



**ICT**  
International Institute  
for Counter-Terrorism  
With the Support of Keren Daniel

## Islamic Radicalization in Russia

Giada Tardivo (Research Assistant, ICT)  
Spring 2015

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the phenomenon of Islamic radicalization in Russia, analyzing the causes, dynamics and implications of the increasing radicalization of Russia's Muslim community. The paper argues that in the last few years Islam has increased its physical presence in Russia, for example through the construction of new mosques and of educational structures, but it has also increased its online presence. The increase of the international mobility of persons and of ideas, new demographic developments and migration flows have also contributed to the change in the composition of Russia's Muslim communities and to the spread of Islam to other areas. The growing influence of transnational Islamic networks (*Salafism*, Muslim Brotherhood) has played an important role in the radicalization of Russia's local Muslim communities, and it contributed to turn local Islam into a new form of protest against the Russian repressive and authoritarian state, particularly in the Northern Caucasus. Finally, the paper argues Russia has a unique approach towards the new forms of Islam and its increasing presence. The Russian strategy towards the Muslim communities seems to be characterized by a strong repression against transnational forms of Islam; by secrecy and lack of transparency in regulatory matters; and by the lack of an open dialogue.

\* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Aims of the study**

The issue of Islamic radicalization is very important for Russia, due to the high number of Muslims living in the country as well as due to the many ethno-political conflicts that took place in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), many of which seemingly had a religious component. Russia has an estimated 20 million Muslims, including 3.5-4 million Muslim immigrants<sup>1</sup>. The phenomenon of Islamic radicalization has become ingrained in Russian society, and it has had an impact on the country's public policy.

The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of Islamic radicalization in Russia, and to consider the causes, dynamics and implications of this radicalization process.

The analysis begins with a brief historical overview of the evolution of Islamism and *Jihadism* in the Russian Federation. This chapter includes a discussion about state-Muslim relations in post-Soviet Russia, Muslim migration from Central Asia to Russia and its impact on the Islamic revival, and the complex relations between local Islam and new, transnational Islamic movements. The next chapter of the paper is dedicated to the dynamics of Russian Muslim communities' radicalization. It will highlight the participants of radical movements, the propagation of ideologies through new media, the manifestation of tensions, and the influence of current world events on the radicalization process in the Russian Federation. This chapter will be supported with evidence from three case studies, illustrating the different radicalization dynamics in three regions of the Russian Federation. Finally, the last chapter will provide an assessment of the

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<sup>1</sup> Malashenko Alexei, *Islam in Russia*, Russia in Global Affairs, No. 3, 2014, p. 176-189.

phenomenon, explaining the reasons behind the levels of radicalization in Russia while considering reactions of the state and of the society to Islamic radicalization.

## **Terminology: Islamic radicalization, ‘Salafism’, ‘Jihadism’**

The terms ‘Islamic radicalization’, ‘Salafism’ and ‘Jihadism’ are frequently used in this paper and therefore it will be useful to define them. However, it is important to note that there is no universally accepted definition for any of these terms. There are many debates among scholars about the definitions of such terms and, therefore, I will adopt the definitions that best suit the following discussion.

Regarding the concept of ‘radicalization’, many critics argue<sup>2</sup> that there is no widely accepted definition of the process of ‘radicalization’, due also to the fact that the concept and definition of radicalism changes with time and space. Nevertheless, the term ‘radicalism’ is still useful in describing dynamics related to political violence. One of the most complete definitions has been proposed by Charles E. Allen: “*radicalization is the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change*”<sup>3</sup>. Scholars and policymakers usually distinguish between cognitive and violent radicalization. ‘Cognitive radicalization’ is a term used to describe the process through which individuals acquire ideas that are at odds with those of the mainstream, refute the legitimacy of the social and political order, and try to replace it with another order based on a system of beliefs.

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<sup>2</sup> Sedgwick Mark, *The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion, Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, No. 4 (2010): 479–494.

<sup>3</sup> Allen Charles E., *Threat of Islamic Radicalization to the Homeland*, testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, March 14, 2007, p. 4.

‘Violent radicalization’ occurs when individuals employ violence to realize the process designated by the ‘cognitive radicalization’.<sup>4</sup>

While the definition of ‘radicalization’ proposed by Allen is very comprehensive, it still leaves many questions open. For example, there is a need to define what ‘an extreme system of beliefs’ is, and also to assess what are the factors and the causes leading to radicalization. There are a lot of theories about radicalization, as well as a lack of reliable supporting evidence. Some of these theories focus on structural factors, like political tensions, marginalization, and cultural issues; others focus on personal and individual factors, such as the influence of mentors. Other theories have been proposed to explain the radicalization of European Muslim communities, and they often identify the search for identity and the anger over discrimination and economic deprivation as the main causes for radicalization. Some theories, however, assume that radicalization is a highly complicated and individualized process, and that it can be explained only through an interaction of structural and individual factors.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that the concept of ‘radicalization’ exists in relation to many ideologies. This paper refers to ‘radicalization’ only in the sense of *Jihadist* inspiration.

Another important term, which needs to be defined, is ‘Islamism’. According to Peter Mandaville, ‘Islamism’ can be defined as “*forms of political theory and practice that have as their goal the establishment of an Islamic political order in the sense of a state whose governmental principles, institutions and legal system derive directly from the Shari’ah*”.<sup>6</sup>

It must be noted that ‘Islamism’ is a highly diversified movement, which embraces many different ideas and groups. It is possible to differentiate Islamists according to their

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<sup>4</sup> Sedgwick, *The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion* (2010), p. 479–494.

<sup>5</sup> Dalgaard-Nielsen Anja, *Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, No. 9 (2010): 797 – 814.

<sup>6</sup> Mandaville Peter, *Global Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 57.

*modus operandi*. Islamists can be divided into three subcategories: violent rejectionists, non-violent rejectionists, and participationists. These three categories can be visualized as a pyramid, where at the top are violent rejectionists - often referred to as *Jihadists*, who reject participation in the democratic system and who use violence to advance their goals – at the intermediate level are non-violent rejectionists – individuals who reject the legitimacy of any government not based on Islamic law, but who do not advocate the use of violence – and finally at the bottom of the pyramid are participationists – individuals who adhere to Islam but who advocate interaction and engagement with the society at large. This is however just an oversimplification for illustration purposes, and the lines between the categories are very blurry, and in some cases it can be difficult to put individuals or groups in one of the pyramid's categories.<sup>7</sup>

Another term, which must be defined, is 'Salafism'. Its original manifestation goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when 'Salafism' was a political-religious movement advocating the return to the uncorrupted form of Islam embraced by the early followers of the prophet Mohammed. Recently, 'Salafism' has come to indicate a contemporary ideological movement that, while advocating the return to 'pure Islam', has rejected the modernism of 19<sup>th</sup> century 'Salafism' and is characterized by conservatism, intransigence and intolerance. Often scholars divide – in a very oversimplified way – *Salafists* into three groups: quietist, political and *Jihadist*. This classification leads to the definition of the last term, which is relevant for this paper: 'jihadist (Salafist)'. 'Jihadist Salafists' adopt the most extreme forms of 'Salafism', and represent the ideological sub-current of Islamism that advocates the use of violence to pursue its goals.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, 'Salafism' has gained followers not only in Muslim countries, but also in Muslim communities around the world. There are many reasons that explain this

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> Vidino Lorenzo, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy. Birth, Development, and Radicalization Dynamics*. Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (2014), p. 10-15.

phenomenon including ‘Salafism’s’ appeal for simplicity, authenticity and moral superiority. These aspects create a misunderstanding of the term ‘Salafism,’ in particular in Western debates on the issue, making it synonymous with extremism and terrorism. This approach is very problematic, because ‘Salafism’ remains a large intellectual movement that cannot be reduced to extremism and terrorism, and the large majority of *Salafists* live both in Muslim majority and in Muslim minority countries without engaging in violent actions.<sup>9</sup>

The post-Soviet Islamic revival, including the radicalization process, has attracted the interest of many Russian academics, due also to the long-established tradition of Oriental Studies in Russia. Some authors – such as Alexander Ignatenko and Roman Silantiev – focus on the dichotomous categorization of Islam as “official” and “non-official”, with the former being considered a traditional and local form of Islam linked to Russian popular traditions, and the latter being considered as a new and transnational form of political opposition to the Russian state, and therefore as a threat. Ignatenko, an expert in Islamic history, focuses in particular on the Islamic movement called *Wahhabism* and attributes it to deliberate attempts by Saudi Arabia to export its ideology for geopolitical reasons. Silantiev, an expert in Islamic traditions, has collected a lot of information on the post-Soviet internal and external politics of Muslim organizations; and he argues that radicalization is in part due to groups vying for political influence and material resources within the Russian institutional framework.<sup>10</sup>

A range of ethnographic studies written by Vladimir Bobrovnikov, Dmitry Makarov, Akhmet Yarlykapov, Enver Kisriev, Ruslan Kurbanov, and Shamil Shakhaliiev<sup>11</sup> offer quite a different picture of the topic, in the context of radical activities in various regions of the North Caucasus. They analyze, in particular, the impact of the Chechen wars on the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 10-15.

<sup>10</sup> Shterin Marat, *Religion, Extremism and Radicalisation in post-communist Russia: issues, public policy and research*: [http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/debate/shterin\\_2012\\_religion-2/](http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/debate/shterin_2012_religion-2/) (4.3.15)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

political, social and economic situation in the region and how that affected radicalization. These studies recognize the influence of radical ideologies, while arguing that radicalization can be also explained by the search – mainly by young Muslims – for alternative sources of authority (*Sharia* law, pure Islam) in the rapidly changing modern world. These studies criticize the idea that *Wahhabist* groups emerged only as the result of foreign missionary activities. Instead, they argue that the scale of these activities has been exaggerated and that *Salafi* ideas were already present in the region in the 1980s. Makarov and Yarlykapov argue especially that the use of *Wahhabism* as a general explanation for extremism and radicalization can become a political instrument to delegitimize and persecute those expressions of social protest, which are not necessarily linked to violence. Moreover, these persecutions may encourage radical positions and terrorist acts, as it was the case of the New Muslims movements in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria and in Dagestan.<sup>12</sup>

## Methodology

This paper is written on the basis of broad research project on the topic of Islamic radicalization carried out by the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism and will focus in particular on Russia. Most of the sources are academic papers or articles written by experts and published in international journals for security or oriental studies. These papers are mainly written by Russian experts and professors; however, there are also considerable contributions from foreign experts. During the literature review, no paper analyzing the phenomenon of Islamic radicalization in Russia as a whole could be found; most of these studies analyze and discuss either single aspects of the process of radicalization, or they focus on specific regions (mainly on Chechnya and on other North Caucasus Republics). Another kind of source used were articles and videos published in

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



the media, which are particularly relevant due to the contemporary nature of the topic. Media articles consist of interviews, and of analysis of the propagation of radical ideologies through media (for example, recruitment through the internet and social media, fund-raising campaigns for the *Jihadists* in Syria and Iraq, etc.).

## **HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF ISLAMISM AND *JIHADISM* IN RUSSIA: CONTEXT, CONTINUITIES, CHANGES**

### **State-Muslims Relations in Russia**

In the Soviet Union, religion was considered an opponent to the state's ideology. While the Soviet state tried to root out Russian Orthodoxy, it also considered Islam in Central Asia and in the Northern Caucasus as an expression of backwardness of the people living in those areas. This conception of religion changed in the 1980s due to the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet authorities realized that Islam was not only a religion, but also a political power that could be used in two ways – as a tool for anti-Soviet resistance, but also as a weapon in anti-Western revolutions. The conception of religion changed in the period of Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika, when religion was considered not to be an enemy of the state but a moral value. The renaissance of religion began with Christian Orthodoxy, while the revival of Islam was slower. Islam, at the time, was increasingly connected with forms of nationalism, and it was quickly politicized and used as form of political and social protest especially by the Chechen separatists in the 1990s.<sup>13</sup>

The political, social and economic context of post-Soviet Russia significantly influenced the state's engagement with Muslim communities. Another peculiarity of the Russian environment is the variety of the Muslim communities and their highly complex

<sup>13</sup> Malashenko, *Islam in Russia* (2014), p. 176-189.

interactions with other religious groups. Russia`s Muslim community includes not only immigrant populations, but also large areas where ethnic Muslims have lived side by side with Orthodox Christians for centuries. There are also strong differences in the religious and cultural practices of Russian Muslims, as well as different traditions of engagement with the federal structures.<sup>14</sup>

The Russian approach to managing issues of multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic diversity is a very conservative one, and it often has an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian character, that finds its manifestation in top-down assimilation policies. State engagement with Muslim communities consists basically in the control of religious and cultural manifestations of Muslim identity, as well as in the control of territorial and ideological expansion.<sup>15</sup> Russian authorities have failed to develop a coherent and pragmatic approach to Islamic culture and religion. They are suspicious of Islam, and they consider it as a potential threat to the stability of the country and as an ideology contrary to the Constitution. This kind of attitude is not only a feature of the Russian state, but it is also present in Europe and in the United States. This fear of Islam in Russia comes from the fact that the authorities` demand for universal and unconditional loyalty to the state cannot be fulfilled, because Russian Muslims are a part of the global Islamic community and they are exposed to external influences, which has used Islam as a form of social and political protest against the ruling system.<sup>16</sup>

However, it is important to consider that in the history of the Russian state, relations with Muslim communities have been liberal, accommodating Russia`s Muslim communities and supporting their minority rights.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Braginskaia Ekaterina, “*Domestication*” or *Representation?* *Russia and the Institutionalisation of Islam in Comparative Perspective*. *Europe-Asia Studies* (2012), p. 599.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, P ; 599.

