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## The Islamic Identity of Russia in Changing Europe

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**Abstract.** The article examines the Western European and Russian approaches to accepting Islam as a part of their identity. A comparative analysis of the history of Islam in the Western European and Russian societies allows understanding the reasons Russia has been more successful in integrating the Muslim community and fighting Islamic extremism. The roots of Islamophobia and Western supremacy have been analyzed from a historical perspective to understand the reasons of a conflictive relation between Islam and the West. The analysis proposes Europeans should reconstruct the concept of nation and appropriate Islam to create a wider identity as a solution for the problem of integration of Muslims and the fight against extremism in Western Europe.

**Keywords:** Chechnya, Euro-Islam, Islam, Islamophobia, Russian Islam, terrorism in Europe, Wahhabism in the Northern Caucasus.

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The increase in xenophobia and Islamophobia in Europe is the result of failed integration policies and the incapacity of European governments to respond to a changing ethnic composition of its population. Intolerance, discrimination and violence towards Muslims will continue to grow as long as misinformation and lack of knowledge of them and their religion is not addressed. The reality of some European states like Germany, France and England is that Islam is part of the society as Christianity and it is possible to coexist as Abrahamic religions. The problematic of this coexistence in Western European states lies on the historically constructed narrative that Islam is the enemy of Christianity and recently reinforced by American rhetoric. Nevertheless, the successful model of national composition of the Russian Federation that includes a multi-confessional society, in which Orthodox Christianity and Islam have coexisted for centuries, exposes the infeasibility of this Western constructed narrative and can be taken as reference.

Having an accepted Islamic identity represents an advantage for Russia as a European state with a well-established Islamic clergy, universities of Islamic teachings that prepare religious leaders and the most important, a Muslim population that identifies with a Russian national identity, regardless of their ethnicity. This has been beneficial for the Russian government fight against extremism and terrorism, and can serve well to Western European states. Through a historical analysis of the approaches Western Europe and Russia have had to Islam, this

work tries to expose the success of Russia over Western Europe in integrating and accepting its Islamic identity as well as the advantages it can provide. This analysis will answer the question; can the Islamic identity of Russia serve as an example for the European Union in the fight against extremism and as a proof multi-confessional coexistence that contradicts the dominant Islamophobic discourse in the West?

For its geographical location, Russia has had a different relation with Islam in comparison with the rest of European states. For other Europeans, the relation with Islam has been one of continuous confrontation, starting with the Umayyad caliphate on the Westernmost side of the continent, the crusades and the Ottoman empire pushing northwards in the Balkans to Vienna. On the other hand, Rus' principalities under the Golden Horde's control experienced a relevant contact with Islam in the XIII c [3]. However, despite being under Islamic rule, the inhabitants of Rus' were never forced to convert. As «people of the scriptures», Christians and Jews were given religious freedom based on the *ahl az-zimma* of the Islamic law [7, p. 50]. Centuries later, the Russian empire expanded to the East coming into contact with nations that had Islam as major religion and that were eventually incorporated into the borders of the empire. Tatarstan, Chechnya and Dagestan were some of these nations. By incorporating these regions, their religion and identities were included, meaning that Islam became part of the transforming Russian identity. Integrating Muslims into the Russian empire became evident when in 1787 empress Ekaterina II ordered to print the first version of the Quran in Arabic in St.-Petersburg [4].

At the same time, Western Europe went through a parallel process but in which Muslims from the region were expelled, like in the XV c. when Christian Kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula completed the Reconquista and in the Eastern front, the Austro - Hungarian empire fought back against the Ottomans in the XVIII c. These events may have set the basis for the current Western mindset that considers Islam is their enemy and contradicts their values. In contemporary events, the military actions in Afghanistan during the 80's conducted by the United States enabled the tragic events of September 11, 2001 and turned the discourse and attention on Islam more negatively resulting in an unprecedented Islamophobia [1, p. 130]. The American led invasion of Iraq in 2003 enabled the emergence of the so called Islamic State that carried out terrorist attacks in the US and Europe feeding the historical rhetoric of «us» (West) vs «them» (Islam). Additionally, academic publications like *The Clash of Civilizations* by S. Huntington and mass media only reinforced and legitimized the centuries long mindset of the West as a superior civilization against the growing threat of Islam. It is in this simplistic theoretical approach presented by Huntington that the Islamic identity of Russia is underrated and presented as the leader of an Orthodox civilization, ignoring the multinational and multi-confessional composition of the country.

