

# Islamic radicalization in Russia: an assessment

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To what extent does the Russian Federation face the threat of Islamic radicalization? The threat is undeniably a serious one, and has been a source of some of the most critical challenges to the integrity and stability of Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Chechnya, Moscow has confronted a secessionist struggle which has become increasingly Islamized and integrated into the global transnational jihadist movement. The conflict has also spread beyond the North Caucasus. Moscow and a number of other cities and regions in Russia have suffered a series of deadly Islamist-inspired terrorist attacks, such as the Moscow theatre hostage crisis in 2002 and the Beslan siege in 2004. Some analysts consider there is a real threat that Islamic radicalization is inexorably advancing, driven in particular by Putin's repressive and centralizing policies, and that it could ultimately overwhelm the Russian state. Gordon Hahn argues that 'Russia is experiencing the beginning of an Islamist jihad' and that the radicalization of the North Caucasus is inexorably spreading to the Volga-Urals region and into the main cities of Russia, such as Moscow and St Petersburg.<sup>1</sup> Some Russian analysts have similarly raised the alarm of an overwhelming 'Islamic threat', the incipient 'Islamization of Russia', and the threat of an alliance between liberals and Muslims which could lead to an 'orange-green revolution'.<sup>2</sup> Close to the surface of such assessments is a demographic element—the fact that the ethnic Russian population is in severe demographic decline while the Russian Muslim population is growing rapidly. Among western commentators, Paul Goble has raised the prospect of a Muslim majority in Russia by 2050.<sup>3</sup>

There are interesting parallels between these projections of an Islamic threat in post-Soviet Russia and similar projections made during the Soviet period. In the final two decades of the Soviet Union, a number of western Sovietologists

\* The author would like to thank Luke March, Ekaterina Braginskaia, Akhmet Yarlykapov and Matteo Fumagalli for their advice and support. The research behind this article, which included field trips in Russia, has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through the project "Radicalization" and violence: the Russian dimension' (RES-181-25-0020).

<sup>1</sup> Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia's Islamic threat* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Deliagin, *Rossii posle Putina: Neizbezna li v Rossiya 'oranzhevo-zelenaya' revoliutsiya?* (Moscow: Veche, 2005); Y. N. Golubchikov and R. A. Mnatsakanyan, *Islamizatsiya Rossii: trevozhnye stsenarii budushchego* (Moscow: Veche, 2005); Roman Silant'ev, *Noveishaya istoriya islama v Rossii* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Goble, 'Muslim birthrate worries Russia', *Washington Times*, 26 Nov. 2006. See also V. Y. Belokrenitskii, 'Rossiya i islamskii mir: politiko-demograficheskie trendy', *Politiya* 4: 47, pp. 104–21.

argued that Islam represented a powerful counter-ideology to communism which constituted, with the increased demographic weight of Muslims in the Soviet Union, a serious threat to the Soviet regime.<sup>4</sup> The fact that these predictions fell short of the mark, and that the most serious challenge to the Soviet state came from European nationalist movements, suggests that a similar caution should be exercised in projecting a generalized Islamic threat to the post-Soviet Russian state. As some scholars of Soviet Central Asia understood, there was no necessary contradiction between being a Muslim and being a loyal Soviet citizen, and most Soviet Muslims had no ambition to challenge, let alone overthrow, the Soviet state.<sup>5</sup> In post-Soviet Russia, it is similarly important to take care not to treat the Russian Muslim community as a monolithic bloc which is in existential opposition to the Russian state and within which Islam is understood primarily as a counter-ideology to Russian national identity and statehood.

It is this more sceptical and questioning approach that underpins the main argument of this article, which seeks to question the perception of an inevitable trajectory of increased Islamic radicalization in Russia. It challenges the assumption that Islamic radicalization has risen inexorably in response to the centralizing and repressive policies pursued by Putin from the start of the second Chechen war onwards. Instead, it argues that radicalization processes were at their most intense during the Yeltsin period, and that Putin has been partially successful in stemming or constraining these dynamics, if far from overcoming or resolving them. In pursuing this argument, the first section examines the legacy that Putin inherited in 1999 and 2000, and how the process of political liberalization, fragmentation and decentralization during the Yeltsin period provided fertile conditions for Islamic radicalization. The next three sections identify the three principal counter-radicalization policy approaches adopted by the Putin administration and their relative successes as well as their limitations. The focus is directed first on the policies of repression and political centralization and their effects, particularly in the North Caucasus; second, on the policies of deliberate state cooption of Muslim elites and the attempts to support a moderate Russian Islam; and third, on the state's attempts to promote a state-approved nationalist ideology which overcomes rather than entrenches ethnic and confessional difference.

A second key objective of this article is to challenge the idea of a Russian exceptionalism in its interaction with political Islam. There is a tendency, as noted above, to view Russian Muslims as inevitably and persistently alienated from the Russian state and thus constantly vulnerable to radicalization. In practice, in Russia as in other parts of the world, Islamic radicalism is attractive for more instrumental and contingent reasons, as a mobilizing ideology which can be flexibly adopted by oppositional movements. The application of social movements theory to Islamist

<sup>4</sup> Alexandre Bennigson and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic threat to the Soviet state* (New York: St Martin's, 1983); Alexandre Bennigson and Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union* (New York: Praeger, 1967); Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Decline of an empire: the Soviet Socialist Republics in revolt* (New York: Newsweek Books, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Muriel Atkin, *The subtlest game: Islam in Soviet Tajikistan* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1987); Nancy Lubin, *Labour and nationality in Soviet Central Asia: an uneasy compromise* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

movements has helped to highlight these more contingent and contextual factors, providing a more dynamic model than the traditional psychological explanations for religious extremism.<sup>6</sup> In Russia as in other parts of the world, the key condition behind the success of Islamic radicalism is its adaptability to the political opportunity structures available for collective action and the extent to which it can provide a narrative which challenges the legitimacy of the existing power structures. But this does not imply that its victory is inevitable. States and governments are far from powerless, since they can potentially implement policies that deny or repress such political openings, and that frame a counternarrative to reduce or undermine the appeal of Islamist radicalism.

Russian strategy towards Islamist extremism and its counter-radicalization policies are certainly distinctive, but there are links and analogies between them and strategies and policies pursued in other parts of the world. As in a number of countries in the Middle East, such as Algeria or Iraq, the Russian use of force in its counterterrorism strategy, particularly in the North Caucasus, raises the issue of whether repression reduces or exacerbates Islamic radicalization. The Russian government's attempts to develop a moderate 'Russian' Islam has clear analogies with the attempts of West European governments, such as those of the UK and France, to develop their own moderate 'British' or 'French' Islam. And, as a large, formally secular, federal state with a religious-ethnic core, Russia has some similarities with India or China in confronting the challenge of developing a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state ideology. In these and other areas, although Russia has distinctive and particular circumstances, its experience of dealing with Islam does have significant resonances with other parts of the world.