<sup>16</sup> Malashenko, *Islam in Russia* (2014), p. 176-189.

<sup>17</sup> Braginskaia, “*Domestication*” or *Representation?* (2012), p. 599.

A key feature of the Russian state is the historical continuity of Muslim administrative structures and their close ties with the government. Since the state's relations with Islamic institutions are largely modeled on Church engagement, the state is also willing to facilitate Christian-Muslim dialogue and to mobilize Muslim spiritual capital to emphasize Russia's religious diversity and its ability to bridge the gap between the Muslim East and the Christian West.<sup>18</sup>

Muslim Spiritual Boards, which comprise the majority of Muslim religious organizations, have been established for over two centuries, and they have remained subject to state influence. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Islamic revival and the formation of new instruments of Muslim governance were accompanied by an asymmetrical shaping of the Muslim space. Liberalization challenged the state's desire to bring Muslim communal governance in line with the official strategy of vertical administration. Internal divisions between Muslim leaders were exploited by the state to create competition for state support.<sup>19</sup>

Two other important factors to consider when analyzing Muslim communities in Russia are their geographical dispersion and their traditional diversity. The attitude of the Russian government towards Muslim communities depends also on their level of assimilation. For example, there are significant differences between Muslim communities in the Volga region and in the Northern Caucasus. While in the Northern Caucasus there is a strong presence of radical Islamic groups, in the Volga region Muslims remain a minority and they are mainly linked to the local Islamic tradition. However, the increasing immigration – particularly from Central Asia - and the growing nationalism of the ethnic Russian population are becoming a potential obstacle to stability and inter-

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 599.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 600.

confessional coexistence.<sup>20</sup> A more reformist brand of Islam can be found in Tatarstan, which was more politically integrated into the state structure in the 19<sup>th</sup> and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite nationalistic aspirations, the region remains relatively open to state regulatory policies towards Islam. The Russian state, from its perspective, presents its interaction with Islam in Tatarstan as a good working model of religious tolerance and Christian-Muslim dialogue.<sup>21</sup>

A completely different situation can be found in the Northern Caucasus, a region that is considered by the Russian state as its primary security concern. The Chechen conflict and the two wars fought there (1994-1995 and 1999-2000) played an important role in determining the current policy of the Russian government towards Islam. An example of this influence can be seen, for example, in the determination of the Russian government to fight real or “perceived” threats of Islamic extremism. Although the political liberalization and decentralization of the Boris Yeltsin-era have encouraged greater autonomy for Chechnya, Chechen efforts to gain independence have been suppressed. Radical Islam and instability in the regions are just some effects of the Russian government’s oppressive military campaigns in Chechnya. Vladimir Putin justified this policy as a necessary measure in the “war on terror”. The conflict in Chechnya outlines some important aspects of Muslims communities in Russia. It highlights a tension between the improvement of living standards and support for moderate forms of Islam on one side and, on the other side the attempt of the Russian state to control Muslim communities and to bring them in line with its own ideological principles. Russia's attempt to impose on Chechnya its own ideological principles has only worsened the

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<sup>20</sup> Dannreuther Roland, March Luke, *Russia and Islam: State approaches, radicalization, and the ‘War on Terror’*, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Braginskaia, “*Domestication*” or *Representation?* (2012), p. 599.

situation and has led to greater Islamic radicalization not only in Chechnya, but also in other North Caucasian Republics.<sup>22</sup>

Summarizing, we can identify three different approaches of the Russian state towards the Muslim communities: the first approach consists in the assimilation of Russian and migrant Muslim populations through a top-down process; the second approach is the respect for the cultural and religious diversity of the (local) Muslim communities and the liberalization of Muslim institutions; the third approach consists in suppressing those Muslim institutions or ideologies which represent a security concern for the Russian state.<sup>23</sup>

## **Migration and the post-Soviet Islamic revival in Russia**

Another important aspect of Russia's governance of Islam consists in the control of Muslims' geographical mobility and of migration patterns. The term 'mobility' in this paper should be understood in two different but complementary ways. On the one hand, 'mobility' refers to the physical movement of people, which concretely means the ability of Russian Muslims to move and to settle down unhindered within Russia; their ability to travel abroad for religious purposes; and the ability of non-Russian Muslims to enter Russia (whether to settle or to visit). On the other hand, 'mobility' can be also defined in a more broadly way to include other phenomena related to migration and to the physical movement of people; such as the degree to which communication with foreigners can take place without obstacles.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 601.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 601.

<sup>24</sup> Light Matthew (2012) *Migration, 'Globalised' Islam and the Russian State: A Case Study of Muslim Communities in Belgorod and Adygeya Regions*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64:2, p. 195-226.

During the Soviet period, Soviet Muslims were isolated from their foreign counterparts, due to the general repression of religion and to the state's strict control of citizens' movement. During this time, Soviet Muslims could not travel abroad for religious study. During Stalin's rule, many representatives of Muslim communities were imprisoned or executed, while many others fled abroad.<sup>25</sup>

The Soviet government tried on one side to reduce Muslims' ability to practice Islam, but on the other side it tried to strengthen a state-supported Islamic establishment. The state did this by giving religious establishments a monopolistic control over all Muslim religious activities. This policy was carried out with the limitation of religious practices of the Muslim communities and with the control and limitation of migration, foreign travel and internal migration. This policy led to a divide between an official form of Islam, controlled by the state, and an unofficial and quasi-clandestine form of Islam, developed outside of state's control and through the interaction with foreign forms of Islam.<sup>26</sup>

As a result of post-Soviet Muslim migration patterns mainly from other post-Soviet states in the Caucasus and from Central Asia, the presence of Islam has expanded into regions of Russia far from its historical origins in the North Caucasus and in the Volga region. Russia has a large and growing Muslim population. Migration increased as a consequence of political violence in the 1990s in some of the Russia's neighbor states and in the 2000s with the growing attractiveness of the Russian labor market to citizens of poorer post-Soviet republics.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 195-226.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 195-226.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 195-226.

The exact number of immigrants from Central Asia is unknown, as many of them entered the country illegally. Estimates by Elshan Rustamov (2012)<sup>28</sup> contend that there are anywhere from 700,000 to 1.2 million Uzbeks, 800,000 to 2 million Tajiks, and 400,000 to 800,000 Kyrgyz immigrants in Russia.<sup>29</sup> The estimated number of immigrants from Azerbaijan fluctuates between 600,000 and 1 million people.<sup>30</sup> The number of North Caucasian migrants is difficult to approximate, but it is certainly in the six-digit range. In 2010 Rosstat – a Russian statistics agency – suggested that Chechens make up the third largest Muslim group in Russia, with a population of 1.04 million.<sup>31</sup>

There has also been substantial migration within Russia; for example Moscow – as the economic center of attraction – has become the major destination for labor migrants from other regions of the country. As a result of these dynamics, the actual Muslim population of Russia is larger than the official total, and is expected to grow in the coming years. Moscow alone is believed to have 2 million persons of the Muslim faith<sup>32</sup>, and it is part of the emerging Muslim diaspora in non-traditional regions of Russia (among them also the Adygeya and Belgorod regions). These new Muslim communities are usually less influenced by local and longstanding Muslim institutions and traditions, and they try much more to situate themselves in the contemporary Russian society and in the network of the global Muslim community. This means that Islam in Russia is increasingly becoming the religion of migrants and of people without direct links to local Muslim

<sup>28</sup> Rustamov Elshan, “V Rossii nakhoditsya bolee 600 tysyach migrantov iz Azerbajjana” [There are 600000 migrants from Azerbaijan in Russia], 1News.az, December 29, 2012: [www.1news.az/region/Russia/20121229011520232.html](http://www.1news.az/region/Russia/20121229011520232.html) (02.12.2015)

<sup>29</sup> Malashenko Alexey, *The Dynamics of Russian Islam*, Carnegie Moscow Center, February 2013: <http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=50811> (13.3.2015)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Malashenko Alexei, *Islamic Challenges to Russia, From the Caucasus to the Volga and the Urals*, Carnegie Moscow Center, May 13, 2015: <http://carnegie.ru/2015/05/13/islamic-challenges-to-russia-from-caucasus-to-volga-and-urals/i914> (08.11.2015)

<sup>32</sup> Light (2012) *Migration, 'Globalised' Islam and the Russian State*, p. 195-226.

institutions in Russia, and that this kind of Islam is becoming more oriented toward international Islamic movements.<sup>33</sup>

## Local Islam versus transnational Islamic groups

In the 1990s Russian Islam became increasingly diversified, and different Islamic traditions developed and coexisted in a competitive and conflicting way. According to A. Malashenko, Islamic traditions in Russia can be put into two main and general categories: “traditional or local Islam” and “non-traditional or transnational Islam”.<sup>34</sup>

‘Traditional or local Islam’ is supposed to be a religious tradition that is centuries old and part of a well-established theological school of thought. In Russia, Bashkirs and Tatars adhere to *Hanafism*, and the Muslims in the North Caucasus for the most part follow *Shafiism*. Different branches of *Sufism* (*Tariqatism* in the North Caucasus) also make up ‘local Islam’.<sup>35</sup>

‘Non-traditional Islam’ includes those Islamic ideologies that began to enter into Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the borders with the Muslim world were opened. It includes mainly *Salafism*, fundamentalism and *Wahhabism*; the term ‘Islamism’ is usually used – even if wrongly - to describe all these forms of ‘non-traditional Islam’.<sup>36</sup>

New Islamic groups with transnational connections to the Middle East and South Asia have claimed to bring an “authentic” Islam to Russia; some of them have used political means, while others have chosen to pursue their goals with violent means. ‘Transnational

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 195-226.

<sup>34</sup> Malashenko, *The Dynamics of Russian Islam* (February 2013): <http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=50811> (13.3.2015)

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



Islam' in Russia represents a complex phenomenon, ranging from the so-called *Jihadists* to more moderate groups like the *Fethullah Gülen*<sup>37</sup> movement. *Salafi Jihadists* have carried out terrorist attacks in the North Caucasus, and they were involved in the assassination of representatives of traditional Islam in Dagestan and Tatarstan in 2011-2012. Moderate Islamic groups such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir*<sup>38</sup> and the *Fethullah Gülen* movement refrain from using violence. These new Islamic movements have attracted the attention of the media, and the groups associated with it are often referred to as belonging to *Wahhabism*. However, 'transnational Islam' is not a homogeneous and monolithic movement, and it cannot be equated to terrorism. Many of these groups have also had an influence on the development of Muslim societies in some regions, and they have had an impact on the official policy towards Muslim communities.<sup>39</sup>

The means used by *Jihadists* and extremist Muslims are very different from the ones used by "gradualist" Muslims, who aim at generating social change through engagement with society as a whole (social interaction, academia, traditional and digital media). *Jihadists* and *Salafis* were one of the first 'transnational Islamic groups' to be banned in Russia, in 2002.<sup>40</sup> They also played a role in the insurgency in Chechnya and Dagestan, which

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<sup>37</sup> The *Fethullah Gülen* movement is also known in Russia as the *Nurcular* Movement. Since the 1990s it has been active in the North Caucasus, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, and it opened schools, spread its teaching through its institutions and personal contacts among the Tatars, the Bashkirs, and the Azeri diaspora in Moscow. However, the movement became controversial, and its institutions were closed down and its staff deported between 2001 and 2006. Afterwards, the movement was outlawed, and it has been monitored by the security services.

