

Islam and Tolerance

in Wider Europe



Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe

Edited by Pamela Kilpadi

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p a r t t h r e e

Political Ideology and Religious Tolerance in Russia

Muslims in the Russian and Tatarstan Media:

Prospects for the Media Policy
Promoting Tolerance

Irina Kouznetsova Morenko

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Muslims in the Russian and Tatarstan Media: Prospects for Media Policy Promoting Tolerance

Irina Kouznetsova-Morenko

As evidenced by the worldwide scandal that erupted following the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in European newspapers, current media representations of Islam easily become heavily politicized. My International Policy Fellowship research project, which included the first public discussion and cooperative initiative ever organized between journalists and Muslim leaders in the Russian Republic of Tatarstan, revealed the significant role played by the media in fueling intolerance toward Muslims in Russia. Many Russian Muslims now insist that Islamophobia in the Russian media reflects a deliberate policy supported by members of Russian officialdom to provoke a conflict between the followers of the most widely practiced traditional Russian religions—Orthodoxy and Islam.

Muslims make up about 15 percent of the Russian population, and many of them live in Volga region republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Although the Tatarstan media tends to be more sensitized to Muslim issues than the Russian national media

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(roughly half of Tatarstan's population are Muslim Tatars), they both fail to adequately represent the role of modern Muslims in Russian social and political life. Ironically, the Tatarstan media's attempt to avoid instigating ethnic and religious tensions by remaining silent on key debates contributes to mutual misunderstanding (for instance the Tatarstan media did not even react when the national press seized on a recent headscarf-related scandal). Rather than promoting democratic dialogue, the Tatarstan media prefers to ward off social tensions by pretending they do not exist.

Such tactics of concealment have profoundly negative consequences. The tendency to take a 'neutral' stance translates into a kind of passive intolerance toward Muslims in practice. The standard mode of operation for the Russian and Tatarstan media in covering any story related to Islam is to reproduce 'facts' devoid of meaningful analysis, relying primarily upon superficial speculation and inaccurate interpretations of Islamic terminology.

The results of a media content analysis show that although purely xenophobic reports concerning Muslims in the Russian media are rare and television broadcasts congratulating Muslim figures and political leaders are common, Islamophobic myths are regularly replicated in media headings and journalistic notes. Foreign Muslims are typically radical, stigmatized characters completely lacking in positive attributes, contributing to a public image of Islam in Russia increasingly associated with threat. The 'image of the enemy' has been constructed—even the once stereotypically pure, feminine, and humble Muslim woman has been transformed into a potential hostage-taker or 'women kamikaze' following the tragic theater hostage-taking in Dubrovka, Moscow in 2002. When Muslim women sought the right to wear their headscarves (hijab) in passport photographs, for example, about a third of media reports described the incident as a threat to national security. Media reports covering the daily life of the Muslim community and various Muslim traditions such as the Kurban Bayram feast (otherwise known as Eid to coincide with the annual hajj pilgrimage to Mecca) are characterized by an alarming inter-confessional polarization.

Given this backdrop of public silence or misrepresentation, it should come as no surprise that when several dozen Muslims were arrested in Tatarstan in 2005 on suspicion of associating with the organization Hyzb-ut-Tahri, the republic saw an eruption of spontaneous public protests with relatives of those arrested holding posters demanding, "*Down with Islamophobia in the media!*"

Russian media policy and tolerance

Inciting religious and ethnic dissent is deemed a punishable crime in Russia according to the Constitution and media regulations intended to suppress extremism. Moral and ethical conflicts in journalism are addressed by the Grand Jury of the Russian Union of Journalists, which is guided by Russian and international regulations as well as the professional code of ethics of Russian journalists. Nevertheless, most experts and independent observers acknowledge that media policy and the implementation of media regulation in Russia is not yet elaborated, with Russian codes of journalism ethics consisting mostly of declarations rather than norms of behavior.



Russian policymakers at the federal level not only lack adequate professional capacity to promote democratic dialogue and responsible media policy as a means of easing ethnic and religious tensions, but they also face a unique situation in their dealings with regional leaders in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Given the republics' significant Muslim populations, the local

governments must form consensus on all relevant policy issues with the local Islamic clergy in the spiritual boards representing Muslim communities. The Muslims of these republics are not yet represented by local civic organizations but only by the clergy—a distinction often criticized by Russian observers at the federal level and completely unrecognized by local Muslim clergymen and journalists. The weakness of civil society in Tatarstan and the lack of open democratic dialogue make it extremely difficult to find innovative solutions to inter-ethnic and inter-religious disputes.