### **Putin's inheritance: fragmentation and radicalization**

Before any broader comparisons are made, the specific context of state engagement with Islam in post-Soviet Russia needs to be understood, particularly the legacy of the immediate post-Soviet period. The situation in the early 1990s gave little indication that Islamic radicalization would become a major internal threat to the nascent post-Soviet Russian state. Within the new pro-western Russian government, the general feeling was one of relief that Russia could finally withdraw and disengage from the Muslim world and its debilitating conflicts and senseless wars, for example in Afghanistan. The foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, developed a foreign policy which sought to ensure that Russia could 'cross over to another civilised, democratic side of the barricades, so that Russia would finally become a "normal power"'.<sup>7</sup> It was clear that Kozyrev and his liberal allies saw the Muslim world generally as being on the other, 'non-democratic', side of the barricades and that a liberalizing and westernizing post-Soviet Russia needed to withdraw

<sup>6</sup> Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims rebel: repression and violence in the Islamic world* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2003); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in movement: social movements and contentious politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic activism: a social movement theory approach* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 20 Aug. 1992.

not only physically but also mentally from the culture and traditions of 'oriental despotism' which, it was believed, had infected and corrupted the Soviet Union. Withdrawing from Central Asia helped further to insulate Russia from the East and its corrupting influences, most notably in significantly reducing the proportion of Muslims in the post-Soviet Russian state.

There is little indication that the new Yeltsin administration viewed the remaining indigenous Muslim population within Russia as vulnerable to Islamic radicalism. Even though Russia's disengagement from Central Asia was partially reversed by the onset of an Islamist-driven insurgency in Tajikistan, there was still a general assumption that Islamist extremism was a problem that confronted backward Afghanistan or Tajikistan, not a serious threat to Russia's own westernized and secularized Muslims. Accordingly, Russia's Muslim communities were treated as recognized minorities, as adherents to one of the 'traditional religions' in Russia, and thus could benefit from the religious freedoms and civil liberties that the new regime offered. This led to one of the most dynamic and favourable periods of religious liberty for Muslims in Russia, when the state withdrew from its traditional role of controlling, and often actively repressing, Islamic belief and practice. As a consequence there was a vigorous Islamic resurgence, which saw new mosques being built, a significant increase in religiosity, the growth in prominence of Muslim religious and political leaders, and, perhaps most importantly, a reconnection of Russia's Muslim communities with the wider Muslim world.<sup>8</sup>

But this Muslim revival and indeed resurgence, with all the undoubted benefits that it brought to Russia's traditionally beleaguered and isolated Muslim communities, also provided fertile ground for radicalization. Among the factors contributing to this situation were the consequences of the fracturing and fragmentation of traditional structures of Islamic institutional authority inherited from the Soviet era. Even during the Soviet period, there had never been a unified Muslim structure analogous to the Holy Synod in the Russian Orthodox Church. Rather, there were four 'spiritual boards' representing the interests of the Muslims of Central Asia, of Central Russia and Siberia, of the North Caucasus and of the Trans-Caucasus respectively.<sup>9</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union not only severed the ties between these boards but also led to further splits within them. In the Russian Federation, the North Caucasus Board fragmented into an array of ethnically defined muftiates. In central Russia, a similar process of fragmentation took place and the authority of Talgat Tadjuddin, the head of the Central Spiritual Board in Ufa, was increasingly challenged by a younger generation of Muslim leaders who declared their autonomy and their credentials as 'muftis' in their own right.<sup>10</sup> In 1996, Ravil' Gainutdin, a former protégé of Tadjuddin and head of the cathedral mosque in Moscow, established the Council of Muftis of Russia as a direct insti-

<sup>8</sup> This topic is covered in greater detail in Shireen Hunter, *Islam in Russia: the politics of identity and security* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), and Aleksei Malashenko, *Islam dlya Rossii* (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: from the Second World War to Gorbachev* (London: Hurst, 2000), ch. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Galina Yemelianova, 'Russia's umma and its muftis', *Religion, State and Society* 31: 2, 2003, pp. 139–50.

tutional competitor to the Central Spiritual Board which brought together the various new anti-Tajuddin muftiates into a relatively loose confederal structure.

In theological or doctrinal terms, there is nothing inherently problematic with such fragmentation of religious authority. Islam is a radically egalitarian religion, with no set or established hierarchy, and orthopraxy is more the norm than the exception, so that increased pluralistic expression within Russia after the loosening of the Soviet straitjacket can legitimately be viewed as a logical and even healthy development. However, as set out in painstaking if unflattering detail by Roman Silant'ev, this institutional fragmentation was driven as much by political as by religious considerations.<sup>11</sup> It reflected a broader battle for religious and political power among the various Muslim leaders in post-Soviet Russia, and for the privileged access to state resources and financial support from abroad which this would ensure. This dynamic of Muslim politicization was also promoted by the rise of Muslim political parties, which introduced the phenomenon of explicitly Muslim Russian politicians.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, where religion was becoming increasingly politicized, Islamic radicalism became a rhetorical and ideological component of intra-Muslim contestation. A classic method of denigrating the traditional religious hierarchy was to declare that their beliefs were heterodox, a deviation from a 'pure' Islam, and that their lack of religious conviction was a function of their subservience to the state. For example, one of the major criticisms of Tajuddin was that his religious ecumenism and his theological openness to other religious traditions reflected a syncretic and heterodox faith and a failure to defend Islam's doctrinal purity due to his closeness to the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>13</sup> In turn, the counterclaim of religious leaders like Tajuddin was to call their opponents 'Wahhabis' and Islamist extremists disloyal to the Russian state. As a consequence, intra-Muslim discourses of Islam, in the context of a fragmenting Russian state, became increasingly polarized, with one side claiming to promote a 'pure' Islam against a corrupted state-controlled Islam, and the other side claiming to defend a moderate and loyal Russian Islam against the infection of an alien foreign and extremist Islam. Evident on both sides were an increasing lack of toleration of difference and a refusal to recognize pluralist expressions of Muslim faith which only strengthened extremist currents and thoughts.<sup>14</sup>

All this intra-Muslim contestation has also to be understood in the broader context of the ethno-national fragmentation and decentralization of the Russian

<sup>11</sup> Silant'ev, *Noveishaya istoriya*; Roman Silant'ev, *Islam v sovremennoi Rossii: entsiklopediya* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> G. Murklinskaya, 'Litsedei v "islamskikh" maskakh na podmostkakh rossiiskoi politiki', *Dagestanskaya pravda*, 26 June 2001; Silant'ev, *Islam v sovremennoi Rossii*, pp. 63–96.

