

# Official Discourses and Patterns of State Engagement with Muslim Communities in Britain and Russia

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## Abstract

The article discusses the institutional complexities and policy discourses of Muslim governance and representation in Britain and Russia in light of the distinct national narratives of state-Muslim relations. Religious governance is not only determined by the patterns of state-religion relations but is also influenced by the level of state involvement. The article focuses on a series of interactions between state officials and Muslim representative institutions to highlight individual patterns and discourses of the two approaches to religious accommodation: 'horizontal' and 'vertical'. The British horizontal approach focuses on liberal multiculturalism and its communitarian preference for resolving internal tensions within local communities. Russia's increasingly conservative policy of consolidating Muslim institutions and building strong relations with official Muslim representatives is typical of the vertical approach. Over the last 10 to 15 years, state policies on Muslim integration and representation have revealed a similar desire to promote moderate forms of Islam. This is evident from extended programmes of state-funding for Muslim communities and stronger cooperation with Muslim representative institutions. A close analysis of state engagement with Muslim Councils brings to light the internal dynamics of horizontal and vertical state-Muslim relations in the two countries.

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## Introduction

State engagement with Muslim minorities in Europe has resulted in a number of fruitful discussions on state-Islam relations and studies on accommodating Muslim minorities within the European settings (see, for example, Bader 2007; Cesari and McLoughlin 2005; Maussen 2007; Soper and Fetzer 2004). Building on the comparative literature of religious governance, state-religion relations, as well as national accounts of Muslim integration, the article presents an attempt to disengage the debate from its purely European context of church-state relations and patterns of

integration. Although the research agenda has extended to occasional comparisons with Muslim populations in the United States or Australia, the Russian dimension has rarely been addressed (Cesari 2006; Minkenberg 2007). Similarly, Russian scholars often avoid making comparisons and consider state-Muslim relations in Russia as a distinct, self-contained field of research (Hunter 2004; Malashenko 2007; Yemelianova 2002). Without diminishing the value of the existing research, the article argues for a stronger incorporation of the Russian agenda into the overall research.

State relations with Muslim minorities in the two countries have been shaped by a number of different historical and contextual factors, including the nature of Muslim communities, institutional mechanisms of minority representation and patterns of state interaction with religious leaders (Malashenko 2007; Modood 2005). However, over the last 10 years, state policies on Muslim integration have revealed a similar desire to engage with moderate representatives within the increasingly securitised patterns of state-Islam relations. Recent terrorist activities experienced by the two countries have led to a similar approach of complementing the counter-terrorist agenda with attempts to build community resistance to terrorism from within. Both countries seek to integrate Islam within its institutional framework of state-religion relations, both are engaged in granting Muslim citizens equal religious and cultural rights. And yet, the ways in which the Russian and British authorities communicate their agenda are different. The British case illustrates a strong reliance on local partners and community initiatives, whereas the Russian efforts have largely focused on encouraging consolidation of previously fragmented religious institutions.

The article argues for the need to attach greater importance to the political aspect of religious governance in the two countries. It discusses policy discourses and a series of interactions between government officials involved in promoting Muslim integration and Muslim community spokespersons engaged in representing Muslim interests in the public sphere. A common element of the two approaches lies in state preferences for using intermediary institutions to regulate Muslim religious practices. There is a shared determination to promote moderate forms of Islam to strengthen a sense of national unity and social cohesion. A brief analysis of the different discourses of state engagement with Muslim representative institutions – the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and Russia's Council of Muftis (RCM) – provides a useful framework to

compare and contrast the ways in which the two modes of governance are being conceptualised.

The cases provide two different representations of religious governance: 'democratic' and 'hierarchical'.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to move away from a politically sensitive nature of the two terms, the paper suggests a more neutral wording of 'vertical' and 'horizontal' modes of engagement which become reinforced through particular communications on local and national levels. The British example of horizontal governance focuses on liberal multiculturalism and its communitarian preference for resolving internal tensions within the local institutional framework. Russia's increasingly conservative policy of consolidating Muslim institutions and building strong relations between Muslim senior representatives and state officials on the national level is exemplary of its vertical approach.

The study is largely based on official documents, public statements and communications between state officials and state-recognised representatives from Muslim organisations, with a particular emphasis on the institution of the Muslim Council.<sup>2</sup> The 'official' nature of the data offers little evidence of the extent to which the proposed ideas have been put into practice, considering the inherent discrepancy between the good intentions and the actual outcomes. However, a close analysis of these official

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<sup>1</sup> See Bader's distinction between democratic (bottom-up) and hierarchical (top-down) modes of governance in V. Bader. 2007. "Regimes of Governance of Religious Diversity in Europe. Introduction". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33 (6): 871-877, Special Volume, State Governance of Islam in Europe.

<sup>2</sup> The article is based on data collected from primary and secondary sources, including analysis of official documents and reports on Muslim representation in Britain and Russia, public speeches and communications between public officials and the MCB's and RCM's respective representatives. Additional data on the Russian case is derived from a series of interviews which I conducted with the members of the RCM and Russian Muslim elites in Moscow and Tatarstan .

communications, public discourses and interchanges provides an invaluable insight into the thinking behind the two approaches of managing religious representation: (1) by engaging with a number of local-level organisations in Britain and (2) supporting high-level centralised Muslim religious institutions in Russia.

