



## **Problems of Muslim Society in Russia Past and Present**

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### **Abstract**

*This article aims to provide an overview of the Muslim minority in Russia not living in a homogeneous environment. The Muslim community in this country is facing old and new problems at the same time. Ancient in the sense that members of this community who identify themselves with Islam have inhabited this vast land for centuries. However, they are considered young because Muslims are part of the modern Russian state. This paper seeks to place the changes experienced by Muslims in Russian society in the context of an actual historical framework. Post-Soviet Union development centered on infrastructure, economy, and society. Now, at a crucial moment, is the time to push intra-Islamic relations to a higher level. Only this allowed Islam to become an integral part of Russia's political identity.*

*Keywords: muslim, Russia, society, history*

### **Abstrak**

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk memberikan gambaran tentang minoritas Muslim di Rusia tidak hidup dalam lingkungan yang homogen. Komunitas Muslim di negara ini menghadapi permasalahan yang lama dan baru dalam waktu bersamaan. Kuno dalam arti bahwa anggota komunitas ini yang mengidentifikasi diri mereka dengan Islam telah mendiami tanah yang luas ini selama berabad-abad. Akan tetapi dianggap muda karena muslim bagian dari negara Rusia modern. Tulisan ini berupaya menempatkan perubahan-perubahan yang dialami umat Islam di masyarakat Rusia dalam konteks kerangka historis aktual dengan melakukan studi pustaka dengan dengan metode analisis deskriptif, dan pendekatan kualitatif artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa tidak ada resep universal untuk komunitas Muslim yang heterogen di Rusia. Pasca Uni Soviet pembangunan terpusat pada infrastruktur, ekonomi dan kemasyarakatan. Sekarang pada masa genting, adalah waktu untuk mendorong hubungan intra-Islam ke tingkat yang lebih tinggi. Hanya ini yang memungkinkan Islam menjadi bagian integral dari identitas politik Rusia.

Kata kunci: muslim, Rusia, masyarakat, sejarah

### **A. Introduction**

As in other parts of the world; The Muslim minority in Russia does not live in a homogeneous environment that includes fixed lifestyles and well-defined institutions; As societies evolve, Islam and its adherents seek to adapt themselves to changing postmodern norms while continuing to adhere to their beliefs. They and the 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide have in common that they constantly face challenges to Islamic ideas that take various forms. They are urging followers of this faith to reconsider the legacy of the past. This is the reality of Muslims in Russia; The Muslim community in this country is young and old at the same time.

We describe the discussion with cycle theory. This theory explains that social change is like a wheel that is turning. The point is that the rotation of the times cannot be avoided by anyone and cannot be controlled by anyone. According to this theory, the rise and decline of a nation's civilization have a correlational relationship between one,

namely challenges and responses. For example, if people's lives can respond to life's challenges and adapt, then the community will experience development and progress.

It is ancient in the sense that members of this community who identify themselves with Islam have inhabited this vast land for centuries, a young community because it is part of the modern Russian state, which recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary. There are a host of severe challenges that Russian Muslims face collectively. They seek to overcome the contradictions that prevent them from speaking with one loud voice on domestic affairs. In this respect, we find that they have not yet transcended the radical secularization that prevailed in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The questions that Russia's Muslim establishment seeks to answer arise against significant political and ideological shifts across the Middle East. We describe research in the early stages of describing research findings based on analyzed literature data and then conduct research in detail. This descriptive method observes natural social conditions and what is sourced from literature books, journals, and previous knowledge. Willingly or unwillingly, we find that the discourse in Russia is pushing toward common issues between Islamic countries and their qualitative transformations. The nature of the Russian Muslim community concerning social, economic, and political affairs shortly depends on the Ummah's ability to confront the current hot issues. From this standpoint, this paper seeks to place the changes that Muslims are going through in Russian society in the context of the existing historical framework from which social development emerged (Dannreuther & March 2010).

## **B. Discussion**

### **1. Islam in the Soviet Union**

No religion in the Soviet Empire, including Islam, enjoyed freedom until the liberation phase of the late 1980s, which was followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. To be more precise, a short period passed in the history of the Soviet Union, namely from 1917 to the mid-1920s. In the last century, Muslims were treated radically different than in subsequent years (Akhmetova, 2019).

