Domestication or Representation?
Russia and Institutionalisation of Islam in Comparative Perspective

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Ekaterina Braginskaia
Politics and International Relations
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh EH8 9LD
Scotland, UK

Tel: +44 (0)131 651 3896
ekaterina.braginskaia@ed.ac.uk

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Introduction

In the aftermath of 9/11, scholarly research on Muslim minorities in Europe and their adaptation to the secular environment has focused on the issue of institutionalisation or ‘domestication’ of Islam. This process has been seen as a state-driven attempt to develop religious and social Muslim infrastructure to counteract a sense of alienation of Muslim migrant communities. It has been also linked to state efforts to create and engage with Muslim institutions, attuned to religious, social and political needs of the communities they represent.

These institutions are envisaged to act as reliable partners of the state and to encourage moderate forms of Islam, in line with state preoccupation with national security and social cohesion. The same willingness to facilitate Muslim practices, engage with moderate interlocutors and diffuse security concerns can be traced in the Russian context of state-Islam relations. Working within traditions of Historical Institutionalism (Hall and Taylor 1996, Steinmo 1992, Thelen 1999), this paper compares some of the mechanisms and implications of Russia’s top-down engagement with Islam with similar approaches undertaken in Britain and France.

I suggest that while institutionalisation of Islam is a political process aimed at encouraging Muslim communities to adapt to individual contexts of state-religion relations, it has a reverse tendency to modify these relations and compel the state to reconceptualise and renegotiate its own engagement with religion. Moreover, existing typologies of state-religion relations are not sufficient enough to explain institutionalisation of Islam. Its processes are conditioned not only by the type of state-religion interaction, but also by the mode of state-society interaction and political forms of engagement, ranging from ‘managed partnership’ in Russia, ‘communitarian cooperation’ in Britain and ‘regulatory administration’ in France.

First, I will outline Russia’s specific historical and social context and draw on some affinities with similar developments in the two other countries. I will then attempt to fuse together the two types of state-religion and state-society relations to examine the ways in which Russia’s promotion of moderate Islam is similar or different to British and French initiatives. Finally, my analysis will focus on the three large Muslim organisations, the Council of Muftis of Russia (CMR), Conseil français du culte musulman (CFCM) and the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) as the state-endorsed intermediary institutions, entrusted with consolidating and normalising Muslim practices. I will highlight some pitfalls of state-driven institutionalisation which seeks to fit pluralistic Muslim representation within hierarchical constraints of centralised religious governance.

1 The scope of this comparison is limited to the analysis of Muslim minorities in Russia and does not extend to the areas of North Caucasus where Islam is a dominant religion and does not require state intervention to facilitate religious practices. A different dynamics of clan patronage and support is a strong determining factor shaping state-Islam relations in this region.
2 I examine path-dependence of Russia’s engagement with Islam within its specific historical context and trace institutional changes and asymmetrical distribution of power within Muslim institutions. A comparative dimension with Britain and France brings in sharp relief some of the most striking features of Russia’s centralised, top-down consolidation of official Islam.
Tracing Similar Milestones in Russia’s Specific Path of State-Islam Relations

This paper offers a comparative exploration of top-down political institutionalisation of Islam which can be conceptualised as a two-fold, essentially state-initiated process consisting of normalising religious practices and ‘steering’ representation and empowerment of Muslim communities. Both elements require the state to establish, or engage with the existing, intermediary Muslim institutions to consolidate Muslim practices and promote moderate forms of Islam.

Sufficient literature exists on the institutional dynamics of Muslim accommodation in Europe and the complex nature of state-religion relations, highlighting institutional arrangements (Cesari 2005, Rath 1991, Soper and Fetzer 2007, Ferari 2005) and questioning the usefulness of the existing national typologies of secular engagement with the Muslim population (Bader 2007, Bowen 2007). Some studies have also focused on individual state approaches to encouraging home-grown versions of Islam (Birt 2006, Caeiro 2005, Glynn 2008, Laurence and Vaïsse 2006, Peter 2006, Silvestri 2007 and Adamson (2005) bring to light different aspects of institutionalisation through grassroots consolidation of Muslim institutes, formation of Muslim minority identity through network support and advocacy work or political processes of official recognition of Islam and support for Muslim Councils (Silvestri 2005).