The article is divided into four parts, bringing together contextual differences and discursive convergences of the two cases. Part I focuses on different state approaches to the governance of Islam, while Part II argues that despite their differences, the two states are engaged in similar policy discourses of securitising their Muslim agenda. This becomes evident in the shared determination to accommodate Muslim needs by fostering moderate forms of Islam. Part III discusses the different character of the Muslim Councils and a very similar intermediary role they play in representing Muslim communities before the state. It compares and contrasts their institutional features and examines them within their individual contextual settings. Part IV examines the nature of horizontal and vertical engagement through the lens of state-Council communication focusing on specific discourses of each approach and its implications.

### **I. Official public discourses on state-Muslim relations: extended typologies**

The following section examines the British and Russian discourses of accommodating Muslim socio-religious needs within the distinct national contexts. It focuses on general policy directions and shifts within the policies. Religious governance is a flexible and negotiable process. However, the extent to which any changes are being communicated depends on the opportunities and restraints offered by the individual settings of state engagement with religion and society. Building on Soper and Fetzer's proposed typologies of church-state relations (Soper and Fetzer 2004) and Koenig's models of political organisation

(Koenig 2005), I suggest extending different patterns of state-religion relations by putting a stronger emphasis on the level of state involvement. Without neglecting the religious aspect, the public discourses of state engagement with society can provide a more nuanced understanding of the political element. While the British case provides an illustration of diversified, community-based interaction, the Russian approach focuses on an increasingly centralised, top-down approach to communicate with Muslim institutions.

#### *British perspective*

Britain's approach to integrating Muslim communities developed as a result of its colonial legacies, local immigration and ethnic issues, and a series of re-interpretations of liberal multiculturalism as a guiding principle of ethnic and religious tolerance. It has been marked by a strong tendency to decentralise activities designed to promote social cohesion and to provide local solutions to common national problems. State-religion relations in Britain have been based on the principle of cooperation between the state and different religious groups. Although the Anglican Church enjoys a privileged position of being the 'established' religion, other religious communities are not required to be registered or officially recognised. The British engagement with Islam envisages provisions to ensure that different Muslim groups have equal access to community representation.

British multiculturalism in its traditional form has failed to recognise the importance of religion in defining Muslim identity and has done little to address Muslims' religious requirements. Although practical elements of religious rituals were respected, their spiritual dimension has not been given enough attention. As Lord Parekh noted in 2006, 'when individuals privilege their religious identity ... they want to be Muslim Britons not British Muslims' (Parekh 2006). The growing alienation of practising Muslims, coupled with the threat of Islamic radicalisation, prompted the British

government to change its *laissez-faire* multiculturalism and reconsider its official discourse on Islam. Following a series of consultations the government has worked towards modifying its agenda on Muslim integration.

In the last couple of years, the discursive emphasis has shifted from recognising racial differences and celebrating cultural diversity to promoting the peaceful coexistence of faith communities. The government took an active role in formulating a new brand of inclusive multiculturalism, designed to address Muslim concerns within a general discourse of shared British values. Generally low levels of religiosity among the British population can partly account for public acceptance of this ideological transformation of multicultural politics. The idea of 'common unifying values' has been used as a persuasive rhetorical device to justify a policy shift: from the original cornerstone of recognising the communities' cultural distinctiveness to promoting social cohesion. According to Tony Blair, being British still implied the 'right to be different', however, it now also increasingly demanded the 'duty to integrate' (Blair 2006).

In a lecture on multi-faith Britain, former Home Secretary David Blunkett has acknowledged that the '[g]overnment has a role to play' but has reduced it to the need to 'facilitate interaction between the different faith communities, and between them and the wider community' (Blunkett 2003). In an attempt to isolate radical Islam and ensure that it lacks strong support in Muslim communities, the British government presents itself as a guardian of common values and institutions of parliamentary democracy, while beginning to pay more attention to Muslim religious needs. It promises to support the work of its 'empowered communities' by helping them 'challenge those work[ing] against...the shared values' (HM Government 2009, 90).

There is a small indication that the state acknowledges that there is no easy assimilation between 'the secular liberal and the person whose faith is inseparable from their politics'

(Miliband 2009). However, it is also keen to praise many British Muslims for binding together the values of liberal democracy with their own religious identity (Miliband 2009). In its efforts to promote Muslim integration, the British state has put strong emphasis on engaging with a variety of moderate Muslim organisations and civil society groups to promote British values and build internal resilience to radical Islam. The results of the measures designed to prevent extremism have been rather mixed (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee 2010).

One of the key criticisms expressed in the recent House of Commons Report highlighted the risk of reinforcing the Muslim identity through its purely religious dimension, without recognising Muslims' multiple roles in different social and cultural situations such as work, family or community (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee 2010, 21-23). This represents a potential discursive shift towards a greater recognition of Muslim rights as ordinary citizens without necessarily 'essentialising' their ethnic or racial identity (as has been the case in the past) or its religious dimension, as was advocated by the current policymakers. The willingness to undertake a wide-reaching consultation on the issues of integration, terrorism and Islam with various Muslim representatives illustrates a degree of flexibility of the British approach.

