Russian Discourses and Approaches to Political Islam and Radicalisation

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The principal aim of this paper is to provide a better understanding of both the specificities of Islam in Russia, - the idea of a ‘Russian Islam’ - and the commonalities, those universal features which connect Islam in Russia to the rest of the Muslim world. The aim is also to highlight the scholarly contribution made by Russian academics and policy analysts to developing an understanding of contemporary Islam in Russia and the associated dynamics of radicalisation and de-radicalisation. The potential for a more substantive mutual interaction between Russian research and scholarship on political Islam with research in western Europe and the United States is also addressed.

Why is this important? First, Russia’s Muslim community is at an important historical crossroad, where there is a potential opportunity to heal the divisions and overcome some of the weaknesses evident within this community since the collapse of the Soviet Union. While the gains of a recovery of faith and re-Islamisation should not be under-estimated, the deep divisions among Russia’s Muslims, the splits and fragmentation, the prevalence of religiously-sanctioned violence in parts of the Russian Federation, the popular association of terrorism with Islamic extremism, have all contributed to a significant degree of marginalisation and demoralisation. This paper argues that in parallel with the consolidation of the Russian state and the regaining of its traditional powers, there is emerging a similar dynamic among Russia’s Muslim communities. This is far from a necessary or inevitable development but the conditions are at least present.
Understanding and developing an analytical framework for this is important for both non-Russian and Russian scholars. In western Europe and the US, there is a scholarly tendency among social scientists to focus on the ‘exceptional’ in Russian politics – the rising authoritarianism and centralisation of power, the conflict in Chechnya, the ‘threat’ of Islamism – rather than on the more mundane, common and thus comparable. This results in a limited understanding of the complexities and variations in Muslim communities in Russia and a general unwillingness to recognise that Russia faces similar challenges and dilemmas to other European countries and other non-Russian Muslim communities. Russian scholars tend similarly to treat Russia as in its own *sui generis* category and fail to make the comparative generalisations which would aid analysis, in part due to a simple lack of access to Western academic publications and networks.

Russia certainly has exceptional features but such particularities should not preclude the social scientific search for similarities, commonalities and comparisons. The paper seeks to contribute to this by first examining the historical legacy of the Russian state’s relations with its Muslim communities. This leads to the first set of comparisons, exploring the degree to which Russian state-Muslim relations have similarities and dissimilarities to those in western Europe, the Middle East or countries like India, Israel and South Africa with substantial longstanding Muslim minorities. The second part of the paper examines Russian understandings of the process of radicalisation, particularly in the Caucasus, and argues that recent developments in Western scholarship can shed additional insights. This leads finally to a forward-looking assessment of the prospects for deradicalisation and for the anchoring of a strong, autonomous but also a loyal and socially dynamic Muslim community in Russia.

**The Historical Legacy**

History is the favourite recourse for those who promote the idea of a country or culture exhibiting an exceptional destiny. The problem is that, for Russia as for other countries, history can be read in different and often contradictory ways. This is particularly the case for the historiography of Islam within Russia and the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the presentation of the historical development of Islam in the Soviet Union was incorporated into a broader ideological confrontation. Western scholarship probably
demonstrated greater objectivity but many of the studies were premised on the belief that the Soviet Muslims represented the ‘soft underbelly’ of the Soviet empire and were the most likely cause for its disintegration.¹ As such, the political disloyalty and the degree of incompatibility between Soviet and Islamic practices were generally exaggerated. Soviet works on indigenous Islam was marked by the contrary tendency to present Islamic traditions and practices as mere ‘relics’ which were inexorably being replaced by a rationalist and atheistic culture of modernity.² In this regard, there was ironically similarities between Soviet approaches and western modernisation theory in their respective claims that Muslims faced a fundamental choice between a backward religious tradition and the freedom and prosperity of modernity, a choice ‘between Mecca or mechanisation’, as Daniel Lerner succinctly phrased it.