<sup>13</sup> Silant'ev, *Noveishaya istoriya*, p. 53. A common theme that emerged in interviews with young and old Muslim figures in Russia during October 2008 was the respect accorded to Tajuddin as an Islamic scholar but also a pervasive belief that he drank alcohol and was even an alcoholic.

<sup>14</sup> For assessments of this situation, see Roland Dannreuther, 'Russian discourses and approaches to Islam and Islamism', in Roland Dannreuther and Luke March, eds, *Russia and Islam: state, society and radicalism* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2010); Dmitry Makarov, 'Nestoyavsheesya vozrozhdenie umeronnogo islamizma v Dagestane', *Islam v sovremennoi mire* 7: 00, 2007, pp. 00–00; Akhmet Yarlykapov, 'Islamskie obshchiny Severnogo Kavkaza: ideologiya i praktika', *Aziya i Afrika segodnya* 1, 2006, pp. 45–9.

state during the 1990s. As noted above, much of the disintegration of the Muslim structures inherited from the Soviet era was driven by ethno-national and regional territorial divisions. The proliferating muftiates generally correlated to republican or regional entities within the Russian Federation. In some republics, like Dagestan, the fragmentation went even further to separate differing ethnic groups within the republic. It was in two Muslim republics, Tatarstan and Chechnya, that the dynamic of ethno-national fragmentation and regional autonomy was most ambitiously and energetically pursued. In both Tatarstan and Chechnya, the initial dynamic for political autonomy and independence was driven by secular nationalist rather than religious demands. Even during the first Chechen war, from 1994 to 1996, the religious element was marginal compared to the overarching nationalist-defined struggle. In Tatarstan the religious factor never gained ascendancy, given the republican leadership's mix of pragmatic accommodation with the centre and its reassertion of controls over the Muslim establishment to ensure its loyalty and moderation. In Chechnya neither of these conditions held, and when it gained de facto sovereignty with the withdrawal of Russian troops in 1996, the Chechen government's inability to provide order and stability provided the conditions for the increased prominence of radical Salafist groups. As in Afghanistan, the black hole of lawless Chechnya provided the ideal conditions for radical Islam and for the penetration of transnational jihadist ideology.<sup>15</sup>

The internationalization of the Chechen war certainly provided a propitious context for foreign forces to contribute to the radicalizing dynamics within Russia. But it is important not to accord too great a weight to these external influences, as Russian commentators have been liable to do. A good example is the frequently exaggerated estimates of the number of foreign *mujahedin* fighting in Chechnya. It is also important to note that most of the assistance received from the Muslim world in the 1990s was driven by humanitarian and apolitical considerations, seeking to contribute to the revitalization of the Muslim community within Russia. Nevertheless, the fact that the secessionist struggle in Chechnya became increasingly viewed as part of the global defensive jihad against foreign non-Muslim aggression, on a par with struggles in Bosnia, Palestine and Kashmir, undoubtedly increased the moral and financial support for the Islamist Chechen cause in the Muslim world.<sup>16</sup> Thomas Hegghammer notes how many of the young Saudi extremists captured in Afghanistan fighting for the Taleban in 2002 had been initially radicalized by the onset of the second Chechen war in 1999–2000.<sup>17</sup> More generally, the prominence of, and the financial resources available to, the Muslim charities and organizations coming from the Arab Gulf region, with their more rigorist Salafist doctrinal inclinations, also contributed to radicalizing tendencies. In this immediate post-Soviet context of a rapidly

<sup>15</sup> Alexei Malashenko and Dmitri Trenin, *The time of the south: Russia in Chechnya* (Moscow: Gendalf, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> The broader global context is provided in Faisal Deji, *Landscapes of the jihad: militancy, morality and modernity* (London: Hurst, 2005); Fawaz Gerges, *The far enemy: why jihad went global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: the search for a new ummah* (London: Hurst, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, 'Terrorist recruitment and radicalization in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Policy* 13: 4, 2006, p. 49.

deteriorating economic situation, those who offered access to substantial financial resources could stipulate how that money was to be used and what form of Islam was to be promoted.<sup>18</sup>

## **Putin's response**

### *Repression and centralization*

By the late 1990s there was a pervasive sense, generated not least by the Russian government, that Russia faced a deep crisis due in large part to a mix of Islamist extremism and international terrorism. It was at this moment that Putin came to power, first as prime minister in 1999 and then as president in 2000. In the North Caucasus, the intervention of Chechen forces to establish an Islamic republic in Dagestan in 1999 was presented as a threat to the stability of the whole region that called into question Russia's capacity to maintain control of the region. The succession of bomb attacks on apartment blocks in Russian cities in the same year, which caused over 300 deaths, had a traumatizing effect on Russians, generating a sense of deep insecurity which the government was quick to exploit. It was at this moment of crisis that Putin staked his reputation on resolute action and the pursuit of a decisive victory in Russia's 'war on terror'. As he noted himself when he came to power, 'My mission, my historic mission—it sounds pompous, but it is true—is to resolve the situation in the North Caucasus.'<sup>19</sup>

Putin's strategic response involved a significant distancing from the policies pursued by his predecessor. In this, there are parallels with George W. Bush's utilization of 9/11 to frame a radical strategic shift in US security policy. In the same way that Bush presented the Clinton period as one of weakness, indecision and lack of moral probity, Putin sought to distance himself from Yeltsin's legacy, which was increasingly associated with the dynamics of state disintegration, penetration and subversion by foreign forces, and the weakening of state structures as a result of criminality and terror. Putin's relaunching of the military campaign in Chechnya in 1999 had an ambition similar to Bush's full-scale invasion of Iraq—to define a distinctively new strategy towards the threat of radical Islamism and to establish a new set of rules for dealing with Chechen secessionism, however problematic that was in practice.

In this struggle, the emphasis was placed firmly on military repression and unconditional victory. Unlike the earlier Chechen war of 1994–6, the new campaign was defined purely and simply as a counterterrorist operation.<sup>20</sup> The military were given *carte blanche* to conduct the war in whatever way was necessary to bring decisive victory, which contrasted with the perceived constant political

<sup>18</sup> Rafik Mukhametshin, Director of the Russian Islamic University in Kazan, noted that 'whoever had the money dictated how and in what way it was to be used': interview with author, Kazan, 17 Oct. 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Natalia Gevorkian, A. V. Kolesnikov and Natalia Timakova, *Ot pervogo litsa* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), p. 133.