#### *Russian perspective*

Russia's discourse on accommodating Muslim minorities has developed within its distinct regional, historical and political setting. It has been strongly influenced by the desire to integrate cultural diversity within the dominant religious and ideological framework. The specificity of Russia's engagement with Muslim communities is based on a mix of 'multi-ethnicity', 'multi-confessionalism' and 'multi-cultural diversity' that escapes any familiar label of narrowly defined multiculturalism or assimilation, making it an interesting

addition to the standard dichotomy between the two approaches. While the economic and social factors continue to dominate the Muslim agenda in big cities, the existence of large, geographically dispersed Muslim communities requires the state to differentiate its policies on the regional level. Whereas some integrationist rhetoric may be at times sufficient to accommodate the needs of Russian Muslims in the Volga region, it is often inadequate to engage Muslim communities in the North Caucasus.

Russia's interaction with Muslim communities has not only involved integrating Muslim migrants, but also Russia's own ethnic Muslims living within its territorial borders. Strong regional differences provided Muslim communities with their particular political and ethnic character, while different schools of Islam in the Volga region and the North Caucasus have led to different interpretations of Islam and interaction with local authorities (on Tatarstan, see Nabiev et al. 2002; on the North Caucasus, see Bobrovnikov 2002; Knysh 2007; Zelkina 2000). Tatar Muslims in the Volga region have been exposed to religious and political integration as a result of Russia's efforts to impose first Christian and then Socialist values on the predominantly Muslim region (Filatov 2002, 93-96; Ro'i 2000). Despite their strong national aspirations, they represent the most culturally assimilated Muslim community, relatively open to government efforts to centralise regional administration and religious representation.

The North Caucasus, on the other hand, has remained Russia's primary security concern, from the days of colonial expansion in the nineteenth century to the Chechen Wars and the current region-wide instability, with the latest explosions on the Moscow underground exacerbating Russia's security situation (Sagramoso 2007; Souleimanov 2007). Aware of the volatile character of the North Caucasus and its complex clan system, the state does not aspire to regulate Muslim communities there as much as it does in the Volga region, nor does it

attempt to influence traditional sources of local and religious authority. However, in light of the renewed counter-terrorist campaign against radical Islam and the use of force to boost regional security, a more interventionist approach to religious governance seems increasingly likely.

Russia's preference for vertical governance of Muslim communities mirrors the centralising dynamics introduced in other parts of social and political life. However, some of its current features have also been shaped by the state's previous efforts to engage with Russian Muslims. Historically, accommodation of Muslim interests in Russia has been an integral part of the state's approach to integrating its different peoples, while preserving some of their cultural autonomy. Short-lived liberal phases of greater respect for Muslim religious institutions have been followed by more authoritarian periods of suppression of Muslim practices in line with state security concerns and ideological preoccupations.

Official regulation and structuring of Muslim representation along hierarchical lines began under Catherine the Great when she set up first Muslim Spiritual Boards to guarantee the country's internal stability.<sup>3</sup> In the nineteenth century, colonial expansion in the North Caucasus and forced Christianisation of Muslim populations in the Volga Region led to further consolidation of Russia's influence over its Muslim populations. The repressive Soviet methods of integrating different ethnic groups and fostering a new brand of ideological atheism significantly weakened Muslim elites and destroyed many Muslim institutions. The Bolsheviks initially welcomed Muslim aspirations of equality and recognised a certain affinity between Islamic and Communist ideals, allowing a limited degree of Muslim representation through the state-controlled

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<sup>3</sup> The Orenburg Mohammedan Spiritual Assembly was officially inaugurated in Ufa by the Empress' edict of 4 December 1789.

Muslim organisations, such as the DUMERS.<sup>4</sup> Although this might have provided a degree of institutional continuity with Muslim institutions today, periods of cooperation were short-lived, with repressive measures inflicting considerable damage on Muslim organisation and educational capacity.<sup>5</sup>

The way the Russian state has envisaged its engagement with Muslim communities over the last two decades underwent a series of shifts, closely following the changes in political and social spheres: from more liberal encouragement of Muslim institutions to more conservative consolidation from within. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian policy has been marked by a continuous re-assessment of its national ideas on religion and identity. In the President Yeltsin era of the 1990s, a positive use of rhetoric focused on 'religious revival', 'respect for individual identities' and 'greater autonomy of institutions', whereas the actual policies were partly tainted by extensive corruption and fragmentation of Muslim institutions. Vladimir Putin's successive governments have been preoccupied with building closer ties with 'traditional religions', including Islam, to consolidate religious and social institutions and promote multinational unity. Considering the more privileged role of the Orthodox Church and the relative disadvantage of Muslim minorities, the Russian government felt the need to redress the imbalance.

A significant development in state-Muslim relations in the Putin-Medvedev period has been the crystallisation of a new brand of conservatism, exemplified by the vertical distribution of power and selective engagement with top Muslim officials rather than a wider

range of Muslim civil society organisations. Putin's (and now Medvedev's) agenda of transforming Russia into a powerful sovereign nation has been accompanied by the Kremlin's drive to reformulate and re-appropriate the discourse on nationalist unity based on Russia's multifaceted heritage and spiritual values (Laruelle 2008).<sup>6</sup> Russia's interaction with Islam has focused on formulating the most suitable approach of engaging Muslim communities within its own particularly centralised mode of governance.