<sup>38</sup> The members of the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* movement are often arrested with the charge of 'organising and coordinating an extremist religious group'. After it was banned, it operated through informal networks and secret meetings. However, it managed to distribute its publications and even to organise annual public conferences in Moscow (in 2010, 2011, 2012). This movement is also active on the internet, and it has a lot of websites, social media and channels. *Hizb ut-Tahrir* has been accused of being a potential tool for recruitment for the insurgency in the Middle East. Even if there is no concrete evidence, some think that *Hizb ut-Tahrir* may facilitate the radicalization process of its members, due to its ideological closeness to *Salafism*. As reaction to the repression against this movement and its members, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* organised in 2011-2012 a global campaign against the repression of Muslims in Russia.

<sup>39</sup> Münster Anna, *Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea*, Research Paper, Russia and Eurasia Programme, November 2014, p. 2-3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

started initially as a nationalist struggle, but turned them into a religious one.<sup>41</sup> This increased also the support from neighboring Muslim countries, and attracted extremist Muslims from Central Asian countries and from the Middle East. The symbol of this struggle is the Caucasus Emirate that was responsible for attacks against Russian military and civilians (bombings of the Moscow Metro in 2010 and of Domodedovo Airport in 2011). However, the Caucasus Emirate is not confined to the Northern Caucasus, but it has rather become part of the global *Jihadist* movement, particularly through its links to *Al-Qaeda*. This led also to the involvement of the Caucasus Emirate in the civil war in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup>

The Islam presented by “gradualists” is not always a religious concept, but rather a social, moral and even economic alternative. Regarding the use of the means to reach their purposes, the “gradualists” can be defined as moderate. However, they remain fundamentalist in relation to their faith, and the definition of moderate in this case may differ from the traditional understanding. However, even if the new Islamic groups use different means, they have common goals: they all focus on impact and influence. Some of the organizations linked to the Muslim Brotherhood have socio-political goals, which consist in encouraging Muslims to become religiously observant and to contribute in a constructive way to the community. Other groups like the *Fethullah Gülen* movement focus only on social goals (religious observance); while even others like the *Hizb ut-Tharir* movement have mainly political goals, such as the establishment of a caliphate in the Muslim enclaves of Russia.<sup>43</sup>

The Russian authorities have maintained and accepted the division of Islam into local and transnational, even if many scholars, politicians and theologians consider this simplified division of Islam as incorrect and dangerous because it splits society; while they would

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 5-6.

<sup>42</sup> Hahn Gordon M., *Getting the Caucasus Emirate Right*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 2011, p. 1–14.

<sup>43</sup> Münster, *Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea*, November 2014, p. 2-3.

rather support an interpretation based on the thesis of the “unity of Islam in its diversity”. However, at the federal level it is still considered important to divide Islam into “local” and “foreign”, while expressing a particular distrust towards the latter form of Islam.<sup>44</sup>

It follows that the Russian government has adopted a unique policy towards all ‘non-traditional Islamic groups’: they are all treated as a security threat. Most of the Islamic groups with transnational connections have been banned: *Salafis* in 2002, the Muslim Brotherhood in 2003, *Hizb ut-Tharir* in 2004, and the *Fethullah Gülen* movement in 2008.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the Russian government closely monitors Islamic publications and their online presence. In 2012 the authorities updated the Federal List of Extremist Materials, which now includes classical books on Islam and the works of the *Fethullah Gülen* movement (which are legal in most of the countries).<sup>46</sup> The government also censors the Internet, blocks websites, and pressures other governments to shut down servers (i.e. Lithuania and Sweden in relation to a website on the Caucasus Emirate). Bans on literature and membership in Muslim organizations have led to persecution and imprisonment in Russia, and – after the occupation - also in Crimea.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Malashenko, *Islam in Russia* (2014), p. 176-189.

<sup>45</sup> Münster, *Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea*, November 2014, p. 2-3.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

## RADICALIZATION OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN RUSSIA

### Geographical spread of radicalism



(Source: Azerbaijan International: <http://www.azer.com/index.html> [11.5.2015])

The most radicalized regions of Russia are the eastern and central parts of the Northern Caucasus – Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia and the districts of the Stavropol region. Radical trends from Chechnya have been spreading into neighboring regions. In fact, radical tendencies are widespread in Kabarda, Balkaria, and Karachai, although the level of radicalization in those regions is not as high as it is in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia.<sup>48</sup> The lowest level of Islamic radicalization in the Northern Caucasus is found in the Republic of Adygeya and in the Krasnodar territory, because in these regions

<sup>48</sup> Malashenko Aleksei, Yarlykapov Akhmet, *Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Community*, Microcon Policy Working Paper 9, May 2009, p. 4-5.

ethno-nationalism has not been superseded by religious radicalism. However, also in the Republic of Adygeya Islamic radicals have stepped up their activity.<sup>49</sup>

In the other parts of Russia there is less activity carried out by Islamic radicals, and they do not act in a structured way. There are small groups located in the Volga area, in the southern Urals and in southern Siberia. Manifestations of radical Islam have been reported in Tatarstan, Bashkiria, Mordovia, the Samara region, the Kurgan, Orenburg, Penza, Perm, Ulyanovsk, Chelyabinsk, and the Tyumen regions. Radicals are also present in Moscow, but they usually maintain a low profile.<sup>50</sup> Lastly, small and unconnected groups of Islamic radicals exist in regions that are far away from the most radicalized regions; some examples are Kaliningrad, the Baltic Sea, and Vladivostok on the Pacific.<sup>51</sup>

## Radical movement participants and their activities

A *Jamaat*, which means “society” or “community” in Arabic, can be defined as the fundamental organization of Muslim society. The spiritual leader of a *Jamaat* is the imam – the prayer leader in a mosque, and a person who plays a very important role in the community due to his knowledge and authority. There is a strong link between the *Jamaat* and the imam. In Russia, the word *Jamaat* is often used as a synonym for radicalism and when it is used in the media it usually refers to radically minded Muslims.<sup>52</sup>

The term “youth *Jamaats*” is also very common, and it highlights the characteristic of the young age of the movement participants. The *Jamaats* were formed in the 1980s and 1990s, and they were in opposition towards the official Islamic bodies – the Muslim

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 4-5.

<sup>50</sup> Malashenko, *The Dynamics of Russian Islam* (February 2013): <http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=50811> (13.3.2015)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 5-14.

Religious Boards – and towards the so-called “local Islam”, whose members usually belong to an older generation supporting the observance of all Russian popular traditions. The young leaders of the *Jamaats* consider those traditions contrary to Islam. The first phase of the establishment of the *Jamaats* in the 1980s was to give an organizational structure to the movement. The second generation of leaders of the *Jamaat* who entered the scene in the 1990s strengthened the ideological basis of the *Jamaat*. Many of the young leaders of the second generation were educated in the Arab world or in other Muslim-majority countries outside the region.<sup>53</sup>

In the Republic of Dagestan the *Jamaats* were formed very early; their presence dates back to the 1970s. In the 2000s after the end of the war in Chechnya and after the suppression of major associations in Dagestan, the *Jamaats* of the Kabardino-Balkaria became the best-organized network association. Their leaders were in contact with each other, and they were very well informed about the situation of other *Jamaats*. Despite these connections, each *Jamaat* maintains its internal autonomy.<sup>54</sup>

From an ideological point of view, youth *Jamaats* are unstable. In fact, their members represent very different ideologies, ranging from extremism to moderate radicalism. Some of the Caucasus youth *Jamaats* were also infiltrated by separatists who had an even greater influence on them.<sup>55</sup> In the 1990s some of the *Jamaats* were transformed into cells of the separatist movement, whose ethnic character was replaced by a religious one: the proclamation of a Northern Caucasian Emirate. In the second half of the 1990s there was a change in the qualitative composition of the leadership of the radical Islamic movement in the Caucasus. The first generation of leaders, who received a local education in the late Soviet and post-Soviet years, was replaced by a generation of

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 5-14.

<sup>54</sup> Shterin Marat, Yarlykapov Akhmet, *Reconsidering Radicalisation and Terrorism: the New Muslims Movement in Kabardino-Balkaria and its Path to Violence*, Religion, State and Society, 39:2-3 (2011), p. 312-315.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 312-315.

younger imams, many of whom received a fundamental Islamic education abroad. Well-known examples are Musa Mukozhev and Anzor Astemirov of the Kabardino-Balkarian *Jamaat*.<sup>56</sup>

The organizational structure of the separatist *Jamaat* community is different from the one of the traditional *Jamaat* communities of the region. Traditional *Jamaats* are organized according to a territorial principle, and they incorporate the population of a village or of a district grouped around a mosque; separatist *Jamaats* are extra-territorial and dispersed.<sup>57</sup> Examples of separatist *Jamaats* are *Shariat* and *Dzhennet* in Dagestan, which were created on the basis of loyalty to the ideology and practice of the separatist movement. From an organizational point of view, these *Jamaats* do not represent any united association. Their structure includes autonomous groups that are made up of a small number of members. It is particularly difficult to identify the whole network, since finding one cell usually does not lead to uncovering others. This kind of structure helps the network to survive confrontations with the security forces. Their members come often from different ethnic groups, in particular from the Northern Caucasus, from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and from the Middle East.<sup>58</sup>

In the rest of Muslim Russia, the *Jamaats* are practically not present. Instead, there are often small Muslim communities composed of a few members. The overwhelming majority of mosques are controlled by the Muslim Religious Boards loyal to the authorities and constantly monitored by the security services, and so it is difficult for other kinds of communities to be created around the mosque.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to *Jamaats*, mosques and Islamic educational institutions, several other types of radical Islamic organizations have been active in Russia. The most prominent of them

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 312-315.

<sup>57</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 5-14.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 5-14.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 5-14.

was the Islamic Revival Party established in Astrakhan in 1990, which had an impact on the politicization of Islam. It had also a branch in Dagestan, which was called the “Islamic Party of Dagestan”. In Tatarstan the Imam Youth Islamic Cultural Center was created in 1990, and was famous for its separatist sentiments and for its radical position.<sup>60</sup>

## The absence of charismatic Muslim leadership

In Russia there are no charismatic Muslim leaders whose influence could shape the whole Islamic community. For example Talgat Tajuddin, Chairman of the Central Religious Board of Muslims of Russia, claims to be an authority for all Russian Muslims, but even in the Republic of Bashkortostan where he lives, he is recognized as a spiritual leader only by 18.5% of the Muslims.<sup>61</sup> Talgat Tajuddin tried to form a vertical structure of power for the Russian Muslim *Ummah*, and to place himself at the head of such a hierarchy. In this perspective, Tajuddin would become the Muslim counterpart of the Moscow Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. Tajuddin faced strong resistance from regional branches of the Muslim Spiritual Directorates (MSDs), which preferred to maintain their autonomy due to the differences among the various Islamic traditions within the Russian *Ummah*.<sup>62</sup>

Nafigulla Ashirov, Chairman of the Religious Board of Muslims of Asian Russia, has the potential to be a popular leader for Russia’s Muslim community. Ashirov does not participate in radical activities but has gained support for his statements in favor of Hamas, the Taliban and al-Qaeda and for his criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 5-14.

<sup>61</sup> Yunusova, A.B. *Islam v Bashkortostane* [Islam in Bashkortostan], 1999.

<sup>62</sup> Goble Paul, *Mufti Tajuddin Seeks to Make Himself and Then His Son ‘Muslim Patriarch’ of Russia*, Jamestown’s Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume: 12, issue: 89 (May 12, 2015): [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43900&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=786&no\\_cache=1#.VWhYNFbGA6V](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43900&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=786&no_cache=1#.VWhYNFbGA6V) (29.05.2015)

<sup>63</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia’s Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 14-16.



Moreover, he is also known for his statement in favor of *Wahhabism*: “*Wahhabism* says nothing about a call for terror. It is a trend in Islamic thinking, not a tactic for waging a struggle. There are no bans on thought in contemporary legislation.”<sup>64</sup>

Usually, the authority and the popularity of radical leaders remain limited to their own communities. In the Northern Caucasus, the political conditions were ripe for the emergence of charismatic figures. Some examples of politicians or ideologists with leadership aspirations were Ahmed Qadi Akhtayev, Sheikh Bagauddin, a leading ideologist of the *Salafists* in the 1990s, and Nadirshah Khachilayev, head of the Union of Muslims of Russia.<sup>65</sup> None of them succeeded in becoming a popular leader. The most charismatic leader in the Northern Caucasus was perhaps Shamil Basayev, one of the leaders of Chechen separatism, but his charisma was mainly of a political nature and he used Islam as an instrument to legitimize his political authority.<sup>66</sup>

Concluding, we can identify some factors explaining why in Russia there are not the right conditions for the emergence of charismatic Muslim leaders. First of all, the security services heavily monitor Muslim communities and their activities, and are ready to marginalize exceptional personalities and to limit their influence. Moreover, the majority of Russian Muslims belongs to the local traditional Islam, and they are not very susceptible to radical ideologies introduced mainly by new transnational Islamic groups.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Jamestown Foundation, *Some Russian Muslims Demur*, North Caucasus Weekly (December 31, 1969): [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=2991&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=187&no\\_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=2991&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=187&no_cache=1) (07.12.2015)

<sup>65</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 14-16.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14-16.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14-16.