In practice, reading between the lines, the Soviet authorities were rather less confident in the presumed inertness and passivity of religious culture. At the same time as Islam was presented as an inoffensive relic, it was also implicitly identified as a potential threat. This is seen, in particular, in the distinction made in Soviet accounts between an ‘official Islam’, loyal to the state and obedient to its dictates, and an ‘unofficial’ or ‘popular’ Islam which is practised in the private spaces of Soviet Muslim communities.³ Attitudes to this ‘popular Islam’ oscillated between benign acquiescence to a socially pacifying force to fears of its oppositional potential. After the Iranian revolution and the Soviet intervention into Afghanistan, the fear that this ‘popular’ Islam might be affected by a ‘foreign’ Islam, incompatible to the ‘official’ Soviet Islam, heightened the security fears. It is instructive in this regard that Gorbachev unleashed an anti-religious and implicitly anti-Islamic campaign as late as 1985-7. Soviet nationalities policies, which placed so much weight on ethnic and ethno-national division and their classification, was also far from religiously innocent. Stalin’s process of ‘delimitation’ was deliberately directed towards undermining pan-national

1 For example, Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1983); and Alexandre Benningsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commisars: Sufism in the Soviet Union* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985);
2 For example, see E.G Filimonov (ed), *Islam v SSSR* (Moscow: Mysl’, 1983); T. S Saidbaev, *Islam i obshchestvo* (Moscow, 1978)
(pan-Turkic) and pan-religious (pan-Islamic) identities. For the Soviet authorities, ethnic and ethno-national fragmentation was consistently to be preferred to religio-national consolidation.

There are clearly resonances of these Soviet approaches and conceptions into the post-Soviet Russian period. The practice of differentiating between an ‘official’ and a ‘unofficial’ Islam is still prevalent, but now with an even greater accentuation of the distinction between a traditional and loyal ‘Russian’ Islam and a ‘foreign’ and disloyal Islam. As will be discussed below, this provides the context to the unusual Russian use of the term ‘Wahhabism’ to describe practically all ‘non-traditional’ and ‘alien’ non-Russian versions of Islam. The Soviet legacy can also be seen in the continuing primacy normally given to ethnic and ethno-national forms of identity and the cognitive difficulties faced by many Russian analysts of recognising the potential power of a more explicitly religious self-identification.

The collapse of the Soviet Union did though also allow for a more considered and substantial recovery of the pre-revolutionary traditions and practices of the Russia’s Muslim peoples. Russian orientalists were significantly involved in this revival and reconstruction, the fruits of which can be especially seen in the comprehensive multi-volume encyclopaedia, Islam on the Territory of the Former Russian Empire, the first volume of which was published in 1998. The main practical ambition of this collection was to highlight the pluralism and internal regional differentiation of Russian Islam, the co-existence of Muslims with Orthodox Christians from the very creation of the Russian state, and the pre-revolutionary tradition of inter-religious tolerance and Muslim intellectual dynamism. In the context of post-Soviet Russia, this provided a reaffirmation that Muslims in Russia are generally not recent migrants and have a long history of being part of and influencing Russian culture and traditions. As Vitaly Naumkin notes, the ‘Russian umma’ can be considered ‘an integral part of the great Russian nation, one of the bulwarks of strengthening

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4 For a discussion about this by the editor of the series, see S.M. Prozorov, ‘Nauchnoe islamovedenie v Rossii (1980-2005)’ Nauka i Obshchestvo, No 1, 2006.
Russian statehood. This accords a certain uniqueness to Russia as the only predominantly Christian European country with a long-standing indigenous Muslim community and the habits and practices of co-existence going back many centuries. And the Tatar intelligentsia of the late 19th and early 20th century, who were leading advocates of a reformist Islam compatible with modernity and liberalism, also provides an important historical juncture when the Russian Muslim community was one of the leading intellectual centres of the Muslim world.

This benign and generally highly positive reading of Russia’s Islamic legacy is not, though, the only possible reading. The less favourable elements of this historical memory is well-expressed by Damir Mukhetdinov, one of the new generation of Tatar Islamic scholars, who unequivocally states that, on the one hand, ‘to serve, to defend, to share their general fate with the Russian Orthodox people is genetically lodged in [Tatar] blood’ but that, on the other hand, ‘Muslims, whose historical memory have not forgotten the brutality of the period of the occupation of Kazan, see their Russian foes as wanting to convert all Tatars, capture their children, and to impose by force the Orthodox faith’. Tsarist Russia always accorded primacy to the Orthodox Church and many leaders of the church viewed Islam as a heresy and conversion of Muslims a noble mission. From the capture of Kazan, for over two hundred years until the institution of religious tolerance under Catherine the Great, Muslim Tatars were not permitted to practice their faith and many were forcibly converted. Such historically grounded mutually suspicious and negative perceptions between Orthodox and Muslims continue to upset inter-confessional relations, as is seen currently in the popularity of the idea of the ‘clash of civilisations’.

