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Sibgatullina, G.R.

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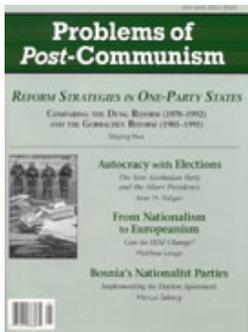
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# The Muftis and the Myths: Constructing the Russian “Church for Islam”

Gulnaz Sibgatullina 

Department of History, European Studies and Religious Studies, The University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

Over the last thirty years, Russia’s muftiates heavily invested in becoming a national “church for Islam,” an Islamic counterpart of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), that would meet the state’s ideological needs. Three discourse clusters generated by the Muslim leadership—on loyal, liberal, and correct Islam—were meant to increase the muftiates’ authority in Russia’s domestic and foreign policy. A diachronic analysis of these discourse clusters shows that by early 2022 the muftiates, unlike the ROC, have largely failed to create political value for Putin’s regime.

## Introduction

A nationwide vote in the summer of 2020 approved a series of controversial changes to the Russian Constitution. The primary purpose of these amendments was to “reset” (*obnulit*) incumbent president Vladimir Putin’s previous terms and permit him to remain in office after 2024. The new constitution has practically cemented Russian autocracy and granted Putin lifelong legal immunity. However, not only the Kremlin but also the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has derived tangible benefits from the 2020 constitutional process. As Kristina Stoeckl has posited, the new constitution ended an era of post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy when the Church was characterized by ambivalence and polysemy; at least four amendments openly supported by Orthodox Christian elites and adopted in the new document signaled the ROC’s successful turn to being a national church deeply woven into the fabric of Russian statehood (Stoeckl 2020). This ending of the almost three-decennia-long process of post-Soviet transformations, which started with the first Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993 and ended with the amended Constitution of 2020, raises a pertinent question: How did Russia’s Islam, inseparably linked to both the state and the ROC, negotiate its place in modern conditions? What did it achieve in the last three dramatically metamorphic decades?

This contribution hopes to partially answer these questions by assessing the evolution of Russia’s post-Soviet Islam in its role as second *inter pares* among the country’s “traditional religions.” That is, the focus of this paper will lie on the position of Islam in the so-called “traditionalism” framework introduced in the late 1990s, which, as we know with the advantage of hindsight, would function as an old-new strait-jacket for regulating activities of religious communities in the country. Readers will remember that this discourse of “traditionalism,” by and large, grounds on an imprecise and vague

concept of “Russia’s traditional religions.” Although the federal law does not directly stipulate either these religions or the criteria for belonging to the selected group, four teachings usually feature in popular discourses as the country’s native religions: Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism (Verkhovsky 2018). The traditionalism paradigm is notorious for imposing rigid dichotomies between state-supported “good” and “traditional” forms of the four religions, on the one hand, and all other forms that are perceived as potential threats to social stability, on the other.

The theme of this special issue, “What Does the Mufti Say?,” invites us to put a spotlight on a particular aspect of Russia’s Islam—the institutionalized Muslim leadership—and assess their contribution to maintaining the traditionalism paradigm as well as their attempts to negotiate its limits. In the Russian context, the term “mufti” refers to leaders of the Spiritual Administrations of Muslims (Rus., sg. *Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul’man*, DUM), also known as muftiates—concrete historical and organizational establishments with the primary purpose of managing Muslim communities in the country. In the course of Russian history, the institutional set-up and especially the functions of muftiates have changed profoundly several times. From the foundation in 1788 of the first muftiate, in Orenburg, which functioned primarily as a center of legal (Shari’a) expertise, the number of DUMs grew parallel to the expansion of the Russian empire in the decennia that followed; the emerging class of Muslim clergy increasingly assumed the role of administrators and brokers, facilitating imperial supervision over Muslims residing in the country (Tuna 2015; Crews 2006; Geraci 2001; Bobrovnikov 2006). In the aftermath of 1917 and following the political repressions of *‘ulamā*’ in the 1920s and 1930s, the Spiritual Administrations as organizations with administrative power practically ceased to exist. During the Second World War, Joseph Stalin restored the institution of the muftiate by creating four region-specific

organizations to mobilize the population to participate in the war; afterward, the muftiates mostly operated to “showcase” Soviet Islam to foreigners as an example of a secular and progressive religion (Tasar 2017).

When the Soviet system of regional muftiates collapsed and many smaller, spin-off organizations emerged instead, Russia’s institutionalized Islam had, at least in theory, the potential to transform into something fundamentally different. The political climate of the 1990s and 2000s provided a wide range of possibilities for renegotiating the relationship with the state (Bekkin 2020). Instead, a number of factors (to be discussed further) prompted the reinstallation of the muftiate system in its primary function, that is, being an extension of the state into the ecclesiastical domain. Here I argue that in the post-Soviet period, Muslim authorities have instrumentalized the traditionalism paradigm and, particularly, the concept of “traditional Islam” to forge a historical continuity between the imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet institutions for governing Islam. By asserting ownership over these institutions’ legacy, as well as over selected ideological projects produced by imperial and Soviet Muslim leaders, the present-day muftiates that operate on the federal level<sup>1</sup> claim to embody a historically continuous institution—a national “church for Islam”<sup>2</sup>; in other words, an Islamic analog of the ROC. This “church” supposedly represents the interests of Muslims in the relationship with the state while also aligning Islamic everyday life in the country with its secular norms and laws.

Construction of such a unified “church for Islam” is, by default, almost impossible given the complexity and variation in local traditions, histories, and social configurations that define Russia’s multi-ethnic Muslim community. Moreover, the political and legal changes in the second half of the 1990s, which limited the financial and managerial autonomy of muftiates, made them dependent on the Kremlin’s preferences.<sup>3</sup> When the process of church–state rapprochement that began in 1992 gained a high speed, the federal muftiates put their stakes on becoming a valuable ally to the state, hoping to obtain political and financial benefits similar to those that were being increasingly granted to the ROC. Muftiates aspired to achieve such a position by performing three primary functions: (1) operating as reliable partners that provided an endorsement of state policies; (2) producing ideological products<sup>4</sup> that addressed the state’s needs; and (3) regulating theological aspects of Islamic practice in the state’s interests. To meet each of the functions, Russia’s muftis, I posit, cultivated three discourse clusters, on “loyal,” “liberal,” and “correct” Islam, respectively.