## **New media and texts propagating the ideas of radicalism and their impact**

There are many different kinds of texts and media promoting Islamic radicalization in Russia – not only in the Caucasus but also in other regions. Radical texts are more diffused in the Northern Caucasus, but in the 2000s they had become relatively widespread also in Tatarstan, in the southern Urals, in western Siberia and in the Volga region. In the 1990s a number of bookstores in Russia sold fundamentalist literature – for example Russian translations of the works written by Ibn Taimi and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founders and ideologists of fundamentalism, Hassan al-Banna, the first head of the Muslim Brotherhood Organization, and Sayyid and Muhammad Qutb, fundamentalist theorists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>68</sup>

Leaflets, brochures and sermons are the most traditional forms of radical material. In the early 1990s publications of texts in religious newspapers and magazines played a crucial role. In the 1990s video-recorded sermons and their dissemination played a central role in propagating radical ideas among the people in the Caucasus.<sup>69</sup> In the late 1990s and early 2000s the Internet became the main instrument for the dissemination of radical ideas and the main tool to influence young Russian Muslims.<sup>70</sup> Lectures delivered by ideological proponents of radicalism at educational institutions and militant training camps that operated in the Caucasus throughout the 1990s played a crucial role in the dissemination of radical ideas. The texts of these lectures were sometimes disseminated in other regions of Russia, including in Moscow.<sup>71</sup>

Another method to propagate radical ideas is the use of Arabic language textbooks. Sheikh Bagauddin, a major radical ideologist of the Caucasus, used the principles of the

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 16-21.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 16-21.

<sup>70</sup> Münster, *Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea*, November 2014, p. 12.

<sup>71</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 16-21.

*Wahhabi* doctrine in an Arabic language textbook. In his book some interesting passages in the texts for translation into Arabic can be found: “*We are fighting with gyaurs (i.e. infidels), and gyaurs are constantly fighting with us. Today they are possessors of power and possessors numerous weapons, but we are possessors of iman (faith), that is why we will definitely win, for we have Allah and they have Satan.*”<sup>72</sup> Or another example: “*I have understood the lesson well. We must be soldiers of Islam. We must learn at schools and at institutes and at universities. And we must defend our religion and our homeland. We must defend our Muslim brothers. Long life our state, a state of Islam!*”<sup>73</sup>

Finally, Internet has increasingly become a major method used to propagate radical ideas, not only within Russia, but also abroad. There are many Russian Foreign Fighters fighting for the Islamic State in Syria and in Iraq who are active in Internet and particularly on the social networks. Russian Jihadists use their social network accounts (particularly V Kontakte (VK) which is the second biggest social network in Russia, after Facebook) to spread their messages, to share experiences from the front, to keep in touch with friends, family and followers back home, and to urge young Muslims to join the fighting in Syria.<sup>74</sup> Some of them also use their accounts to encourage donations for the *Jihad* and the *Mujahideen*. The activists who raise funds do so using the online payment services QIWI and Beeline, and accounts of the Sberbank of Russia. In describing the purpose of the donations, they are usually careful to keep the wording vague, saying that the money is intended to “*help the brothers in Syria*”<sup>75</sup> or “*assist needy brothers and sisters in Al-Sham.*”<sup>76</sup> However, the *Jihadi* orientation of some of the pages strongly

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<sup>72</sup> Muhammad, B. *Uchebnik arabskogo yazyka. Perviy god obuchenya* [Arabic Language Textbook, for the First Year of Study], Santlana Publishing House, Moscow 1992.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Toron Mike, *Russian Jihadis Use Social Media To Raise Funds For Jihad In Syria*, Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC), 27.06.2014: [http://www.trackingterrorism.org/chat/russian-jihadis-use-social-media-raise-funds-jihad-syria-0?ip\\_login\\_no\\_cache=ac2b36fbef43e883a742dce4a4f5581f](http://www.trackingterrorism.org/chat/russian-jihadis-use-social-media-raise-funds-jihad-syria-0?ip_login_no_cache=ac2b36fbef43e883a742dce4a4f5581f) (24.3.2015)

<sup>75</sup> Nasiba Al-Ansaria on V Kontakte (page now deleted because of violent content).

<sup>76</sup> Nasiba Al-Ansaria on V Kontakte (page now deleted because of violent content).

suggests that the money is used to support radical Islamist organizations. Some fundraisers are more explicit about their goals. Some say, for example, that they are collecting funds “*for our brothers who obeyed Allah's command and enacting the Shari'a in this land [Syria],*” for “*the active part of the ummah in Syria*” or for “*the wives of martyrs.*”<sup>77</sup> Many advise donors to contact them in private for more information. Some of them also provide information on fundraising accounts that have changed or have been closed, or warn readers against fundraisers who should not be trusted.<sup>78</sup>

Russian authorities closely monitor religious literature and the online presence of radicals, and impose a strict form of censorship on publications and on web pages that in their opinion preach religious intolerance. Books written by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and other classics of Islamic radicalism have been banned in Russia.<sup>79</sup> In 2008, another list of banned literature was drawn up banning books at many Islamic educational institutions and mosques, which led to strong protests, including public ones, on the side of the Muslim community. Certain Russian liberals supported the Muslim communities' protests, comparing important Russian works by Vladimir Lenin who preached hatred among various groups of society and hatred for religion arguing they should also be destroyed.<sup>80</sup>

## **A profile of adherents to radicalism and converts**

In the last few years the qualitative composition of radically minded Muslims as a group has changed. Islamic radicals in Russia are no longer poor, uneducated and jobless persons having a low social status. The young and the intelligentsia are perhaps becoming

<sup>77</sup> Abdullaev on Vkontakte (page now deleted because of violent content).

<sup>78</sup> Toron, *Russian Jihadis Use Social Media*, 27.06.2014:

[http://www.trackingterrorism.org/chat/russian-jihadis-use-social-media-raise-funds-jihad-syria-0?ip\\_login\\_no\\_cache=ac2b36fbef43e883a742dce4a4f5581f](http://www.trackingterrorism.org/chat/russian-jihadis-use-social-media-raise-funds-jihad-syria-0?ip_login_no_cache=ac2b36fbef43e883a742dce4a4f5581f) (24.3.2015)

<sup>79</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 16-21.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16-21.

the main sources of the increasing number of radically minded Muslims.<sup>81</sup> Young people and the intelligentsia are very keen to respond to the challenges and problems of the society. The absence of a civil society and of public discussions along with the growth of nationalism – both Russian nationalism and nationalism of the ethnic minorities – should also be considered as the main causes for the spread of radicalism among young Russian Muslims. In the Northern Caucasus these negative emotions are reinforced by feelings of inferiority in respect to the non-Muslim majority. Contributing to this spread of radical ideas is also the growing level of Islamophobia in the society, so in this sense, radicalism can also be interpreted as a kind of reaction to the negative perception of Islam.<sup>82</sup>

A radical Muslim is today often a young man, active, energetic and a sociable, engaged in some kind of business.<sup>83</sup> Research on new radical Muslims has shown that these characteristics provide an explanation for the particular and distinctive development and appeal of new radical groups. In fact, they are able to propose an innovative belief-system along with radical ideas that have a strong potential to accommodate the aspirations of young people.<sup>84</sup>

General trends show that many radical Islamic groups tend to focus mainly on younger generations. Experience shows also that individuals become more pragmatic and back away from radical positions as they grow older. It seems that radical Islam's belief-system and theology accommodate the desire of young people for social change and offer them a way to change the world. Moreover, radical Muslim communities provide alternative ways of life and facilitate the networking of like-minded people. Through this socialization, religious beliefs and practices interact with social interests and psychological needs, and they produce new forms of social movements and new socio-

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 21-23.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 21-23.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 21-23.

<sup>84</sup> Shterin, Yarlykapov, *Reconsidering Radicalisation and Terrorism* (2011), p. 307-308.

cultural systems. These social groupings also offer an alternative source of authority, which is often in conflict with conventional forms of authority (family, state).<sup>85</sup>

Another important aspect that needs to be considered in this section is the conversion of ethnic Russians to Islam. In the early 2000s there were between 2000 and 3000 conversions of ethnic Russian to Islam – excluding Russian women who married Muslims.<sup>86</sup>

In the 1980s the conversion of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians to Islam had something to do with the shock that Russian servicemen went through in Afghanistan.<sup>87</sup> This situation can be explained by noting that servicemen felt a kind of guilt because of their fight against Muslims. This situation was also represented in 1995 by Vladimir Khotinenko – a Russian film producer – who made the film *The Muslim*, in which he told the story of a Russian soldier who converted to Islam. In the following years, conversion to Islam can be mainly interpreted as a response by people to the resentment and to the attitude of the Russian state and society against Muslims. Conversion to Islam has also to do with the disenchantment of ethnic Russians with their own Christian Orthodox faith; so the conversion was in this sense a kind of reaction to the crisis of the Russian identity, which started in the years of the *perestroika*. Conversion to Islam is today in part a continuation of the search for identity, and in part it is linked to anti-Americanism which is widespread in the Russian society and which may lead many to embrace Islam. Islamic radicals of ethnic Russian origin have been noticed in the Rostov, Samara and Saratov regions, but also in Stavropol, in the Urals and in Tyumen. An example is the ethnic Russian Viktor Senchenko, who converted to Islam and took part in the attack on Nalchik on the militants' side.<sup>88</sup> Another example is the Russian Vyacheslav Panin who, after his

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 307-308.

<sup>86</sup> Sapojnikova Galina, *Pochemu russkie prininimayut islam* [Why Russians convert into Islam], Komsomolskaya Pravda, 21.10.2003: [www.kp.ru/daily/23141/24151](http://www.kp.ru/daily/23141/24151)

<sup>87</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 21-23.

<sup>88</sup> Pateyev, R.F. *Islam v Rostovskoi oblasti* [Islam in the Rostov Region], Logos, Moscow, 2008.

conversion to Islam, engaged himself in the propagation of radical ideas.<sup>89</sup> Also if the role of converts cannot be overestimated, Muslim communities appreciate their presence, because they are considered as a proof that the Islamization of Russia is going on.<sup>90</sup>

## Methods of violence or manifestations of tensions

Violence follows from the ideology of radicalism. However, violence resulting from religiously motivated conflicts should be considered as relational and processual rather than as simply social action; and therefore no single factor would account for violent outcomes.<sup>91</sup> Following a general schema – that fits particularly well to the situation in the North Caucasus - manifestations of religious-motivated violence can be divided into two types with respect to its objectives: on the one side violence against non-Muslims and authorities, and on the other side violence against moderate or traditional Muslims.<sup>92</sup>

The first type of religious-motivated violence is directed against the non-Muslim population and against Russian authorities. Radicals consider the modern secular state as devoid of divine blessing, and therefore deserving destruction.<sup>93</sup> According to their ideology, it should be replaced by a state based on divine law (*Shari'a*) and by an Islamic society. Because of their desire to overthrow the state and replace it with a caliphate, radical Muslims in militant *Jaamats* conduct military and violent actions against state and power structures – army, security services, etc. Acts of terrorism create panic in the society, and they represent a challenge to the culture and traditions of the ethnic majority.<sup>94</sup> There has been a large increase in terrorist attacks in Russia in the last 10 years. According to the 2014 country reports on terrorism by the National Consortium for

<sup>89</sup> Semyonov, V.V. *Islam v Saratovskoi oblasti* [Islam in the Saratov Region], Logos, Moscow, 2007

<sup>90</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 21-23.

<sup>91</sup> Shterin, Yarlykapov, *Reconsidering Radicalisation and Terrorism* (2011), p. 315-316.

<sup>92</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 23-25.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23-25.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23-25.

the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, in 2014 the Russian Federal Security Service reported 78 “terrorist crimes” committed in Russia, but it prevented 59 “terrorist crimes” and 8 “terrorist attacks” from January to December 2014.<sup>95</sup> Although there were terrorist attacks in metropolitan areas like Moscow and St. Petersburg, most of the attacks are localized in the Northern Caucasus, and particularly in the regions located closest to Sochi – Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia. Most of the groups that carried out the attacks are Islamic extremists (Caucasus Emirate, Armed Forces of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria), but some of the attacks were carried out also by “black widows” – female suicide bombers tied to Chechen separatists.<sup>96</sup>

The second type of violence exercised by radicals occurs against moderate or traditional Muslim communities, which are often charged by radicals with being unbelievers. In this case the use of violence is mostly directed against Muslims serving in state power structures. Main targets of the terrorists are in particular militia officers who are members of the local ethnic groups in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia and the eastern district of Stavropol.<sup>97</sup>

With the exception of the Northern Caucasus, there has been generally less call to violence on the part of radical Muslims in other parts of the Russian Federation. Radical Muslims do not consider the confrontation with the authorities as their main goals, but they put rather an emphasis on the propaganda of radical ideas. Today, calls for violence are not likely to find support among Tatars or among Muslim migrants from Central Asia, who come to Russia to work and to earn money, and not to engage in the *Jihad*.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2014*, University of Maryland, June 2015.