Marginalization and discrimination experienced by an ethnic group in a very long period of time make ethnic emotional bonds closer and more substantial because of the existence of a common cause, common goal, and common interest and finally gives rise to identity politics, which is a political movement involving a person or group of people

who have similar characteristics, such as religion, ethnicity, and culture. This concept is in line with the conclusions and findings of this study.

We carry out data analysis that began with the rise of Russia in 1917, which made Muslims increasingly marginalized by various factors since the outbreak of the First World War. Until now, during the prolonged conflict between Russia and the West. In order to consolidate the achievements of the October Revolution of 1917, it was required to mobilize the support of the broad masses. In December 1917, the Bolsheviks addressed "all the Muslim workers in Russia and the East whose mosques and places of worship have been destroyed, and their beliefs and customs violated by the tsars and darkness in Russia"(Morrison, 2022, pp. 978-90-04-43612–1). With this appeal, the Bolsheviks pledged to allow all religious freedoms, declaring the following (Kończak, 2018):

We declare that your beliefs, customs, and national and cultural institutions are free and inviolable from now on. And you have the right to organize your national life freely and without hindrance. This is your right, and know that your rights, along with the rights of all the peoples of Russia, are guarded by the power of the revolution and its institutions representing the Soviet workers', soldiers', and peasants' deputies") (Linz et al., 2006).

Prior to the 1917 Revolution, various ethnic groups and organizations represented by heterogeneous Russian Muslims were seeking representation in the institutions governing the Russian Empire; For example, representatives of the Turkish people, mostly Tatars, and Bashkortos, formed an intellectual, socio-political movement called Jadidism (from the Arabic word for "new"), which flourished in the mid-nineteenth century. This was a progressive, avant-garde reform movement with nationalist landmarks that consisted primarily of young scientists, philosophers, scholars, and public figures with innovative thinking, such as Hossein Faizhanov and Shihab al-Din al-Murjani. Their goal was to bring about a qualitative leap in their societies. They worked to stimulate popular participation and highlight the need for public awareness and enlightenment as a kind of diligence.

Before the October Revolution of 1917, which ignited the civil war between 1917-1923, an integrated group of nationalist movements was formed that represented Russian Muslims. From 1905 to 1917, several Muslim councils arose at the all-Russian level, as well as at the local level, throughout the territory of the empire (Brower, 1996). These gatherings put forward a relatively robust agenda and ambitious plans, which

included, among others, issues of establishing Muslim political parties, obtaining autonomy for Muslim peoples, and other matters related to political participation.

For this reason, the Bolsheviks needed to win the affection of the Muslim intellectuals and their people; For the solid patriotic feelings of the peoples of Central Asia, Siberia, the Volga region, and the Caucasus, the aspirations of these ancient peoples for political autonomy and the building of their own states could have encouraged the emergence of immature revolutionary forces. On the other hand, the ultimate goal of the Bolsheviks was not simply to establish a Soviet state on the ruins of the Russian Empire. The goal was a world revolution led by the working class. Thus, the Communists planned to bring to the understanding of the Russian Muslims what the final plan was. But that involved a two-sided process; The Bolsheviks introduced several reforms, accompanied by persistent atheistic propaganda, to secularize the state's daily life on the European model. Although attempts by Muslims to establish national, religious, and political autonomy had failed during the civil war years, it was not until the mid-1920s that the Bolsheviks began their openly anti-religious campaign under Stalin. The radical eradication of religion from the political sphere and homes involved the massive physical liquidation of religious leaders, the closure of mosques, and the political persecution of religious people, a campaign known as part of Stalin's terror. By the middle of World War II, barely over 1,500 mosques were officially operating in the USSR. In addition, in 1943-1944, about 600,000 peoples of Karachay, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Crimean Tatars, Azeris, and some other Muslim peoples were subjected to forced resettlement in Siberia and Central Asia under the pretext of their cooperation with the Nazi invaders (Kuromiya, 2014).

