/Soviet regimes.

Apparently, this was enough for contemporary Russian authorities to put Russian Islamic institutions in charge of the integration of Crimean Tatars after the March 2014 annexation. In Chapter 4, and throughout this work, I have demonstrated how official religious organizations in Russia are not only responsible for the proper conduct of their flocks as believers, but also for their adherence to the new Russian patriotism. Following

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<sup>32</sup> A Tatar of the Ural-Volga can better understand official Turkish than the Tatar language of Crimea (personal information to the author).

Russia's functional interpretation of the public role of religion (Schuppert 2012; Chapter 4 of this dissertation), Muslim leaders have taken prompt action to "help" their Crimean counterparts conform to Russian arrangements.

At the time of the unrest in Kiev, the religious institutional picture in Crimea was composite (Yarosh and Brylov 2011). Partly, it still reflected the structure molded on the Spiritual Boards of Catherine II, replicated under Soviet rule. Although Muslims also live in other areas of Ukraine, the largest community by far (about 250,000) is that of Crimean Tatars. They control the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Ukraine (DUMC), based in Crimea, which formed in 1992 as a spin-off of the Soviet Union's Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the European Part of USSR and Siberia (SAMEUS). The DUMC, though, was experiencing the competition of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine, based in Kiev (Yarosh and Brylov 2011: 257). Outside the control of these two major institutions, "a significant part of Islamic life in Crimea [thrived] in the so-called independent communities", including Salafi groups and international organizations like *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Yarosh and Brylov 2011: 254; 259).

Characterized by a strong sense of their Turkic heritage, Crimean Tatars have established close contacts with Muslim organizations in today's Turkey, which provides teachers, educational materials, and even financial support for real estate development (especially mosques and religious schools). The international movement led by Fetullah Güllen and various Turkish Sufi groups have also been active in Crimea. Finally, Yarosh and Brylov (2011) note that "recently, the politics of [DUMC] shows signs of an influence of Arab Islamic centers, predominantly fundamentalist and modernist trends" (259).

Against this backdrop, it does not surprise that Russian authorities have felt the necessity to bring the network of relations of Crimean Muslims under control. Significant, in this regard, is the preparatory work conducted by Russia's Islamic organization *prior* to the annexation. In the weeks leading to the referendum in Crimea, Russian media had already prepared national public opinion to a possible development of the situation into some form of Russian protection (or protectorate) of Russian citizens in Crimea (NG 2014). This approach reflected Russia's interpretation of international law, according to which Russia claims its right to intervene on foreign territory to protect its citizens. This has been the official motivation for several actions of Russia's, notably in Georgia in 2008. In the case of Crimea, though, the novel element is the full engagement of Muslim institutions to build a bridge to the Crimean Tatar community – and the almost complete silence of the Orthodox Church about the Christian community there.

The (Volga Tatar) head of the Russian Mufties Council (RMC), *Mufti* Gainudtin, has repeatedly reassured about the empathy of Russian Muslims for their Crimean Tatars fellow believers. He has stretched his argument beyond religious brotherhood and, thwarting historical and ethnic facts, has proclaimed the existence of a common, albeit distant, ancestry of the two communities. Having completed his self-empowerment to act as protector of Crimean Tatars, Gainudtin has proceeded, in a series of public commentaries, to raise consensus among both Crimean Tatars and Russians. He started by denouncing the unfair treatment of Tatars by Ukraine authorities and, in general, their misplaced trust. On the RMC website, lengthy articles reconstruct the origins of the wartime allegations against Crimean Tatars, denounce them as circumstances-induced misunderstandings, and reassure about Tatars' true patriotism.

Noting how Gasprinski's lesson is valued by both Crimean and Volga Tatars, RMC leaders have also proclaimed a civilizational affinity between the two groups which, they observe, has been (positively) enhanced by their common history under Russian rule. With his speeches, Gainudtin "welcomes" Crimean Tatars into Russia's multi-ethnic, multi-religious state. His slightly patronizing tone shows that he speaks from a position of force, as the official representative of Russia's Islam and perhaps, as Tatar, as an exponent of one of the most influential "founding" (*korennyi*) groups of the Russian civilization (see Chapters 2-4),

It is noteworthy that the actions of the RMC are addressed to the Russian as much as the Crimean Tatar populations. Its re-assessment of the Tatar betrayal during the war is intended to create a better disposition among Russians – both in Russia and in Crimea – toward Tatars as new citizens. This would reduce the possibility of resistance or protest against Russia's reinstatement of Tatar as the official language of Crimea alongside Russian. A fairer assessment of the Tatars' behavior in World War II is also meant to soften Tatars' historical skepticism toward Russian domination, and reduce the risk of unrests or violent opposition to Moscow.