## II. Converging challenges: encouraging 'our national' Islam

The previous section focused on some of the key differences in how British and Russian government institutions and officials conceptualise the governance of Islam and engage with Muslim communities. What is rarely discussed is the degree of current convergence between the two discourses of building stronger bridges with the Muslim minorities. Similar security concerns and the lack of provisions for Muslim citizens to exercise their religious rights encourage government officials to 'nationalise loyal forms of Islam' and engage with moderate Muslim representatives in a more regulated way.

Despite Russia's distinct historical experience of state-Muslim relations, the current challenges faced by the post-Soviet elites are not dissimilar to those experienced by the British authorities. Both countries make attempts to rebuild Muslim infrastructure and improve the living conditions for Muslim citizens. Both share analogous security concerns regarding Islamic radicalisation. In order to accommodate Muslim minorities within the national interests of the majority, the state caters for the needs of its Muslim citizens, respects their rights and provides legal recognition of moderate Islam. In return, Muslim citizens are expected to promote

<sup>4</sup> DUMERS, the Muslim Spiritual Board for European Russia and Siberia, later renamed the Central Spiritual Board (TsDUM), was formed in 1944 as the official governing body for the Muslims living in the territory of the Russian Federation (the RSFSR).

<sup>5</sup> For further details on the three dynamics of Russia's historic engagement with Islam, see Braginskaia (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> On Russia's unique ideological synthesis of spiritual and nationalist values, see Surkov 2008, 9-27.

tolerant Islam, in tune with the national civil values.

Moreover, state efforts to develop a British or Russian brand of Islam present an attempt to 'appropriate' the Islamic faith by disengaging it from its foreign roots and fusing it with the familiar sets of national values. There is a shared conviction that today's tension over Islam, and particularly its radical representations, is not linked to 'our', 'home-grown' Islam, but to its 'imported version' (Markov 2009). A report commissioned by Communities and Local Government in 2007 states that 'British Islam is emerging as a powerful response to radical Islam' and that this version is 'integrationist and dynamic' (Department for Communities and Local Government 2007).

State efforts to engage with moderate voices from Muslim communities and promote 'home' versions of Islam demonstrate that both countries seek to complement their counter-terrorist policies with a series of 'softer' measures designed to promote moderate Islam. They are accompanied by an increased level of state involvement in regulating and funding specific Muslim institutions whose agenda (or at least discourse) is compatible with the official line on religious tolerance and moderation. Similar measures involve state-sponsored programmes for imam training and Islamic education and improved provisions for Muslim religious practices and prayer spaces.

In Britain, state initiatives provided funding to local Muslim projects through the 'Community leadership fund', with extra resources being allocated to engage Muslim women and youth to participate in community life (Communities and Local Government 2008). Further funding channelled through the strategy of *Preventing Violent Extremism* have included subsidising and developing imam training programmes and materials designed to strengthen the connection between the Islamic faith and British secular values. Although these measures play a positive role in fostering more active participation, they are typical of the efforts to monitor and regulate Muslim

initiatives. Similarly, Russian officials tend to emphasise a policy of non-intervention into religious activities (Putin 2006). However, the state-sponsored programme of support has also included a more systematic patronage and monitoring of Islamic scholarship and education. For example, the Fund to Support Islamic Culture, Science and Education, established in 2007 by the joint efforts of state officials and senior Muslim representatives, has been created to selectively channel resources for publishing Islamic literature and Muslim educational projects.

State attempts to develop effective mechanisms of engaging Muslim communities have been accompanied by an increasingly conciliatory and inclusive discourse of 'shared values' and 'national belonging'. Official statements reveal a desire to find a common denominator between the allegedly shared civil values and a certain significance of being a British or a Russian Muslim. Moreover, there is an attempt to limit negative associations between Islam as a religion and extremism as a form of violence. For example in Britain, the discourse has focused on expressing British values through the notions of democracy, the rule of law and mutual tolerance between different faith communities. Gordon Brown talked of the need to 'disrupt the promoters of violent extremism ... where by emphasising our shared values across communities we can both celebrate and act upon what unites us' (Brown 2009). That same year, guidance on counter-terrorism communications stressed the need to exercise caution and not make any unnecessary links between Islam and terrorism (Research, Information and Communications Unit 2007). There is a growing consistency in the rhetoric from different British government agencies, which aims to reinforce the same messages of home-grown, moderate Islam and its compatibility with the British way of life.