In the remainder of the paper, I analyze the diachronic evolution of these clusters and show that attempts to consolidate power and forge “traditional Islam” as an essential part of Russia’s civil religion essentially failed.<sup>5</sup> Since state ideology has taken an increasingly conservative and nationalist turn (Laruelle 2020), muftis prefer not to engage in ideological production but follow the footsteps of ROC leaders to avoid accidentally stepping into “no-go areas.” By 2014 the state had drastically reduced its need for the muftiates’ services to legitimize its political decisions, both in domestic and foreign realms. As the Russian state began pursuing aggressive foreign policies and intensifying its crackdown on freedom of

expression within the country, the value of soft religious diplomacy naturally diminished. In the end, despite an ongoing religious renaissance among Russia’s Muslims, the muftiates have accumulated limited to no power to exercise authority over religious matters. Thus, while the ROC by 2020 had managed to occupy many essential roles within society as well as vis-à-vis the Russian state, global Orthodoxy, and international politics, the leaders of the federal DUMs, I argue, were largely unsuccessful in both securing their authority in Russia’s *umma* and creating political value for Putin’s regime. Instead, the functions of the muftiates are becoming more and more limited to fulfilling administrative tasks, such as managing mosques, vetting imams, and providing Islamic education.

## Ideological Production

A methodological note must be made concerning the selection of discourses to be discussed further. First, in this paper, I aim to analyze only discourses produced by institutionalized Muslim leaders, who constitute a powerful but small and ideologically exclusive fraction within a broad array of voices that shape and articulate Russia’s Islam today. Since the paper focuses on muftis’ participation in the traditionalism paradigm on the federal level, the analysis will cover specifically ideological constructions produced by the large muftiates in Ufa and Moscow and by their satellites. Moreover, given the breadth of the focus and the limited space available here, the paper will provide only a bird’s-eye view of how Russia’s muftis have contributed to and been influenced by the traditionalism paradigm in the post-Soviet period. This means that the analysis presented here will inevitably generalize otherwise extremely complex processes that have been characteristic of Russia’s Islamic scene after 1991. Despite these methodological limitations, the proposed zoom-out approach, I believe, enables us to recognize larger patterns in the relationship between the post-Soviet Russian state and institutionalized Muslim authorities and to trace the development of this relationship over time.

In communicating with the state, Russia’s Muslim leaders today target primarily the presidential administration. As Marlène Laruelle contends, the presidential administration is the newest and least ideologically rigid entity in the range of “political ecosystems” within the Kremlin. Until recently, it manufactured an eclectic and broad palette of ideological products, aiming at a “pick and choose” policy; however, after the mass protests in 2011–2013, the administration became more repressive against liberal actors (and, consequently, against projects that endorsed political liberalism), progressively approving a conservative reading of Russian history (Laruelle 2020, 349).

Since the late 1990s, the muftiates have been producing a range of discourses that can be roughly divided into three clusters. Although boundaries between these clusters are very porous, this division enables us to separate ideological projects that were adopted under state pressure from those engineered at the hands of Muslim political entrepreneurs who have been consciously testing the limits of public discourse.

The first cluster encompasses discourses on “loyal Islam” and addresses the state’s need to have a reliable partner to

relinquish autonomy in regulating religious affairs. This cluster intends to harmonize devotion to Islam with civic patriotism and define Islam as a religion innocuous to Russia's political system, social order, and cultural values. Ideally, this cluster provides endorsement and legitimization of the incumbent authoritarian regime. It thus addresses primarily a conservative wing within the presidential administration and provides a blueprint for Muslim organizations and public figures that closely cooperate with state institutions.

The second cluster, "liberal Islam," was supposed to improvise new ideological products that could provide "loyal Islam" discourses with a more in-depth intellectual foundation. During the period of relative religious freedom (the late 1990s–early 2000s), several distinct projects were designed with an aim to nationalize Islam and interpret it in line with universal human rights and basic tenets of political liberalism. This cluster targeted liberal circles within the state apparatus and Muslim national elites and received a boost during Putin's first two presidential terms; however, it was largely subsumed by 2009 when the Kremlin began placing a stronger emphasis on Russia's anti-Western and anti-liberal stances. Definitions of Islam as a liberal moral framework that did survive into the 2010s were curbed after ideological restrictions were imposed amid the Syrian crisis (since 2011) and the ISIS insurgence, as well as against the growing assertions of Russia's (Orthodox) messianic destiny after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The third cluster, inherently intertwined with the aforementioned two, unites discourses on "correct Islam." It works toward defining and regulating religious practice, rituals, and theological tenets constitutive of Russia's "traditional" Islam. The cluster focuses primarily on issues of theology and is, therefore, usually embedded within exclusively intra-Muslim debates. However, some of these discussions spill over into the public sphere; as much as in the previous imperial and Soviet periods, discourses on "correct Islam" tend to become instrumentalized by the state to exercise control over Muslim communities through imposing legal limitations on the forms labeled as "incorrect."

### Discourses on Loyal Islam

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 instigated what was probably the most notable period of freedom of religion in Russia; with the disappearance of Soviet institutions that exercised firm control over citizens' religious activity, the state practically abandoned its control functions, at least for a short while. Under Boris Yeltsin's presidency (1991–1999), the relationship between political power-holders and the leaders of an ever-expanding number of religious organizations developed sporadically. The adoption of a new conceptual framework was hindered mostly due to the political confrontation between the president and the parliament, which lasted for most of the 1990s. As a result, for almost a decade, there were neither formal regulations nor a central body in charge of this relationship (Marsh 2013, 25–28).