Similarly, scholars of Islam in Russia provide individual explorations of multi-faceted manifestations of Islam in the Russian context. Some choose to focus on security concerns and regional processes of radicalisation or de-radicalisation of Islam (Hahn 2007, Hunter 2004, Makarov 2000). A number of Russian studies also discuss state-Islam relations (Filatov 2007, Malashenko 2007) and examine official Muslim institutions and their relations with authorities (Tulsky 2005, Verkhovsky 2007). Occasionally, some comparisons are being drawn between state-Islam relations in Russia and European states, but these studies tend to be an exception rather than the rule.

And yet, over the last ten-fifteen years, Russian policy of accommodating Muslim minority interests witnessed a number of processes and transformations similar to those experienced in Britain and France. This is partly due to the salience of global security concerns and the real or perceived threats of Islamic extremism on the national level, partly the result of the governments’ slow progress in establishing institutional mechanisms for resolving Muslim religious and political concerns. What is particularly interesting is the shared determination to develop a home-grown version of Islam, loyal to the state and consistent with national ideals. In his assessment of state-Muslim relations in Russia, Filatov brings to light that the success of the sovereign democracy was deemed to be conditioned not only by the support of any Muslims, but rather the ones who fit within its ideological framework, who would be loyal to the state, and recognise Russia as their own homeland (Filatov 2007, p. 42).
It cannot be denied that a long history of state-Muslim relations in Russia provides a different set of conditions for institutionalisation of Islam. First, a large proportion of Russian Muslims are not newly arrived migrants, but ethnic Muslims, predominantly Tatars, who have been living in the Russian territory for over a thousand years. They do not present the same problem as parts of Muslim populations in Britain and France. They do not need to be integrated into the Russian way of life, partly because of this coexistence, partly because of the shared experiences of the Soviet assimilation. Second, in spite of official separation between state and religion there is a very strong bond between the Orthodox Church and the State that influences the way the state engages with Islam. In one of his first speeches, the newly elected Russian Patriarch Kirill referred to a Byzantine representation of state-religion relations as a ‘symphony’ or a model built on a harmonious meeting of interests and division of responsibilities.

Third, Russia’s policy makes good use of the existing Muslim structures as some of the institutions have already been established 220 years ago, in the form of Muslim spiritual boards, established by Catherine the Great as early as 1788-1789. There is a degree of continuity in Russia’s deliberate strategy of co-opting Muslim leaders to guarantee the country’s internal stability. An interesting parallel may be drawn between Russia’s current institutionalisation efforts aimed at diffusing security concerns and the Empress’ understanding that in the days of Pugachev Rebellion, Russia’s stability depended on active cooperation with Muslim spiritual leaders. Malashenko goes further to suggest that “the wise Empress has realised back then the menacing salience of what is now known as the Islamic factor” (Malashenko 2008).

And yet, despite a different historical context, some of the developments of the last two decades have influenced the institutional dynamics of Russia’s state-Islam relations. The resulting administrative challenges and the need for more effective Muslim institutions invite a direct comparison with similar issues experienced in Britain and France. Increased migration from Central Asia, and the North Caucasus, accompanied by Islamophobic attacks and stigmatization made Muslim presence more visible and their religious and social needs more pressing. In light of the unfolding financial crisis and unclear prospects for migrant workers on large construction sites the problem can only become more acute. Migration has also contributed to a conflict of interests with ethnic Tatars over the nature of ‘Russian Islam’ and the extent to which it can represent not only jadidist interpretations but also be able to accommodate, for example, Sufi traditions.