In Russia, the notion of shared values is conceptualised through the use of patriotic rhetoric and calls for national unity based on the moral and spiritual capital of Russia's

'traditional religions'. The official programme of the 'United Russia Party' for 2009 praises Islam as one of Russia's 'traditional religions', which are 'keepers of wisdom and experience passed down through the generations' and are therefore indispensable to understanding current social problems (Edinaia Rossiia 2009). President Dmitrii Medvedev has acknowledged the large contribution 'Muslim religious organisations make towards the civil peace and spiritual and moral upbringing of generations, fighting against extremism and xenophobia' (Medvedev 2009). Interestingly, he also calls on the media to be more sensitive and not to use the expression of 'Islamic extremism' because 'thugs have nothing to do with religion' (*Kommersant* 28 August 2009). A clear preference for a neutral discourse on security issues and the Islamic faith is thus a shared feature of state policies towards Muslim communities in Britain and Russia.

### III. Muslim representative institutions: different organisations, similar functions

Official endorsement or at least selective engagement with Muslim representative institutions is an integral part of the secular institutionalisation of moderate forms of Islam in Europe. A number of studies on secular management of Muslim representation have focused on the processes leading to the formation of such Muslim representative organisations and their subsequent evolution into state-endorsed partners, entrusted with promoting Muslim integration (Lawrence 2006; Silvestri 2005).<sup>7</sup> State efforts to set up an administrative institution responsible for regulating Muslim religious practices in the public sphere has been particularly evident in France, where the Ministry of Interior played an active role in setting up the French Council for the Muslim Religion (CFCM) to give Islam its official status.<sup>8</sup> A clear constitutional separation

between state and religion and egalitarian accommodation of Muslim minorities facilitated the creation of such an institution, designed to represent Muslims' civic interests before the state, rather than their religious identities.

The lack of a similarly strict or reinforced separation between state and religion in Russia and Britain makes the conceptualisation of the secular governance of Islam more complex, resulting in a more nuanced set of relations between the state and the institution of the Muslim Council. In Britain, a greater variety of religious organisations has encouraged the government to develop decentralised patterns of engaging with Muslim representative institutions, which has been evident in official discourses on Muslim integration. In Russia, the existence of hierarchically structured Muslim institutions for religious representation and a degree of continuity in relations between Muslim religious leaders and government officials have contributed to the ease with which a more centralised dynamic of interaction has developed. A close cooperation between Muslim leaders and the government officials has been equally reinforced by a particular fusion of religious and patriotic rhetoric based on Russia's conceptualisation of its multi-ethnic and multi-religious identity.

Before examining the two different dynamics of state-Council relations in Britain and Russia, the following section focuses briefly on the two intermediary institutions, their different characteristics and, what is most interesting, their similar administrative functions and limitations. The MCB and RCM act as auxiliaries to state policies of Muslim integration. By actively engaging with these organisations, the state attempts to 'steer' Muslim representation and promote moderate forms of Islam. A brief analysis of a series of interchanges between the Councils' leaders and government officials in

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further comparison between the administrative functions, internal divisions and the role of the CFCM and the RCM in the constitutionally secular governance of Islam in France and Russia can be found in Braginskaia (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> For a useful overview of studies on representative Muslim bodies, see Maussen 2007, 30-31.

<sup>8</sup> On the creation of the CFCM, see Laurence, and Vaisse 2006, Chapter 5, and Amiraux 2003. A



Britain and Russia brings to light the two contrasting patterns of horizontal and vertical regulation of religious representation.

The two Councils are very different institutions in the way they have developed, their institutional make-up, ethnic and religious composition, and internal power relations. They are highly contested by other organisations and must compete not only for state patronage, but also for community support. They claim to represent the majority of Muslim populations and aspire to be the main 'national' defender of Muslim interests before the state and other faith groups. However, they often suffer from internal disputes and a legitimacy deficit.

Very little comparative research has been done on these institutions to date (on the MCB, see Birt 2008 and McLoughlin 2005; on the RCM, see Silant'ev 2007 and Tulsii 2003). There is a tendency to dismiss them as unrepresentative and irrelevant. Some Muslims criticise them for being too closely linked to the government, while some state officials do not like some of the radical elements within these institutions. The leaders of the Councils are faced with an almost irreconcilable task of not upsetting the government while attempting to maintain their grass-root support.

The MCB was formed in 1997 as an umbrella body with over 500 local, regional and national affiliates, following a long process of consultation with a number of Muslim associations and organisations. In the aftermath of the controversy surrounding the Rushdie Affair, an independent 'National Interim Committee on Muslim Affairs' (NICMU) was formed in 1994 to carry out a countrywide consultation on the issues affecting the Muslim community. The questionnaires reconfirmed the need to create a representative umbrella body, which would pave the way for the eventual formation of the MCB. Today the Council consists of different working committees and a board of counsellors, with the General Assembly elected from the national, regional and local mosques and affiliated organisations every four years. It seeks to represent different Muslim interests,

speaks out on the impact of Islamophobia and anti-terrorist legislations, actively engages in the public life of Muslim citizens and promotes inter-faith dialogue.

The Council's leadership is keen to show its community roots and presents the institution as 'an initiative of the community, led by the community, for the service of the community' (Research & Documentation Committee of the MCB). Although the Council emphasises its voluntary basis, its creation has been strongly welcomed by the government. The Council gives voice to a number of moderate as well as radical Islamic figures. Although this provides a more pluralistic representation of Muslim interests, it hinders the Council's ability to work as a coherent actor. Some of its radical Islamic ideology and the style of community activism are increasingly challenged by other Muslim representative bodies, including the British Muslim Forum and the Sufi Council of Britain. Its over-reliance on the affiliated organisations undermines its grass-root support, while close identification with the government creates a problem for engaging with young Muslims.