<sup>20</sup> Pavel Baev, 'Instrumentalizing counterterrorism for regime consolidation in Putin's regime', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27: 4, 2004, pp. 337–8.

meddling of politicians of the Yeltsin period.<sup>21</sup> Compared with the occasionally tragi-comic unfolding of the first war, the second campaign was considerably more professional and effective. Putin also constantly emphasized that there would now be no negotiations with ‘terrorists’.<sup>22</sup> Any remaining ambiguity over the potential for Chechen independence was foreclosed by Putin’s assertion that this was simply not open for discussion. Similarly uncompromising new rules were established for dealing with major terrorist incidents. Putin was determined to avoid the impression given by the responses to the terrorist hostage incidents in Budennovsk in 1995 and Kizlyar in 1996, when leading government officials appeared to be negotiating with the hostage-takers, agreeing to their demands and even facilitating their escape. When Putin was confronted by similar challenges, most notably the hostage crises in the Moscow theatre in 2002 and in Beslan in 2004, he brooked no negotiation and was willing to use deadly force (toxic gas in Moscow, flamethrowers in Beslan) to end the sieges, even at the cost of substantial loss of innocent life.

Military force was not, though, the only strategy that Putin adopted in pursuit of resolution to the situation in Chechnya. Once it became clear at the 2002 Moscow theatre siege that the Russian military would not be capable of overcoming the terrorist threat on its own, and that the Chechen crisis could spill over into an ever-broader terrorist campaign, Putin was sufficiently flexible to shift strategy.<sup>23</sup> He realized that the only practical alternative was to pursue a political path, seeking to localize or de-internationalize the conflict by establishing a genuinely pro-Russian support base within Chechnya. This would involve, against the wishes of the military, a devolution of political and security responsibilities to the Chechens themselves—or, more accurately, to certain clans or groups within Chechnya. To promote this, the Putin administration astutely chose Ahmad Kadyrov, the former Mufti of Chechnya who had supported the resistance and proclaimed a ‘holy war’ against Russia, to act as the designated pro-Russian leader in June 2000.<sup>24</sup> After a referendum in 2003, Kadyrov was voted president in elections in 2004. As Chechnya gained stability, federal forces were gradually reduced, and local armed formations loyal to the Kadyrov clan were given increasing power; this included their taking control of a number of informal but lucrative economic resources. This process of ‘Chechenization’ was nearly derailed by the assassination of Ahmad Kadyrov shortly after the presidential elections in 2004, but continuity was sustained through his son, Ramzan, who gained increasing power until he in turn was appointed to the presidency in 2007.

Nevertheless, this devolution of power in Chechnya from the centre to the region was a marked exception to the general rule. Putin’s overarching ambition was generally to reverse the dynamic of disintegration and fragmentation associated

<sup>21</sup> See one Russian general’s view of this in Gennadii Troshchev, *Moya voina: chechenskii dnevniki okopnogo generala* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Aglaya Snetkov, ‘The image of the terrorist threat in the official Russian press: the Moscow theatre crisis (2002) and the Beslan hostage crisis (2004)’, *Europe–Asia Studies* 59: 8, 2007, pp. 1349–65.

<sup>23</sup> Pavel Baev, ‘Chechnya and the Russian military: a war too far?’, in Richard Sakwa, ed., *Chechnya: from past to future* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), p. 123.

<sup>24</sup> John Russell, *Chechnya: Russia’s war on terror* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 59.



with the Yeltsin period and to centralize power and authority. A significant step in this direction was taken in 2004 in the immediate aftermath of the Beslan incident when Putin abolished direct elections for subnational regional and republican leaders and reimposed a system of presidential appointment. The local autonomy of the regions was now increasingly circumscribed and those republics which, like Tatarstan, had gained a substantial degree of independence during the 1990s were forced to fall back into line with the laws and decrees of the federal centre. This centralization of power and the restoration of the traditional Russian 'vertical of power' affected the official Muslim institutions and their leaders. Prior to the start of the second Chechen war, Putin invited the main Muslim leaders to a meeting at which he set out the limits of their freedom and autonomy, which excluded any criticism of Russian actions in Chechnya.<sup>25</sup> In this more authoritarian political environment, Muslim political parties and their leaders suffered a terminal decline as the 'party of power' became the only remaining salient political force.

This reassertion of the power of the centre over local Muslim actors was combined with a distinctly less hospitable environment for foreign Muslim charities and organizations operating in Russia. There was a significant reversal of the *laissez-faire* policy of the Yeltsin period, when foreign Muslim organizations had had little difficulty in pursuing their work in Russia. Various charities with private or foreign state support that had been active in the 1990s, such as al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn, al-Iqra'a, al-Igasa and the Ibrahim al-Ibrahim foundation, were closed down.<sup>26</sup> Foreign-funded schools and lyceums, including those supported by the generally moderate and apolitical Fehullah Gulen organization, found themselves under increasing pressure and either were closed down or found their activities drastically reduced. Anti-terrorist legislation established, as in the US, a list of prohibited organizations which included bodies such as the Muslim Brotherhood. More comprehensive anti-extremist legislation extended the field of surveillance and created a list of prohibited books, which even included the last testament of Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>27</sup>

Overall, Putin's ascension to power and his determination to overcome the challenge of Islamist radicalism, secession and terrorism depended heavily on repressive measures—military force, the centralization of power, the imposition of authoritarian structures of power—and a political environment distinctly less liberal towards foreign actors, inhibiting their influence on policy. It is commonly assumed that such repressive measures increase the sense of alienation and intensify rather than reduce the dynamics of radicalization. But the evidence in the Russian case is ambiguous. In Chechnya, the Russian administration under Putin could claim with some credibility to the broader Russian population that it had finally established a sufficient degree of stability and normality to allow substantial

<sup>25</sup> I. S. Polyakov and G. A. Kizriev, 'RoI' islamskogo faktora v rossisko–chechenskom konflikte i v formirovanii sistemy novykh mezhdunarodnykh svyazei mezhdru RF i stranami arabo-musul'manskogo mira', *Kavkaz i Tsentral'naya Aziya* 3, 2007, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Malashenko, *Islam dlya Rossii*, p. 143; Silant'ev, *Islam v sovremennoi Rossii*, p. 141.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Verkhovsky, 'Anti-extremist legislation and its enforcement', Sova Center website, 2007, [http://xeno-sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB42908/9D\\*E370?print+on\\*r8](http://xeno-sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB42908/9D*E370?print+on*r8), accessed 20 March 2009.

reconstruction efforts to take place.<sup>28</sup> Russia has also not suffered from a large-scale terrorist incident since 2005, with evidence suggesting that Putin's harsh, uncompromising stance has deterred potential terrorist groups. Among the ethnic Muslim republics, there is now far less political expectation that independence, or even increased devolution of power, is politically on the cards. Among Russia's Muslim leaders, there is similarly an accommodation to the new 'vertical of power', which requires their conformity to state national priorities in exchange for recognition.