Since the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 in the United States, several sensational cases of media-inspired Islamophobia seriously undermined tolerance toward Muslims in Russia. In 2003 the Moscow Muslim Fund Ansar launched a lawsuit against the popular newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* after it published an essay where a passport photo with a headscarf was compared with a photo of a Nazi secret service police cap. In a 2004 lawsuit, Muslims from Saratov and Makhachkala sued the newspaper *Izvestiya* over its coverage about the *Islam.ru* website they maintained. The Moscow City Court ruled in favor of the newspapers.

These lawsuits were intended not only as a protest against concrete publications, but also against the larger phenomenon of Islamophobia in the Russian media. The Russian Muslim server *Islam.ru* regularly monitors media coverage related to Islam in Russia and comments on every instance of Islamophobia. Those bringing the lawsuits clearly believed that the media coverage reflected an intentional Russian policy to provoke conflict between the followers of Orthodoxy and Islam. Public media reports about the lawsuits never mentioned these larger allegations.

The failure to examine and follow up on such allegations highlights not only the active denial of ethnic and religious tensions by the Russian and Tatarstan media (which of course failed to report on the lawsuits at all), but also the low level of engagement by Muslim leaders in Russian national policymaking circles.

In Tatarstan, a number of political institutes are responsible for media policy. At the republic level, the State Religious Affairs Department of the Cabinet of Ministers and the Ministry of Press and Information are responsible. According to Professor Renat Nabiev, Chairman of the State Religious Affairs Department and one of my International Policy Fellowships project mentors, the department faces serious manpower and budgetary problems. The Ministry of Press and Information is engaged in the organizational control of the media to a greater extent. Public journalistic organizations are fragmented and weak, while the Spiritual Board of Muslims is not oriented toward public information campaigns and is staffed by only one part-time public relations person. Given this set

of circumstances amid uncertain relations with Russia's federal center, organizations charged with the development of professional media policy in Tatarstan shirk their responsibilities and stagnation predominates. Weak civil society is undoubtedly a major part of the problem—experts evaluate Tatarstan's system of governance to be one of the least developed republican democracies in the country.

Elsewhere in Russia the situation is not quite so dire. Responding to media coverage of the Moscow theater hostage-taking in 2002, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Republic of Karelia (a Russian region with a low percentage of Muslims) disseminated a policy paper on regulating the Russian media's coverage of Islamic issues. Thus, *Islam.ru* and Muslim Board of Karelia are good examples of Muslim organizations that unite and empower Muslims to defend their rights in the face of discrimination.

Even in Tatarstan, Islamophobia in media has begun to arouse political reactions (but not yet well-conceived media policies). Following a series of human rights violations on the basis of ethnicity and religion, in January 2006 the Tatarstan Parliament addressed the Russian President and Government requesting that urgent state-level steps be taken to prevent ethnic and religious instability in Russia. Referring to a notorious essay published in *Izvestia* about the Tatar village of *Srednyaya Yelyuzan* in the Penza Region that was stigmatized as a base for Wahabi extremists, Tatarstan's deputies warned against reporting that “instills xenophobia into public thinking.” In March 2006, the Tatarstan Parliament rejected the federal draft ‘Law on the Fundamentals of State Policy’ given their belief that primarily it defends the rights of ethnic Russians only rather than all citizens of Russia. The draft was also criticized by the Tatarstan head of the Muftis Board, Ravil Gaynutdin.

Relations between the Russians and Tatars in Tatarstan have not improved in the last decade, and negative images of Islam in the Russian media only serve to worsen anti-Russian sentiment among Muslims in the republic. Russia's divide-and-rule style ‘power hierarchy’ is particularly manifested in ethnically diverse regions like Tatarstan

National and Islamic Movements in Tatarstan

by *Eduard Ponarin*

The revitalization of Islam in Tatarstan dates back to the time of perestroika in the late 1980s—part of the more general process of searching for ideological alternatives involving all peoples of the former Soviet Union. The Islamic renaissance was an important tool of the Tatar national movement, reinforcing the Tatar population's distinct identity and demands for greater autonomy or independence from Moscow.