The Russian Muslim Council is a centralised religious organisation which consists of the heads of the Muslim Spiritual Boards, under the leadership of Moscow-based mufti, Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin. It was formed in 1996, following a series of internal clashes within the existing regional structures of Muslim institutions and was created in direct competition to the long-established institution of the Central Spiritual Board (TsDUM). During Soviet times, the TsDUM represented Muslim interests within the Russian Federation (or the RSFSR). The turbulent 1990s provided new opportunities for creating new alliances and groupings within the Muslim Spiritual authorities, with the RCM gradually emerging as one of the clear favourites of the government.

The Council is currently one of the three large coordinated Muslim bodies in Russia. Unlike its British counterpart with its more democratic form of internal governance, the RCM represents a tightly structured,

hierarchical organisation. While remaining closely linked to the government, it claims to represent the majority of Muslim religious organisations in the public sphere and is increasingly entrusted with representing Russian Muslims in the international arena. It also has strong connections with the state and Moscow's local authorities. There are many other organisations that belong to the competing TsDUM, under the regional leadership of Mufti Talgat Tajuddin, while Muslim organisations in the North Caucasus are largely represented by the Coordinating Centre of Spiritual Boards of Muslims. Over the last few years the idea of creating a more unified body to represent Muslim interests has gained wider popularity with the heads of the three institutions. Although it is a religious duty of Muslim believers to unite and work together, in the Russian case, it is also symptomatic of hierarchical opportunities offered by the state's vertical approach to governance.

Despite their inherent differences, the Councils share similar priorities, administrative and religious responsibilities and play a similar role in state governance of Islam. They place the interests of Muslim citizens (practicing or non-practicing) on an equal footing with other religious groups by facilitating Muslim practices. They negotiate with public authorities to secure permissions for religious spaces and the renovation of places of worship. Both institutions deal with the issues of imam training and fulfilling state requirements by incorporating national civic values into the curriculum of Islamic education. Both regulate *halal* provisions, coordinate the dates of Islamic festivals and assist with provisions for the *hajj*. In other words, the two institutions carry out many mundane but crucial functions essential for supporting Muslim communities, negotiating with government officials and engaging with other religions.

The internal dynamics of religious governance requires the Councils to be effective administrators. However, their institutional legitimacy rests on a delicate balance between

the spiritual and political responsibilities. If they become too religiously focused, they lack the ability to represent non-practicing Muslims within the officially secular debates. The British Muslim Council never claims to be a religious organisation: the accommodation of religious groups implies 'recognition and support of communities rather than... ecclesiastical or spiritual representation' (Modood 2009, 183-84). The Russian Council, on the other hand, aspires to be a religious body, although some of its spiritual credentials and the knowledge of Islam are continuously challenged by younger, more educated Muslims.

Should these councils not be purely administrative instruments or mechanisms for facilitating everyday life of Muslim communities and proactively catering for minority interests? If the emphasis is on 'governance' and religion is to be understood in its purely cultural dimension, the state is perhaps right to engage with the Councils as institutions representing Muslim interests in promoting the 'common good' (Britain) and encouraging 'national moral revival' (Russia). On the other hand, if the Councils only represent a cultural dimension of the Muslim identity, they face a risk of becoming religiously hollow institutions, lacking in spiritual authority and support from practicing Muslims. They become increasingly vulnerable to accusations of being 'co-opted' by the state to 'manage' Muslim communities. Stripping the institutions of their religious authority might result in an unnecessary friction between the secular and Islamic sources of authority.

#### **IV. State-Council relations: horizontal and vertical modes of religious governance**

The Muslim Councils are independent intermediary actors entrusted with representative and administrative functions over Muslim minorities. However, their institutional capacity is influenced by the specific regime of religious governance within which they operate. A further analysis of the ways each Council interacts with the state brings to light the

internal dynamics of horizontal and vertical patterns of state-Muslim relations. The scope of this section will be limited to discussing the opportunities and constraints provided by the mode of state engagement with the Councils and the level of competition from other Muslim organisations.

*MCB and the British Government: the freedom of engagement*

Over the last 10 years the British government has developed a rather complex relationship with the MCB by not only closely cooperating but also distancing itself from the institution. In the late 1990s, the New Labour administration welcomed the creation of the MCB as a more centralised organisation collectively representing Muslim interests in Britain. The MCB may not be fully representative of all Muslim opinions in Britain, but its organisational structure is based on democratic principles of consultation and internal elections.

The Council enjoys good relations with the government if it refrains from making any radical statements and cultivates the idea of 'common good' which resonates with the British values of social cohesion. It is instrumental in reducing community tensions, promoting moderate forms of Islam and accommodating Muslim interests. However, its refusal to take part in the Holocaust Memorial Day in 2006 as well as its more recent statements about the situation in Gaza cost it the government's financial and moral backing. 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). This move was strongly criticised by the MCB, which had its funding cut as a result. Dr. Abdul Bari, the former Secretary of the Council, wrote in response that the 'indication that only those organisations that agree with your particular strategy as the best way to fight extremism will receive your favours is another way of saying that only those who support your government can expect to receive public funds' (MCB 2006).