Islam in Russia as a Source of Comparison

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This particular historical legacy and evolution means that Russian Islam fits uneasily with other regional manifestations of Islam. This, at least in part, explains the limited efforts at cross-regional comparisons. A key example of this is the rarity with which Russian Islam is included in studies of Islam in Europe. Here the focus is normally on western Europe and, in particular, countries like France and the UK. Research in this area has focused on the role that immigrants and their second- and third-generation offsprings have played in constructing a communitarian and fundamentalist (or neo-fundamentalist) Islamic identity, and how this provides a sense of meaning and identity for those alienated both from the traditional religious expressions of their ethno-national communities and from the secular and at times racially discriminatory Western societies in which they live. The work of Olivier Roy has arguably been the most influential in identifying how such “neo-fundamentalist” Islamist constructions are better understood as a rejection of culture than a re-articulation of Muslim tradition, and as an adaptation to rather than a rejection of globalisation, providing an individualisation of faith and sense of identity with a ‘virtual umma’ which responds to the crises of identity from those suffering from a sense of rootlessness and alienation.\(^8\)

Russian Muslims are rarely seen to be facing similar tensions or dynamics to their west European counterparts. On the part of west European scholars and policy analysts, this is due often just to an ignorance of the presence of a substantial Muslim population in Russia, as well as a general disinclination to treat Russia as a European country. From the Russian side, a number of inter-connected arguments are adduced, such as the historical presence and indigeneity of Russia’s Muslim community in contrast to that of western Europe; the absence of concentrations of Muslims in ghettos or banlieues as can be found in cities like Paris; the lack of the phenomenon of large-scale post-imperial immigration of Muslims similar to that from the former colonial possessions of the west European states; the continuing relevance of Soviet culture and self-expression, and the assumption that ethnicity and ethno-national

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identity play a far more critical role for Russia’s ‘ethnic Muslims’ than for Muslims in other parts of Europe.⁹

But such arguments for the non-applicability of a European pattern of radicalisation are increasingly contestable. Russia, and large Russian cities in particular, have all experienced substantial migration of Muslims from other parts of the former Soviet Union, such as Central Asia and the Caucasus. These migrants are also often young people who have missed out on the integrative socialisation of a Soviet-style education, where Russian language and culture were taught to a relatively high standard. They also face an increasingly hostile social environment where anti-migrant sentiments among the host population is growing. These developments are similar to the processes of post-imperial immigration into countries like the UK and France. Inter-generational tensions, which is a marked part of the explanation for radicalisation of Muslim youth in western Europe, also has similar echoes in Russia. Damir Mukhetdinov explains how many imams of mosques in Russia have to satisfy two very different audiences: the older generation who are used to a traditional Islam and a simple unsophisticated and syncretic dogmatic faith, and a younger generation who ‘seek to find a rational explanation for this or that question of faith, who will only accept as rituals that which is minimally prescribed by shari’a law, and who know incomparably more about the proper rules for the fulfilment of ritual obligation’.¹⁰ This younger Muslim generation is, as in many parts of western Europe, questioning the inherited traditional culture, which in the Russian case is linked to the ‘popular’ Islam of the Soviet period, and finding it insufficiently universalist, rationalist and capable of satisfying the needs of a generation struggling with the impact of globalisation and the disorientation of post-Soviet society. For such young people, the austerity of salafist doctrines, with their commitment to a universalist umma, can appear significantly more attractive than a perceived state-corrupted traditional Russian Islam.

Just as western Europe is often discounted as of relevance as a model for understanding developments in Russian Islam, so the Middle East is generally dismissed in a

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⁹ Alexei Malashenko has argued, for instance, that Russian Muslims are generally ‘immune’ to the appeals of Islamism, Islamskaya al’ternativa i islamistkii proekt (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment, 2006).