<sup>96</sup> Scarborough Rowan, Terrorist Attacks Are on the Rise in Russia as Winter Olympics Near. The Washington Times (30.01.2014): <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jan/30/terrorist-attacks-russia-winter-olympics-near/> (30.05.2015)

<sup>97</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 23-25.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23-25.



## **Influence of the international situation and current world events – linkage dynamics**

Migration, immigration and diaspora communities play a central role in the transnational characteristic of Russian Islam. Immigrants from Central Asia, the Middle East and Southern Asia have not only formed their own ethnic communities, but they have also influenced local Muslim communities with their cultural and religious practices. This process is further compounded by the fact that Russia has close political connections to Africa, the Middle East and South Asia dating back to the 1960s as well as educational exchanges. Foreign students who came to the Soviet Union supported local Muslim communities and set up informal connections at the universities in Russia. This phenomenon was present throughout Europe, where foreign students set up informal Islamic networks that then grew into organizations.<sup>99</sup>

Language impacts Islam in Russia as there is some controversy in the language that should be used in Muslim communities. Some Muslim communities in Russia (particularly in Tatarstan and in the Moscow region) are increasingly under communal pressure to change from the use of local languages (for example the Tatar language) to Russian in order to accommodate Muslims coming from Central Asia and the Northern Caucasus.<sup>100</sup> Russian remains the main language used by transnational Islamic groups to disseminate their ideas to a wider audience through traditional and new ways of communication. These groups direct their messages in particular to non-Muslims, who may convert and serve as a bridge to the broader society, and therefore broaden the mobilization pool. Converts often play a very important role in Islamic organizations because they contribute to the re-definition of Islam for non-Muslims.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Münster, *Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea*, November 2014, p. 9-12.

<sup>100</sup> Suleimanov Rais, *Vahhabism vedet tatar k assimiliatsii* [Wahhabism causes the assimilation of Tatars], APN, 25 June 2013: <http://www.apn.ru/publications/article29442.htm>.

<sup>101</sup> Münster, *Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea*, November 2014, p. 9-12.

Another transnational factor affecting Islam in Russia is represented by diaspora connections. Some ethnic Muslim communities in Russia have their own diaspora in the Middle East. For example the Circassian diaspora in Jordan, Syria, Turkey and Egypt has been a source of support for its community in the Northern Caucasus. The “Circassian question” has been exacerbated by recent events and in particular by the Syrian Civil War, the migration of some Circassians back to the North Caucasus, and the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi.<sup>102</sup>

Itinerant speakers, religious leaders and the links between representatives of Islamic organizations and political leaders can be identified as fourth channel for the “transnationalization” of Islam, as they bring new ideas and support some local initiatives. Also if many of the links with Muslim communities in other countries have been blocked by the Russian government, some initiatives have been encouraged. For example, the undersecretary of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs of Kuwait – Adel Al-Falah – played an important role in establishing the chapter of the Al-Wasatiyya Centre in Russia. He became one of the most important representatives of “centrist Islam” in Russia, and he was able to create links between the Al-Wasatiyya Centre in Kuwait and the Muslim communities of Moscow, of the Volga region, and of southern Russia.<sup>103</sup>

In fact the spread of “centrist” Islam corresponds to Russia’s acquisition of observer status in the Organization of Islamic Conference in 2005, which facilitated the rapprochement between Russia and Kuwait. Russian Muslims support the official policy of Moscow in the Middle East and its stand on Iran and Afghanistan. Veniamin Popov, former special envoy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, believed that Russia

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<sup>102</sup> Dzutsati Valery, *Moscow Puts Restrictions on Circassian Immigration to the North Caucasus*, Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 10 Issue: 111 (12.06.2013): [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=41011&no\\_cache=1#.Vmnbw1YinII](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41011&no_cache=1#.Vmnbw1YinII) (10.12.2015)

<sup>103</sup> Münster, *Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea*, November 2014, p. 9-12.

should support and maintain Christian-Muslim dialogue. Islamic radicals are also in agreement with Russia's engagement in Muslim majority areas. They appreciated for example the visits by Hamas delegations to Moscow since 2006, and the support of then-Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad by Russia, because they are convinced of the fact that Russia can play an intermediary role in the relations between the Muslim world and the West.<sup>104</sup>

Moderate Muslims represent a fifth important factor in the “transnationalization” of Islam in Russia. Some of them have become observant Muslims after visiting Muslim-majority countries or after living among observant Muslims in the Middle East. Others have been influenced by a pilgrimage to the Mecca. The most radical, however, are those who received an Islamic education in foreign countries such as Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Saudi Arabia. These are mostly young men, who often become important figures in the local communities because their knowledge of Arabic and religion accords them credibility. However, this may be at the same time a challenge to local beliefs and ways of life, and may lead to further radicalization and propaganda. This is the case for example of indoctrinated men joining civil wars in foreign countries (in particular the Syrian opposition). In this case there is a high risk that foreign fighters returning to Russia may challenge local customs and contribute to homegrown terrorism upon their return to Russia.<sup>105</sup>

Finally, modern media is the sixth factor playing a key role in the “transnationalization” of Islam in Russia. Transnational Islamic groups often compete with one other, and this competition of ideas is reflected in the media. These ideas differ mainly in the interpretation of what constitutes “true Islam”. *Salafi* Internet forums are full of discussions on determining correct Islamic teachings and they attack other groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and *Hizb ut-Tharir*, as well as *Sufis* and *Shias*. *Salafis* in Russia

<sup>104</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 28-30.

<sup>105</sup> Münster, *Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea*, November 2014, p. 9-12.

do not only have websites and forums, but they also have accounts and social networking sites (Facebook, Vkontakte, Moi Mir and Twitter), a YouTube channel, and their own online channel called SalafTube.com. *Hitz ut-Tharir* has been using various online platforms along with traditional media to diffuse its ideas.<sup>106</sup>

## Islamist militants in ongoing-armed conflicts

Although radicalization of Russian Muslims can be said to have started in the 1990s, the recruitment and engagement of Russian Islamist militants in conflict zones is a relatively new phenomenon. The number of Russian Foreign Fighters fighting in Syria and in Iraq is estimated at around 800, which makes Russia one of the top contributors of fighters in the conflict, along with Turkey, France, the United Kingdom, Tunisia, Morocco and Saudi Arabia.<sup>107</sup> Chechen brigades are the biggest ones, and they have absorbed other militants from Russia and Central Asia, in particular from the Volga region, Crimea, and Azerbaijan. They have formed a “Russian wing” along with “Turkish”, “European” and “Arab” wings in the conflict. Chechen Foreign Fighters are often praised by rebel groups in Syria, because of the skills and experience that they have gained by fighting in the separatist wars in Chechnya in 1994-96 and in 1999-2000. A Syrian opposition source said that Chechens are also leading the fighting and they are also leaders of brigades, due to their skills and experience.<sup>108</sup>

There is also information about the involvement of Crimean and Ukrainian Tatars in the Syrian conflict. There are also reports confirming the participation of Tatars from the Volga region in the Syrian conflict.<sup>109</sup> Militants from Russia do not only operate on the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 9-12.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>108</sup> Grove Thomas, *Militants from Russia’s North Caucasus Join ‘Jihad’ in Syria*, Reuters (06.03.2013).

<sup>109</sup> Vatchagaev Mairbek, *Russian Muslim Militants Are Joining the Ranks of Rebel Fighters in Syria*, Eurasia Daily Monitor, vol. 10, issue 117 (20.06.2013)

battlefield in Syria and Iraq, but they are also active on the Internet, through which they encourage other Russian Muslims to join the *Jihad*. Militants use their social media skills to update followers on the activities of *Jabhat al-Nusra* and the Islamic State. The escalation of the conflict in Syria and Iraq may lead to the further recruitment of Russian-speaking Muslims and to an increasing threat of terror for Russia, in the case of foreign fighters' eventual return.<sup>110</sup>

The general approach of the Russian authorities towards foreign fighters has been highly punitive, and measures are taken at the federal level. In Chechnya and in the Northern Caucasus stronger border controls have been put in place. The authorities prosecute individuals who seek to become foreign fighters, if there are indications that they are involved in terrorist activities. In these cases, Russian authorities may confiscate or refuse to issue travel documents. Moreover, Russian authorities have arrested and tried individuals returning from the war in Syria, on the basis of the 359 Law on Mercenaries, an act prohibiting Russian citizens from joining a foreign army or conflict. In 2013 an amendment was made to the 2006 Anti-Terrorism Law, so that the participation in an armed group abroad – whose goals are contrary to the interests of Russia - became a criminal offence.<sup>111</sup>

The growing number of Russian Muslims involved in the Syrian and Iraqi conflict will have an impact on Russia's security, and foreign fighters are increasingly considered as one of the major threats for the country. The proliferation of *Jihadist* ideas is no longer limited to the Northern Caucasus, but is spreading also to other less radical regions, such as the Volga region and central Russia, including Moscow and St. Petersburg. This shows that *Jihadism* is becoming a large challenge for Russia's security forces.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Münster, *Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea*, November 2014, p. 14-15.

<sup>111</sup> Vidino Lorenzo, *Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Responses in Eleven Countries*, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, 2014, p. 13-14.

<sup>112</sup> Vatchagaev, *Russian Muslim Militants Are Joining the Ranks of Rebel Fighters in Syria*, (20.06.2013).

## CASE STUDIES

### Moscow: Muslims and the limits of multiculturalism

As previously stated in this paper, Islamic radicalization is more prevalent in the Northern Caucasus, but it also present in other parts of Russia. The extent of radicalization is very difficult to quantify due to the lack of reliable statistics. Despite the lack of accurate data, it is possible to observe different dynamics in the framework of radicalization that affect Russian cities in different ways. Moscow is the first example showing the limits of multiculturalism.<sup>113</sup>

Moscow has always had a Muslim population, with Muslim Tatars being some of the oldest residents in the city. Authorities are not keen on providing the exact number of Muslim residents in Moscow. According to the 2002 Russian census, Tatars remain the second largest minority group in Moscow, after Ukrainians, constituting 1.6% of the city's total population of 10 million.<sup>114</sup> After the collapse of the USSR the population of Moscow has substantially changed due to the demographic decline of the ethnic Russian population and the influx of migrants. Among the migrants there is a large number of Muslims, in particular coming from ex-Soviet countries (Tajikistan and Azerbaijan), and also among transit migrants from East Asia and Africa. This explains why the Muslim population of Moscow is considered to be about 2 million inhabitants.<sup>115</sup> The Muslims of Moscow are maybe the biggest group of Muslims concentrated in any Russian city. Despite this huge number of Muslims, Moscow has only six official mosques. This explains why Muslims in Moscow often pray in other buildings that are not appropriate

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<sup>113</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 8-12.

<sup>114</sup> Demoscope Weekly, *Perepis' 2002 goda pokazala izmenenie natsional'nogo sostava naseleniya Moskvy*: <http://demoscope.ru/weekly/2007/0271/tema01.php> (11.12.2015)

<sup>115</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 8-12.

for religious practices. When Muscovite Russians do this, security forces consider them to be adherents to “unofficial Islam” and are therefore labeled as potential terrorists.<sup>116</sup>

Immigration and the reaction of the authorities in Moscow to this phenomenon have many implications for the integration of the Muslim population. The major risk is the potential ghettoization in Moscow. In Moscow there are traditionally no Muslim areas, but the presence of immigrants has started to change this. For example Azerbaijanis live mostly in the northeast market district of Izmailovo. In 2007 North and South Butovo became the first “Islamic quarters” – or ghettos - to open exclusively Islamic shops, Islamic healthcare and cultural centers. Muscovites have expressed fears of “separatism” and “self-isolationism” in relation to this new development.<sup>117</sup>

Immigration also has had a significant socio-economic impact in Moscow, and it has fuelled resentment, especially in relation to crime and job security. In this sense, the situation of Moscow reflects a general trend of “securitization” of migration, whereby migration, crime and terrorism are perceived as security issues. The increasing immigration has made ‘migrantophobia’ an actual political issue in Moscow and in Russia in general, and immigration is mostly considered more as a threat than as an opportunity. According to a statistics published by Yudina in 2005 only 1.3% of the Muscovites had a positive attitude towards migrants.<sup>118</sup> The many reasons for the negative perception of migrants are basically the fear of economic competition and the fear of cultural differences. The Russian press has also strengthened this negative

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<sup>116</sup> Vatchagaev Mairbek, *Moscow Remains Fertile Recruiting Ground for Aspiring Jihadists*, Jamestown’s Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume: 12, issue: 41 (March 5, 2015):

[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43616&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=786&no\\_cache=1#.VWr7m1bGA6V](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43616&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=786&no_cache=1#.VWr7m1bGA6V) (31.05.2015)

<sup>117</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 8-12.