As the state effectively withdrew from the management of Muslim institutions, the very survival of the muftiate system was under question. The only Spiritual Administration that lived on after the fall of the Soviet regime, the one in Ufa,

underwent a major schism as several organizations broke away and formed independent competing units (Tul'skii 2004). In the context of a booming religious market, Russia's Muslim communities, inherently the subjects of muftiates' attention, practically operated outside any institutionalized system. Though the first post-Soviet decennium provided chances for restructuring (or even abandoning) the muftiates as an institution, this did not happen for several reasons. First of all, newly created regional DUMs quickly entered into a collaboration with national elites in Muslim-majority regions and became a valuable instrument in advancing initially secular nationalist programs. In these programs, Islam was subordinated to the authority of political elites and given the role of a unifying factor within ethnic minority communities. Second, the democratization of post-Soviet Russian society was aborted prematurely, following a series of grave economic and social crises that compelled the state to resume suppression of (religious) freedoms. In particular, the conflict in the North Caucasus, which rapidly transformed from an ethnic struggle to a religious and military opposition (especially after separatist forces declared a *jihād* against Russia in 1995), led the state to seek cooperation with religious functionaries. That is, it was essentially the state that provided the primary reason (and later also the financial means) for the survival of the muftiates into the post-Soviet period. With the emergence of two major centers of power, the DUM of the Russian Federation (DUM RF)<sup>6</sup> and the Central DUM (TsDUM), by the early 2000s, smaller muftiates had no choice but to pick a side and squeeze themselves into the emerging institutional hierarchy, thereby abandoning any alternative trajectories.

### From an Accomplice . . .

The growing political weight of the ROC and mounting fears of Islamic radicalization accelerated the closure of the religious market in the second half of the 1990s. The state documented the first boundaries for excluding religious groups perceived as a threat. The 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations intended to limit activities of "religious sects," that is, "foreign" organizations that arguably caused "significant damage to the spiritual life"; the 1997 Russian National Security Plan referred explicitly to "non-traditional Islam," as the regional authorities were urged to "take into account the destructive role of various religious sects" (Bobrovnikov 2020, 239); the 1998 Federal Law No. 130-FZ, which formulated the concepts of terrorist activity and terrorist act in the context of the First Chechen War, concretized measures to "combat terrorism," both ethno-nationalist and religious.

Russia's public domain saw a reintroduction of the term "Wahhabism," used to refer to allegedly militant and ultra-conservative forms of Islam. In the late Soviet Union, the *'ulamā*' attached the label "Wahhabi" to anyone whose religious ideas did not conform to established consensus, a practice later adopted by the KGB (Tasar 2017, 355; Babadzhanov and Sartori 2018). In the 1980s, the term entered the popular vocabulary, in part because of widespread fears of a global Islamic "explosion" in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Soviet army's debacle in

Afghanistan (1979–1989) (Knysh 2004, 10). In the context of the First Chechen War (1994–1999), mainstream discourses viewed the chief goal of “Wahhabi” ideologues as restoring Islam to its pristine state by purifying it of “alien,” “non-Islamic” elements. Consequently, the “Wahhabis” were “routinely portrayed as politically ‘activist,’ ‘fanatical’ and prone to indiscriminate violence against non-Muslims” (Knysh 2004, 6–7). Academic scholarship has repeatedly criticized a discriminatory and erroneous use of the “Wahhabism” label by Russian-speaking experts, journalists, and commentators in their assessments of Muslims’ ideologies and practices. The term creates confusion about the theological tenets of the incriminated Muslims: in Russia there were and are, in fact, few actual followers of the ideas propagated by the Arab theologian Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1703–1792), although in the North Caucasus there are dozens of Salafi groups that have a broad range of divergent, often competing agendas (Iarlykapov 2006; Bobrovnikov 2001). It is also factually incorrect to portray purist Islamic movements as inherently foreign to Muslim practices historically present on Russian soil.<sup>7</sup>

Back in the 1990s, institutionalized Muslim leaders used the term “Wahhabism,” first of all, to marginalize violent religion-inspired extremism and to condemn terrorist attacks carried out under the banner of Islam. However, the label was attached not only to criminal gangs with ultra-conservative programs, but also to moderate political opponents: in the struggle for resources, leaders of emerging regional and federal DUMs leveled accusations of “Wahhabism” to disqualify powerful rivals (Bobrovnikov 2001). Thus, although the “turbaned elites” (Kemper 2012, 105) that came to power in the early post-Soviet period had to operate in a radically different socio-political setting than the one that shaped them, they resorted to the same old instruments. Making allegations of adherence to “Wahhabism” against others has been a tactical maneuver to divert the attention of the state watchdog, a strategy that seems to have worked in imperial,<sup>8</sup> Soviet, and post-Soviet periods.

The reintroduction in the late 1990s of the ideological constructs that distinguished between “official” (in the post-Soviet version, “traditional”)<sup>9</sup> Islam and its “dangerous” forms can be viewed as mere inertia, falling back upon the familiar. However, the Muslim leaders’ participation in deepening these dichotomies played a role in legalizing the persecution of particular Muslim groups (discussed later in this paper) and, more widely, in creating a new political climate. By asserting their authority over Russia’s *umma* and projecting intra-Muslim interest conflicts into the federal security agenda, Muslim leaders (much like the Orthodox Christian elites, albeit in other ways) increasingly challenged the secular principles of the Russian state. The anti-Wahhabism campaigns have eventually fed into Islamophobic trends (Ragozina 2008; Laruelle and Yudina 2018) and alienated apolitical but devout Muslims from participation in public debates. Moreover, an emphasis on Wahhabism being a product of foreign ideological import diverted the attention of Russian policymakers from the domestic socio-economic and political roots of radicalization (Dannreuther 2010). On a larger scale, it can be argued that the securitization of Islam in the aftermath of the Chechen

wars has contributed to security services’ gaining the upper hand in the Kremlin (Rubin and Netroba 2014).

### ... To an Ally in Culture Wars

After assuming the presidential office in 2000, Putin could choose a single dialogue partner from the two federal-level muftiates—the DUM RF led by Mufti Ravil Gainutdin, based in Moscow, and the TsDUM led by Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin, based in Ufa. Although there were some ideological differences between them in the late 1990s,<sup>10</sup> over the years, the two organizations grew increasingly identical in their rhetoric. As in the imperial and Soviet contexts, DUM leaders were essentially exhorted to collaborate with the state to ensure their institutional survival. However, unlike in the previous periods, the major muftiates in post-Soviet Russia did not limit themselves to displaying loyalty to the regime but invested heavily in creating an external resemblance to the ROC. This tactic manifested itself in adopting the language (Sibgatullina 2019) and symbols (Rakhmatullin 2020) of the Russian Orthodox Church, which was done with remarkable creativity. In the post-9/11 and post-two-Chechen-wars context, this strategy helps construct an image of Russia’s Islam as an inherently familiar, Russian-culture-bound religion, in contrast to its “Arabized”—that is, “foreign” and “dangerous”—forms.