### ***Reactions from the Crimean Tatar community***

Despite the efforts of Russian institutions to present Russia as a benevolent elder brother, there have been many negative reactions of Crimean Tatars to Russian annexation. The head of the Crimean Tatar community in Moscow, Ernst Kudusov, declared already in February 2014 that Russians are "hereditary slaves", accustomed to being dominated by their leaders (*Regnum* 2014). In contrast, he claims that Tatars have been historically persecuted by Russians because of their independent spirit. Kudusov added that, in

Crimea, Tatars were working to create enmity between Russians and Ukrainians, claiming that “neither Ukrainians, nor Tatars” want to join Russia.

In a November 2014 article for *Ekho Moskvy*, republished by *The Guardian*, the Russian historian and opposition politician Vladimir Ryzhkov harshly condemns Russia’s annexation of Crimea as a major failure:

It became clear soon after the sudden annexation of Crimea in March that modern Russia does not possess either the institutions or the tools to integrate an ethnic group with a strong sense of its own identity and a traumatic history. The usual methods employed by the Kremlin – bribery, intimidation and displacement – will only aggravate the conflict. (Ryzhkov 2014).

Like Kudusov, also Ryzhkov reports about the opposition of Tatars to the referendum and their virtually total abstention from voting. He denounces the violent and illegal actions of Russian authorities against the Tatar community and its religious leaders. He leaves little hope for the rapprochement strategy of pro-Russian actors, when he condemns the Russian-imposed ban on the commemoration ceremony of the deportation of Tatars by Stalin. Whereas Russia seems to aim at canceling (or revising) a key event in its relationship with Crimean Tatars, the latter do not intend to second it:

The ban was an insult to the Tatar people, for whom the deportation remains the most terrible tragedy in their history. (Ryzhkov 2014).

Indeed, the effects of Crimea’s new obligations under Russian law have soon become tangible. Religious organizations outside the protective wing of RMC have been declared illegal, and required to re-register with Russian authorities. Predictably, a good number of them, including *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and Güllen-affiliated centers, are going to be denied authorization and, in some cases, to be persecuted. Foreign religious leaders, especially from Turkey, have been expelled or denied re-entry. Concurrently,

international observers denounce the introduction of a strict censorship on Tatar media (Corley 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media 2014).

Even within official Muslim organizations there will likely be disruptions. DUMC's rival Islamic institution, SAMEUS, had been created after 1992 further to the suggestion of the head of Soviet Board, Talgat Tadzhuiddin. The latter has been the fiercest competitor of Gainudtin for the leadership of Russian official Islam (Silant'ev 2010) – although he is now a little more than a secondary figure, it is unlikely that Gainudtin would leave him the possibility to maintain his influence on Crimea, adding internal quarrels to an already tense situation.

The annexation of Crimea is an exemplary case of attempted instrumentalization of religious influence at the service of both geopolitical and patriotic interests of Russia. Religious affinities are being exploited as a bridgehead to conduct an operation of assimilation through historical revisionism, with receptions that are mixed at best. In particular, it appears evident that the tensions' hub is the intention of Moscow to replicate in Crimea the social, institutional, and, ultimately, political structures of twenty-first century Russia. This strategy requires the control of the Crimean Tatar community and the curbing of its independent stances. Because of the strong international network of Crimean Tatars, the latter's integration into Russian "civilization" runs necessarily through the severing of religious ties, for example with Turkish and Arab groups, and the control of Islamic leaders and influences on the territory.

Differently from the other geopolitical issues examined in this chapter, in the case of Crimea the relevance of Islam is not – or not so much – in its religious or even ideational value. Instead, what is being tested is the capability of Russian official Islamic

organizations to play that institutional role that, as I have shown in Chapter 4, they have been able (or allowed) to carve for themselves in the last decade.