<sup>118</sup> Yudina T., *Labour migration into Russia: The response of state and society*, *Current Sociology*’ 53, 4, 2005.

perception with the deliberate use of stereotypes about migrants, and it has propagated an image of migrants that charges them of being involved in corruption and in mafias.<sup>119</sup>

The city authorities of Moscow have adopted strict measures against immigrants, including penalties for migrants working illegally and the implementation of a federal decision to forbid migrants from working in markets or on the streets. ‘Migrantophobia’ has been increased also by Russian nationalism. For example, in the 2005 election campaign the populist bloc ‘Motherland’ caused a scandal with its slogan “Let’s cleanse Moscow of rubbish”, stereotyping Caucasian immigrants.<sup>120</sup> Although these campaigns against “illegal immigrants” have caused distress to Moscow’s Muslim community, it is the lack of positive policies from the authorities that causes the most serious long-term problems.<sup>121</sup> Russian authorities have blocked any attempts to open new Muslim institutions and as a result people move into areas (like Butovo) where such institutions already exist. The biggest obstacle is apparently bureaucracy; however ethnic, cultural and/or religious discrimination plays a role as well, as Moscow’s Muslim community seems to suffer disproportionately more than other religious minorities. It is clear that interethnic tensions are increasing in Moscow, but it is not completely clear what kind of impact these social attitudes and policies will have in the long-term.<sup>122</sup>

There are essentially two main reasons explaining the low levels of radicalization among Moscow’s Muslim community. The first reason is the illegal status of many migrants, which forces them to maintain a low profile and not to draw the state’s attention to them.<sup>123</sup> Secondly, Moscow’s Muslims want to show that their Islam is moderate and that they are not creating cultural or religious enclaves. They also support state authorities through organized movements (i.e. “Muslims in support of President Putin”) in order to

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<sup>119</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 8-12.

<sup>120</sup> *Vremya novostei*, 15.09.2006, p. 4; and *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 17.10.2005, p. 1.

<sup>121</sup> BBC Online, *Moscow courts its million Muslims*, 06.03.2001.

<sup>122</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 8-12.

<sup>123</sup> *Novye Izvestiya*, 10.11.2005, p. 1, 6.



put forwards their initiatives and to establish state-approved institutions, such as the Moscow Islamic University.<sup>124</sup>

The main problem in Moscow seems to be the fact that the government does not understand who the enemy is. The widespread ‘migrantophobia’ is directed mainly against Muslims and does not distinguish between radical and moderate Muslims. Harmless organizations can end up on the list of extremists and potential terrorists. For example, sometimes people in Moscow are detained for membership in the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* organization, which is considered by the Russian authorities to be equal to the Islamic State, while the two organizations are in fact completely different.<sup>125</sup>

Apathy or discrimination towards Muslims by the state increases their tendencies towards self-isolation and ghettoization, as a way to promote their own way of life. The presence of radical Islamist *Jaamats* in Moscow is very well known<sup>126</sup>, but there is no indication that they are politically active. There is little evidence that Muslim groups in Moscow engage in radical actions towards the state, but from the point of view of the authorities they still represent a threat. The terrorist acts in Moscow from 1999 until 2005 – usually attributed by the authorities to the North Caucasian *Wahhabism* - have shown that the capital is a potential target for terrorist attacks, also if it is not the source of it.<sup>127</sup>

## Tatarstan: moderate Islam in the Caucasus

A very different situation can be found in the Republic of Tatarstan, which is considered to be the center of Muslim moderation and of inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony.

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<sup>124</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 8-12.

<sup>125</sup> Vatchagaev, *Moscow Remains Fertile Recruiting Ground for Aspiring Jihadists*, (March 5, 2015): [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43616&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=786&no\\_cache=1#.VWr7m1bGA6V](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43616&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=786&no_cache=1#.VWr7m1bGA6V) (31.05.2015)

<sup>126</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 12.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8-12.

With its Muslim population numbering 5 million<sup>128</sup>, the Republic of Tatarstan provides a more positive perception of Islam as being part of Russian history and of the Russian state. In fact, the historical integration of Tatar Muslims into Russian society has resulted in a less negative attitude of ethnic Russians towards Tatars as compared to other Muslim groups. The widespread feelings of ‘Islamophobia’ and ‘Caucasophobia’, evident in the Moscow case study have had less of an impact on the Tatars. There are also large concentrations of Tatars in the biggest Russian cities and this may be due to the lack of discrimination against Tatars.<sup>129</sup>

The Republic of Tatarstan, unlike Chechnya, signed a special treaty with Moscow in 1994 which gave Tatarstan and President Shaimiev special privileges: the control of taxes over the sale of alcohol, oil and gas; power to retain a large proportion of VAT revenues within the Republic of Tatarstan; and ability to establish economic and trade links with foreign countries. The “Tatarstan model” represents an example of the establishment in Russia of a looser asymmetrical federative structure, where relations between the various inter-ethnic and inter-religious groups are structured in a more modern way.<sup>130</sup>

Islam has always played a limited role in the national self-assertion of Tatarstan, but the religious dimension has become more important due to the increase of personal religiosity among Muslim Tatars and also due to the re-construction of those public institutions that represent the Islamic faith, such as mosques and religious schools. Moreover, the Tatarstani government became increasingly dissatisfied with the traditional Muslim institutions, such as the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia (TsDUM), and its leader Talgat Tajuddin.<sup>131</sup> In Tatarstan some Muslim leaders seceded from

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., P. 12.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 12-16.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 12-16.

<sup>131</sup> Goble, *Mufti Tajuddin Seeks to Make Himself and Then His Son ‘Muslim Patriarch’ of Russia* (May 12, 2015):

[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43900&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=786&no\\_cache=1#.VWhYNFbGA6V](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43900&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=786&no_cache=1#.VWhYNFbGA6V) (29.05.2015)

Tajuddin's jurisdiction and established their own independent Spiritual Board of Tatarstan (DUM RT) and elected a Mufti, Gabdulla Galliullin, who became increasingly radicalized and critical of the Tatarstani President Shaimiev and of his government. In this context, the Tatarstani government approved the secession from the federal Muslim structures and nationalized Islam in the Republic of Tatarstan, by giving the DUM RT a monopoly over all matters concerning Islam— ignoring in this regard the federal religious law of 1997 that sought to protect religious pluralism.<sup>132</sup>

Because of the nationalization of Islam in Tatarstan, the role that Islam plays for the autonomy of Tatarstan has become increasingly important, and this has also contributed to the willingness of the Tatarstani government to give an official definition of Islam. Tatarstani authorities consider tolerance and moderation as the distinctive features of the Tatar-Russian model of Islam. The Islamic tradition in Tatarstan is considered to be more universal, tolerant and integrated with modernity than in other parts of the Muslim world. Rafael Khakimov, one of the leading Tatar national ideologists in the 1980s and 1990s and chief national ideologist in the Shaimiev administration, proposed a very ambitious state-approved definition of Islam. He developed the concept of 'Euro-Islam'<sup>133</sup> with the key idea of modernizing Islam in Russia through the integration of eastern and western elements. The idea of 'Euro-Islam' mostly represents the cultural, rather than the religious, aspect of Islam, leaving the latter to individuals. Khakimov believes that Tatar civilization is more enlightened than the more backward Muslim societies in the Middle East. He is of the opinion that Islam needs to develop beyond traditional constraints and to make use of the power of interpretation, so to better adapt itself to the challenges of modern life.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 12-16.

<sup>133</sup> Khakimov Rafael, *Gde nasha Mekka? Manifest evroislam*, Kazan: Magarif, 2003.

<sup>134</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 12-16.

For the Shaimiev administration there are some political advantages in promoting a liberal and reformist conception of Islam. First, it shows to Moscow that the Republic of Tatarstan is committed to the peaceful co-existence of different cultures and religions, and to the fight against Islamic radicalization. Second, the promotion of Tatarstan as a region of ‘moderate Islam’ in the Muslim world is a good tool to develop relations to other foreign countries, and to consolidate Tatarstan’s autonomous status. Finally, the idea that the Tatar concept of ‘moderate Islam’ could be a key distinctive feature of a more inclusive ‘Russian Islam’ accepted by all Russian Muslims.<sup>135</sup>

The Tatar-driven conceptualization of moderate Islam has been challenged and criticized by the federal administration. One of the most significant challenges to the Tatar concept of ‘moderate Islam’ was proposed by the think-tank Center for Strategic Research in 2002/2003.<sup>136</sup> The concept of ‘Russian Islam’ was particularly important in this context and it was put forward by Sergei Gradirovskii in his report.<sup>137</sup> He argued that the coexistence of different cultures in Russia is becoming critical due to the growing multicultural character of society that is transforming post-Soviet Russia, especially in large cities where the immigration of Muslims is changing the social composition. In this context, Gradirovskii supports a more comprehensive Russian approach to Islam instead of a Tatar-led definition and promotion of the same. Gradirovskii supports also a multicultural and universal ‘Russian Islam’ as a distinctive feature of Russia from the global Muslim community. This implies a more centralized management of Muslim affairs, and a more ‘official’ definition and promotion of Islam. This means as well that the role of Tatarstan should be subordinated to the exigencies of the center. There is also

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 12-16.

<sup>136</sup> Gradirovskii Sergei, *Kul'tornoe pogranič'ie: russkii Islam*: <http://antropotok.archipelag.ru> (12.12.2015).

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

a strong competition between the center and the periphery about the definition and promotion of Islam.<sup>138</sup>

However, there are some weak points in these attempts to provide a liberal and modernist conception of Islam. Difficulties with this concept are mainly due to the resistance of those Muslims who may be dissatisfied with the political system and are therefore opposed to the idea of the state assuming control over their religious institutions. For these people, other alternative and more conservative conceptions of Islam – such as the *Wahhabist* or the *Salafist* approach - may appear as an attractive form of protest. Also in Tatarstan the nationalist opposition to the Shaimiev administration supports a more radical Islamist agenda. An example is Fauziya Bairamova, the leader of the Tatar opposition party Ittfaq, who has called for the Islamization of the social and political life in Tatarstan and for a return to a more conservative and traditional Islam.<sup>139</sup>

In fact, there is evidence that radical Islam is increasing in Tatarstan. In 2012, Valiulla Yakupov, a former pro-Kremlin Muslim leader was killed in Kazan, the capital city of Tatarstan. In the same year, the Mufti of Tatarstan, Ildus Fayzov, was seriously wounded in the July terrorist attacks. In Tatarstan, Internet forums managed by radical Muslims call for attacks against those who openly criticize the spread of *Wahhabism* in Russia. Moreover, Russian authorities say that radical groups are supported also by the criminal underworld. At some markets in Kazan merchants are extorted and forced to pay tribute to radicals, who exploit the Muslim tradition of paying *Zakat* (alms); these ‘donations’ are frequently used to support militant groups and violent *Jihad*. There is evidence that radical Tatars supported the separatists in Chechnya and even the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>140</sup> Rafik Mukhametshin, head of the Russian Islamic University in Kazan,

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<sup>138</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 12-16.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 12-16.