¹⁰ Damir Mukhetdinov and D. Z. Khairetdinov, ‘Ideologicheskie ustanovki v musul’manskom soobshchestve Rossii’, Islam v sovremennom mire, 5-6, 2006
similar if not more emphatic manner. The fact that these countries generally are Muslim-dominated or mono-religious makes them certainly very different from Russia where Muslims are a minority. Indeed, Russian apologists for a ‘traditional Islam’ argue that salafism finds its roots and legitimation in the context of a mono-confessional society and that its export to the Russian reality of a pluralistic multi-confessional society can only be highly destabilising and dangerous. But while multi-confessionalism holds for Russia as a whole, it is not applicable to parts of the North Caucasus, such as Ingushetiya, Chechnya and Dagestan where Muslims are the overwhelming majority. And it is in the North Caucasus where similarities with the Middle East are most apparent. In particular, the pervasiveness of patron-client and clan networks – the phenomenon of neopatrimonialism – is something that connects North Caucasian republics and Middle Eastern countries.11 These commonly experienced neopatrimonial structures provides insights into similar patterns of the appropriation of Islam for political purposes. What Charles Tripp argues in relation to Arab states in the Middle East equally applies to some of the republics of the North Caucasus:

The basic structures of patron-client relations and the networks they create constitute the principal organisation of power in all the Arab states in the Middle East….The relevance of Islam as a system of beliefs is that they may be interpreted and deployed in such a way to reinforce the strategies of the ruling patrimonial elite.12

Tripp continues to note that it is precisely this disguising of narrow patrimonial networks of power through a constructed Islamic legitimation, which leads to opposition forces using Islam precisely to unmask that structure of illegitimate power and repression. As in the Middle East, so in the North Caucasus the attraction of radical Islam is greatly aided by its explicit opposition to the corruption and repression of the ruling elites.

A final set of potential comparator countries are those like India, Israel and South Africa which have themselves substantial longstanding indigenous Muslim minority

11 One of the best accounts of this can be found in Georgi M. Deluguian, Bourdieu’s Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003).
communities. Within the Russian context, there is a specific normatively-driven interest in making such comparisons by Russian Muslim religious elites and intellectuals so as to promote a more communitarian state structure, which devolves responsibility for intra-religious norms and practices to the confessional level. Such group minority rights are found in countries as India, Israel and South Africa, where Muslims have a history of co-existence as minorities not dissimilar to that of Russia. And such communal rights are not alien to the pre-revolutionary Russian historical record as the Tsarist state copied a number of Ottoman institutions and practices, such as the establishment of the Spiritual Directorate for Muslims in Ufa and permitting private legal matters to be regulated by the Muslim community itself.

An interesting take on this communitarian logic can be seen in the argument by Rustam Batrov, a young influential Muslim intellectual, that secularism in multi-religious Russia should not privilege the Christian tradition of monogamy (as societies in the ‘secular’ west European states do) but accept that marriage can be variously configured and that Muslims should have the right to preserve their traditions of polygamy, precisely so as to uphold the presumed impartiality of secularism.\(^\text{13}\)

### Understanding Radicalisation

The intellectual debate in Western Europe and the US over Islam, and particularly over its more anti-Western radical politicised forms, has tended to become polarised over the issue of ‘orientalism’. Ever since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, orientalists, of whom Bernard Lewis has become the iconic exemplar, have been critiqued for presenting Islam as a timeless reality whose influence and pervasive traditions continually block the prospects for reform in the Muslim world and lead it to take an aggressive anti-Western political stance. Such critics of orientalism argue that contemporary forms of Islamic expression must be understood sociologically, as the consequences of the particular conditions of political life in Muslim countries and in part as a response to international developments, most notably the pressures of Western hegemony.\(^\text{14}\) Although the sociological, post-modern and post-colonial

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approach dominates the Western academic study of political Islam, the events of 9/11 and the increased security fears over radical Islam have increased the popularity of orientalist claims.