In reaction to the socio-economic crises that undermined social stability during Yeltsin’s presidency, Putin has adopted a course toward re-traditionalization of the Russian public sphere. This course implied a growing opposition to political liberalism and defined Russia’s activity in the international arena in terms of moral duty. This policy had a strong effect on the ROC: if, in the early post-Soviet period, the Church was a multivocal institution defined by power struggles between the liberal, fundamentalist, and traditionalist factions, the traditionalists eventually took the upper hand under Putin’s presidency, especially after the appointment of Kirill as Patriarch in 2009. The traditionalists’ ideological and political program, embodied in the “defense of traditional values,” became the ROC’s signature rhetoric after the mass protests in 2011–2013 and the Pussy Riot affair (although, of course, it had been introduced much earlier) (Chapnin 2020). This rhetoric attempts to construct “tradition” by drawing upon the imagined ethos of imperial Russia and the late Soviet Union and translates the religious language of traditional morality into the political discourse of solidarity and patriotism (Agadjanian 2017). In the international context as defined by the global culture wars, the ROC discourse on tradition gained the approval of some right-wing forces in Europe and the United States (Shekhovtsov 2017; Laruelle 2019; Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022).

The muftiates have uncritically adopted and emulated this anti-Western, conservative-values-oriented discourse. For example, Damir Mukhetdinov, the first deputy chairman of DUM RF, portrayed Russia’s Muslim community as grounded on “anti-globalism, defense of traditional values, traditional multiculturalism and moderate conservatism” (Mukhetdinov 2016, 6–7; Aitamurto 2019). It is important to note that the present-day muftiates’ appeal to the Russian language and to

the cultural norms arguably shared by Russia's Islam and Orthodox Christianity, is not a recent invention. Already in the 1880s, a series of publications written in Russian and on behalf of Russia's Muslims aspired to present Islam as a religion compatible with rational thinking, modern lifestyle, and the Russian system of norms and values. Authors of these publications, modernist Muslims under the leadership of the famed Crimean Tatar intellectual Ismail Gasprinskii (1851–1914), attempted to challenge the deep-rooted negative image of Russia's Muslims as backward citizens of the empire (Batunskii 1996; Bessmertnaya 2017; Sibgatullina 2022). For instance, the paradigm suggested by Gasprinskii (1881) implied viewing the Qur'ān as a clear set of values virtually in line with the Christian norms that underlined Russian society. Both Gasprinskii's rhetoric from the early 1880s and Gainutdin/Mukhetdinov's discourses today represent essentially the same strategic move to foster relationships with Russian political elites, while ignoring the theological, cultural, and ethical variation within Russia's Islam and in comparison to Christianity (Kemper 2019). In fact, although this relationship is developed under the pretext of advancing a broader agenda relevant to Russia's Muslims, the Muslim leaders' personal interests remain hidden.

However, this siding of institutionalized Islam with the Russian Orthodox Church, which accelerated in the post-Soviet period, has more serious and long-lasting effects than was possible previously. As Alfrid Bustanov and Michael Kemper have suggested, there is a process of an increasingly evident convergence between the two institutions as they develop similar views on Russia's domestic and foreign politics and similar doctrinal lines, and both of them interpret and protect societal moral norms along the same conservative lines (Bustanov and Kemper 2017). As Islam is being continuously interpreted through Orthodox Christian vocabulary, this rapprochement affects the very system and symbols of Islam; the convergence, where Orthodox Christianity clearly has a leading role, thus moves into the deeper sphere of meanings associated with Islam and Islamic practice (Sibgatullina 2020).

The power imbalance between the two religions also exists in their very abilities to claim traditionality. The Orthodox Church has a long-standing presence in articulating messianic ideas: practically all major streams of Russian socio-political thought of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (including the Narodniks, anarchists, Slavophiles, Russian nationalists, and Eurasianists) spoke of Russia as a global balance provider and guardian of values (Christian or derived from Christianity) (Curanović 2019). In the twenty-first century, Russia has extensively drawn on selected elements from these ideologies to position itself as the defender of traditional religious values against liberalism at home and abroad (Engström 2014). In the process, the ROC and the state have mutually benefited. By 2020, the amended constitution turned conservative (family) values into the letter of the law, thereby securing the role of Russian Orthodoxy as Russia's new national civil religion (Stoeckl 2020).

The muftiates, in contrast, do not have either a domestic or a foreign base that would have enabled them to engage on the frontlines of the global culture wars. In the domestic discourse, an emphasis on conservative religious values risks attracting

the much-dreaded accusation of “Wahhabism,” while ties with transnational organizations are limited to preventing the spread of radicalism from abroad. Thus, the federal DUMs are walking on a tightrope to avoid either falling into “non-traditional” forms or siding with political liberalism. Though, by and large, they manage to keep this fragile balance, the DUM RF and TsDUM's current relationship with the state has become restricted to toleration and the muftiates' dependence on state funding, rather than evolving into one of mutual benefit (Aitamurto 2021).

### Liberal Islam

Such a state of affairs in the DUMs–state relationship was not always the case. The 2000s witnessed a period when the muftiates energetically produced ideological products that could be of interest to the political elites. Putin's initial unpredictability as the country's leader and a fluid bricolage of ideologies produced by his administration during his first two terms offered a broad array of permitted themes, including space for projects aimed at continuing the political liberalization of Russian society that was put on the agenda in the 1990s. Yet, the discourses on Islam to be discussed in this section were eventually short-lived and disappeared after the presidential administration began developing an explicit though still blurry conservative narrative.