<sup>140</sup> Ivshina Olga, *Radical Islam raises tension in Russia's Tatarstan*, BBC (August 9, 2012): <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-19179399> (01.06.2015)

stated that divisions within the Islamic community in Tatarstan are the most obvious cause for increasing radicalization and for the terrorist attacks of 2012.<sup>141</sup>

## **Dagestan: center of Islamist and radical trends**

The Northern Caucasus is the region where the risk of radicalization is higher and where Russia faces the greatest challenges to accommodate the needs and aspirations of the Muslim community. The region has a total Muslim population of 5 million and it is also the region where Muslims are most compactly settled. The post-Soviet religious revival in the Northern Caucasus was influenced by the historical links of the region to the Middle East. Modernist Islamic movements remain mostly absent in the region. Religious disputes in the Northern Caucasus have taken place mostly between radical or *Salafist* Islam – popularly described as ‘*Wahhabism*’ - and local Islamic traditions of the region. An important question is whether extremist and internationalist Islamic influences will be obstructed by the ethnic and religious differences in the Northern Caucasus, or if these ideologies can be a way to overcome the ethnic differences in this region.<sup>142</sup>

Dagestan is a critical case study in this context. Dagestan has always been considered as the one region – after Chechnya - most likely keen to radicalization and extremist actions against the federal center. Along with Chechnya, Dagestan is the most Muslim Russian republic with the Muslim population comprising 90% of the whole population and with the highest number of Islamic institutions per capita.<sup>143</sup> In the 1970s Dagestan was the first region to be influenced by radical Islam and in the 1990s islamization in the North Caucasian region was considered as a way to overcome the Soviet ethnic and cultural identity. In the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Dagestan strengthened its

<sup>141</sup> Mukhametshin Rafik, Malashenko Alexey, *The Religious Situation in Tatarstan*, Carnegie Moscow Center (October 4, 2012): <http://carnegie.ru/2012/10/04/religious-situation-in-tatarstan/eyxk> (01.06.2015)

<sup>142</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 16-20.

<sup>143</sup> Sagramoso, D., *Violence and conflict in the Russian North Caucasus*, *International Affairs*, 83.4, 2007.

contacts with foreign countries during the difficult period of the socio-economic transition and of the absence of federal control. This tough period led to the adoption of foreign and radical ideas to fill the void that the Soviet ideology created. In the 1990s, Dagestan experienced an ethno-religious revival (pilgrimages, Islamic literature, mosque building, cultural and political movements) and the formation of a political opposition that proposed a larger role for Islam in the public life.<sup>144</sup>

One of the politico-military forces in Dagestan was *Wahhabism* that peaked in 1999 when 1500 Dagestani, Chechen and Arab fighters invaded Dagestan in an attempt to establish an “Independent Islamic State of Dagestan”. However, some 25000 Dagestani stopped the invasion and the emirate could not be established. This failure is explained by the fact that radical Islam in Dagestan is supported only by 5-10% of the population, while the majority of the population and of the political elites is in favor of the status quo.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, pro-Russian Dagestani elites were not willing to experience a similar crackdown as the one that occurred in Chechnya, despite their disapproval for the methods and effects of the federal military operation. Anti-*Wahhabism* was a key component of the ideology of the Dagestani elites, and in 1999 the Dagestani State Council banned ‘*Wahhabism*’ and other forms of religious extremism. This was a very controversial measure: some considered this law a necessary step, while others were more critical due to the difficulty in defining ‘*Wahhabism*’. Also if this law had an initial success, by 2007 the Dagestani capital Makhachkala was threatened with explosions and assassinations directed against the regional elite and law enforcement agencies. There is no exact data on the number of radical Islamists in Dagestan; estimates show that after 1999 the number of *Jihadists* could not be more than 2000, but the number of Islamic

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<sup>144</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 16-20.

<sup>145</sup> Makarov, D., *Ofitsial'nyi i neofitsial'nyi Islam v Dagestane*, Tsentri Strategicheskikh i politicheskikh issledovaniy, Moscow, 2000.

*Jaamats* could be around 20000-100000, which means that the potential for Islamic radicalization remains still high.<sup>146</sup>

The main reasons for high levels of violence in Dagestan can be found in the policies of the local and federal authorities, which often address only the manifestations of the problem but not its roots. The unpopularity and the corruption of the elites along with their violations of democratic practices often compound this reality. Moreover, the local authorities and the local elites - formed mainly by exponents of the Soviet-era '*nomenklatura*' and of local mafias - use and manipulate the arguments against '*Wahhabism*' in favor of their own interests.<sup>147</sup> This opposition towards the radical part of the Muslim community has been strengthened under the leadership of the Dagestani head of state, Ramazan Abdulatipov, under whose leadership mass arrests of Muslims in mosques have become routine. The approach of his predecessor, Magomedislam Magomedov, who used to negotiate and to engage in dialogue with the radical part of the Muslim community, was gradually abandoned during the last few years.<sup>148</sup> Nowadays, Dagestan is the only republic of the Northern Caucasus that is experiencing continuous counter-terrorism operations (KTOs). KTOs are managed by the local authorities and they take place in different parts of the republic, and they may last for months. During these operations, the movement of citizens is restricted in the Novolaksky, Khasavyurt and Kizilyurt districts that are located close to the border between Dagestan and Chechnya. Many of these KTOs are not justified by security reasons and their effectiveness is questionable. However, Dagestanis believe that the purpose of these

<sup>146</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 16-20.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 16-20.

<sup>148</sup> Dzutsev Valery, *Pressure on Salafists in Dagestan Could Have Unpredictable Results*, Jamestown's Eurasia Daily Monitor, volume: 12, issue: 93 (May 19, 2015): [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43928&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=786&no\\_cache=1#.VW2oN1bGA6V](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43928&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=786&no_cache=1#.VW2oN1bGA6V) (02.06.2015)



operations is not to find militants and insurgents, but to demonstrate that the government is keeping them under control.<sup>149</sup>

Putin's 'Chechenisation' policies – the use of military means to attempt to solve political issues – had a further negative impact on the situation in Dagestan, despite their apparent achievements. The military campaign was quite successful and led to the assassination of resistance leaders (such as Maskhadov, Basaev, Raduev and Abdul-Khalim Sadullaev), and the absence of large scale terrorist attacks in the main cities of Russia seems to indicate a weakening of the resistance. 'Chechenisation' is very controversial. Also if this policy could bring Chechnya into a new phase of political stability, it also has spread the conflict within the region: Dagestan, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria are now faced with increasing political violence from the side of radicals from Chechnya displaced from the republic, after that Putin's appointee Ramzan Kadyrov has adopted pro-Moscow policies in this republic. However, the use of military means to deal with political issues in the Northern Caucasus has driven young Muslims into 'Salafist Jaamats'. Also if the Islamist opposition was largely expelled from Chechnya, Russian radical Islam is becoming less controllable and separated from the Chechen national cause; other North Caucasian republics (Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria) and even traditionally pro-Russian areas are increasingly becoming new sites for radical Islam. Furthermore, the political centralization at the federal level had negative consequences on the Northern Caucasus, because – in parallel to militarization – it removed safety valves that prevented disaffected populations from joining radical actions and insurgencies.<sup>150</sup>

The situation in Dagestan is a good example of the difficulties that the Kremlin is facing in the Northern Caucasus: the centralization of power in Moscow and a zero-sum attitude

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<sup>149</sup> Vatchagaev Mairbek, *Counter-Terrorism Operations Take Place in Dagestan Virtually Non-Stop*, Jamestown's Eurasia Daily Monitor, volume:12, issue: 92 (May 15, 2015): [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43922&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=786&no\\_cache=1#.VW2rV1bGA6V](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43922&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=786&no_cache=1#.VW2rV1bGA6V) (02.06.2015)

<sup>150</sup> Dannreuther, March, *Russia and Islam*, p. 16-20.

towards the opposition deny the government any room to maneuver. These policies have left Moscow increasingly dependent on appointed leaders of varying levels of effectiveness. Although Islamic radicalization in Dagestan, and more in general in the Northern Caucasus, is increasingly influenced by international factors, radical trends seem to remain a reaction to regional and local issues. Concerns about corruption, political representation, and socio-economic instability are the main drivers of radicalization in the region. The regional and federal approach, that addresses the social and economic aspect of radicalization and that considers ‘*Wahhabism*’ as a unitary and inflexible threat, might have some short-term success. However, this strong focus on the socio-economic aspects of radicalization and the negligence of the political causes of the phenomenon does not contribute to eradicate the radicalization.<sup>151</sup>

## ASSESSING THE PHENOMENON

### Explaining the levels of radicalization

Historical and cultural factors represent one of the underlying causes of the relatively high levels of radicalization of Russia’s Muslim community. In the Russian Empire and particularly during the Soviet Era, Russian Muslims were subject to often-brutal treatment by the state. Propensities to violence are common not only in the Northern Caucasus, but also in the Russian society as a whole. These factors created a background for violence and for radicalization of the Russian Muslim community.<sup>152</sup>

Aside from historical and cultural factors there are also other causes contributing to the radicalization of Russia’s Muslim community: endemic poverty in the Northern Caucasus and in other regions of Russia; the Chechen wars and the infiltration of Chechen

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 16-20.

<sup>152</sup> Hahn Gordon M., *Russia’s Islamic Threat*, Yale University 2007, p. 6-13.

militants' revolutionary network into Russia; and Putin's resurgent authoritarianism and de-federalizing counter-revolution.<sup>153</sup>

Also if socio-economic deprivation is not the major cause of radicalization and of potential terrorism, the social and economic differences among different regions in Russia provide in part an explanation for the radicalization of some Muslim communities. In Russia there are large differences between rich (urban and usually more populated by ethnic Russians) and poor (usually rural and populated by non-ethnic Russians) regions. The majority of Russian Muslims live in the poorest regions, such as the Republics of the Northern Caucasus, which have very low-income levels, high unemployment rates, and low investment levels.<sup>154</sup> Dagestan and the Kabardino-Balkaria Republics are good examples of this dynamic, and in 2004-2005 they experienced the most radical Islamist terrorist campaigns outside of Iraq, Chechnya, and Moscow. The very high youth unemployment rate in the Northern Caucasus is of particular concern, because Islamist and radical networks often provide a viable alternative for young Muslims. Moreover, the disparity between the demographic growth of Russian Muslims and the demographic decrease of the number of ethnic Russians should be considered as a cause of radicalization. If so, young Muslims might see the engagement in radical Islamist organizations as a way to change their place in the Russian society. Thus, if Russia slights the aspirations for self-determination of minorities, this might provoke a radical reaction by the Muslim community and even aspirations for Islamist separatism.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, the Islamic identity of Muslim communities in rural areas is likely to strengthen as modernization penetrates these regions. There is an increasing conflict

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 6-13.

<sup>154</sup> Cohen Ariel, *A Threat to the West: The Rise of Islamist Insurgency in the Northern Caucasus and Russia's Inadequate Response*, 26.03.2012: <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/03/a-threat-to-the-west-the-rise-of-islamist-insurgency-in-the-northern-caucasus> (14.12.2015).

<sup>155</sup> Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 2007, p. 6-13.

between Russia's urban popular culture and traditional (and even more radical) Islam, particularly in the Northern Caucasus.<sup>156</sup>

The two Chechen wars for independence against the Russian state in the 1990s had a destabilizing effect on the security of the country, and they contributed to the radicalization of the Russian Muslim community. Though the conflict began as a nationalist war for the independence of Chechnya, it was increasingly influenced by Islamic groups that tried to spread the conflict to neighboring regions in order to create a Caucasus Emirate. The main idea of the Caucasus Emirate was to unify all the North Caucasian Islamic terrorist groups in the *Jihad* against Russia.<sup>157</sup>

The counter-terrorism operations of the Russian state in the Northern Caucasus have often contributed to the radicalization of the Muslims in this region. The measures taken by the security forces include kidnappings and arrests against those suspected of supporting or joining the insurgents. Under Putin the government's policy towards minorities have become even more centralized, nationalistic and anti-Muslim; and this has exacerbated the radicalization of Russia's Muslim community. Evidence of this phenomenon is the growing Islamic movement in other regions of Russia, outside the Northern Caucasus, and particularly in the republic of Tatarstan, which has always been an example of moderate Islam. In the last few years the "Caucasisation" of Tatarstan has been increasing, and it culminated in the assassination of Tatar religious leaders loyal to traditional Muslim institutions.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 6-13.

<sup>157</sup> Moore Sian, The Roots of Radicalization in Muslim Russia, The Melbourne Globalist: <http://www.tmglobalist.org/index.php?module=article&view=detail&cid=50> (03.06.2015)

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

## Reaction of the state and society to the Islamic radicalization

The reactions of the Russian state to radical Islamist activities are often not adequate, and they may provoke conflicts between state authorities and the Muslim community at large. The state, both at federal and local level, takes a very rigid position in respect to “Islamic dissidents”; this is evident particularly in the Northern Caucasus. State authorities also apply repressive measures to Muslims and to their families who sympathize with radicals.<sup>159</sup>

An exceptionally repressive policy has led to the radicalization of the Kabardino-Balkarian *Jamaat*. In 2004 the local *Wahhabite* Yarmuk *Jamaat* carried out an attack on the Department of the Federal Drug Control Service in Nalchik, and as a consequence, the authorities dissolved the leading group of the *Jamaat* in the course of a special operation in Nalchik in 2005. However, this measure was only apparently a success, it became clear that the *Jamaat* itself was not eliminated. Since then Kabardino-Balkaria has become a very explosive territory and its Muslim youth has started to cooperate with radical Chechens.<sup>160</sup>

The Muslim religious boards are turned into bureaucratic structures by the state and they have no control over the religious situation at the local level, and they have no authority over the Muslim community at large. Moreover, they fail to engage in dialogue with informal and radical Muslim structures and drive them to the margins of society.<sup>161</sup>

Obviously, the state is not likely to accommodate the positions of extremist groups, but at the same time it should provide a definition of extremism, and differentiate between radical and moderate Muslims. An additional challenge for the state is represented by the diversity of youth communities in the Northern Caucasus, which - because of the lack of

<sup>159</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia`s Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 25-28.