The orientalist debate broadly bypassed Russia. This is in part because the social sciences in Russia never experienced the same post-modern questioning of their fundamental claims to objectivity. Orientalism as a scientific study never, as a consequence, became a term of embarrassment. Nevertheless, similar divisions and nuances to those in the West can be found in the differing approaches to political Islam and debates over radicalisation in Russia. The closest to a Russian Bernard Lewis would be Aleksandr Ignatenko, who is a respected orientalist, but whose concerns have become increasingly focused on the security threats emanating from within Islam. His interpretation of the causes of such religiously-induced violence are primarily theological rather than sociological, most notably in what he argues is the extreme intolerance found in the sectarian ‘heresy’ of Wahhabism. Ignatenko heads an Institute of Religion and Politics whose principal focus is on Islam’s relation to security and counter-terrorism. Although not directly contributing to anti-Muslim sentiments, the role and purpose of the Institute tends to support the idea of the ‘clash of civilisations’ which finds a particularly widespread audience in Russia. However, other orientalists, such as Vitaly Naumkin, have adopted a more sociological approach, seeing the roots of religious extremism in the particularities of specific socio-political conditions, and have sought to promote a more informed and tolerant understanding of Islam, as can be seen in the establishment of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies in 2006. As in the West, there are many nuances and inflections in the internal debates between Russian informed scholars. For example, Aleksei Malashenko is one of the most prolific and well-respected scholars on political Islam who adopts a rigorous sociological approach but also holds to a pessimistic prognosis for the reformability of Islam along liberal lines given the historical strength of an austere dogmatic fundamentalism.

17 Malashenko, Islamskaya al’ternativa.
Such sociologically informed Russian scholars are aware of the definitional problems in identifying the various strands of political Islam – the sensitivities and meanings attached to terms such as fundamentalism, Islamism, salafism, reformism, Islamic extremism, Islamic terrorism, etc. But what is nevertheless striking in Russian discourse is that, despite such efforts, the use of ‘Wahhabism’ and ‘Wahhabis’ as an all-encompassing term for all forms of salafist or fundamentalist Islam remains pervasive. It is this prevalence of the catch-all use of the term “Wahhabism” among Russian commentators which is particularly noticeable for non-Russian scholars. Its use is also not just limited to the popular level but can be found in much academic work, including the impressive, if controversial, bestseller study of post-Soviet Russian Islam by Roman Silant’ev.

The potentially damaging implications of the pervasiveness of this use of Wahhabism is not lost on many Russian analysts. As a number of them note, it potentially leads, first, to a failure to differentiate between variants of salafist ideological expression – between a quietist version, which is the traditional Saudi model; a communitarian version which involves a separation from the wider society but remains non-violent; and a radical and violent version. Second, it contributes to a monolithic view of Islam where there is a ‘right’ version (traditional Islam) and a ‘wrong’ version (Wahhabism) and thereby undermines the concept of Islam being a pluralistic religion where a variety of interpretations can be accommodated. It is in relation to this that the concept of ‘Wahhabism’ has been a source of significant friction between Russian Muslim leaders. When Ravil Gainutdin, the head of the Russian Council of Muftis, stated that Wahhabism is not necessarily an extremist ideology, he received a furious denunciation from Ismail Berdiev, the head of the Coordination Centre of the Muslims of the North Caucasus. The third associated problem is that the political temptation to ban or outlaw ‘Wahhabism’ tends to have counter-productive consequences, most notably alienating apolitical but devout Muslims who get caught up in the anti-Wahhabi campaigns. This tends to be counter-productive and promotes further radicalisation. Finally, the use of the term of ‘Wahhabism’, with its non-Russian Arab origins, leads to a perception that radical Islam is a purely ‘foreign’ phenomenon which has acted like a virus and infected

a pristine ‘Russian Islam’. As such, the domestic roots of radicalisation tend to be ignored or overlooked.

As mentioned above, many Russian analysts have a sophisticated understanding of the variants of salafism and the complex roots of radicalisation and avoid a ‘Wahhabi’ reductionism for understanding such social phenomena. This is particularly evident in the number of excellent works by Russian scholars on the dynamics of radicalisation in the North Caucasus and in Dagestan in particular. While the role of foreign actors and influences (particularly in the 1990s) is recognised for their radicalising influence, the part played by the weaknesses of traditional Islam, and the ineffectiveness of the corrupted local patrimonial power structures are also recognised as significant causal factors.