Finally, Russia’s framework of Muslim institutions is afflicted by the same divisions and fragmentations that can be observed in Britain and France. Early 1990s were marked by a series of restructuring and consolidating processes within Muslim institutions. This was

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4 Orenburg Mohammedan Spiritual Assembly was officially inaugurated in Ufa, by the Empress’ edict of December 4, 1789.
5 Clearly, Britain or France can indeed build on their colonial past and adapt the same policies at home, but this has a different internal dynamics.
partly a result of newly-discovered freedoms and separation of the state and religion partly because of personal ambitions of individual spiritual leaders, formation of new Islamic institutions or fragmentation of the existing Muslim spiritual boards. The revival of Islamic traditions and formation of new instruments of Muslim governance was thus accompanied by asymmetrical shaping of the Muslim space (Naumkin 2008). This proved to be particularly challenging for the later attempts to bring state-Muslim relations in line with the official strategy of vertical administration; even though internal splits and divisions between Muslim leaders (Silantiyev 2008) have always been exploited by the state as a way of creating competition for state support and patronage.

Institutionalisation in the Context of Extended Typology: State-Religion/State-Society Relations

State-sponsored efforts to accommodate Muslim interests in Russia, Britain and France reveal an interesting linkage between institutionalisation of Islam and some inevitable adjustment of the existing structures of state-religion relations. The need to incorporate Muslim communities and establish institutional mechanisms to facilitate religious governance and representation could not but contribute to a partial blurring of the boundary between political and religious spheres. This can be traced not only in the discursive shifts towards a greater recognition of religious rights and state involvement in matters of religion, but also in specific measures of state funding.

Russia’s engagement with its Muslim minorities is similar to the French approach in its determination to provide better regulation and control of Muslim initiatives. At the same time, while moving away from its Soviet legacy of multiculturalism, conceptualised in terms of ethnicity and nationality to the one more attuned to the religious and spiritual needs of its citizens, its engagement with Muslim minorities might be compared to a similar trend in British multiculturalism and a greater acceptance of faith communities

In her analysis of Islam in Europe, Cesari identifies three different modalities of European secularism: “cooperation between the state and the churches”, “total separation of the state and religion”, and finally the “existence of state religion” (Cesari 2005, p.2). The following typology may be applied to Britain, France and Russia respectively. However, we would need to specify that in the Russian case there is a move towards establishing not one, but at least two “traditional [state] religions” within the secular framework guaranteed by the Constitution, while in the UK, cooperation between the state and religions coexists with the Anglican Church being the “established” religion.

I suggest that it is also important to look at the state-society relations in each case as they help to better understand the nature of accepted norm of governance, ranging from a more community-based one in Britain, more regulatory-focused principles of engagement

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in France and an increasingly centralised approach in Russia. Different versions of state-society relations, together with a different degree of autonomy they allocate to religion, may also account for different scenarios of state-Muslim engagement. The issue of state funding of Muslim activities is a good illustration of this.

The Changing Nature of State-Islam Relations: the Question of State Funding

Despite different historical contexts and traditionally-established modes of state-religion interaction in Russia, France and Britain, each state faces the same challenge of how to make the funding available for Muslim communities without infringing any of its existing legal or constitutional arrangements. There exists of course an array of private funding initiatives and local arrangements, a shared issue here, however, is the determination set up more far-reaching, nationwide structures of support.

The French Republican separation of state and religion, enshrined in an increasingly disputed notion of laïcité and egalitarian principles that recognise neither ethnic, nor racial or religious differences, have created a number of problems for religious manifestations of Islam, epitomised by the heated debates around the issue of the veil. With the question of Islam and its compatibility with the French secular way of life taking the centre stage, the issues of religious governance and administration of Muslim religious affairs became more pressing.

What is interesting here is that the challenge of Muslim incorporation has questioned the restrictiveness of laïcité and encouraged the politicians to stretch the idea and to make the state more accommodating to religion. Laurence and Vaïsse (2006, p.140) note that “the presence of Muslims in France has challenged laïcité, forcing it to adapt to the needs of Islam.” In their work on the compatibility between Republican values and Islam, Kaltenbach and Tribalat (2007, p.328) went further to suggest that the idea of assimilation has become unfashionable and politically-incorrect and laïcité has lost some of its meaning.