But Putin's strategy based on coercion and force has certainly not resolved the problem of Islamic radicalization or provided a lasting solution to the problems of the North Caucasus. The Islamist insurgency movement, effectively expelled from Chechnya and increasingly distanced from the Chechen national cause, has not disappeared but has transmuted into a more diffuse and networked set of groups that represent an increasingly significant threat to other North Caucasian republics, most notably Ingushetiya and Dagestan. In 2007 the post-Maskhadov Chechen rebel leader, Doku Umarov, expanded the goals of the Islamist resistance to the proclamation of an emirate in all of the North Caucasus.<sup>29</sup> The survival and continuing effectiveness of these radical opposition groups are themselves a function of the neo-patrimonial system of governance in the North Caucasus, which relies on intermediary leaders whose loyalty to the centre is often greater than their local popularity or political effectiveness.<sup>30</sup> Islamist extremism is likely to remain a powerful force so long as the pervasive corruption of the political system remains unreformed and the arbitrariness and heavy-handedness of the law enforcement bodies are not effectively curbed. There is a clear analogy here with many Middle Eastern countries, including Algeria and Syria, where policies of severe repression can be said to work in sustaining the existing political system against the Islamist challenge but where the underlying sources of conflict, primarily the problems of economic and political governance, are left essentially intact and unresolved.

### *Cooptation, foreign policy and state-supported Islam*

Putin's government has been aware that strategies based primarily on force and repression can have only limited effectiveness and that a longer-lasting solution, which genuinely tackles the underlying roots of political extremism, requires a more ambitious political and diplomatic approach. As noted above, a certain degree of political flexibility was adopted in Chechnya through the devolution of

<sup>28</sup> For views of western analysts on this point, see Roland Dannreuther and Luke March, 'Chechnya: has Moscow won?', *Survival* 50: 4, 2008, pp. 97–112; Anna Matveeva, 'Chechnya: dynamics of war and peace', *Problems of Post-Communism* 54: 3, 2007, pp. 3–17.

<sup>29</sup> For analyses of the significance of this proclamation, see Gordon M. Hahn, 'The jihadi insurgency and the Russian counterinsurgency in the North Caucasus', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 24: 1, 2008, pp. 15–22; Alexei Malashenko and Akhmet Yarlykapov, 'Radicalisation of Russia's Muslim community', in Michael Emerson, ed., *Ethno-religious conflict in Europe* (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2009), pp. 166–70.

<sup>30</sup> Georgi Derlugian, *Bourdieu's secret admirer in the Caucasus* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005); Domitilla Sagramoso, 'Violence and conflict in the Russian North Caucasus', *International Affairs* 83: 4, July 2007, pp. 681–705.

responsibility to pro-Russian Chechen groups. Although there has been no shift towards a more inclusive democratic process, this does not mean that the Russian government lacks other capacities for a more progressive political approach. Internally, the post-Soviet Russian government can build upon the periods of religious toleration in Russian history, most notably that initiated by Catherine the Great, who recognized and institutionalized Muslim representation, as well as developing further the achievements of Russian Muslims themselves, such as the Tatar *jadidist* Islamic movement of the late nineteenth century, which sought to reconcile Islam with modernity and democratic liberal values.<sup>31</sup> Externally, Russia benefits from the positive memories in the Muslim world of the Soviet Union's ideological support for Arab liberation struggles and the Soviet attempt to counterbalance American hegemony in the region.

This external dimension, aimed at regaining respect for Russia in the Middle East, has been a particular focus of diplomatic activity under Putin. In the early 2000s, Russia's image in the Muslim world was probably at its nadir as a result of the second Chechen war. At that time, the Saudi representative at the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) called Russia's operations an 'inhumane act against the Muslim people of Chechnya' and referred to the conflict in terms of the 'right to national self-determination'.<sup>32</sup> Other Gulf states, and Middle Eastern states with large Caucasian diasporas, such as Turkey and Jordan, might have been more cautious in their statements but could not ignore the strong populist indignation at perceived Russian brutality and aggression against fellow Muslims.<sup>33</sup> Russia's cause was also harmed by Putin's initial resolve to support the US-led 'war on terror' and openly to rely on advice and support from Israel for Russia's counterterrorism strategy in the North Caucasus.<sup>34</sup>

The US intervention in Iraq in 2003 provided the diplomatic opening for Russia to seek to repair its tarnished image in the Muslim world by distancing itself from the West, with which its relations were already under strain because of perceived western support for the reformist movements in Georgia and Ukraine. In the Middle East, the war made it possible for Russian diplomats to approach countries traditionally close to the US that were increasingly disillusioned by the radicalism of the Bush administration. Bilateral relations with Turkey improved significantly, as Turkey became frustrated both with US policy in Iraq and with the EU's reluctance to support Ankara's bid to join the Union.<sup>35</sup> Russia also developed for the first time a substantive relationship with Saudi Arabia, as the Kingdom became increasingly worried about the direction of US policy and saw Russia as a potential balance against both US and Iranian pressures. The general improvement in Moscow's image and posture in the Muslim world was symbolically confirmed

<sup>31</sup> For historical overviews, see R. G. Landa, *Islam v istorii Rossii* (Moscow: Vostochnaya Literatura, 1995); Galina Yemelianova, *Russia and Islam: a historical survey* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> 'Moscow officially protests alleged Saudi interference in Chechnya', *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, no. 129, 3 July 2000.

<sup>33</sup> Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, pp. 386–8.

<sup>34</sup> Ilya Bourtnan, 'Putin and Russia's Middle Eastern policy', *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 10: 2, 2006, pp. 3–4; Boris Levitch, 'Dmitriy Kozak izuchaet Izrail'skii opyt', *Izvestiya*, 11 Aug. 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Fiona Hill and Omer Taspinar, 'Turkey and Russia: axis of the excluded?', *Survival* 48: 1, 2006, pp. 81–92.

in 2003 when Russia was accepted as an observer member of the OIC. Only a couple of years earlier the OIC had been a forum for severe criticisms of Russian actions in Chechnya, and Russian membership at that time would have been quite inconceivable. Russia's admission reflected the new reality that Iraq had replaced Chechnya as the core concern of the Arab and Muslim world, and that Muslim and Middle Eastern states were now willing to overlook domestic developments within Russia in order to encourage renewed geostrategic activism.