A vast diversity of Muslim groups, encouraged by a more liberal framework of state-religion cooperation and less invasive policies, allows the British government to be more selective in its choice of partners for governing Islam. The highly competitive environment of Muslim representation in Britain ensures that the Council is not the only representative of Muslim interests (Qenawi 2007). There are no provisions precluding state financial assistance to religious organisations and the state does not necessarily have to rely on a single Muslim institution to engage with Muslim communities. The British government has been free to channel financial resources to specific Muslim organisations, as has been recently demonstrated by its support for the Sufi Council and the British Muslim Forum.

A key advantage of the British horizontal approach is its flexibility. While the government is free to distance itself from one of its institutional partners, it is also free to re-instate its relations with the institution, provided a series of conciliatory steps have been made on both sides. Most of the interactions take place between the leadership of the MCB and senior officials in the Local Government. Following the exchange of letters between the MCB and the Department for Communities and Local Government's Secretary General earlier this year, there is currently a clear improvement in the state-Council relations. The government has promised 'not to be cut off entirely from significant voices in the community' as it welcomed the Council's support for British forces abroad and its determination to build better relations with the Jewish community (Denham 2010).

The change in the government's position may also be explained by the growing criticism of the way it distributed financial resources under the *Preventing Violent Extremism* programme. The report from the House of Commons, mentioned earlier, voiced a growing concern that the government's involvement in regulating and funding Muslim activities may have reflected its desire to 'engineer a

“moderate” form of Islam, promoting and funding only those groups which conform to this model’ (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee). The strength of the horizontal approach to religious governance is its extensive and arguably more democratic engagement with civil society institutions and a greater capacity for policy change.

Discursive shifts in formulating the general direction of state policies on Muslim representation may not be indicative of the actual changes in policies themselves but are representative of the changing dynamic of how these policies are being conceptualised and communicated. A potential danger of the British approach may lie in its over-commitment to Muslim communities and inability to provide adequate and simultaneous support for a variety of Muslim activities. While this approach does not always result in improving the lives of Muslim citizens, it is often accompanied by somewhat over-zealous ideological and security demands on Muslims to integrate and share British values.

*RCM and the Russian Government: the institutional consolidation*

Close cooperation between official Muslim figures and state officials is an important element of Russia’s vertical governance of Islam. While Muslim leaders draw attention to ‘Muslim patriotism’ and praise the good care the government takes of its Muslim citizens, the government acknowledges the input of Muslim religious authorities and organisations in ‘fighting against extremism and xenophobia’ (Medvedev 2009). The Council’s spokesmen prefer to emphasise the partnership aspect of their engagement with the state. There is a shared understanding that the internal stability and spiritual revival of the nation requires a consolidation of Muslim structures of administration. This arrangement gives a greater justification for the state efforts to bring state-Islam relations within its own vertical structures of administration.

Highly centralised, vertical structures of government support have become the norm, so much that according to one commentator, ‘a specific feature of the Russian state is that everything is permeated by the state’.<sup>9</sup> Russia’s vertical arrangement of state-Islam relations allows the Council to act in the interests of the state while representing Muslim communities. Although in the domestic sphere many Muslims may resent the Council’s strong commitment to the state, in foreign relations such an arrangement has proven quite effective. The state benefits from the RCM’s ties with Muslim institutions abroad to build a stronger emotional connection with its Muslim citizens, while a systematic accommodation of its Muslim communities presents Russia in a better light to the Muslim World.

Recent discussions on the unification of Muslim regional organisations highlight the current drive for greater consolidation of Muslim institutions within the hierarchical principles of religious governance. In 2005 the idea to create a unified structure of Muslim authorities and elect a single Mufti of Russia was met with certain scepticism by religious leaders and Muslim communities alike (*Kommersant* 22 April 2005). By 2010 the renewed discussions on consolidating Muslim representation have been largely welcomed by the RCM and other official Muslim organisations, with Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin suggested as one of the most likely figures to head the new consultative structure.

According to the opinion poll conducted by the League of Muslim Journalists in March 2010, the majority of Muslim leaders support a gradual unification of regional Muslim boards, although some have stressed the need for bottom-up representation and warned against the dangers of creating such an organisation from the top (Muslim Press, March 2010). Creating a single, unified organisation of Muslim representation is beneficial to promoting Islam

<sup>9</sup> Interview with senior representative from *Islam.Ru*, Moscow, 15 October 2008.

and combating extremism. It reflects a growing readiness to resolve internal leadership disputes and overcome the fragmentary nature of Russia's *umma* (Muslim community). And yet, it is also symptomatic of hierarchical consolidation authority and a centralising dynamic of religious administration.

In the Russian context, where unofficial organisations remain relatively weak, this tight partnership may be viewed as a necessary step to ensure that Muslim communities are represented at the national level. A more centralised form of governance is beneficial to consolidating the flow of financial resources and political opportunities needed to improve the Muslim infrastructure. Some commentators suggested that it might be helpful to use the model of the Orthodox Church to represent Muslim religious interests. Although these ideas are difficult to implement because of the a-hierarchical nature of spiritual authority in Islam, state officials look favourably on the possibility of having one Muslim interlocutor to engage with. Moreover, there is a widespread belief that a single national Muslim organisation, consisting of the key moderate Muslim figures loyal to the Kremlin, can provide strong opposition to radical Islamic movements, particularly in the North Caucasus.