The three projects that I group here under the “liberal Islam” umbrella—on secular, national, and humanist Islam—were designed by a range of actors and supported by the major muftiates to varying degrees. The common denominator of these projects is that they all draw on the simplified history of Islamic reformism in the Russian empire. In the context of a political transition from attempted liberalism to political conservatism in the 1990s–2000s, Jadidism (from Arabic *usūl-i jadīd*, a “new method” of schooling) proved to be the most fruitful container of ideas. The post-Soviet ideological projects portrayed an inherently positive image of Jadids as Muslim modernizers who promoted educational reforms, Muslim women's emancipation, and rationalization of religion.<sup>11</sup> The opposite pole, the so-called “Qadimists,” composed of traditionalist *‘ulamā’* accused of backwardness and resistance to modernization, manifested an easy-to-grasp “they” camp. The idea of an indigenous “Muslim enlightenment” offered a powerful ideological construct, which explains its eager instrumentalization by Tatar nationalists and the Tatar-dominated federal muftiates (Bustanov and Kemper 2012). The latter's claim to an intellectual continuity with Jadids from the Volga-Ural region is somewhat ambiguous, given that the Tatar Muslim modernists sought to reform Muslim administrative institutions precisely to limit the power of appointed spiritual authorities.

### Secular Islam

Probably the best-known attempt at creating a coherent ideology of post-Soviet Islam was Rafael Khakimov's Euro-Islam project (Khakimov 2003). Khakimov, then part of a fundamentally secular oligarchy in power in the Republic of Tatarstan, began engineering his project in the late 1990s. The Euro-Islam project advocated for a modern, twenty-first-

century-compatible type of Islam in line with European values, democracy, and economic liberalization. Seeking to subordinate religion to strong national identities, the project practically stripped Islam of its theological content. The DUM of Tatarstan, which at the time was utterly dependent on the political authorities, endorsed the project, although it recognized Islam merely for its role in the national culture (Laruelle 2007). Khakimov's manifesto (2003) received much—but mostly negative—attention. It failed to attract the support of believers, who accused Khakimov of disparaging fundamental elements of Islam (Aitamurto 2019, 206; Laruelle 2007). Putin's administration, which by then had already begun strengthening the power vertical, was interested neither in boosting the authority of Tatarstan elites nor in endorsing openly pro-Western ideas. Another version of the manifesto that Khakimov (2013) published ten years later only proved that secularist ideas<sup>12</sup> were falling absolutely out of vogue in Russia (Aitamurto 2019, 206).

Though the officially secular status of Tatarstan formally remains in place, the de facto influence of Islamic discourse on state policy and the political weight of Muslim leaders have substantially increased since 2003. The Tatarstan elites, both political and religious, have been cooperating in forging “traditional Tatar Islam” (Di Puppo 2019; Di Puppo and Schmoller 2020; Benussi 2020) in order to curtail and co-opt Islamic piety movements, but also to advance the role of Tatarstan as a foundry of locally trained, Russian-culture-sensitive Muslim theologians and community leaders. In reaction to Jadidism-inspired politically liberal projects, there was also a rediscovery and reassessment of the previously condemned “Qadimist” legacy (Bustanov and Kemper 2013). This turn toward home-grown conservatism accelerated significantly after the appointment in 2013, as chairman of the Tatarstan Muftiate, of Kamil Samigullin, who showed himself to be theologically conservative and politically loyal to the state (Makarkin 2013).

The case of Tatarstan, where the DUM–state rapprochement is quite pronounced, remains nevertheless a regional and, thus, limited phenomenon. Equally, projects that define and endorse specific interpretations of “traditional Tatar Islam” are limited to that ethnic minority community and do not have a transregional, let alone transnational, appeal. Moreover, in the mainstream discourses, local Muslim leaders, unlike their Orthodox Christian counterparts, continue to be treated with suspicion and have to operate under the close scrutiny of security forces and notorious pro-ROC “experts on Islam” (Kovalskaya 2020).

### Popular Russian Islam

In parallel to regional projects, Russian political technologists on the federal level attempted to de-nationalize and deculturalize Islam and liberate it from undesirable “Turkic” and “Arab” elements. Born in 2002–2003, the “Russian Islam” (*ruskii islam*) idea aimed to foster “an Islam of Russian culture” (“*ruskokul'turnyi islam*”), a sort of a hybrid combining essentialized and selected Islamic elements with folklorized Russian culture. It was developed under the aegis of liberal politician Sergei Kirienko (at that time, the Russian

presidential envoy to the Volga Federal District) and promoted by the young political scientist Sergei Gradirovskii (back then engaged in *Russkii Mir*, the Russian World, initiatives). The project's implementation was accompanied by a massive release of Russian-language Muslim literature, the creation and promotion of federal-level Muslim media, and the popularization of Russian-speaking Muslim intellectuals (Graney 2006).

Around the same time, a similar venture was launched by a former Orthodox priest and politician, a convert to Islam, Ali Viacheslav Polosin. In the 2000s, Polosin cultivated close connections with the umbrella organizations under Mufti Ravil Gainutdin's leadership—the DUM RF and the Council of Muftis of Russia (*Sovet muftiev Rossii*, established in 1996). Together with a professional translator from English, convert to Islam Valeria Iman Porokhova (1940–2019), Polosin founded the “Direct Path” (*Priamoi put'*, 2001–2006), an organization that targeted Russian converts to Islam. In his manifesto “The direct path to God,” Polosin interpreted Islam as an alternative to “guilt-driven” Orthodoxy and a panacea against Russians' ethical degradation, “spiritual weakness,” and alcohol abuse (Polosin 2000). Porokhova issued a verse translation of the Qur'an into Russian, adapting the Arabic original to the language of iconic Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837), which, although it caused an ambivalent reaction from theologians and scholars, withstood several reprints (Kurbakhadziev 2004; Sibgatullina 2020, 85–104).

Gradirovskii's and Polosin–Porokhova's projects pursued essentially the same goal: to create an indigenous “Russian Islam” based on moderate Russian (primarily cultural) nationalism and the ideas of a secular religion, which met the demands that existed back then in liberal political circles. Unlike Khakimov's attempts at *de*-confessionalizing, Gradirovskii's and Polosin–Porokhova's projects sought to *re*-confessionalize Russia's Islam so that it could be of use in larger post-Soviet nation-building initiatives. Predictably, the projects did not receive support among Muslims and Muslim leaders in the regions, who saw them as state instruments for pursuing forced Russification of ethnic minorities. However, this idea of easy-to-digest, popular “Russian Islam” had the potential to fit into the DUM RF ideological agenda grounded on arguably shared values and common theological tenets between Islam and Christianity. However, with Russian society developing a more acute sense of ethnic awareness, the term *ruskii* became associated with exclusive, oftentimes anti-Muslim ethnic nationalism that emerged, in part, as a response to public anxieties of losing identity under the pressure of migrants from Central Asia and Russia's North Caucasus (Laruelle 2016).