As well as discouraging Arab and Muslim interference in Russian domestic affairs, the enhancement of Russia's reputation in the wider Muslim world had a positive impact on the country's own indigenous Muslims. Moscow's willingness to distance its Middle East policy from the West, for example by engaging with Hamas or Hezbollah, was seen domestically as being supportive of the interests of Russian Muslims. The decision to join the OIC as an observer state also pleasantly surprised many Muslims in Russia, as such a move had been believed unlikely given the resistance of the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>36</sup> Like other Russian citizens, Russian Muslims have been caught up in the growing patriotism and nationalist enthusiasm of the Putin period. The Russian government has been careful to ensure that the official ideology emphasizes the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional nature of the Russian state. The recently established 'National Unity Day' on 4 November specifically highlights the Tatar Muslim role in 'liberating' Russia in 1612 and emphasizes that Muslims should therefore be considered co-constructors of Russian statehood.<sup>37</sup> The Putin administration has also purposively diverged from the Yeltsin-era policies of neutrality and neglect in the religious sphere and has provided direct financial support for Russia's Muslim communities, most notably through the Fund for Islamic Culture and Education, which has provided financial support for mosque building, the training of imams, Muslim education and Islamic scholarship.<sup>38</sup> Much of this funding is directed towards supporting the official Islamic establishment and the promotion of a moderate Russian Islam, which would undermine the attraction of more radical interpretations of Islam.

All these policies by the Russian government to promote a moderate Islam in Russia have undoubtedly had their successes. The official Muslim establishment feels more secure than was the case during the Yeltsin period and, though the internal feuding has not ceased, its role as a recognized intermediary with the state has been confirmed. The increase in financial resources to Muslims in Russia, which has markedly strengthened Muslim educational and scholarly activity, has contributed to a more progressive and intellectual Islamic revival. And the anti-western shift in Russian foreign policy, with a more distinct and ambitious Russian policy in the Middle East, has reassured many Russian Muslims. Along with the more repressive measures taken by the government, the general situation facing

<sup>36</sup> Author's interview with Abdullah Rinat Mukhametov, Deputy Director of Islam.ru, 14 Oct. 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Vitaly Naumkin, 'Evroislam kak naslednik dzhadidizma', in D. V. Mukhetdinova, ed., *Forumy Rossiskyyekh musul'man na poroge novogo tysyacheletiya* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Medina, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Y. U. Idrisov, 'Musul'manskiye fondy i ikh zadachi v sovremennoi Rossii', *Islam v sovremennom mire* 1: 7, 2007, pp. 6–8.

Russian Muslims is one where radical opposition is both less attractive and more costly.

But this does not mean that the attractions of more radical Islamist approaches have vanished. This is in part due to the very nature of Islam as a universal religion, which makes it more difficult to ‘nationalize’—as compared, for instance, to the Russian Orthodox Church within Christianity. Those who promote an analogous ‘Russian Islam’ are constantly vulnerable to the claim that they are heterodox, asserting a deviation from ‘pristine’ Islam, which is purified of all ethnic and national characteristics. The attraction of Salafist Islamic thought lies precisely in its purity and austerity, its emphasis on monotheism, its rejection of innovation (*bid’a*) and its rejection of any popular, ethnic or national accretions.<sup>39</sup> The promoters of a more moderate message are also vulnerable to the accusation that they have been coopted and corrupted by the state, particularly if their efforts are being funded by the secular authorities. In the age of globalization and the internet, their message of an Islam specific to Russian culture and traditions appears parochial and limited, particularly for many young Russian Muslims who are engaged with the intellectual excitement of theological debates in the wider Muslim world or what Olivier Roy calls the ‘virtual umma’.<sup>40</sup>

These various difficulties in promoting a moderate Russian Islam are evident in both the modernist and the traditionalist approaches to the task. Of the two, the modernist approach, which seeks to continue the *jadidist* tradition of making Islam compatible with modernity and democracy, has suffered the most severe decline in influence since the end of the Soviet Union. This can be seen, for example, in the ‘Euro-Islam’ project of Rafael’ Khakimov, a Tatar nationalist and close political ally of President Mintimer Shaimiev, who has tried to promote a modern reformed Islam and promote Tatarstan as a European centre for religious and political moderation.<sup>41</sup> Despite strong support from republican and federal authorities, this project, along with other modernist attempts, has become increasingly marginal, rejected not only on the popular but also on the elite Muslim level. A major problem has been that the theologically radical propositions of modernist interpretations, which reject for example the traditional schools of Islamic law (*maddhabs*), appear not only heterodox but also too politically convenient. Such approaches have become increasingly attacked as representing a continuation of the Soviet tradition of political authority coopting religion as an ideological support for, rather than a challenge to, the secular and atheistic order.

This decline in the ideological attraction of modernist interpretations of Islam has certainly enhanced the power and prestige of the traditionalist religious establishments. Their core claim is that there is no necessary contradiction between being an orthodox Muslim and a politically moderate and loyal Russian. However,

<sup>39</sup> For an excellent examination of Salafist ideology, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘The Salafi movement’, in M. Cooke and B. B. Lawrence, eds, *Muslim networks: from hajj to hip hop* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), pp. 203–34.

<sup>40</sup> Roy, *Globalised Islam*.

<sup>41</sup> Rafael’ Khakimov, ‘“Evro-Islam” v mezhsivilizatsionnykh otnosheniikh’, *NG-Religiya*, no. 23, Oct. 1997, and *Gde nasha Mekka (manifest evroislama)* (Kazan: Magarif, 2003).

while this traditionalist approach has been strengthened in relation to more radical modernist accounts, its ideological appeal has been undermined by internal divisions and disputes over what actually constitutes 'traditional' Russian Islam. The problem is that there are multiple traditional Islams in Russia and much competition between them for the orthodox standard. There are divisions on strictly theological grounds, such as divisions between *hanafi* and *shafi'i maddhabs* in the Volga–Ural and North Caucasus regions respectively. In the North Caucasus, there are further divisions between Sufi-dominated and non-Sufi-dominated religious establishments. These legal and doctrinal differences are further exacerbated by internal ethno-national divisions and interregional competition: for example, the Tatar assertion of pre-eminence in Russia's Islamic religious tradition is rejected in Dagestan, where the religious leadership sees itself as preserving a pure form of Islam uncorrupted by Russian domination and cultural assimilation. Even with the traditional Tatar religious establishment there are significant tensions and divisions, as seen in the unceasing competition between Talgat Tadjuddiin's Ufa-based Central Spiritual Board and Ravil' Gainutdin's Moscow-based Council of Muftis.