Where there remains the potential for a fruitful synergy between US-European and Russian approaches is in the potential application of social movements theory to the Dagestani and North Caucasian case-studies. Quintan Wiktorowicz has been the leading advocate of the extension of social movement theory, originally applied to radical social movements in the 1970s, to Islamist movements and he has provided a number of instructive studies, including that of Islam in Jordan and of the Muhajiroun movement in the UK.19 The advantage of taking such an approach is that it makes Islamist movements open to comparative analysis and avoids treating them as exceptional and *sui generis*. And it acts as an antidote to the common temptation to identify underlying structural factors for explaining radicalisation – such as economic deprivation, political repression and anti-imperialism or anti-Westernism. Instead, the social movements approach posits Islamist movements as themselves dynamic and rational actors, whose reproduction depends on their capacities simultaneously to respond to the political opportunities structures open to them and to adapt their message to a cognitive framing which secures popular support and legitimisation. Such a framework could help to provide a finer assessment of the dynamics of radicalisation in Dagestan and its comparability to processes and dynamics in other parts of the Muslim world.

Deradicalisation

If radicalisation is properly seen and viewed as a political and sociological set of processes, so it is important to consider attempts at deradicalisation – the articulation and incorporating of a normalised, routinised and depoliticised Islam – as similarly structured within a socio-political context. The important point here is that there is a clear linkage and synergy between the forms and expressions of Russian Islam and the developments and evolution of the post-Soviet state. As the context and structures of the post-Soviet state have changed from the Yeltsin to the Putin eras, so the evolution and context for Russian Islam has similarly shifted. During the 1990s, the fate of Russian Islam mirrored the developments in the state as a whole with a fragmentation of authority and legitimacy both at the regional and at the national level. In the struggle for power and authority in the post-Soviet dispensation, personal ambitions, corruption and the cynical exploitation of radical extremist ideas undermined the unity and legitimacy of traditional Russian Islam. As a consequence, there was a multiplicity, rather than a unity, of Russian Islamic expressions, which reflected multiple personal, inter-ethnic, inter-religious suspicions and distrust. The consequence was a marginalisation of the Muslim community as a unified actor despite the rapid growth of religiosity among Russian Muslims as a whole. This provided a fertile breeding ground for more radical voices, which in turn only increased the suspicions of Russia’s non-Muslim population.

The consolidation of power under Putin, the processes of state centralisation and increasing authoritarianism, provides a new context for a loyal state-approved Islam. This new context includes certain clear risks and threats, such as the increased primacy accorded to the Orthodox Church and to ethnic Russian nationalism, which is part of the strengthening of a specifically Russian national identity, and which potentially fosters greater suspicions and hostility towards Muslims. In addition, the intolerance of the Putin administration to any manifestation of a non-traditional oppositional Islam and the willingness of the government to use unconstrained force and repression limits the space for even a mildly politicised Islamic expression. But the context also provides new opportunities. Just as the state is seeking to unify and centralise, so there is a clear governmental interest in a more unified
Islam, if not a clear ‘vertical’ of authority. This creates in itself a significant force towards unification. With a more powerful state reaping the benefits of high oil prices and a revived economy, there are also greater opportunities for securing state patronage, which is also greatly needed to compensate for the reduction of subventions from foreign sources in the Muslim world. In addition, with an evolving political system which relies more on indirect authoritarian rule, where power is centralised but also devolved to loyal intermediaries, there are opportunities to secure distinctive religio-communal rights for Russia’s Muslim communities. And last but not least, the prospect of a period of relative stability, as compared to the 1990s, provides the opportunity for the Muslim community in Russia to develop the ‘social capital’ for a mature Islamic expression and identity.