An example of a clear shift in the Sarkozy’s policy towards greater intervention in the matters of religion, was the creation of the French Foundation for Muslim Works (Fondation pour les Oeuvres de l’Islam de France) in 2005, which was set up to finance the maintenance of the mosques and fund imam training. It was created by the government, in conjunction with the French Muslim Council, as a central depository for foreign donations, contributions from French businesses, and a 60% tax relief offered to private donors. Although the state does not provide direct funding for the foundation, its

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8 Some steps have been made in this direction by individual studies (McLoughlin 2005), but not in a comparative context.
10 See a more detailed discussion in Bowen 2007 Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves…
11 The question of Muslim Councils as an institutional vehicle for consolidating Muslim practices will be addressed later in the paper.
12 See discussion in Laurence and Vaïsse 2006, Integrating Islam…
civil servants and representatives sit on the Committee and play an active role in overseeing the distribution of resources. The government is also often encouraged to use its diplomatic ties to guarantee further foreign investment. Dalil Boubakeur, previously the head of the French Muslim Council, urged the state to get more engaged in the name of “laïcité flexible et ouverte”. Although some commentators suggested that the creation of the foundation was not a significant attack on the secular principles and indeed a similar Protestant association has already been established on the similar principles (Laurence and Vaisse 2006, p.155), it is a good demonstration of the state active engagement and participation in creating an institutional framework for moderate Islam. Indeed, as has been revealed by Sarkozy’s speech at the ‘First Conference on teaching Arabic language and culture in France’, the French government sees this initiative as an important success in the series of initiatives taken to create a domesticated French brand of Islam as opposed to radical Islamism (Sarkozy 2008). It seems plausible that this foundation might have served as more modest precursor to the one later established by the Russian state on a much wider scale.

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The British context is somewhat different. Although the Anglican Church enjoys a privileged position of being the ‘established’ religion, the system of state-religion relations does not require any form of recognised or officially registered religious community on behalf of other religions (Ferrari 2005,Lyall and McClean 1995) and there are no provisions precluding state financial assistance to religious organisations. What seems to have hindered state assistance of Muslim communities in the end of the 1990s was the overstated emphasis on accommodating minority rights of individual racial groups rather than addressing their religious requirements. The growing sense of alienation of practicing Muslim citizens being thus excluded, coupled with the threat of Islamic radicalisation prompted the British government to change its laissez-faire multiculturalism to the one more sensitive to the needs of faith-communities.

This shift in New Labour’s policy towards proactive cooperation with Muslim organisations and a tighter control of their activities was accompanied by an extensive range of community-based funding programmes, such as Preventing Violent Extremism: Community Leadership Fund (Communities and Local Government 2008). Ruth Kelly openly voiced a clear strategy of “funding … [only] … those organisations that are taking a proactive leadership role in tackling extremism and defending … shared values” (Kelly 2006). A vast diversity of Muslim organisations, partly encouraged by a more liberal framework of state-religion cooperation and less-invasive policies, partly by the absence of official registration requirements, also means that the government is free to withdraw its institutional support from the chosen partners if and when required. For example, as Toni Blair’s administration became increasingly concerned with the Muslim Council of Britain expressing less patriotic and tolerant views, it transferred some of its funding to less political organisations, such as the Sufi Council. Although this creates tensions with the well-established Muslim interlocutors (i.e. the Muslim Council of Britain) it is an

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indication of how the state can keep its official partners in line with its own expectations of institutionalising liberal forms of Islam (Glynn 2008).

Similarly, by channelling further resources to set up the National Muslim Women’s Advisory group, the government reinforces its wager on the elements of the Muslim society who can supposedly de-radicalise younger generations and promote social cohesion from within. A more diversified approach of engaging with Muslim communities may question the extent to which the state sponsors certain Muslim groups (at the expense of the others). And yet, it might be an indication that the government is also more sensitive to Islam’s pluralistic nature and a-hierarchical structure of Muslim authorities. Although there are different Muslim organisations in Russia and the state does engage with some of them, the next section will show that the Russian approach to institutionalisation forces Islam to adapt to more centralised rules of engagement.