### ***Muslims in Crimea, Christians in Ukraine***

While Muslims are being very active in reaching out to their fellow believers in Crimea, the Orthodox Church in Moscow (ROC) has behaved much more cautiously. This reluctance is in contrast with the usual dynamism of the ROC in foreign relations, including in areas where Christianity is not preponderant or even relevant, such as the whole Middle East, (Curanović 2012). Metropolitan Kirill's prudence stands out even more after Vladimir Putin's declarations about the centrality of Crimea as Christian cradle of the Russian civilization.

Katarzyna Jarzyńska (2014) argues that, in fact, the Church may be too involved in both Russia and Ukraine to take sides. She notes that many Ukrainians are opposed to Russia's intrusion into their affairs, whether it be real or alleged. Increasingly, not only are they expecting the ROC not to support Moscow, but they also ask it to condemn Russia's behavior. In Jarzyńska's analysis, since Kirill has made of his "alliance of Church and throne" the basis of the Church's considerable influence, he is reluctant to jeopardize it. Therefore, Jarzyńska comments, his only option is to strive to keep a distance from either side.

What the Russian state expects from its religious organizations, though, is clear. The multi-religious character of the Russian Federation creates an affinity between domestic religious groups and their fellow believers abroad. Then, by metonymy, the *whole* of Russia feels entitled to an affiliation with *each* of the religions in question. Religious ties become political doors. Putin is making of civilizational-religious

commonalities one important tool of its foreign policy. Despite Kirill's restraint, other personalities in the ROC seem more ready to support the government. Recently, a Church high representative has claimed that Russians have "historical", if not "religious" or even "blood" commonalities with Orthodoxes in Ukraine, Muslims in the Middle East, etc. (Russian Orthodox Church 2014). For all the Orthodox Church's alleged influence on the President, it may be increasingly difficult for Kirill to maintain his equidistance.

### **Conclusion**

As was already visible in the previous chapters, Russia's conceptualizations of Islam have significant repercussions on its foreign policy.

As I have done throughout this dissertation, I have not limited my analysis to apparent dynamics – however complex they may have been. Instead, I have sought to expose how deeper-level perceptions, interpretations, and conceptualizations of the place of Islam in Russian identity transfer into policy doctrines and measures. The study of the sources has revealed not only foreseeable patterns of behavior – for example the willingness of Islamic organizations to facilitate the entry of the Crimean Tatars into Russian polity and society. The relevance of the "Islamic factor" has been clearly identified even when the nature of Islam is not directly discussed, as in the current conflict in Syria and Iraq and the changes in Russian-U.S. relations.

Most surprising, and interesting, is the suggestion that ideational encounters at the regional level, originated by thematic crossings and overlaps that span over space and time, may (again) be possible. Such encounters, sparked by geopolitical considerations, and supported by religious or spiritual ontologies, generate geocultural considerations, and aim to exert a *political* influence on governments.

Despite the variety of issues concerning the geopolitical dimension of Russia's Islam, it is possible to devise the growing importance of an overarching Russian civilizational dimension, of which Islam is a component. Beyond issue-specific elements, it is becoming increasingly clear that Russia is developing much of its foreign relations strategy along these lines. Paul Saunders (2014) notes that, more than on religion, it is on the adherence to traditional values that Russia is attempting to build its appeal on Muslim communities in the Middle East and elsewhere. Together with the shared perception of the United States and the West as aggressively disrespectful of local habits, these commonalities constitute a potentially fruitful platform to create an alternative to U.S. "unipolarism". Ryzhkov (2014) also points at Russia's renewed attempt to "Russify" Crimean Tatars. He even quotes the Tatar leader Refat Chubarov saying that

Moscow is now planning to repeat the "Chechen scenario" in Crimea, that is, to find a second Ramzan Kadyrov among the Crimean Tatars who could bring his turbulent people to heel using either money or force, thereby guaranteeing its loyalty. (Ryzhkov 2014)

In a sort of dialogue at distance, Ryzhkov deems Moscow's attempt at integration an already failed project, but Kadyrov himself, who seems to have upgraded his status as Putin's special envoy in the Muslim world (Suchkov 2014), boasts the contribution of "his" Chechen former-rebels in building the "new" Crimea (Saunders 2014).

The most recent and significant example of Russia's civilizational stance has been its reaction to the terrorist attack, in January 2015, on the offices of the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, an outlet famous for comics harshly satirizing various subjects, including Islam. While blaming the attack and mourning the numerous deaths, many in Russia have also condemned what they consider the disrespectful line of the magazine.