Russia was not immune to Islamic extremism, as the government fought violent separatist movements in the Northern Caucasus after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 90's and early 2000. However, the initial separatist movements were not inspired by religious motives but rather religion was used later as

a unifying method by extremists to booster their cause and exploit the identity of the Chechen people [5]. The Russian government however, was clearly not fighting Islam but the individuals and groups who had embraced Islamic extremism (Wahhabism) and teamed up with local Muslims who also saw in Wahhabism a threat for their communities.

With the continuous migration of people from Muslim majority countries in the Middle East and North Africa and the declining birth rates among ethnic Europeans, the reality is the social composition of Europe is changing, especially in the European Union. This change is happening at a sustainable pace, and regardless second generation immigrants integrate into receptor societies better than their parents, aspects like traditions, religion and family values may remain an identity issue to them. These aspects clash with well-established and rooted aspects of European identity like gender equality and individuality that can be affected by non-European tradition. However, being Muslim and European should not represent an issue if the national identity is put forward before any other identity an individual may have, but the conflicting rhetoric dominant in the West continues to insist being Muslim and European is contradicting. This rhetoric still today led by ideology (liberal or conservative) has not been able to catch up with the current reality of Europe and admit there are some people born in European soil who happen to be Muslim.

The Russian authorities managed to create the conditions for a *supranational* model identity in which the national identities of the peoples of the Russian Federation are respected and maintained, including their religion. As the Russian empire expanded, it included the identities of the peoples that were incorporated into it, and religion was not an exception. When Chechnya was incorporated in the XVIII c there were already official representatives of the Russian Islamic clergy acting as authorities [8]. Today, there are Islamic institutions with full recognition of the State acting in behalf of the interests of Russian Muslims that not only provide religious education but also reinforce patriotic values among the believers [6]. This is of high relevance for the maintenance of a moderate and secular State as commitment to civic values that unite all citizens must always be a goal in religious education in a multi-confessional State.

Nevertheless, the previously mentioned seems to have failed in Western Europe as in some cases, there is no control over preachers who disseminate Islamic extremism or who having received religious education abroad, try to apply the values and traditions of foreign cultures on European Muslims. A similar observation was made in Chechnya by A. Kadyrov in the 90's when the first Wahhabis from abroad started pouring into the republic with the intention to «Arabize» Chechens [5]. This is the moment when having an Islamic identity part of the national identity and accepting it as such is a natural advantage for Russia and that Western Europe lacks. Today, Muslim Russians can easily identify foreign cultural elements part of the Islamic identity of other nations that do not match the traditional Islamic practice accepted in Russia.

The fight against extremism and terrorism in Western Europe would benefit from the acceptance of Muslims as part of a wider European identity and the inclusion of them in society instead of pushing them out simply for being Muslims, as they are the first front in the fight against what is not traditional or accepted. Europeans have the opportunity to artificially create the Islamic identity they lack by appropriating Islam adding it to their culture as another Abrahamic religion like Christianity or Judaism. Once it is appropriated, it will be easier for governments and societies to identify and target extremism. The first steps in this direction have already been taken, in countries like Denmark where the first only female mosque was opened in 2016 and is led by Imam Sherin Khankan with a feminist approach to Islam [13]. Other similar initiatives have been taken in Germany by Seyran Ates and France by Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed with the operation of inclusive mosques led by women that welcome all genders praying in the same room as well as sexual minorities [11].

Having an Islamic identity (natural or artificially created) can act as a lock against extremism. Tatarstan and the North Caucasus are the largest Muslim majority regions in the Russian Federation and have their own characteristics and identity. Tatar secularism can provide answers to Western Europeans on how to integrate Islam into their own culture without losing the major aspects of it but at the same time, allowing an exchange of qualities to enrich both identities. This secularism however, is the result of centuries long Russian and Tatar coexistence and achieving it in Western Europe could be a big challenge if the acceptance of Islam as part of Europe does not occur before. The traditionalism of the Northern Caucasus republics like Chechnya and Dagestan can be considered a quality that has functioned as a natural lock and a front against extremist Islamist movements. These regions have given important personalities to Russian academia, politics, sports, music, arts, entertainment and more. It could have only been possible by providing the conditions necessary for a free and safe development of all individuals regardless of their ethnic or religious identity. Moreover, there is a sense of self-identification and belonging to the Russian Federation among individuals from these regions.