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The way Russia has structured its engagement with Islam over the last ten years underwent a series of shifts, closely following the changes in political and social spheres. What started as new hopes for a wave of democratic reforms and liberalisation of outmoded institutions and introduction of personal freedoms following the collapse of the Soviet Union has turned into a series of economic crises, fragmentation of civil and religious organisations and the lack of accountability and public confidence in bureaucratic institutions.

Putin’s attempts to remedy some of the previous shortcomings of this period of instability have led to an increased centralisation of the state and greater interference into the private sphere. Moreover, his successive governments saw clear political advantages of taking an active role in consolidating religious and social institutions and forging Russia’s unique, ‘holistically conceptualised’ identity (Surkov 2008), based on closer ties between the state and ‘traditional religions’. Public speeches by government officials and representatives of the United Russia Party are heavily saturated in expressions of Russian statehood through spiritual revival, the inner strength and the need to consolidate, centralise and protect peaceful coexistence of different peoples and confessions.

The Russian state is keen to stress that its engagement with religion in general and Islam in particular is built on multicultural principles of cooperation with protected religious communities which, on the surface, is not that different from the British approach. Putin’s address to the Muslim leaders is typical of such a discourse that reiterates the importance of multi-religious coexistence as “an absolutely new form of cultural cooperation between different peoples and religions [which] constitutes Russia’s inner strength as a great and important world power” (Putin 2007).

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Official Muslim leaders also prefer to emphasise the idea of partnership in their relations with the state. In one of his interviews, the Chairman of the Council of Muftis of Russia, Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin mentioned that he would like the state to develop relations with Muslim communities on the level of partnership, taking into account the interests of religious organisations and cooperating with them (Gainutdin 2003).

He has also acknowledged that though the “Council does not intervene in political affairs” it is “aware that the state needs it to ensure peace and stability” (Ibid). The assumption here is that there is a gentleman’s agreement between official Muslim authorities and the government to build state-Islam relations on the basis of ‘managed partnership’. Internal stability and spiritual revival of the nation can only succeed through top-down consolidation of Muslim structures of administration in close cooperation with the state. This arrangement gives a greater justification for the state efforts to bring state-Islam relations within its own vertical structures of administration.

As mentioned earlier, a pressing concern for the Russian authorities in the ‘uncontrolled’ instability of the 1990s was the fear of radical foreign influences establishing a firm grip on Russian Muslim communities. The government became concerned that foreign organisations could simply buy the loyalty of Russian Muslims by injecting money to set up schools, mosques and publish Islamic literature. And yet individual measures restricting the flow of foreign aid and banning some Islamic organisations from Russia, combined with carefully-worded rhetoric to recognise the value of having Muslim citizens at home and boosting Russia’s Islamic credentials abroad were deemed neither sufficient, nor sustainable in the long-term. What was required was a programme of financial support for officially-approved Muslim projects.

However, a secular framework of state-religion relations inevitably conditions and restricts financial support the state can provide for the religious needs of its citizens. The Article 14 of the Russian Constitution clearly states that the “Russian Federation is a secular state” …[r]eligious associations shall be separated from the State and shall be equal before the law.”16 Similarly to the French notion of laïcité, the official separation implies that no religion should receive more financial support than the other.

In an ideal situation, where the needs of individual religious communities are equally and sufficiently provided for, this may not be a problem. Considering a more privileged role of the Orthodox Church and a relative disadvantage faced by Muslim minorities with regard to the lack of effective Muslim infrastructure (ranging from prayer spaces, community centres, Muslim educational institutions or halal provisions) this is an issue that the Russian government simply could not have ignored. Partly concerned with re-adjusting the balance between religious communities and staying within the secular constraints, partly motivated by its own security agenda, the Russian state has officially recognised Islam as the second ‘traditional religion’ and played an active role in establishing the Fund to support Islamic culture, science and education in 2007.