The DUM RF rebranded the “Russian (*ruskii*) Islam” idea as “Russia's (*rossiiskii*) Islam” project. In contrast to *ruskii*, the adjective *rossiiskii* was supposed to emphasize the country's multinational character and, consequently, stress the role of Islam in shaping its cultural diversity. However, the term *rossiiskii*, which was promoted initially in Yeltsin's era, by 2015, when Mukhetdinov published his programmatic document (Mukhetdinov 2015, 2016), had become reminiscent of Russia's failed attempts to endorse Western-style pluralism and liberalism.

As Michael Kemper posits, Mukhetdinov's project was a prime example of religious political technology designed explicitly to respond to the expectations of the state and thereby attract the attention of Kremlin authorities (Kemper 2019). The "Russia's Islam" project presented a bricolage of themes that fed into the broad palette of ideological products produced by the presidential administration between 2000 and 2015. In his programmatic essay, Mukhetdinov attempted to bridge the histories of Muslim communities in imperial and post-Soviet Russia: the very title of the document was an explicit reference to the famous essay by Ismail Gasprinskii (1881), mentioned earlier. Both Gasprinskii and Mukhetdinov used the term *musul'mansto* (Muslimhood), which refers not so much to Islam as a system of beliefs and practices but to Muslim communities, in this particular case—those living under the Russian rule (Kemper 2019, 85–86). Mukhetdinov suggested that both in Gasprinskii's times and today, Russian authorities do little to learn about and enlighten Russia's Muslims; by co-opting its Muslim subjects, the state, according to Mukhetdinov, would gain a robust patriotic base (Kemper 2019, 222). Moreover, the DUM RF official clearly embraced popular neo-Eurasianist ideas that drew on strong anti-Western sentiments and nostalgia for the imperial past. These references to neo-Eurasianism were supposed to emphasize long-time historical links between the Eastern Slavs and Turks and portray the Volga Tatars as bridge-builders within the Eurasian space (Sibgatullina and Kemper 2019).

Though Mukhetdinov carefully tailored his "*rossiiskii* Islam" project to the state's demands at the time, the Kremlin authorities did not pick it up. There are several possible reasons for that. First of all, after 2014, an emphasis on the multiculturalism of *rossiiskii* stands athwart Kremlin's aggressive projects to forge the historical unity of the *russkii* world and to unite Eastern Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians) (Laruelle 2016). Secondly, the DUM RF did not offer the means to employ this project strategically and legitimize the Kremlin's political moves. During the Crimean crisis, the muftiate's Eurasianist profile brought only losses: although the DUM RF aspired to legitimize the annexation of the peninsula, portraying it as a return of Crimea to the Russian fold, at the level of civil society, Turkic-speaking Muslims in Russia showed deep sympathies with the Crimean Tatars (Antonov and Nikiforov 2016). The DUM RF has also failed to integrate the Crimean DUM into Gainutdin's umbrella organizations: after a series of unsuccessful negotiations, the Crimean DUM eventually fell under the direct control of the Kremlin and the local Russian administration (Insafly 2015). Nor was the "*rossiiskii* Islam" project of any use in the Syrian crisis. Despite Gainutdin's calls on his fellow Muslims not to "politicize" the Kremlin's actions in the region, groups of Russia's Muslims (who are mostly Sunnis) condemned Moscow for siding with a minority Alawite, pro-Shia Syrian government in a struggle against the country's Sunni Muslim majority (Malashenko 2016).

### Humanist Islam

Finally, the DUM RF tried, also unsuccessfully, to push forward ideas on universal liberal Islam. In the early 2000s, the

muftiate adopted the project of "the Qur'ānic humanism," developed by a scholar from the Russian Academy of Sciences, Taufik Ibragim. Ibragim believes that in the current context of religion-inspired extremism and stagnation in Muslim thought, it is necessary to emphasize the tolerance of the Qur'ān and the humanist character of Islam in general. In this rethinking of the Qur'ān, Ibragim emphasizes the individual's moral responsibility and rational faculty; to argue for the compatibility of his doctrine with Russian realities, he also taps into the heritage of the Tatar Jadids (Kemper and Sibgatullina 2021).

The DUM RF embraced Ibragim's religious philosophy as another essential building block for a new Islamic ideology. However, after a period of energetic collaboration between the DUM RF and Ibragim in 2015–2007, the "Qur'ānic Humanism" notion suddenly disappeared from the muftiate's public rhetoric. The project was censored following scandals around two self-proclaimed disciples of Taufik Ibragim (Bekkin 2019). DUM RF adversaries criticized them for adopting the "fundamentalist" method of the Salafis (rejecting the centuries of *ḥadīth* studies in favor of direct access to the Qur'ān). Under public pressure, the DUM RF had to issue a *fatwā* (Aliautdinov 2018) against the "Qur'ānists" (Rus. *koranity*), indirectly identifying the group around the scholar as a heretic sect.

Ibragim's broad agreement with political liberalism and international human rights is unmistakable, as he openly speaks in favor of societies that accommodate diversity, religious freedom, multiculturalism, fairness, and tolerance. Though the backlash came primarily from intra-Muslim circles, such ideology is obviously an uneasy fit within the current Russian conservative family values discourse that prioritizes national legal sovereignty over international human rights commitments.