What can be detected in the shift from the Yeltsin to Putin period is the relative weakening of ethnic and national separatism and self-identity and a relative strengthening of a Muslim identity and political activism now directed more at protecting Muslim minority rights within rather than outside the Russian state. As this Muslim identity gains in significance, the issue about the nature and substance of a Russian state-Muslim relationship becomes more critical. There are two major loyalist variants of this, which reflects the division at the highest level of Muslim representation in Russia – between the Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Russia, under the leadership of Talgat Tadzhuddin, and the newer Council of Muftis of Russia under Ravil’ Gainutdin. Tadzhuddin, who represents continuity with the traditions from the Soviet period, promotes a Eurasianist conception of Russia’s identity, which recognises that Russia statehood has both orthodox and Muslim roots but where the primacy of orthodoxy is also accepted. His loyalty is derived from a confidence that Russia is a fusion of West and East, between Christianity and Islam, and that the orthodox church in its instinctive anti-Westernism (when allied to an authoritarian state) also protects the interests of Russia’s Muslims. Tadzhuddin has even suggested that his title should be the “Supreme Mufti of Holy Russia” and that there is nothing contradictory in such an appellation. For many Russian Muslims, however, it is quite a leap of faith to assume, as

20 See also Aleksandr Verkhovsky, ‘Publichnye otnosheniya pravoslavnyh i musul’manskih organizatsij na federal’nom urovne’ (Public Interactions between Orthodox Christian and Moslem Organizations at the Federal Level) in Malashenko, A. (Ed) Islam v Rossi. Vzgliad is regionov (Moscow: Aspekt Press, 2007).
Tadzhudiin does, that a more nationalistic and self-assertive Russia will become more rather than less hospitable to Muslim interests or that Russian leaders frequent assertions of their European destiny does not incline ethnic Russians to a more negative assessment or even a complete denial of the Russian state’s Muslim heritage.

It is this greater scepticism of the presumed conflation of orthodox and Muslim interests, while combined with a clear policy of loyalty to the Russian state, that characterises the position of Gainutdin and the Council of Muftis of Russia. The presumption here is not of any necessary conflict but only that the interests of the Russian state, as de facto often reflecting the predominance of ethnic orthodox Russians, is not necessarily coextensive with ethnic minority Muslim interests and rights. There is, thus, a need to define and institute a space for autonomy and protection within the Russian state. The question then becomes of how this autonomy is to be defined and instantiated in practice. The temptation is for the state to impose such a sphere of autonomy through a process of political pragmatism. But, this would be unfortunate since ultimately this issue has an important theological dimension which needs to be articulated and developed from within Russia’s Muslim community. For example, there are are questions about the acceptable limits of theological pluralism and how the unacceptable extremes are to be policed and monitored and who has the competence to determine this. There are also question about how much religious self-autonomy is necessary or desirable, which involves sensitive issues surrounding the implementation of shari’a law. In addition, the particularities of Islam where there is no clear religiously-sanctioned clerical hierarchy raises questions of how to institutionalise the interaction of state and Muslim authority structures which will ensure their legitimacy to ordinary Muslims. These are all difficult practical and theological questions which require the emergence of a Muslim intelligentsia capable of defining and articulating clear and rationally defensible positions and answers. It is one of the most significant sources of optimism that such an intelligentsia does appear to be emerging, if inevitably slowly.²¹

Conclusion

Russian Islam is thus at an important crossroads. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s Muslim community has suffered from internal fragmentation, splits and divisions, and the rise of radical alternatives which have provided ideological justifications for acts of violence and terrorism. As a consequence, mutual suspicions between the Muslim and majority non-Muslim population within Russia have increased significantly. In this context, a Russian nationalist revival allied to a more assertive centralised state potentially threatens to marginalise Muslim voices and demands.

However, the contemporary Russian state remains committed to the promotion of a secular, multicultural and multinational state where Russia’s traditional religions preserve their autonomy as well as their legitimate moral and spiritual influence. As with other states in Europe, the Russian government is confronted with the considerable challenges of defining a durable and effective state-Muslim relationship. Given Russia’s particular history of Christian-Muslim coexistence, and the past dynamism of Russia’s Muslim communities, Russia again has an opportunity to be at the intellectual forefront of thinking about this and in developing practical solutions. In this regard, a new Muslim intelligentsia is emerging within Russia and is committed to developing a unified Muslim institutional body which is intellectually capable of articulating and defending Muslim interests in ways which strengthen rather than weaken Russian statehood. At the moment, these are still delicate flowers of growth. The danger is that even these growths might be undermined by the continued fragmentation and marginalisation of the Russian Muslim community, which only entrenches the traditionally over-powering and all-controlling state which fears rather than encourages the dynamics of an autonomous self-renaissance of the Russian Muslim community.