The fund supports various large and small projects aimed at promoting Islamic education, academic research and developing Muslim infrastructure through community initiatives and cultural activities (ranging from money given to set up the website for the Muslim Council to individual exhibitions on Islam). The creation of the fund, its structure, and its ambivalent charitable status is reminiscent of the similar foundation created in France two years earlier, with similar objectives but less significant rate of success. With the representative of the President’s administration having a voice on the committee of the trustees together with key Muslim organisations and national oil and gas companies being on the list of investors, it is difficult not to notice the government’s involvement in the fund, which does not limit itself to the offer of purely ‘moral support’, as it would have the public to believe.\(^\text{17}\)

Nevertheless, the fund plays a very positive role in channelling resources to Muslim communities. Its strict requirements not only regulate the process of securing funding, but also help establish officially-recognised and registered Muslim organisations. To qualify for funding, communities or organisations have to be registered, and have their own bank account and a finance officer.\(^\text{18}\) Although some commentators questioned a large-scale programme of funding Islamic education as state involvement and patronage of Islam gone too far (Ponkin 2008) such an initiative may be also seen as the official drive for secular regulation of Islamic institutions.

A change in Russia’s approach to greater involvement in the life of Muslim communities is similar to the ways the French and British governments have tackled this issue. However, it is also characteristic of Russia’s increasingly centralising policy of building a vertically-controlled rather than a horizontally-managed structure of society. The next section will examine some relative successes and limitations of mediating this top-down institutionalisation through specially-selected Muslim representatives.

**Building Moderate Islam: Institutional Role of the Official Muslim Councils**

Financial assistance alone is not sufficient to domesticate Muslim communities. The state also needs to engage with reliable intermediate institutions which would act as official interlocutors and spokesmen for Muslim interests. State institutionalisation of Islam through the work of Muslim Councils has its benefits and limitations. Although the official status of each Council is strongly contested by other Muslim organisations (e.g. the Sufi Council in Britain, the Union of French Muslim Organisations or the Central Muslim Spiritual Board in Russia), each Council still acts as the main institutionalisation platform. And yet the solidity of such an institutional platform is debatable. State engagement with the Councils highlights the complexities of state patronage and preferential treatment of one set of interests over the other. There is a further question of


\(^{18}\) Interview with Ildar Mukhamedjanov, Chief Editor of *Islam Minbare*, (official newspaper of the Russian Muslim Council). 24/10/2008.
how various interpretations of Islam are negotiated within the diverse membership of each Council and what are the implications of institutionalising one brand of Islam and not the other.

Following a long process of consultation, the French government has established the *Conseil français du culte musulman* (the French Council of the Muslim Religion). This was an attempt to help regulate Muslim practices and institutionalise Islam by giving voice to Muslims to discuss religious practices and coordinate representation on regional as well as national level (Laurence and Laurence and Vaisse, Chapter 5). The Muslim Council of Britain, an umbrella body claiming to represent over 500 organisations actively participating in public debates on the issues affecting British Muslims was formed in 1997. Although the Council always emphasises its voluntary basis, it is possible to trace the government influence not only in its creation, but also in financial assistance it received from the government. The Council of Muftis of Russia was created by the decision of the heads of the Muslim Spiritual Boards in 1996 and serves as a “centralised religious organisation” uniting Muslim associations on a voluntary basis. Similarly to the French Council, some of its functions are purely administrative and aimed at organisational consolidation of Muslim religious organisations on the territory of the Russian Federation. Its active engagement in debates and strong online presence is comparable to the public role enjoyed by the British Council.

The three Councils are different in terms of their institutional make-up; ethnic and religious composition; internal power relations; and decision-making process. Still, they serve an important institutional purpose of legalising and normalising Muslim practices. Each Council plays a constructive role in placing interests of Muslim citizens (practicing or non-practicing) on an equal footing with other confessions/minority groups. This is implemented through securing funding and permissions for maintaining religious spaces, dealing with imam training, coordinating dates for festivities and voicing Muslim grievances on the national levels. The Russian Council successfully combines its responsibilities of developing Muslim infrastructure (e.g. establishing quality control over the *halal* provisions, opening Muslim institutes, *madrassas*, community centres and clinics, facilitating publication of Islamic texts) with establishing strong relations with the Muslim World.