<sup>160</sup> Shterin, Yarlykapov, *Reconsidering Radicalisation and Terrorism* (2011), p. 320-321.

<sup>161</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia`s Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 25-28.

registration - often find themselves outside of the legal framework, and this increases the growth of radicals' and extremists' influence on them.<sup>162</sup>

Although state policy towards Islamic radicalism has a very repressive character, some officials support a more balanced approach, and they even admit errors committed by the authorities. For example, in the Astrakhan region the local authorities took a reserved attitude towards local radicals and their head, Ayub Astrakhansky. However, examples like this remain an exception.<sup>163</sup>

The history of Islamic radicalism in the Northern Caucasus has shown that its emergence was brought about by a profound crisis in the region and in the society. To stop protest and radical trends, the authorities are trying to replace the elites in the North Caucasian republics and to show their willingness to fight corruption and the inefficiency of the local economies. Examples of these measures are the replacement of the leaders in the republics of Dagestan, Adygeya, and Kabardino-Balkaria, as well as punitive actions against corrupt officials, the implementation of economic projects, and the development of tourism. All these measures have been very warmly received by the local population. However, given the scale of the problems that the region is facing, such measures are clearly insufficient. The Northern Caucasus would need a reform of the whole system, but Moscow is not willing yet to carry out systemic reforms in the region. Another obstacle which needs to be overcome is the need for a national identity. The growing anti-Caucasus sentiments in the Russian society are perceived in a negative way by young Muslims, and the integration of Muslims from the Northern Caucasus into civil society is moving forward slowly. Moreover, authorities use the struggle against extremism and terrorism as a way to strengthen the control over the media and over the political opposition. Quite often, the measures taken by the authorities have no connection to the struggle against extremism, and they may have a significant impact on

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 25-28.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 25-28.

the society. For example, the elections of governors were abolished after the Beslan terrorist attack due to security reasons. In certain cases the Russian authorities exaggerate the issue of extremism and the security policy measures to counteract it. For example, some cities or even regions in Russia – such as Tatarstan and the Muslim Volga area - were declared to be under the influence of *Wahhabism*, also if this was clearly not the case.<sup>164</sup>

The relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Muslim community is another important factor that needs to be mentioned in this section. Over a period of 700 years, there have been times of peaceful coexistence, competition, and violent confrontation. In the Soviet era, the relations between the Orthodox Church and the Muslim community were friendly, because of the state's policy of atheism and the repression of all religions. This changed radically after the collapse of the USSR, when many unsolved problems emerged. The first anti-Muslim stereotypes emerged as a consequence of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, and of the anti-Russian moods in the republics of Central Asia (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan) and in the Caucasus. The wars in Chechnya in the 1990s also contributed to the spread of Islamophobia in the Russian society; militant Islam was considered as an enemy of the Russian society, and as the religion of terrorists and of immigrants from Central Asia and from the southern republics. Islam in Russia became increasingly described as an aggressive religion, and it was often associated with terrorism and with separatism.<sup>165</sup>

These stereotypes have been spread among the Russian Orthodox majority, and they have been supported by the most conservative branch of the Russian Orthodox Church. Islam has been criticized by some lobbying groups of the Russian Orthodox Church for violations of human rights, restrictions for women, and discrimination against other

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<sup>164</sup> Viktorin V.M., *Islam v Astrakhanskoy regione* [Islam in the Astrakhan Region], Logos, Moscow, 2008.

<sup>165</sup> Sotnichenko Alexander, *Islam-Russian Orthodox Church Relations and the State in the Post-Communist Russia*, Saint-Petersburg State University (2009), p. 270-273.

religious groups. As a consequence of this negative perception, many missionary campaigns have been carried out to convert Muslims to Christianity. Despite the fact that Russian Orthodox devotees and Muslims do not have the same rights, there is an increasing number of people joining Islam, because they consider it as a way to oppose the system and the centralization of power. However, there are also more moderate branches of the Russian Orthodox Church, which try to engage in interreligious dialogue with the Muslim community in order to establish a peaceful relation between the two traditional religions of Russia.<sup>166</sup>

## Potential counter-trends

The first function of a counter-terrorist strategy consists in the definition of a terrorist threat. This is a very strategic issue, and Russian leaders make use of a wide range of terms, such as ‘militants’, ‘illegal armed groups’, ‘terrorists’, ‘extremists’, ‘radicals’, ‘bandits’, and ‘criminals’. The number of terms is not the result of hesitation or creativity, but it is rather connected to older representations of people and groups considered as threats to the state. This consideration is also supported by facts and by Russian practices dating back to the Soviet period, when individuals or groups suspected of representing a threat to the state’s security were said to be ‘criminals’, ‘bandits’, or ‘traitors’. The Chechen wars contributed to the strengthening of these representations, and made of terrorism the supreme threat to state’s security. The Russian government poorly defines the term ‘terrorism’, and it is often used as a synonym for ‘extremism’. This confusion and ambiguity can be found also in Russia’s counter-terrorism legislation. The law on ‘extremist activities’ passed in 2002 defines ‘extremist actions’ as any activities perceived as undermining the security of the Russian Federation. Thus, terrorism is perceived in security terms as a direct attack against the state. This broad

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 270-273.



definition leaves room for various interpretations, and it gives the government latitude in determining what is terrorism and what is extremism.<sup>167</sup>

Russian counter-terrorism strategy covers different domains of intervention. Dmitry Medvedev quoted five pillars which constitute the federal approach to terrorism: strengthening of law enforcement agencies; use of preventive strikes; assistance to those citizens willing to “reintegrate” in the society after a period of membership in radical groups; the development of socio-economic spheres; and the consolidation of common moral and spiritual foundations. Both Medvedev and Putin support a hardline policy when it comes to countering terror and to encouraging preventive actions against terrorism, including the development of intelligence capacities. In 2014 Putin approved a policy for countering terrorism in Russia until 2025, which focuses in particular on intelligence gathering (especially social networks), interethnic relations, and illegal migration. Putin’s strategy involves a combination of the efforts of the state, society and public organizations:” *One of the most important aims is to establish a climate of public non-acceptance, and strengthen civil immunity against the spread of extremist and radical ideas*”.<sup>168</sup> So, the purpose of this new strategy is to monitor information, to amend existing legislation on extremism, and to include civil society in a multi-pronged approach aiming at reducing extremism.<sup>169</sup>

However, the Russian counter-terrorism strategy has evolved since the anti-terrorist operations began in Chechnya in 1999. In the early 2000s, the security approach to terrorism was predominant and Chechen terrorism was linked to international terrorism,

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<sup>167</sup> Campana Aurelie, *Beyond Norms: the Incomplete De-securitization of the Russian Counter-terrorism Frame*, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 6:3 (2013), p. 457-472.

<sup>168</sup> Security Council meeting in the Kremlin on November 20, 2014 to discuss the draft Strategy for Countering Extremism in the Russian Federation through 2025: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47045> (16.12.2015)

<sup>169</sup> McDermott Roger, *Putin Approves Draft Strategy for Countering Extremism in Russia to 2025*, *Jamestown’s Eurasia Daily Monitor*, volume: 11, issue: 211 (November 25, 2014): [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43124&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=756&no\\_cache=1#.VXFV5FbGA6V](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43124&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=756&no_cache=1#.VXFV5FbGA6V) (05.06.2015)

representing a threat not only for Russia but also for the entire world. However, the discourse on the topic has shifted from a focus on security threats to a stronger consideration of the underlying structural factors of terrorism. The establishment of a link between socio-economic difficulties and violence dates back to Putin's second term as president. This new approach was intended to raise the effectiveness of the counter-terrorism strategy. Due to the fact that repressive measures to prevent terrorism have failed, the focus has now been put on actions aimed at diverting the recruitment of terrorists. In 2006 Putin created a commission to improve the socio-economic situation in the Southern Federal District, but it was only after Medvedev put an end to the anti-terrorist operations in Chechnya in 2009 that this soft approach to fighting terror was further developed and implemented. In 2010 Putin presented a counter-terrorism strategy mainly based on socio-economic aspects, with only a few mentions of security considerations. He stressed also the fact that Russia's strategy should be discriminate and target only "terrorists" instead of the whole population. This positive aspect of counter-terrorism includes the idea of the re-integration of the Northern Caucasus into Russia, for example through job creation, and educational reform. Currently, Russia's counter-terrorism framework includes three approaches: terrorism as a result of internal troubles; counter-terrorism as a "positive process"; and Islam not being stigmatized.<sup>170</sup>

The Russian counter-terrorism strategy has been increasingly characterized by a de-securitization process under the Presidency of Medvedev, also if counter-terrorism in Russia still remains embedded in a cultural and normative context that makes security, sovereignty, and integrity leading principles. Thus, the de-securitization process was plagued with tensions that reduced its impact and effectiveness. There are in particular four difficulties that can be identified in the implementation of the counter-terrorism program. The first one is the lack of coherence between the definition of the threats and the identification of the causes leading to violence. The second one is an incomplete

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<sup>170</sup> Campana, *Beyond Norms* (2013), p. 457-472.

attempt to de-securitizing the counter-terrorism discourses, which paradoxically leads to the re-securitization of socio-economic, religious, and interethnic issues. The third one is the use of old discourses (paternalism, strong interventionism) to persuade public opinion. The last one is the stress on strategic silences.<sup>171</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper provided an outline of radicalization dynamics in the Russian Federation, and also of the engagement of the Russian state with Islam, showing the ways in which the government accommodates religion, and in which Russian society interacts with the Muslim communities.

Over the last few years, Islam has become more visible in Russia, for example through the construction of mosques or of *halal* businesses (restaurants, clothes shops), educational structures, awareness raising initiatives, and a growing online presence. There have also been changes in the composition of the Muslim communities due to demography and migration. Moreover, Islam is no longer confined to traditional Muslim areas, and it has significantly changed from its designation as traditional. Transnational Islamic networks (*Salafis*, Muslim Brotherhood) have extended their presence and influence in Russia, and brought significant changes to the region. Although these organizations are small and restricted by the Russian legislation, their members have a growing impact on local and traditional Muslim communities in Russia.<sup>172</sup>

The radicalization of local and traditional Islam in Russia is a relatively new phenomenon. Radicalization is expected to increase in the near future, and to grow into a form of ideological protest against the repressive internal situation in Russia. Due to its

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 457-472.

<sup>172</sup> Münster, *Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea*, November 2014, p. 15-17.

internal instability, the Northern Caucasus is likely to remain the main region for radical activities. Competition between transnational and local Islamic groups is likely to continue, also if there are some points of contacts, especially regarding the position of Russian Muslims in the relations between the West and the Islamic world. Concerning this last point, the question of the links and relations between Russian radical Muslims and radical Muslims in Western Europe remains still open. Probably, these links will increase, as some mutual contacts between Russian and European Islamist network structures have already been put in place.<sup>173</sup>

If we consider Russia from a comparative international perspective, we can see that the challenge of changing forms of Islam in a globalized world concerns also many other countries. In the same way, Russia is not the only state that is hostile to Islam and to its expansion or transformation through immigration. However, there are some features in the approach of the Russian government to Islam that are unique. First, the insertion of new transnational forms of Islam in the authoritarian political system of contemporary Russia is particularly problematic; in this framework violence against Muslims can be understood as a consequence of the lack of ground rules in political life and of the lack of individual rights. Second, the secrecy and the lack of transparency with which regulatory issues concerning Islam are decided are also peculiar features of the Russian political system. Third, the Russian government has no coherent strategy for responding to Islamic expansion, but rather a repressive, arbitrary, and incoherent approach. Fourth, while Russia is opposing a public debate on the future of Islam, in Western Europe dialogue and policy evaluation are taking place with a higher degree of openness. Due to the nature of their political system, Western European countries pursue a more nuanced strategy in respect to Islam. Finally, the illusion that the state can prevent the spread of

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<sup>173</sup> Malashenko, Yarlykapov, *Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Community*, (2009), p. 33.

Muslim institutions to new regions, and that it can suppress foreign elements, is a unique feature of the Russian approach to Islam.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Light (2012) *Migration, 'Globalised' Islam and the Russian State*, p. 219-224.

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