During perestroika, Islam was restored largely as a conservative national tradition—a set of popular rites rather than an independent political force. The nationalist movement used Muslim symbols such as green flags and traditional dress to back up political demands with claims of national authenticity. The instrumentalist role of Islam was exemplified by numerous instances of its non-canonical use, such as reciting prayers in theaters or staging theatrical shows devoted to Ramadan and the feast of Sacrifice in stadiums or in the streets near national monuments.

The first public celebration of Ramadan was in Kazan on April 16, 1991. It culminated in a procession of thousands of people to Freedom Square chanting the slogans of the national movement. Since the mid-1990s, such public celebrations of religious holidays have become rare. Religious celebrations today in Tatarstan tend to be more private and local, with little mention in the Russian-language local press, or mere formal greetings published on the occasion of a religious holiday.

A more self-sufficient strand of Islam has emerged, however—one that is independent of both the remnants of the nationalist movement and the local government, and whose followers have recently exhibited political ambitions.

Tatarstan's Islamic renaissance

As of 1990, there were only 154 Muslim parishes in Tatarstan for about two million Tatars, with most established after former Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms. Of the 55 imams, 41 were older than 60 years of age, only one had university-level theological education, and just eight had secondary (high school level) Muslim education. The year 1990 was a year of great changes. For the first time since the early 20th century, two Muslim secondary schools opened in Tatarstan, breaking the Soviet-era tradition of Tatar religious leaders receiving their education in Central Asia. With significant assistance from rich Muslim nations, the creation of numerous new parishes and the construction of mosques shifted into high gear. The number of (still unregulated) parishes increased from 18 in 1988 to more than 700 in 1992, when the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Tatarstan was established. According to the board's deputy head Valiulla Yakupov, "almost half of the mosques [at the time] were built without any licensing documents from any Muslim authority."

Prior to 1992, Tatarstan's Muslim organizations were subordinated to the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the European part of Russia and Siberia, which is headquartered in the city of Ufa in the Republic of Bashkortostan, and headed by Talgat Tadjutdin. Tatar nationalists played a substantial role in the organization, calling on the Ufa mufti to relocate his headquarters to Kazan, the capital city of Tatarstan, because they believed that the impending secession of Tatarstan from Russia would require independent religious structures. The mufti declined those calls and instead established only a representative office in Kazan.

Eventually, the emergence of an alternative Muslim Spiritual Board based within the republic precipitated a schism among the Muslims of Tatarstan. The acrimony surrounding this split was indirectly related to the abolition of the Council on Religious Affairs in Moscow—a Russian government watchdog organization. After its demise, the receipt and distribution of financial assistance from foreign Muslim countries was left uncontrolled. At the second International Islamic Forum "Islamic Education in East Europe and Muslim States" held in Moscow in the fall of 1992, the leaders of international Muslim organizations concluded agreements with the leaders of the new Russian Muslim organizations to provide financing and teachers and accept local students to Islamic universities abroad. Saudi representatives at the forum reportedly donated fifteen libraries of mostly Salafi (known as Wahabi in Russia) literature and, according to Yakupov, hinted at generous assistance should an alternative organization to the Ufa Muslim headquarters emerge. Disagreement among the Tatar clerics as to how these spoils should be divided greatly contributed to the heat and eventual split of the Muslim community into factions during the establishment of the Tatarstani Muslim Spiritual Board.

Another major factor precipitating that schism was the position of President Shaimiev of Tatarstan, who relied on the support of nationalists to counter Moscow, but became wary of increasingly popular nationalist leaders. He chose to co-opt those nationalists who he deemed less dangerous into his government while seeking to marginalize those he felt he could not trust, especially after he succeeded in securing favorable treaty with Moscow in 1994 guaranteeing several privileges for his republic. Through continued tactics of soft repression of stronger opponents and co-optation of supportive nationalists, President Shaimiev sought to ensure

political control over Tatarstan's religious renaissance. Shaimiev chose to support the local Spiritual Board to the detriment of the Ufa mufti Talgat Tadjutdin based outside his republic, orchestrating a campaign against Tadjutdin in the local press and encouraging the seizure of mosques and other premises by the supporters of the new Tatarstani mufti. In January 1995 a Congress of Tatarstani Muslims recognized the new status quo.