## **2. Islam as part of Russia's Identity**

Although religion had never been officially banned, atheism was instilled in the core idea of the Soviet state, and the repudiation of religious dogma was one of the main ideological pillars espoused to rise above the giant red world. The erasure of the national religious identity and the push of Islam - among other religions - to the margins of the Soviet state led to the emergence of a danger to the state because with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia faced the danger of disintegration due to ethnic and religious separatism, which developed into tragic war actions. After passing the critical stage with significant losses, the question arose of how to build reliable internal relations with the Muslim population distributed over 57 ethnic groups of varying sizes. Overall, the collapse of the Soviet Union marked the first moment in Russian history when freedom

of belief and personal religious affiliation was recognized as fundamental human rights regardless of religion or nationality (Yemelianova, 1999).

Today, Muslims make up about 10 percent of Russia's population; This makes them the second largest religious group after the Orthodox Christians. Russian Islam does not exist only within the borders of the Russian Federation; First: It is clear that it participates in the global, transnational processes that Islam is witnessing elsewhere in the world. Second, it includes a historical rather than a geographical grouping extending far beyond Russian borders. The Muslim Ummah in Russia is somewhat heterogeneous and includes diverse individuals representing different national mentalities and people adhering to other Islamic traditions. Ethnically, the Russian Muslim community has various groups stretching from the North Caucasus to the Turkic people of the Volga region and the Turks from the republics of Central Asia for their wide diversity and even belonging to the Persian culture. Communication between these groups is being strengthened due to globalization, freedom of movement, and global economic interdependence. By the end of the first decade of this century, Russia had redefined itself and created a relatively positive image of itself in the Muslim world. Russia has achieved much in its government's efforts to gain acceptance in the global Islamic community. This is what Putin expressed by saying: "Islam is truly an integral part of the religious, social, and cultural life of modern Russia, and its traditions are based on the eternal values of goodness, mercy, and fairness (Merati, 2017). Millions of our compatriots are followers of this ancient religion". With my endeavor, Russia became an observer in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 2003. Russia participates in dialogue with Hamas and Hezbollah and, at the same time, maintains stable relations with Israel and the Palestinian National Authority. Medvedev was the first official of this level to meet Khaled Meshaal. In contrast to the Western powers, Russia stood against the US invasion of Iraq and supported Lebanon in 2006. At the same time, Russia strengthened and realigned its relations with regional powers such as Iran, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar (Hasan Khairi, 2012).

Despite the green light given by the Kremlin, Muslim political activists have not been able to take full advantage of it. The Islamic establishment has expressed regret that some groups are using political pressure against them. The existence of a defect at the government level certainly is one of the reasons that Islam has lost the influence it deserves. But it is not as important as the lack of robust and coherent political pressure that Muslims themselves should exert. The year 2013 has come, and institutionalized

Russian Islam is still impotent and disorganized. We frequently witness the assassination of prominent muftis, imams, and activists, even in politically stable regions.

2012 was the most dangerous year in the arena of inter-Islamic affairs for the past period. In February of this year, several public figures paid with their lives for their social activities. The car of the Deputy Mufti of Stavropol Krai Kurman Ismailov was blown up in Pyatigorsk. In March, the imam of the Dagestan Mosque, Getenmagomed Abdolgaburov, was assassinated in a terrorist attack; In April, the charismatic young Muslim activist Metin Mehdiyev was brutally stabbed in Moscow. Waliullah Hazrat Yakupov, who was deputy mufti of Tatarstan until 2011, was found dead in July 2012. One of the most revered spiritual leaders in Dagestan, the Sufi sheik Said Effendi al-Sharqawi, was killed in an explosion in August, and the deputy mufti of North Ossetia, Ibrahim Dudarov, was shot dead in December if attacks on Muslim leaders motivated by religious hatred were previously prevalent in the North Caucasus (Kończak, 2018). The year 2012 showed that the roots of the problem are more profound than they appear. The motives behind some of these baffling assassinations were too vague to comment on (Dannreuther & March 2010). But the fact that all these victims were followers of the Wasatiyyah madhhab (derived from the Arabic word for "Wasatiyyah" or moderation) and staunchly opposed extremism and terrorism speaks for itself. Regardless of who is behind these inhumane acts, their main goal is to sow panic in people's hearts (Stoeckl, 2016).