Reincorporating affected societies in the Northern Caucasus after the war was relevant to avoid further ethnic and confessional fragmentation in the Federation. After the separatist movements of the 90's, the military actions taken by president Putin in the North Caucasus to fight extremists and bring stability to the region had to be followed by a strategy of social integration and cohesion that eliminated the perception of an interethnic conflict in the country. Additionally, pouring money for the reconstruction of devastated cities like Grozny prevented the creation or deepening of feelings of revenge against the Russian State or ethnic Russians which would have pushed Chechens into extremism. Moreover, investment in infrastructure was necessary to give the message Chechnya was part of the Russian Federation and the enemy was not the Russian authorities, but religious extremism.

Today, some governments in the EU punish Muslims altogether in its fight against extremism and terrorism on the excuse of promoting integration, but in a

manner that pushes assimilation of European and Christian customs and the loss of their own. The most recent examples of this are found in Austria and Denmark. In Austria the closure of seven mosques and the expulsion of imams and their families on suspicion of receiving foreign funding and spreading extremist interpretations of Islam was announced in June 2018 [10]. In Denmark, a new pack of laws forces kids of immigrants from the age of one and from what the Danish government calls «ghetto» spend at least 25 hours per week in education facilities to be taught about Danish culture and traditions, including religious celebrations [9]. Both approaches will be proved wrong in the fight against extremism as they expel the «*unwanted individuals*» and contribute to the resentment of the Muslim population towards the authorities and locals. Resentment can only have two results: the expelled individuals will live in a parallel society where they will not have any contact with those who expelled them; the expelled will canalize their negative feelings and create or join groups (extremist) that directly oppose those who expelled them.

Whatever the result is, the risk of inter-ethnic conflicts elevates as the society becomes dysfunctional and fragmented. The Danish and Austrian government approaches are punitive, oppressive and ignore prevention, but more important, they lack a sensitive and knowledgeable approach to educating the locals (ethnic Danes and Austrians) to create a wider national identity that incorporates the new European Muslims. These two European approaches to «integrating» Muslims follow a primordialist position to the understanding of nation that stresses a nation is made up of people of the same language, culture and ethnicity and even the same blood origin [2]. Forcefully demanding individuals to abandon who they are and imposing them who they must be only pushes them to develop negative feelings either towards themselves for failing to be accepted or towards the society that demands they change.

It is because of the above that the primordialist position towards the understanding of nation in European countries with a high number of non-European residents must be revised to match the reality. The new understanding of nation should equal the one proposed Renan in «What is nation?» of 1882 where he described nation as «a spiritual principle resulting from the profound complexities of history, a spiritual family, not a group determined by the lay of the land» meaning every person can be part of the nation, regardless of their ethnicity or origin [12]. In comparison, the Russian Federation has managed to successfully form a universal national identity (continuously evolving) in which the understanding of nation is not limited to the ethnic identities of the residents of the Federation but to a wider sense of belonging to the State. Once European societies accept their reality as multi-ethnic and multi-confessional the first step will be done in the fight against extremism, as the more accepted identities a society has, the less prone to fall for extremist it is.

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## Исламская идентичность России в меняющейся Европе

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**Аннотация.** Рассматриваются подходы западноевропейских и российских сообществ к принятию ислама как одного из факторов идентичности. Используется метод сравнительного анализа истории ислама в Западной Европе и России, что позволяет понять причины, по которым Россия была более успешной в интеграции мусульманской части населения страны, равно как и в борьбе с исламским экстремизмом. В контексте исторической точки зрения исследуются такие специфические вопросы, как возникновение исламофобии и основ так называемого западного превосходства, что способствует пониманию причин конфликтных отношений между исламом и Западом. На основе проведённого исследования предлагается пересмотреть концепцию нации и принятия ислама европейцами с целью создания более широкой трактовки идентичности как способа решения проблемы интеграции мусульман в европейское общество и борьбы с экстремизмом в Западной Европе.

**Ключевые слова:** ваххабизм на Северном Кавказе, евроислам, ислам, исламофобия, российский ислам, терроризм в Европе, Чечня.

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