Although similar international duties are also part of responsibilities of the French and British Councils, they constitute a much larger part of the activities carried out by the Russian Council. This is particularly revealing of the state’s determination to build strong relations with the Muslim World. The Council takes an active role in representing Russian interests, negotiating the *hadj* arrangements and securing international support and trade agreements beneficial to the Muslim communities at home. Interestingly, there is a strong linkage between Russia’s institutionalisation of Islam at home and its desire to

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19 This is characteristic of the New Labour approach of changing its approach and being actively involved in promoting the interests of faith-communities.
21 Adopted from [www.mulsim.ru](http://www.mulsim.ru)
be a significant player in the Middle East, which is perhaps less apparent in the two other countries.

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Close ties between the Russian Muslim Council and the state are based on a mutual understanding of the hierarchical structures of power. This is an interesting and distinct feature of Russia’s institutionalisation of Islam. Highly-centralised, vertical structures of government support have become the norm over the last few years, so much so that even some unofficial Muslim organisations which usually accuse their official counterparts of being too close to the state are forced to interact with the state to ensure approval for their activities and financial backing. According to one commentator, “a specific feature of the Russian state is that everything is permeated by the state”. Although French and British Muslim officials are often accused of collaborating with the state, a well developed network of unofficial Muslim organisations creates a set of checks and balances on the extent to which they can afford to be identified with the state agenda. In the Russian context, where unofficial Muslim organisations are less developed, this tight partnership appears to be a mixed blessing.

On the one hand, it facilitates top-down consolidation of the Muslim institutions. There is a degree of cold pragmatism in the Council’s approach of acting within the given set of hierarchical structure, as this is the given environment in which it has to represent Muslim interests. A representative from the Council has commented on this vertical rather than a network or horizontal structure of interaction by highlighting that “this is our state model and it is more convenient for us… it makes it easier to deal with authorities… a village imam cannot have access to the authorities, so he has to ask the Council to help solve local issues.” He went on to suggest that had they not dealt with the state/authorities in such a way, they would not have been able to achieve anything – The Council sees its role in voicing Muslim concerns, cooperating with the Church and the state working towards ensuring Russia’s stability.

On the other hand, such close collaboration has two significant implications. First, it creates an impression that the Russian Council is less concerned with representing Muslim interests before the state and more with communicating the state objectives to Muslim communities. This leaves the Council vulnerable to accusations from some unofficial Muslim organisations that rather than promoting Islam in Russia, it ‘domesticates it’ and isolates Russian Muslims from the rest of the Muslim World. Second, excessive institutionalisation results in ‘over-bureaucratisation’ of official Muslim leaders which undermines their credentials as spiritual leaders. Neither French nor British Councils claim to be religious bodies and emphasise that they represent practicing and non-practicing Muslims. The Russian Council is keen to advertise its religious dimension. However, the spiritual authority of some of its leaders is challenged by younger, more educated, Muslims who question their understanding of Islam as well

22 Interview with Galina Khizriyeva, 20/10/2008.
23 Interview with Abdulla Rinat Mukhamedov, Islam.Ru, 15/10/2008.
24 Interview with Ildar Mukhamedjanov 24/10/2008.
25 Interview with Mukhamed Salyakhetdinov, ‘Sobraniye’ 30/10/2008.
the knowledge of Arabic. Therefore, similarly to their British and French counterparts, the Russian Council seems to be more effective in institutionalising external manifestations of Muslim practices. This creates a disconnect between its religious and administrative responsibilities and undermines its legitimacy in the eyes of the Muslim communities.