For many Russian Muslims, 'traditional' Islam can appear more as a defence of a particularist cultural tradition than as the expression of a universalist and transnational religious faith. The traditionalist religious establishment is also seen as being compromised by its unseemly competition for political support and its willing cooption into federal or republican state-approved structures. Among the younger generation there is also a strong sense of a usurpation of religious authority by an older Soviet-trained elite which is rarely justified by their theological or religious knowledge.<sup>42</sup> For these young Muslims, as well as for the increasingly large Muslim migrant communities in large Russian cities, the generalized sense of alienation from particularist ethnic Muslim identities makes the appeal of a universalist transnational Islam attractive. In the current context, this message is frequently most clearly and logically expressed by radical Salafist ideology. The appeal of a 'pure' Islam, which prioritizes a Muslim over an ethnic or national identity, also provides a connection with the global dynamics of radicalization in Islamic thought and practice.

### *State-approved ideology and nationalism*

One of the acute perceptions of the Russian governing elite is that political radicalization, whether through anti-regime liberalism or through Islamic radicalism, finds fertile ground in the ideological vacuum of post-Soviet Russia. During the Putin period there has been a vigorous quest for a new 'national idea' to replace the perceived failure of liberal ideology in the 1990s. For many Muslims, as for other minorities in Russia, there has been an understandable anxiety that this quest for a new national conception could lead to the assertion of an exclusive ethnic Russian

<sup>42</sup> This was a regular theme in interviews with the new generation of young Muslim intellectuals in Moscow, Kazan and Makhahchkala in October 2008.

nationalism. Some western analysts take the view that Putin's Russia has in fact moved decisively in this direction, citing the marked increase in xenophobic and chauvinistic public sentiments, the prominence of Russian nationalist thinkers in public debate, and a neo-imperial foreign policy based on strong anti-foreigner and anti-immigrant sentiments.<sup>43</sup> As many Russian Muslims, most notably those from the North Caucasus but also immigrants from Central Asia, are clear targets for these xenophobic views, this has been seen as a factor with the potential to contribute to the radicalization of Muslims within Russia.

Although popular nationalism is definitely on the rise in Russia, it would be unfair to see this as a deliberate and intentional policy of the Kremlin. Putin's national conception, as set out from the start of his presidency, draws on a conservative rather than a nationalist tradition: the emphasis is on the defence of tradition and organic society, on the need to promote moral and spiritual values, and on the value of patriotism and strong statehood.<sup>44</sup> Although it is clearly not a liberal creed, the conservatism is relatively moderate, promoting modernization rather than anti-modernism, secularism rather than religion, pragmatism rather than messianism, and a civic nationalism rather than an ethnic or cultural heritage. As has been noted before, the official Russian discourse has been scrupulous in maintaining the multi-confessional nature of the Russian state and of Russian national identity, even if an underlying primacy is accorded to the Russian Orthodox Church (as discussed below). Under the Putin administration there has been a conscious effort to excise the word *Russkii* (ethnic Russian) from official use in deference to Russia's multinationality. For Putin, as March notes, 'the "Russian idea" is *Rossiiskaya* rather than *Russkaya*'.<sup>45</sup> But this commitment to multinationalism does not entail a strong Eurasianism along the lines of Aleksandr Dugin's assertion of a Russian exceptionalism and his belief in geopolitical determinism and an inevitable clash between Russian civilization and the West.<sup>46</sup> Although Putin has gone much further than previous leaders in recognizing the Muslim element in Russia's composition, not least by joining the OIC, this reflects a pragmatic assessment of state interests rather than an ideological commitment to Russia as a unique Eurasian civilization.

In practice, the official doctrine can better be described as statist rather than nationalist. This is evident in the conception of 'sovereign democracy' which was strongly promoted in the later years of the Putin presidency.<sup>47</sup> As many commentators rightly noted, the principal concern of the doctrine was to promote Russia's sovereignty rather than its democracy, emphasizing that the Russian state gains

<sup>43</sup> Mark A. Smith, *Putin's nationalist challenge* (Wakefield: Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2005); Mihaj Varga, 'How political opportunities strengthen the far right: understanding the rise in far-right militancy in Russia', *Europe-Asia Studies* 60: 4, 2008, pp. 561-79.

<sup>44</sup> Luke March, 'Nationalism for export? The domestic and foreign policy implications of the new "Russian idea"', *Europe-Asia Studies*, forthcoming 2010. I am grateful for insights provided by discussions with Luke March for this section generally.

<sup>45</sup> March, 'Nationalism for export?'

<sup>46</sup> Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: an ideology of empire* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> *Suverenitet* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006); *Suverennaya demokratiya: ot idei k doktrine* (Moscow: Evropa, 2007).

its legitimacy from the organic 'general will' of the Russian people, that outside powers have no right to criticize Russia's distinctive political path, and that Russia has the right to develop an independent foreign policy based strictly on its national interests. The doctrine does not, though, rely on mystical ideas of Russian spirituality and tradition; rather, the general approach is one based on western political rationalism and the primacy of economic over political development.<sup>48</sup> Nor is it a doctrine that privileges any one ethnic, national or religious group over another within Russia; what it does privilege is the authority and primacy of the state.

Nevertheless, this relatively mechanistic and bloodless official ideology cannot be completely divorced from, or seen to be autonomous from, the growth of more nationalist and religious-nationalist currents in Russian popular culture. As such, there is a degree of symbiosis between the statist and popular cultural levels. For example, while the Russian government maintains a commitment to secularism and has sought to avoid a particular closeness between church and state, the Russian Orthodox Church has an undoubted politico-moral authority and considers itself *primus inter pares* among the 'traditional' religions. Its own conceptualization of Russia is as an 'Orthodox country', with Muslims as a recognized minority but a minority nonetheless. The church hierarchy privileges relations with Talgat Tadjuddin, the Soviet-era head of the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims, who has consistently been willing to assume a spiritually subordinate role.<sup>49</sup> Relations with Ravil' Gainutdin, the head of the rival Council of Muftis of Russia, and his associates are much more tense; these are men who have sought to assert the equality of Russian Muslims and have, at times, made provocative demands, such as that a Muslim should be appointed vice-president or the Russian state emblem be changed so as to remove its Christian symbols. Close to the surface of these interconfessional tensions is an Orthodox fear of Islam as representing a threat to the Russian people, and Muslim fears that they are being progressively reduced to a second-order status in an ethnic state dominated by the Russian Orthodox. There is here the potential for a spiral of radicalizing sentiments as perceptions of Russian Christians and Muslims become more mutually suspicious and distrustful.