State and religious leaders have reminded that any religion is holy to its believers and that it is proper to societies to treat them with respect – and that it is the task of the governments to ensure this. Russian spokespersons and media have reminded that this is the spirit of the anti-blasphemy law in Russia<sup>33</sup>. The Head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, has authorized a demonstration on Grozny’s main square against religious blasphemy. Although attendance estimates vary, the demonstration turned out to be one of the largest of the last years.

Christian authorities have also taken a strong position against religious-addressed satire, while clearly condemning the killings. The Roman Pope Francis has called for respect for all religions, and added: “if [...] a friend offended my mother, he should expect to be punched [by me]” (Vecchi 2015). Along the same line is the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill, who laments how Christianity, in fact, has been an even more frequent target of *Charlie Hebdo* (Gashkov 2015).

The role attributed to religious organizations in “welcoming” new groups not only to Russia, but into *Russian civilization* must not be underestimated in contemporary Russia. The case of Crimea may be considered a special opportunity – it does not happen every day that a major state acquires a new, significant territory. Yet so far, it is only the most accomplished result of the preparatory work revealed in this dissertation: the conceptualization of a new Russian identity, and the consistent pursuit of its pervasive implementation into a new Russian state.

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<sup>33</sup> The law has been under the Western screens since, under its effect, the famous anti-Putin punk rock girl group *Pussy Riots* have been sent to prison for playing in the Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior in February 2012.

A journalist of the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* notes how in Russia this kind of satirical tradition does not exist – partially because of government censorship. More important, the “Russian civilization”, as opposed to the “European”, is one of integration and not one of juxtaposition. The (controversial) strategy of Russification (which, the author claims, derives from the Iranian/Persian model) that forced the conquered peoples to abandon their specific habits and embrace the Russian ones, has fostered the integration of all different groups into an all-encompassing Russian civilization.

The debate about the opportunity (or necessity) for Russia to impose Putin’s model of Russian patriotism, and the inevitable resistance that such attempt generates, is going to remain relevant in the future. Equally important, perhaps determinant, will be the role that Russia’s Muslims and Islam will have in it.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This dissertation has been sparked by the observation that, despite Russia's Muslims' rich history, conventional narratives about them are univocal. Russian accounts depict Muslims of the Empire and in the Soviet Union as reluctant subjects or rebel citizens, covertly plotting against Russia, often on behalf of its Muslim enemies. This stereotyped image of Russia's Muslims is due in great part to the overwhelming influence of the Orthodox Church. The Church, which as self-proclaimed founding force of Russian civilization was openly intolerant of other religions, felt a particular aversion against Islam, with which it was in competition for the hearts and souls of imperial subjects in Russian Asian territories.

Although less harsh views on Islam and the Orient did exist in Russia, from Catherine II to the Slavophiles, they could never fully dispel the perception that Muslims were fundamentally alien to Russian culture and society. This interpretation was supported by the rebellions of Russia's Muslims against the imperial dominance and its often colonialist manifestations, for example the attempts at Russification (later, Sovietization). The ethnic-religious juxtaposition between Orthodox Slav and Muslim non-Slavs became a fixed interpretative framework of the relations between these communities.

Most contemporary analyses of Russia's Islam, in Russia but especially in the West, have not challenged this traditional assumption. The resurgence of nationalist movements, the outburst of armed conflicts in the North Caucasus, and the participation of Russian groups in international terrorist activities have only reinforced the perception

of a self-repeating history of Muslims in Russia. In a vicious cycle, preoccupations with national and international security, still associated with issues of socio-economic “backwardness”, provide both the impulse to study Russia’s Islam and the guidelines to research findings.

The richness of Russia’s contemporary discourse on Islam, however, is strikingly at odds with the narrow perspective of most of the scholarly, political, and journalistic literature. The revived interest in religious matters, revamped after 1991, has not been limited to questions of spiritual and theological relevance. In the chaotic aftermath of the Soviet Union’s demise, the necessity to reconstruct Russian society on new ideational, social, and political foundations has opened an unprecedented window of opportunities for new propositions of state building – including those of Muslims. The debate on Islam has expanded to include topics that, in the traditional discourse, had been marginalized or neglected or that, like *jadidism*, had had a short, but impactful, blooming.

The main purpose of this work has been to fill the research gap on Russia’s Islam by acknowledging the variety of Russia’s discourse on Islam, exposing its ideational impact on Russia’s self-perception and, ultimately, tracing its influence on policy-making processes. I have not intended to provide an all-encompassing account of the vast arrays of authors, topics, and visions. This would have not only required much more space and time than suitable for a dissertation, but it would have also been, to paraphrase Bobrovnikov (2007), a mere listing of information, with limited value.