By and large, ideological experimenting ceased after 2014 due to several external and internal factors. The external ones include major events in the international arena (the Syrian crisis, the ISIS insurgence, the diplomatic fallout after the annexation of Crimea and the MH17 plane crash), as well as a conservative turn in Russia's public discourse following the 2011–2013 protests that forced the Kremlin to adopt a more rigid ideological posture. Internal factors include serious challenges posed to the authority of the DUM RF, which made Gainutdin and his associates abandon risky projects and focus on maintaining his political clout. Since 2011, the relationship between the DUM RF and the Tatarstan Muftiate (DUM RT) has gone downhill, culminating in a public scandal<sup>13</sup> around a new *tafsir* issued by the DUM RT in 2019. Gainutdin's attempt to bring smaller muftiates under the direct jurisdiction of the DUM RF in 2020 led to (further) estrangements from the DUM of the Asian part of Russia and the DUM of the Republic of Bashkortostan (Akhunov 2020). In the spheres of religious education, literature, and norms production, as well as in establishing contacts with international Islamic bodies, DUM RF faces tough competition from DUM RT, the Muftiate of Dagestan, and another umbrella institution established in 2016, the Spiritual Assembly of Muslims of Russia (*Dukhovnoe sobranie musul'man Rossii*).

## Correct Islam

### Muftiates as Norm Protagonists

The muftiates' engagement with Islamic theology after 1991 primarily sought to legitimize state policy and legislation from an Islamic point of view. In this respect, the post-Soviet Islamic authorities emulated steps taken by the post-1991 Russian Orthodox Church and returned to some of the practices employed by muftiates in the imperial and Soviet periods.

In the early 2000s, the ROC published several doctrines on matters of social teaching (2000) and human rights (2008). Analysis of these doctrines showed that they were designed not only to clarify the ROC's positions on social matters but also to serve as essential instruments in negotiating the church–state relationship and conducting “religious diplomacy” abroad (Agadjanian 2010; Stoeckl 2012). The major documents issued by federal muftiates in the post-Soviet period, predictably, followed the blueprint of the church doctrines, but only in form. In 2015, the federal muftiates approved “The Social Doctrine of Russia's Muslims” (*Sotsial'naiia doktrina rossiiskikh musul'man*), which was a follow-up to the previous “Basic Provisions of the Social Program of Russia's Muslims” (*Osnovnye polozheniia sotsial'noi programmy rossiiskikh musul'man*) from 2001 (SMR 2001; Doktrina 2015). The documents sought to explain to Russia's Muslims how to combine the norms prescribed by Islam with being a citizen of a secular Russian state. While the 2001 document primarily addressed questions related to Muslim life within a new, post-Soviet political system, the 2015 doctrine responded to Putin's “Ufa Theses” (Tezisy 2013) and instructed Muslims on “socialization” within the Russian mainstream society.

The doctrines did not become a basis for a new social contract between the state and Muslim believers, as the muftiates imagined them to be. The Muslim community did not participate in either discussing or drafting the documents and remained largely skeptical toward the initiatives (Tuaev 2015). Moreover, a largely symbolic event of signing the 2015 document did not happen without a conflict: a refusal of the Chechen Muslim authorities to accept the doctrine revealed the deep-rooted competition for the Kremlin's attention between the federal muftiates and the Chechen leadership.<sup>14</sup> The intractability of local powers in the North Caucasus also proved the inability of either DUM RF or TsDUM to consolidate power beyond Central Russia.

During Putin's presidency, the muftiates also tried to resume their function in preventing Islam from becoming a mobilizing force for Muslims' rebellion in a non-Muslim state.<sup>15</sup> Yet, being in a deep crisis of legitimacy, the muftiates have not been able to establish their authority over local, more charismatic and independent Muslim leaders. To gain weight in stipulating theological norms, the federal muftiates entered a collaboration with the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), which featured influential Islamic theologians such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Ali al-Qaradaghi. These scholars were supposed to plant the idea of “Islamic moderation”—the doctrine of *al-wasatiyya*—on Russian soil. This collaboration was curated by Polosin and supported by influential political functionaries and secular academics (Sibgatullina 2020, 85–104). The partnership resulted in the signing of several documents. The Moscow Declaration of 2012, for

instance, aimed to give theologically “correct” interpretations of the controversial concepts of “*jihād*” and “caliphate” in order to “deprive the [Islamic] extremists of their ideological basis” (Deklaratsiia 2012). Conferences in Makhachkala in 2012 and 2014 declared Dagestan (later also Stavropol region) to be *dār al-Islām*, the “territory of Islam,” thereby forbidding *jihād* in the region as contravening Islamic norms (Fetva 2012; Deklaratsiia 2014a, 2014b). However, these region-specific declarations designed to support the local Muslim spiritual leaders had little practical effect (Vatchagaev 2014). The cooperation with the IUMS was dropped following Russia's intervention in Syria (in 2012, al-Qaradawi denounced Russia as “enemy no. 1” of the global Muslim community because of Putin's support for the Syrian regime) (Malashenko 2013).

### Challenges of “Sunnification”

In providing authoritative theological interpretations of Islamic sources, the muftiates have to deal with steadily increasing levels of religious education among Russia's Muslims. If by the early 1990s, there was practically no established system of religious education, the following years witnessed the construction of numerous schools and even institutes and universities for training religious cadres (Kemper et al. 2009). With the opening of the borders, many young Muslims traveled abroad to study and established contacts with international Muslim organizations.

Since the 2010s, there has been a tendency toward a more theological interpretation of the “traditional Islam” concept, which Matteo Benussi and others have identified as “Sunnification.” That is, the growing degree of religious education—among Muslim leaders and across the Muslim community—requires going beyond “ethnic Muslimness” and thoroughly engaging with sources. Such theological grounding aims, on the one hand, to establish tradition with the Muslim theological schools in imperial Russia; on the other, the theological argumentation serves an ideological purpose of satisfying the needs of pious Muslims who search for a more “doctrinal Islam,” and thus are at risk of leaving the hold of the muftiates and joining independent movements (Benussi 2020; Di Puppo 2019).

This “Sunnification” process may partially explain the turn of the federal muftiates toward traditional Hanafism in settling minor theological disputes within the Muslim community. A quick look at the series of theological statements adopted by the DUM RF in 2019–2020 on issues related to marriage and family (DUM RF 2020) reveals, on the one hand, the process of adopting increasingly conservative interpretations of Islamic norms (Kemper 2022); on the other, these documents endorse the state–ROC course on re-traditionalization of the society from within the Muslim community.