Unfortunately, there is practically no integrated concept within the government, whether at the federal or regional level, to unify efforts to counter extremism. The institution of spiritual councils, which has traditionally ignored Islamic life in Russia, is going through unstable times (Simons, 2019). There are no clearly defined centers of influence or any active attempts to find common avenues for action. Governmental and public institutions are scattered and mismanaged and lack an ideological middle ground to create a stable environment for joint development (Laruelle & Hohmann, 2020). These institutions have not yet been able to overcome the decades-long crisis of anti-religious oppression, and therefore they remain weak. Given the lack of human and material resources, Islamic organizations cannot wholly ignore the mechanisms operating in the social milieu (Akhmetova, 2019).

The problem of institutional disintegration can be attributed in part to the process of generational change. This process must be understood primarily positively, as an integral part of the development of ideas, and as an attempt to reconcile Islam and modernity on a regional level. A common Soviet-era ideology united the previous

generation of Soviet graduates from Bukhara and Tashkent; many are still "in office." These people are about the same age, have the same education, and belong to the same religious tradition. Today, however, we notice the formation of the nation under the leadership of young leaders. They represent somewhat omnidirectional forces; Some of them are graduates of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, etc. Obviously, they do not know each other personally. They tend to associate themselves with different ideological camps and act in a biased and aggressive manner toward each other(I. Grinovski, personal communication, April 30, 1997). From an objective point of view, we see that the issues of Islam in Russian internal affairs will increasingly attract more public attention, both Muslims and non-Muslims. With the old generation of Muslims of the former Soviet Union gradually disappearing to be replaced by young leaders, the number of religious people who consciously practice religion is on the rise. Unlike their parents, who were raised in an age of secularism and entrenched atheism, today's youth are eager to fill the void created by radical but failed attempts to demolish the state's religious identity (Dannreuther & March 2010).

Due to the eradication of religion in the Soviet Union, the bonds between generations are not strong enough to pass traditions on to those born in the New World. With the increasing importance of information technology and social media, traditional spiritual leaders are losing their exclusive right to reproduce Islamic values, traditions, and knowledge by passing them on to the new generation. Access to information is clearly one of the most important values in today's world. The number of publications, periodicals, and websites has increased, and many mosques and religious schools have emerged in the past twenty years, promoting the spread of Islamic values. The downside is that there will always be people who are skilled enough to use and exploit technology for their own ends. The average Russian Muslim has been damaged intellectually and emotionally by issues related to protecting national and religious values. He is easy prey for extremists who play on the emotions affected by acute problems that are centuries old, such as freedom of belief, preservation of language, and national autonomy (Hunter et al., 2004).

### **3. Lack of Capabilities**

Unfortunately, even Muslims who are active in the service of their religion and their people are individuals or small groups with limited influence and lack adequate means to achieve their goals. Not only do Russian Muslims not possess any of the media and propaganda, but they also do not have the physical ability to influence it, nor even



the prestige or moral ability to guard against its evil. Any politician, for example, can speak with great boldness about the danger of the Islamization of Russia and ways to confront this future threat. Still, none dares to hint at the current risk of Judaization of the Russian media and its programmed guidance of public opinion, nor about their influence on politics and the economy. Instead, no one dares to reopen sensitive topics, such as their financing of wars and coup attempts against the ruling regime for fear of destroying its political future on charges of anti-Semitism. As for the accusation of anti-Islam, it does not frighten anyone, nor is it even proposed. Hence, these Muslim activists have no choice but to be satisfied with the modest capabilities at their disposal, such as explanatory videos on the Internet and printing and distributing leaflets that attempt to defend the rights of Muslims and refute the charges against them. This, of course, is not enough to win sympathy, let alone direct or influence public opinion. In addition, the Islamic community in Russia is generally confused. It feels that it has become a stranger in its own land, and its unorganized attempts to defend itself sometimes serve to discredit it even more in Russian society.

In parallel, there is cooperation with Sufi groups and the assistance of the Taba Sufi Foundation, which holds periodic conferences in Chechnya to spread Sufism and promote moderate Islam. The Russians' goal behind this is to make Chechnya a model of moderate Islam after it was the foremost Muslim force in conflict with the Russian state.

