Political Order, Identity, and Security in Multinational, Multi-Religious Russia

James W. Warhola and Alex Lehning

The basis of a civil nation is common goals, common values, trust in the government, and the understanding that the government serves us. The main task of the people [now] is to avoid military service, taxes, and the authorities in general. Under such conditions, it is impossible to form a civil political nation.¹

In 2004, before the grotesque tragedy of the Beslan school hostage massacre had materialized, Shireen Hunter offered the following trenchant commentary on the highly complex and fluid situation of religion and national identity in Russia, particularly regarding Russia’s multi-religious and multinational character:

The challenge for Russia, a multiethnic and multireligious entity, is how to ensure that the reassertion of Russianness and the affirmation of the Russian culture and identity will not be at the expense of other major ethnic and cultural groups, notably the Muslims. Failure to reconcile the competing claims of its diverse people for self-determination within a broad and all-encompassing civic Russian identity, encompassing loyalty to the Russian state after a period of reawakening and reassertion of ethnic, cultural, and religious peculiarities and efforts to achieve greater self-determination, could presage continuous interethnic strife and the strengthening of nondemocratic forces. Such a development could set back Russia’s development and modernization—economic, social, and political—and possibly endanger Russia’s stability.²

The problem of achieving civic solidarity while maintaining a balance between the extremes of unruly, uncivil disorder (*bezporyadok*: Hobbes’ worst scenario) and repressive authoritarianism is an age-old problem not only of political philosophy but also of practical, concrete governance in the late modern world. Russia, in this respect, is no exception, neither to European (Western or Eastern) nor to North American democracies. What might be learned, by each side, from the collective experiences of Europe and Russia in terms of Euro-Islam and Islam in Russia? How are the deepening problems of terrorism and racist xenophobia in Russia connected to shifting patterns and concepts regarding religion and ethnic self-identity within various groups in the Russian Federation? Answers to such questions may

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present the key to the larger question of the possibility of the formation of a healthy sense of civic solidarity in contemporary Russia.

Hunter offers that Russia under Putin has been moving toward some type of monocultural Russo-centrism:

the basic contours of a new Russian identity have been gradually emerging. In this process, interaction with the West and the challenge from the Muslim South, both within the borders of the Russian Federation and on its periphery, have played important roles in shaping this new identity, as they have done throughout Russia’s history. *This identity is largely ethnocentric and monocultural,* as illustrated by the Russian Ministry of Education’s decision in November 2002 to develop a course on Orthodox culture for the Russian public school system.3

To the extent that such a *monoculturalism* might be emerging under the Putin administration, it is proving to be problematic in terms of Russia’s identity, security, and political order. It is axiomatic that most ethnic Russians tend to identify themselves as “Orthodox” in terms of religion, but this identification does not necessarily possess a theological character, and even less an overtly, religiously practicing character.4 Recent sociological research presents an interesting picture of the religious disposition of the Russian Federation’s population since the dissolution of the USSR. While the proportion of religious believers in the overall population has increased significantly since the collapse of the USSR, attendance at services of worship has not risen at the same rate, as Tables 1 and 2 indicate.

Furthermore, this increase in religiosity has been accompanied by an increase in ethnic self-awareness across a wide array of groups, including ethnic Russians. Svetlana Ryzhova notes that “ethno-sociological surveys do show that the strengthening of ethnic self-awareness in the republics—among the titular peoples as well as among ethnic Russians—is a unidirectional process. That is, increasing religiosity is always accompanied by increasing ethnic self-awareness” (emphasis in original).5 Yet such a cultural identification with Orthodoxy, and an increased ethnic self-awareness, may

| TABLE 1 Religious disposition of the population of the Russian Federation (percentage of population) |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Unsure/vacillating                              | 22       | 32       | 34       | 40       | 44       |
| Unbelievers                                     | 7        | 30       | 24       | 22       | 20       |
| Atheists                                        | 35       | 5        | 6        | 5        | 5        |
| Don’t know                                      | 7        | 4        | 6        | 2        | 2        |

not, in and of themselves, serve as the foundation for a deeper and broader sense of civic
solidarity within Russia. As also noted by Ryzhova:

Orthodox identity has become a marker of cultural identity, an especially noticeable
trend given the post-Soviet ideological vacuum. However, the politicization of this cul-
tural identity is fraught with potentially serious complications. This becomes especially
apparent when we consider that xenophobia and anti-Semitic attitudes have grown
along with increasing Russian self-awareness and religiosity.6

The ethnic and religious divides in Russia are thus complex. Perhaps the most salient
characteristic is that among ethnic Russians there is a multiplicity of religious
orientations along both confessional (Orthodox, Baptist, etc.) and behavioral lines
(from active church involvement to complete disengagement from any practice of
religiosity). Among Muslims, however, there are somewhat similar lines of division,
plus the significant divides along ethnic, ethno-linguistic, and regional lines. Thus
there appears to be a significantly different social-psychological identity structure
among Muslims from that of ethnic Russians. Understanding and dealing with this dis-
tinction may be critical to the resolution of the problem of creating a sense of civic
solidarity in Russia.

In this respect the question of the success or failure of the so-called “Euro-Islamic”
model may be relevant, inasmuch as it has been presented as a “viable way of resolving
the apparently inevitable tension between formally Muslim Tatarstan and allegedly
Islamophobic Europe.”7 However, according to the conclusion of a working meeting
at the Carnegie Endowment on the theme of “Islam in Russia’s Regions,” the
“general trend is toward the radicalization of Islam” within the Russian Federation.8
Nonetheless, both public officials and religious leaders have offered on numerous
occasions during the second Putin administration that Russia may be a model for
dealing with multinationality and particularly multi-religiosity. Before considering
this further, it will be useful to sketch out the contemporary political orientation of
the Russian Orthodox Church, since it holds such a prominent place both in contemporary
public religious life in Russia and also historically.

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TABLE 2 Frequency of attendance at worship services, Russia Federation (percentage of
population)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not less than once a month</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A few times per year</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once per year or less</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Dmitry Furman and Kummo Kaariainen, “Religioznaya Stabilizatsia: Otnosheniye k
The Orthodox Church administration has sought an increasingly active voice, if not a direct role, in the foreign and domestic policies of the Russian state since the collapse of the USSR. In domestic religious affairs, it has arguably pursued a course of *hegemonic ecumenism* because of its ecumenical spirit regarding public affairs, yet persisting emphasis of the leading role of Orthodoxy in Russian culture and society. Gvosdev has identified an important connection between the “managed pluralism” of the Putin administration and the role of public religion in Russia’s identity, with a special place given to the Orthodox Church. This “management” of the country’s ostensible pluralism became increasingly authoritarian, particularly after the Beslan incidents. While creating an appearance of stability, this pattern has also raised numerous questions of crucial political importance, particularly as they pertain to religion and religious organizations.

The Russian Orthodox Church has been generally cooperative and positively supportive of Vladimir Putin’s increasingly authoritarian “vertical of power.” The question is whether *ecumenical hegemonism* can work in the long run, given the complex nature of the religious and ethnic divides in contemporary Russia. How does this general political trend comport with Russia’s multinational and multi-religious character? What sort of relation has emerged between the Orthodox Church and the Putin administration? And at the level of popular attitudes, what sort of social and political climate has emerged during the Putin administration? Upon such questions may hang the issue of whether or not a “monocultural Russo-centrism” ends up creating more problems than it resolves.

Despite its preponderance of historical and cultural influence compared with other religious orientations in Russia, the Orthodox Church must share Russia with a multiplicity of religious and ethnic minority groups. Fortunately Russia has a long history of generally peaceful coexistence among ethnic Russians who are religiously Orthodox and Muslims of numerous ethno-linguistic groups, and also a history of generally positive and mutually enriching interaction, which the Orthodox Church has aided and supported. Svetlana Ryzhova sees in contemporary Orthodoxy a predominance of emphasis on *tolerance* (as opposed to the major competing strains of *radicalism*, *dysfunctional subjectivity* and *extremism*), sufficient to help serve as the foundation for the emergence of civic solidarity:

> It is clear that the further formation of a new Russian self-awareness—one mediated by Orthodoxy, constructed on peace-loving principles, and permeated with an understanding of Russia’s multicultural space and respect for individual and group rights—is in the hands of the tolerant wing of the Russian Orthodox Church. The model of a tolerant Russian self-awareness that they represent could serve as a marvelous symbol of civic solidarity for the Russian Federation, independent of its ethnic, cultural, and religious subdivisions.