## Conclusion

This contribution traced major evolutionary trends in the state–muftiates relationship over the past thirty post-Soviet years by focusing on the discourses produced by Islamic authorities. The muftiate system of Spiritual Organizations for Muslims survived the fall of Communism, not least

because, in the late 1990s–early 2000s, the state expressed its need for loyal partners in exercising control over Russia’s Muslim population. Dependent on the state for financial and political resources, the federal DUMs attempted to become an Islamic analog of the ROC, a national “church for Islam,” beneficial both to the state and to the DUMs in consolidating power. Over the years, the muftiates have produced three types of discourse in order (1) to signal their loyalty to the state; (2) to provide ideological framing for rooting Islam as a religion native to Russia; and (3) to align Islamic tenets with the state’s political agenda. The analysis of these discourses has shown that despite considerable efforts, as of early 2022, the DUMs have not succeeded in achieving mutual (not one-sided) dependency in their relationship with the state.

The present-day major muftiates in Moscow and Ufa have positioned themselves as successors of imperial and Soviet institutions. Although there are certainly overlaps in managing and controlling functions between them, the claims to continuity ignore the devastating disruptions in the history of muftiates and Russia’s religious communities at large that make these claims ill-founded. Neither the state nor Russia’s *umma* recognizes any direct (TsDUM) or argued (DUM RF) successors as institutions with a tradition to be cherished for socio-cultural or political reasons. Furthermore, attempts to build a unified umbrella body that, like the ROC, could still contain a range of various voices are *a priori* futile, given the cultural, historical, and social diversity of Russia’s *umma*. The idea of “traditional Islam” endorsed by the state places emphasis on that very cultural, ideological, and ethnic variation and, thus, further complexifies efforts to unite an extremely multi-vocal community. Projects aimed at imposing supra-ethnic ideologies—such as Qur’ānic Humanism or *al-wasatīyya*—do not enjoy success and are usually met with skepticism by ordinary Muslims for being introduced top-down and designed without taking into account believers’ actual needs.

Finally, the muftiates lack a foundation for pursuing a broader “messianic” role and making themselves valuable for a state that has engaged with expansive foreign policy. Although federal muftiates maintain personal connections with leaders across the Middle East, they do not have the political clout to engage in successful religious diplomacy. Lacking authority in Muslim communities within Russia, the muftiates have also failed to justify the state’s foreign interventions. Against the backdrop of pronounced Islamophobia and with the space for ideological maneuver continually shrinking, the muftiates have to abandon their searches for original ideological products and limit themselves to discourses on loyalty and patriotism, which essentially means following the ROC’s lead. As the muftis continue to lack ideological independence and (are expected to) converge with the ROC, their functions are being increasingly limited to administrative tasks, while the state governance of Muslim communities has been increasingly taking forms of securitization and persecution of unwanted communities and individuals.

## Notes

1. These are the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia (*Tsentral’noe dukhovnoe upravlenie musul’man Rossii*; TsDUM)

under the leadership of Talgat Tadzhuiddin, and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation (*Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul’man Rossiiskoi Federatsii*; DUM RF) under the leadership of Ravil Gainutdin.

2. With regard to the Russian imperial context, the term was first introduced by Robert Crews (2006, Ch.1). On historical and contemporary examples of fitting Islam and Muslims into the existing institutional frameworks regulating the relationship between the church(es) and the state in (Eastern) Europe, see also Račius (2020) and Vinding (2018).
3. The 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and the 1998 Law on Combating Terrorism put an end to the *laissez-faire* policy that characterized the early 1990s.
4. The term “ideological product” here refers to political platforms (including concepts, doctrines, narratives) that draw on Islamic tradition and the history of Islam in Russia and are designed to integrate Islam into the post-Soviet socio-political context. See also Michael Kemper’s (2019) use of the concept “religious political technology” to refer to this phenomenon.
5. Under “civil religion” here I understand a set of beliefs and symbols that amount to a quasi-religion of the nation. In the case of Russia, this set is remarkably eclectic and features elements from Orthodox Christianity and imperial and communist ideologies (Hovorun 2017).
6. In 1998–2014, it was still called DUMER, *Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul’man Evropeiskoi chasti Rossii*.
7. On the ambiguity of the labels “reformist” and “modernist” vs. “conservative” and “fundamentalist,” and early Salafi ideas among Muslims in the Russian empire, see DeWeese (2016).
8. For instance, Dagestani Sufi leaders used the “Wahhabism” trope to accuse a wide range of reformist-minded Muslims in the post-1917 context (Sahakyan 2022); also Knysht (2004).
9. Some attribute the authorship of the term “traditional Islam” to Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin (Safargaleev 2018); but similar expressions were used also by secular politicians; for instance, the mayor of Moscow from 1992 to 2010, Yuri Luzhkov, repeatedly declared his readiness to support the “traditional Muslim community in Russia” (Bobrovnikov 2001).
10. Initially, Gainutdin distinguished himself as a more liberal and progressive leader, in opposition to “Soviet-trained,” conservative Mufti Tadzhuiddin (Kemper 2012; Sidorov 2022).
11. Recent scholarship has challenged this dichotomy that arguably existed between Muslim modernists and the conservative ‘*ulamā*’ at the turn of the twentieth century (Frank 2001; Sartori 2016; Ross 2020).
12. Secularism here is understood as a statecraft doctrine and a worldview that denotes a set of ethical–political principles at the center of which lies the separation of the political from the religious (Stoeckl 2020, 5; Casanova 2011).
13. Gainutdin accused the leader of the DUM RT, Kamil Samigullin, of misinterpreting the Qur’an; the DUM RF *tafsir* arguably standardizes the interpretation upheld by the Turkish İsmailağa community, which is considered alien to “traditional Tatar Islam” (Gainullin 2021).
14. The tension came to surface again in 2016, following the conference in Grozny hosted by Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of Chechnya. The *fatwā* “On true believers” issued by the conference guests caused much discontent in DUM RF (Fuller 2016).
15. Especially during the Soviet period, the *fatwās* issued by the muftiates were deployed not in the traditional manner of nonbinding scholarly opinion but rather as executive orders (Tasar 2017, 150).

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## ORCID

Gulnaz Sibgatullina  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5628-5920>

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