#### **4. National Nervousness**

As for the observant Muslims who submit, it is taken from them that they give precedence to nationalism over religion, and its fanaticism disgustingly spreads among them. And I do not mean here only against other peoples, not even against the southerners, but even among them, for this one is Bashkir first, then a Muslim, and that Tatar first of all, then a Muslim, and so on (Halbach, 2001). How many Russian Islamic projects have faltered due to the loudness of the national voice, so capabilities and efforts that had a long and arduous road ahead of them to bring together different national spectra and cultural specificities of Russia's Muslims faltered.

Muslim community leaders from various ethnicities must unite to improve the condition of the Muslim Ummah due to opportunities like now, where the Russian government needs Muslims in dealing with Ukraine, which provides concessions in various fields. Including the application of Islamic law in Muslim areas. Support from within the Muslim community and from outside is urgently needed because, so far,

Muslims have experienced stagnation in religious development and must make significant progress and take advantage of this rare opportunity.

### **5. Ignorance of Religion**

Despite a large number of religious administrations and fatwa councils in Russia, the number of preachers is very few, and this is a severe shortcoming, especially after that long era of communism, atheism, and fighting religion, as many Muslims grew up not understanding their faith, or understanding it in a distorted way. Completely. Perhaps the most telling evidence of this is the presence of Muslim women married to non-Muslim men, sometimes with the blessing of their fathers. Also, the large number of religious references, without a unified body that organizes its efforts, increases the dispersion of Muslims. Sixty muftis in the Islamic regions and republics are at the center of disagreement on many important jurisprudential issues. Any of them can interpret the Qur'an or the hadith and comment on it in the way it deems appropriate. However, it opposed what was agreed upon by the general jurists over the times. Islam is the second largest religion in Russia; Muslims represent 7-15% of the Russian population. Islam is recognized under Russian law and by political leaders as one of Russia's traditional religions, is part of Russia's historical heritage, and is financially supported by the Russian government.

### **C. Conclusion**

Two decades ago, political and ideological shifts took place, which led to intense, unprecedented developments in the Russian Muslim community. In terms of Islamic identity development, Russia will experience days of turmoil and instability shortly. These will be exacerbated by several factors, including the challenges mentioned above of contradiction, extremism, and the search for ways to unify the different Islamic centers. One of these problems relates to the recent wave of xenophobia, Islamophobia, and anti-immigration sentiment that seems to be spreading even in the more liberal countries of Western Europe.

Russian society is not spared the influence of the biased presentation of information by the global media obsessed with the "Islamic menace". Also, trying to blame the mound of economic and social problems on immigrants is a popular concept, much like the ultranationalism in Europe in the late 1930s, and populist politicians unhesitatingly exploiting it to sway the minds of potential. But the Russian labor market in every large and medium city is full of workers from the Central Asian republics and

internal migrants from the Caucasus. Many believe their existence is threatened by Islamic radicalism, extremism, and terrorism. Despite this, according to economists' forecasts, the Russian economy will grow shortly, and more labor will be needed. And since the non-permanent expatriate labor does not need naturalization, there will be hardly any alternative social institution to the mosque that will have as much influence on both sides as it does. Thus, apart from the need to build a stable base that can unite Russian Islam, there is an urgent task for the spiritual leaders to facilitate the integration of immigrants and convince the Russian people to accept their permanent presence. Another difficulty that can only be resolved through a joint effort is the reactionary widespread opposition to increasing Islamization.

The imposition of restrictions on the construction of mosques in Moscow or the recently passed biased anti-liberal legislation, including the "banning of manifestations of infidelity in public places" -whatever that means-are examples of obscurantist practices at the highest level of government. There are no universal prescriptions for Russia's heterogeneous Muslim community. Qualitative development concerning the issues of the Russian state will be the main task before this society in the future. And if the past decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union were devoted to putting in place the necessary infrastructure, whether physical or institutional, Now is the time to push intra-Islamic relations to a higher level. This will enable Islam to become integral to Russia's political identity.

The policy of openness pursued by President Putin had a positive impact in consolidating Muslims' connection to their homeland, Russia, and in confirming their loyalty as part of the formation of the Russian nation. No Russian leader or president in the tsarist and communist eras had ever visited the Russian mufti or mosques in Russia. Today, Prime Minister Medvedev visited the All-Russian Council of Muftis, and it was the best precedent in the history of Russia. In 2016, Putin personally sponsored the opening of the Moscow Grand Mosque.

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