A similar self-reinforcing dynamic is visible with the increased political salience of ethnic Russian nationalist ideologies. Again, while both Putin and Medvedev have consistently and unreservedly identified the threats posed by 'nationalism' and 'extremism', they have also tacitly recognized that nationalism is an ideological force that cannot be ignored and can be utilized potentially for the purposes of state-building. For example, the setting up of 'anti-Orange' youth groups, such as Nashi and Molodaya gvardiya, were outwardly and partly attempts to promote a moderate nationalism, and to warn against extremism and fascism.<sup>50</sup> But these groups have themselves appeared to condone extremist behaviour and to expound a vehement anti-immigrant rhetoric, with the apparent support of the authorities. On public television, formerly marginal extremist national-

<sup>48</sup> March, 'Nationalism for export?'

<sup>49</sup> Aleksandr Verkovskii, 'Publichniye otnosheniya pravoslavnykh i musul'manskikh organizatsii na federal'nom urovne', in Aleksei Malashenko, ed., *Islam v Rossii: vzgliad iz regionov* (Moscow: Aspekt, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> March, 'Nationalism for export?'



ists, such as Aleksandr Dugin, Mikhail Leont'ev and Aleksandr Prokhanov, have moved to the mainstream and are now treated as respectable public commentators. They espouse views that are anti-liberal, anti-western and anti-US and at times openly imperialistic and even neo-fascist, and they help to consolidate the officially approved depiction of Russia as under siege from foreign forces. Unsurprisingly in this context, there has been a marked growth in popular support for the slogan 'Russia for the Russians' and an increase in anti-Caucasian and anti-Muslim sentiment. The experience of many Caucasians, most notably Chechens and Dagestanis, of being violently discriminated against in their own country is undoubtedly a contributory factor in the dynamic of Islamic radicalization.

The more general problem is not, though, that popular Russian nationalism, which the government both distances itself from and utilizes as an instrument of state power, is inherently or inevitably anti-Muslim. In fact, the highly influential Eurasianist ideologist Aleksandr Dugin is himself sympathetic to Islam and promotes a Russian–Muslim alliance against the West. One of his former colleagues in this endeavour is Geidar Dzhemal', who has a very considerable media and public presence and has published a large number of books and articles, but espouses a radical and extremist form of political Islam.<sup>51</sup> The paradox here is that the Russian authorities, in their determination to restrict mainstream and moderate but potentially politically challenging voices, provide an open space for extremist and unrepresentative views, since this gives the appearance of pluralistic toleration without the threat of that being translated into a genuine political challenge. Like the example of Dzhemal', this is a case where the Russian state is itself a facilitator of Islamic radicalization.

## Conclusion

The question posed at the start of this article was whether Russia faced a serious threat of Islamic radicalization. The subsequent analysis has shown that there is no simple, unambiguous answer. Islamic radicalization certainly represented a serious and even existential threat to Russia in 1999–2000, when Putin first came to power, with an Islamic insurgency in Chechnya then threatening the stability of the whole of the North Caucasus and a series of large-scale Islamist terrorist attacks taking place throughout Russia. Putin's administration adopted a set of policies that had some success in stemming this threat, even if they have not resolved their own internal contradictions. A strategy based primarily on the use of force and repression brought a degree of stability to Chechnya and eventually ended the pattern of mass terrorist attacks in the Russian heartland. These repressive actions were combined with more positive and proactive political and diplomatic measures, which helped significantly to improve Russia's reputation and image in the wider Muslim world, and provided substantive moral and material support to moderate Muslim leaders and communities within Russia. The Russian leadership has also made strenuous efforts to ensure that the official national ideology remains

<sup>51</sup> e.g. Geidar Dzhemal', *Osvobozhdenie Islama* (Moscow: Umma, 2004).

committed to the principles of multinationality and interconfessional toleration, and has formally recognized Muslims in Russia as an integral part of the Russian state and its national development.

These policies nevertheless have had their limitations and have been only partially successful. Popular nationalism within Russia has been on the rise, and this has included anti-immigrant, anti-Caucasian and implicitly anti-Muslim currents which have increased the sense of alienation of many Russian Muslims, particularly those from the North Caucasus. The promotion of a moderate Russian Islam has struggled to counter the appeal of radical Islam, particularly among young Russian Muslims, since an avowedly 'traditional' Islam appears to lack theological rigour, deviating from the purist standards of the Salafist movement, as well as being continually compromised by the official state support that it receives. The disunity among the traditionalist Muslim establishments in Russia also enhances the appeal of an Islam which presents itself as universalist and shorn of particularist national or ethnic features. Politically, the reassertion of the 'vertical of power' under Putin and the growing authoritarianism of the Russian state have undermined the prospect for improvements in political governance. In the North Caucasus, this has helped to sustain the appeal of Islamist jihadists who target the corruption and lack of popularity of the local governments. Among other Russian Muslim communities, it has undermined the development of a proactive and vibrant civil society which might help to promote a more pluralistic and mutually tolerant community. As the economic crisis has shown, Russia remains a brittle state and has barely engaged with the deeper reforms which are required for a more durable and sustainable political development.

Overall, Islamic radicalization probably represents a lesser threat than it did in the late 1990s and early 2000s, though its ideological appeal, and the underlying conditions which foster support for it, remain strong. However, as this article has tried to show, there is no deterministic inevitability, as many accounts suggest, in Muslim disloyalty to the Russian state, nor any inevitable contradiction between being a Muslim and a loyal Russian citizen. There is also no need to assume a priori that the policies of repression and centralization undertaken by Putin have increased, rather than reduced, the dynamic of Islamic radicalization. Nevertheless, the picture is mixed. There is a degree of uneasy stability in Chechnya, or at least a reduction in the level of violence in that republic, and there appears to be little threat from Islamist extremism in the Volga–Urals region or in the main Russian cities. But there has been a diffusion of the Islamist insurgency from Chechnya to the rest of the North Caucasus, particularly affecting Ingushetiya and Dagestan, with regular attacks on government forces, assassinations of local elites and a general prevalence of societal violence. It is still an open question whether this currently relatively contained conflict could escalate and spread to other parts of Russia. More generally, there remains a serious question whether the top-down approach adopted by the Russian government, which has had some success in managing disaffection and alienation, will continue to assuage the demands and needs of the Muslim communities in Russia and, if not, how future disaffection might be expressed.

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