I have focused, instead, on those aspects of the discourse on Islam that reveal, at a deeper epistemological level, networks of ideas, mutual intellectual influences, conceptual dynamics that, alone or in association with other ideas, concepts, or visions,

contribute to processes of identity formation. I have followed these discursive threads to demonstrate how they affect Russia's geopolitical self-perception, determine institution building, and influence policy conceptualizations and implementations. At the same time, I have exposed the ways in which the discourse on Islam is, in its turn, influenced by theological disputes, political interests of leaders, the international *ummah*, and even non-Islamic conceptualizations of Russian identity and Eurasian civilization.

I have deliberately abstained from applying pre-construed interpreting models, especially Western ones, although I have signaled the existence of dominant narratives on many issues. Instead, I have chosen a theoretically eclectic approach that, thanks to its flexibility, has provided me with the interpreting tools most appropriate for each topic. In this way, I have been able to reveal how several issues related to Russia's Islam are linked by factors other than just Islam, and how they participate in domestic and international debates.

At the beginning is identity. Contrary to the traditional narrative of Muslims as monadic communities within Russia, my analysis reveals that, in post-Soviet Russia, Muslims have been elaborating a vision of their own identity that is included in – and not separated from – a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Russian “civilization”. What appears as a radical change in Muslims' self-representation is, in fact, the evolution of an attitude that was already developing in pre-revolutionary times (Crews 2006). The significant difference, today, is that Muslims are no longer content with “tolerance”, but claim full recognition of their legitimate belonging to Russian civilization and history.

This message comes from so many parts of the Muslim community in Russia – Tatars, Caucasians, Sufis, Russian converts, and others – that it is very surprising that the

(Western) literature has not yet fully captured its impact. This is not the case for Russian authorities, who have been attentively following the development of the debate and have attempted to accommodate several of its stances into new systems of governance and institutions (with uneven results). Many Russian media have followed suit.

It does not surprise, instead, that the Islamic official organizations have advocated for a better recognition of the history of Muslims in Russia. It may have been just a tactic for survival, to temper the growing influence of the Orthodox Church, but Muslim leaders' insistence on a common heritage of Orthodox and Muslim Russians suggests that there is more at stake. It is noteworthy that, between the two major, competing Islamic organizations, it has been the much more assertive Russian Mufties Council (RMC) that has prevailed. Contrary to its rival, it is less complacent with the state and with the Church, and expresses a more independent point of view of Muslims on several issues.

It is unprecedented in Russian history for an Islamic organization to have reached the same institutional status as the Orthodox Church. The RMC has achieved this position, expanding on traditional tasks assigned to Islamic leaders by the Russian states (foreign relations and management of the Muslim communities). Now, the RMC is officially on par with the Orthodox Church and sits at the same institutional tables. Yet, such historical change has gone overlooked in the general debate on Russian religious institutions, which is mainly preoccupied by the renewed, alleged aspirations of the Orthodox Church to political power.

The fundamental definition of traditional and extremist Islam, too, has not been fully appreciated – so far – by most observers. In this work, I have demonstrated how, in fact, what was initially considered one of many attempts to pacify an explosive socio-

political phenomenon has become a key tenet of Russia's geopolitical conceptualization. Two important consequences of the definition of traditional Islam are its desecuritization and the denial to extremist Islam of its religious value. These effects have laid the legitimizing premises for the incorporation of Islam into the Russian system.

As part of Putin's "patriotic" project, traditional Islam is expected to ensure the participation of Russia's Muslims. Therefore, the role of a "correct" Islamic education has been reassessed. No longer a suspicious activity, Islamic training is now defined as a primary tool for the prevention and countering of Islamic "terrorist ideology". This attitude reflects a fundamental difference from the conception of the Western world to keep religion out of the public sphere. In conformity to the historical function of official religion in Russia, legitimate Islam must remain within set boundaries – institutionally and doctrinally. Because religion in Russia does belong to the public sphere (Malashenko 2012), deviations from official forms of cult are punished. In the case of Islam, they are outlawed, and extremist doctrines are denied their religious status. Although this arrangement is still highly imperfect (definitions of legitimate and non-legitimate Islam are heavily influenced or even determined by the state, political considerations overcome theological considerations, etc.), Russia's model of relations with Islam, especially domestic ones, may offer valuable suggestions for other countries.