However, over-reliance on the vertical mode of engagement has a number of implications for the governance of Islam and the representation of Muslim communities. The first issue is the problem of the bureaucratisation of religious figures by close identification with the state. By bringing Muslim representatives within its administrative mechanisms, the state risks widening the gap between Muslim leaders and the communities they represent. Close cooperation with the state leaves the official Muslim figures vulnerable to accusations of channelling down state demands to integrate and root out any manifestations of extremism, rather than voicing up the economic, social or political needs of Muslim communities. Moreover, the lack of competition from other

organisations reduces the level of institutional transparency and accountability.

Another implication of the vertical power distribution lies in the asymmetrical representation of Muslim interests along ethnic and religious lines. Different schools of Islamic thought which have given a special character to Muslim representation at the regional level may have partly contributed to the difficulty of forming a single representative organisation in the past. While these tensions are unavoidable, they become a serious issue if one ethnic community is allowed to dominate the Council and project its own agenda. This asymmetrical distribution of power may lead to a rather skewed institutionalisation of Islam with the interests and beliefs of one community promoted as the official version of Islam.

For example, Tatar representatives have traditionally occupied key positions in the RCM. They exercise a considerable influence as the government looks more favourably on their moderate teachings, namely the Hanafi school of Islam (on the Hanafi teachings, see Gainutdin 2009). A Tatar brand of Islam has been considered suitable for the Russian context because of its strong preoccupation with education and moderation and long tradition of imam training. However, any efforts to create a single administrative body of Muslim representation will have to take into account Russia's diverse Islamic traditions and beliefs.

Finally, the vertical patterns of religious governance can become unstable because of the built-in rigidity of its pyramid-like structure. It is difficult to imagine the state changing its set of preferred interlocutors once certain bureaucratic provisions are in place without upsetting the entire arrangement. If the relationship between the government and the RCM, or an even more centralised organisation, deteriorates, will it still be possible for the state to retract its support and disengage as we have seen in the British case? If this is simply a matter of replacing one Muslim official with another, how independent and representative would such an organisation be? Discrediting the

credentials of a state-endorsed institution cannot but negatively reflect on state-Muslim relations.

The Russian approach of close cooperation with specific Muslim figures contains a strong preference for a top-down institutionalisation of Islam. However, the patterns of such a vertical engagement have not been 'locked in place'. There is some limited scope for discussing alternative arrangements to improve the lives of Muslims in specific social or educational domains, provided Muslim unofficial organisations are given sufficient space within the public sphere.

### **Conclusion**

The article addressed the question of religious governance by comparing state engagement with Muslim communities in Britain and Russia. It has tried to expand the existing state-religion typologies to incorporate a stronger political dimension and differentiate between liberal and conservative ways of accommodating minority rights. While the factor of state-religion relations is critical to understanding the complexities of state-Islam engagement, the political element and the associated bureaucratic tendencies play an important role in state policies towards Islam.

The securitised approach to accommodating Muslim needs has resulted in a partial blurring between the state's responsibilities towards its Muslim citizens and a strong state involvement in Muslim representation in the public sphere. While in Britain this has been communicated by delegating the authority to the local level, Russia has been increasingly involved in centralising its institutional structures and creating an overarching discourse of national unity and spiritual revival. Although both approaches have had some successes, they have also shared a number of criticisms, including asymmetrical representation of Muslim interests in Russia and excessive 'essentialising' of Muslim religious identity in Britain.

Finding 'suitable' partners within the Muslim communities who are sufficiently qualified to

represent the complexity of Muslim religious, social and political interests is one of the most challenging aspects of state policies on Islam. Without underestimating the key differences of horizontal and vertical patterns of state-Muslim relations, the research agenda can particularly benefit from identifying the level of convergence. State efforts to control the promotion of moderate forms of Islam have challenged the established arrangements between state and religion and questioned the acceptable boundaries of state involvement with intermediary institutions. These similarities bring out certain aspects of state paternalism, which has hindered the state engagement with Muslim communities through excessive prescribing of 'acceptable' forms of moderate Islam and tighter controls on anything that does not 'fit' the requirements.

The article has focused on tracing horizontal and vertical tendencies of Muslim governance by analysing a series of interactions between state officials and Muslim senior representatives. It highlighted some of the discursive shifts and policy reformulations in light of the security challenges and potentially divisive measures that tend to isolate the religious element of the Muslim identity. Political institutionalisation of Islam encourages 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 supporters of Muslim representative institutions. The official rhetoric on Muslim integration continues to treat 'Muslim citizens' as a problematic 'category', whose 'separate' rights/needs have to be protected, while its 'Islamic' activities are monitored. And yet, there is a promising indication that a more neutral discourse might lead to more inclusive patterns of engagement, respecting the plurality of Muslim identity, without necessarily securitising its religious dimension.

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