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The success of institutionalisation efforts depends on the effectiveness and reliability of the partners. The question mark over the Councils’ spiritual authority is not the only obstacle to the effective implementation of the government’s agenda. Muslim Councils are torn by internal ethnic and religious tensions, which are partly to do with traditional mosques structures and personal loyalties, partly with tensions between ethnic groups or splits along more sectarian groups who are forced to work together. For example, in France, last summer the Council became completely paralysed before the elections because of the ongoing disagreements between Moroccan and Algerian communities. The Russian Council often has to deal with continuous disputes between its own representatives.

However, I would argue that while these tensions are unavoidable and may inadvertently highlight a degree Islamic pluralism, they become a serious issue when one community manages to dominate the Council and project its own agenda, be it national or religious. This asymmetrical distribution of power leads to a rather one-sided institutionalisation of Islam as interests and beliefs of one community are promoted by the state as the official Islam at the expense of all others. For example, not only have Tatar representatives traditionally occupied key positions in the Russian Muslim Council, but they have also juxtaposed their moderate hanafi teachings with radical manifestations of Islam in the Caucasus.

Interestingly their brand of Islam has been viewed by the state not as a manifestation of Tatar nationalist aspirations but rather as a convenient and logical form of moderate Islam, suitable for the Russian context. Russian authorities are keen to capitalise on the Tatar brand of Islam because of its strong preoccupation with education and moderation and long tradition of imam training. And yet, such a preferential treatment cannot but antagonise other ethnic communities. Serious tensions exist over the state intervention of introducing or re-introducing Tatar imams into the mosques from which they have been previously excluded (Mukhetdinov 2008, p.106). A similar series of tensions can be seen in France between Moroccan and Algerian communities. Unlike their Algerian counterparts, Moroccan community trains large numbers of imams working in France and therefore, it is not surprising that its victory at the last elections to the French Muslim Council was welcomed by the state which wished to expand the role of imams by giving them semi-religious, semi-bureaucratic functions, not generally envisaged in Islam.
Conclusion

Political institutionalisation of Islam is an interesting process of negotiation and accommodation not only of Muslim communities to the secular management of religion, but also of traditional state-religion relations to the presence of Muslim communities. This highlights a certain fluidity of secular arrangements and the states’ willingness to act not only as regulators and facilitators of this process but also as sponsors of Muslim interests. Although this is a positive development that ensures that the everyday political, social and religious needs of Muslim are being addressed, it may be problematic in light of the assumed state neutrality in religious matters.

I suggested extending the typology of state-religion relations to include state-society interaction to better understand how different historical trajectories and socialised norms of religious governance created different patterns of institutionalisation of Islam in Russia, France and Britain. The paper explored how Islam fits into Russia’s approach to religion and revisited the centralisation argument to gain an insight into how the Russian state builds its relations with Muslim communities along the same semi-authoritarian principles of vertical distribution of power.

The comparative analysis with the British and French experience helped contextualise the process of political institutionalisation and revealed interesting hybrid nature Russia’s religious governance. Although its centralising dynamics is very visible, there are also some elements of liberal multicultural aspirations and the drive for regulatory efficiency and institutional accountability. While this implies that the Russian approach is in the state of transition, it is also an indication of its pragmatism, quite typical of Russia’s policy in other areas. Interestingly, although different cultural and historical contexts condition the way each state accommodates Muslim interests, similar security threats and the need to domesticate Islam has indicated that in their engagement with religion, France and Britain might have moved closer to the Russian more conservative approach of ‘managed partnership’ than they would let the public to believe.

This paper also looked at the way the Russian state engages with Muslim intermediary institutions and discussed the limitations of this approach. The Russian context is helpful in understanding the wider implications of how to accommodate Muslim authorities within the secular mode of governance and how to provide representation for different ethnic and religious communities without promoting interests of one group over the other. Finally, there is a further ethical implication of how to ensure that the official version of Islam is representative of Muslim populations as a whole and is not just a part of state rhetoric to domesticate Muslim communities, or to promote its agenda of social cohesion by capitalising on the nation’s religious and cultural diversity.
References