Less unique, but bearing equally relevant consequences, is Russia's treatment of extremist Islam as an "ideology of terrorism". The development of Russian counterterrorism doctrine, that considers terrorism a violent instrument of political struggle, has accentuated the conceptual rift between Russia and the West, especially the United States, which tends to treat Islamic terrorism as a religious issue. As the debate,

initiated by Primakov, on the necessity of a shared definition of terrorism shows, a seemingly technical difference in terminology reveals, in fact, increasingly diverging worldviews. If the West is conducting a war against religious fundamentalism, Russia is countering the spread of political oppositional movements.

In search for the reasons of this diversity, I have found that, contrary to narratives that deny, or underestimate, the heritage of the Soviet experience in favor of an imperial nostalgia, the effects of the October Revolution are still impinging on many Russians. Beyond simplistic allegations that Putin would value stability abroad to avoid losing power at home, fears of political disorder as bearer of violent opposition and, ultimately, of revolution are powerful motives that gear Russian foreign policy and provide the legitimation of (for the West) “irrational or counterproductive” behaviors (Kanet and Piet 2014).

Finally, this work shows how the “Islamic factor” in Russia’s geopolitical self-perceptions has superseded mere security preoccupations and has acquired a much broader policy outreach. Divergences in the interpretation of Islam as a threat, which have first affected regional dynamics, have then fueled pre-existing tensions in the international system, especially between Russia and the U.S. Contentions have then ensued at various levels of international relations and with different degrees of intensity, from Russian qualified condemnation of the terrorist attacks in Paris in January 2015, to the Russia-West confrontation in Ukraine, in which also Russian Islamic organizations are contributing to the “Russian civilization” project.

### **Suggestions for further research**

This work is the result of the study of a large, but necessarily selective, amount of primary sources about Russia's Islam. Within this material, specific issues have proved relevant for my discussion, while I have not included in my final work minor details, or other topics. Often, what I have left out of my dissertation would have opened an equally intriguing analytical path, but the space at my disposal was just too limited. The necessity to choose among a great variety of sources carries, together with analytical dilemmas, the comforting notion that Russia's Islam is indeed a complex and intriguing research topic that offers a great, untapped potential for future studies.

Each of the chapters of this dissertation may be expanded into one or more books. The number of texts considered can be increased, to include more authors on a specific issue: A longer work would avoid being a simple list of names and works and offer a much more detailed discussion than a dissertation chapter – or a section of it – allows. For each chapter's main topic (identity, security, etc.), additional circumstances can be identified, or details added to the discussion. For example, given the great relevance of geopolitics in Russia's domestic and international behavior, Chapter 7 offers much potential for future studies. Russia's preoccupations with the future of Afghanistan, the objectives of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and its complex internal dynamics, and Russia's purposes within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, of which it is an observer member, are major research topics that I could not include in this work due to space limitations.

Another relevant theme, although more frequent in the literature, "Globalization" is a concept that engages many Muslims in Russia. Historically, Russia's Islam (and

Islam in general) has been characterized by a strong transnational component. In its golden times, from the beginning of the Islamic era until the seventeenth century, the territory of “Turkestan” (former Soviet Central Asia plus the Russian Volga region) was the center of Islamic culture. From Central Asia, people, ideas, and religious movements spread throughout the Muslim world and beyond. Especially the Turkish Muslim areas, from the Bosphorus to Western China, but also Afghan and Persian territories, enjoyed an intensive exchange with Central Asian centers.

After centuries of decadence in prestige and the Soviet-imposed interruption of contacts, today globalization has brought back to Russia’s Muslims the benefits of renewed religious exchanges and cultural renaissance. For entrepreneurial Tatars, it has also opened up new possibilities of economic prosperity. For example, Tatarstan has invested in the development of *halal* food industry. Kazan’ hosts a major trade fair dedicated to *halal* production, very well attended by operators from the entire Muslim world.

Analogously, Tatarstan strives to become a major center of Islamic banking, although with less convincing results (Lossan 2014; for a less optimistic analysis, see Eremenko 2014). In both instances, Russian central authorities have been quick to meddle with the Tatar initiatives –adding an international conference on *halal* guidelines to Moscow’s calendar of events, or shutting down a bank under vague allegations of illegal activities. Are these signs of Moscow’s fears of excessive entrepreneurship in Tatarstan? Does Moscow want to have the last word on institutional relations with the Islamic world? Conversely, is Tatarstan just confirming its cosmopolitan nature? These are some questions that could be addressed in dedicated studies.