It was not long before the head of the newly established religious body, Abdulla Aliulla, discovered how far the republic's leadership would tolerate independent political actors in Tatarstan. His attempt to seize another mosque and a Muslim school in Kazan in the fall of 1995 resulted in a criminal case against him. His leadership position was shaken and, in February 1998, cleric Usman Iskhakov was elected the republic's mufti with Shaimiev's backing. Aliulla condemned the government interference accusing county-level government leaders of handpicking delegates to the Congress of Tatarstani Muslims and instructing them on who they should support. His stance was backed by opposition nationalist parties including Ittifak and Milli Mejlis.

Current context

Appreciating the extent to which his leadership depends upon Shaimiev's support, Usman Iskhakov has consolidated his position as the religious leader of Tatarstan's Muslims. According to the Chairman of the Milli Mejlis Party, Usman Iskhakov "was and remains an obedient tool of the authorities." Shaimiev's domination in religious matters is further exemplified by his personal choice of an imam in 2005 for the newly opened Kul Sharif grand mosque in Kazan. Despite the efforts of local nationalists to unleash a vicious campaign against him on the eve of the elections, steadfast political loyalties have evidently helped Usman Iskhakov to acquire a significant personal fortune and win a second re-election in February 2006.

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and Bashkortostan. Relationships with the federal center are characterized as a latent conflict, with the 'ethnic card' often played by local authorities seeking to expand their power base.

Steps toward more tolerant media in Tatarstan and Russia

The roundtable discussions organized within the framework of the IPF project revealed a series of obstacles limiting democratic dialogue and problem resolution regarding Muslims and Islamic issues in the media including the following: 1) the journalistic community does not follow a common code of ethics; 2) local journalists, who are often poorly educated, act as conduits of political statements and policies rather than defenders of freedom



of speech; 3) journalists lack both education and practical experience in understanding and working with Muslims; 4) there are no local institutes assisting in the implementation of media policies and recommendations from the Russian Union of Journalists; and 5) significant prejudice exists in relation to the Muslim clergy.

Tatarstan's journalists noted that sometimes the Muslim clergy communicate in a unilateral way without offering substantial public information, and there is no reliable center that can provide them with information on life of Muslims in Tatarstan. As a result, formal regulations have not led to common practices preventing Islamophobia and religious intolerance in the media. This means that Russian policymakers and Muslim institutions must work together to increase inter-religious and inter-ethnic tolerance as well as the openness of their policymaking processes with these aims. At the level of media professionals, this implies overcoming of journalistic incompetence in highlighting religious issues and relying more heavily on professional journalism ethics. Last but not least, civil society organizations should be strengthened so that they may contribute to tolerance-building initiatives.

The longer term prospects for change will depend upon the willingness of private organizations to introduce special training courses in religious educational institutions as well as for journalists, with the cooperation of journalism faculties and Muslim communities. As a result, Tatarstan's Muslims should be better positioned to engage in constructive cooperation with Russia's regional and central media.



Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe offers a refreshing new look at the complex interplay between religion, nationalism and expansionism in an increasingly globalized world, as revealed by a new generation of open society leaders working to build a more tolerant Europe. The authors are fellows and colleagues of the International Policy Fellowships program—an initiative of the Open Society Institute that has attempted to combat ‘brain drain’ while developing policy research capacities, initially in emerging democracies of the former Soviet sphere where concepts such as ‘policy’ and ‘fellowship’ were virtually untranslatable. Since its establishment in the late 1990s, some 250 of its fellows have grown into a network of open society leaders spanning more than 40 countries on nearly every continent.

Each chapter—focusing on Western Europe, the Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, Central Europe, and the Balkans—includes several essays by different authors, all of whom are actively involved in the dynamic policymaking processes transforming their respective countries. Their policy perspectives benefit from a uniquely ‘inside out’ rather than the usual ‘outside in’ orientation found in most English-language information about their communities. Taken as a whole, the compilation offers insightful insider stories and comparisons across countries and regions. The results are illuminating.