### **When Islam is not a factor**

It would also be important to establish those instances in which Islam does not play a significant part in Russia's geopolitical considerations – even when the contrary would be expected. In recently revamping relations with Egypt, Russia has not apparently acted as fellow Muslim country. Rather, it appears to be motivated by opportunist considerations of strategic alliances in the Middle East. Analogously, despite the possibility that a shared civilizational approach lingers among intellectual groups in Russia and Iran, as discussed in Chapter 7, Russia's improved relations with Iran might just be a continuation of a century-long history of alternate mutual trust and diffidence. Considerations of economic and strategic nature, reinforced by the view of the United States as common adversary, may have been stronger than ideational affinities.

It is not granted, however, that seemingly self-evident explanations of geopolitical issues are also the most effective ones – in fact, each of the cases mentioned here would benefit from an in-depth, multi-level analytical approach like the one I have proposed in this work.

### **Final considerations**

The unprecedented availability of Russia's Muslims to participate to the shaping of Russia's identity, and the willingness of key agents to accommodate Muslims' claims, have so far produced significant results. As I have shown in this dissertation, they go beyond simple declarations of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, to affect important sections of state policies. Although the encounter of Muslims with the Russian state and the society at large is not devoid of frictions, it would seem that Putin's "patriotic" nationalism has envisioned a primary place for an Islamic component.

This new version of “Russian civilization” embraces neo-Eurasian perspectives historically present in Russian thought (Slavophiles, Trubetskoi’s Eurasianism, etc.). The most notable difference from the past is the supremacy given to the state, and not the Church, as major driving force and to the state’s strength (domestic and international) as ultimate objective. A thorough discussion of the consequences of the substitution of a religious messianism with a state purpose is not possible here. It will suffice to note that it has changed the relative status of Church and Islamic institutions, in favor of the latter, which are now on par with their Christian counterpart.

Although my work has demonstrated the role of Islam within Russian new patriotism, a certain degree of uncertainty remains about the motives of each actor in participating in the project. The Orthodox Slavic majority that leads the Russian state might just have found a suitable formula to make renewed ambitions of dominance acceptable to Russian minorities. It is undoubted, also by his own admission, that Putin’s line follows the examples of Russia’s most charismatic tsars – Peter I and Catherine II (both “Great”). They were aware of the necessity to integrate Muslims and the Orient into imperial structures, but not necessarily ready to acknowledge a parity of value between Muslims and Orthodoxes. Putin is careful in not favoring, at least in public, one religion over another, but he might as well far from believe in a joint Slavic-Muslim Russian civilization. He has often expressed his acknowledgment of the fundamental civilizational role of the Russian Orthodox Church since its inception, and reinstated several religious festivities as national holidays. As I have mentioned in Chapter 7, he maintains close personal relations with some exponents of the Orthodox clergy, which, according to some observers (Trenin 2014) may have a certain influence on him.

Analogously, Russia's Muslims, especially Tatars, might support the central state for reasons of pure opportunism. As Bennigsen and Wimbush (1979) note, this would not be the first time that Muslims in Russia embrace the dominant ideology to carve out their own advantage. The motives of pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism, which after their renewed booming in the 1990s have lost in popularity, are still lingering in the background of Muslim communities, and might just be waiting for an opportunity to re-emerge. It is true, however, that Tatars have already experienced, at the end of the nineteenth century, a "golden age" (in Tatar accounts) of peaceful and fruitful cooperation with the Russian central state. At that time, key Tatar thinkers and important *jadidists* developed an original discourse that enjoyed wide influence in the entire Muslim world. Today, many Tatar intellectuals and leaders are rediscovering the ideas of those thinkers and adapting them to fit their arguments in favor of a Russian Muslim identity.

Whether the cooperation between the state and Muslims in Russia, which is producing notable effects at many levels, will continue, and what form it will take under Russian patriotism is a question that cannot be easily answered—even in the light of the key findings of this dissertation. It remains, however, a priority in the comprehension not only of Russia's attitude toward Islam and Muslims, but also of the processes of formation of Russia's ontological and epistemological conceptions.

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## VITA

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