Perhaps this is so. Before reaching any firm conclusions, however, a closer look at the larger picture of Russia’s multi-ethnic and poly-confessional character is needed. Perhaps the place to begin is by considering that the Russian state itself under Putin...
has not always been particularly tolerant.\textsuperscript{12} As a complicating factor, the influence of Russia’s numerous religious organizations, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church, differs significantly across the regions of Russia. Marsh and Froese have discerned the following pattern:

where the Orthodox Church is strong and active, local governments place severe restrictions on minority religions. As argued by Fagan and by Homer and Uzzell, the drive for restrictive religious policies emanates from the Orthodox Church itself, which puts pressure on state and regional leaders to pursue policies that either restrict the activity of other religious groups or provide the Orthodox Church with special privileges.\textsuperscript{13}

The “minority religions” referred to in this pattern are generally the smaller sects. In conjunction with the larger pattern of ecumenical hegemonism by the Russian Orthodox Church, however, the above-described pattern by Marsh and Froese makes the issue of Islam politically sensitive and difficult in terms of national identity, security, and effective governance.

**Islam in the Russian Federation**

Islam is clearly the most significant minority religion in contemporary Russia, by virtue of Muslims’ numerical strength (at nearly 15\% of the total RF population), cultural influence, and connections with co-religionists abroad. Russian Muslims may number from 10 to 30 million.\textsuperscript{14} Hunter considers that “a realistic range for Russia’s Muslims is between 16 million and 20 million, with the latter closer to the mark.”\textsuperscript{15} These figures are consistent with those of Alexey Malashenko, Russia’s leading expert on the subject.\textsuperscript{16} Others put the figure much higher, and Paul Goble recently predicted that Muslims will become the majority within the next generation; while few observers share this view, the point is that the proportion of Muslims in the Russian Federation is almost certain to continue increasing.\textsuperscript{17} But how politically significant is this?

Regarding the threat of politicized Islam, some observers offered that it was not inevitable, and perhaps not even likely, well after the USSR’s collapse. Even before the first Putin administration began, one observer noted in 1999:

> Although Islam as a faith and a cultural force has had a continual influence on Muslim parts of the USSR, its political role was virtually non-existent until the 1990s. Its revival, however, since the foundation of the Islamic Renaissance Party in 1990, was rapid, and its desire to influence political developments was apparent from the start.\textsuperscript{18}

True as this is, the growing consensus among scholars and other observers is that an even greater inclination toward the politicization of Islam has resulted from the Chechen War. This theme is explored in greater detail below. Here it is useful to consider that, as noted briefly above, the psychological structure of identity appears
to be qualitatively different among ethnic Russians, and Russian Federation citizens who are Muslim. Russian Muslims exist as multiple ethnic groups, but share an Islamic identity whose political significance, it seems, is becoming increasingly evident. Thus what unites “ethnic Russians”—a sense of national self-awareness based on ethno-linguistic and cultural moorings—is conspicuously absent among Muslims, for whom religion is the common unifying factor, even though religious practice may be marginal or absent altogether. This divide is only reinforced by the distinctively different manifestations of the patterned role of religion in politics in the North Caucasus region from the Volga region, the two areas with the greatest concentration of Muslims in Russia. These factors make the content of that religious self-identification of critical importance for the prospect of a sense of civic solidarity to come into being.

The key question, perhaps, is how such a sense of civic solidarity can emerge when ethnic Russians’ concept of identity is to a significant degree anchored in a religious reference point (Orthodoxy); whereas for Muslims in the Russian Federation, any sense of their being “Russian” must necessarily have an alternative religious and cultural reference point, or simply have none at all, which for Muslims would, of course, be highly problematic for several reasons. Either way, the foundation for inclusion in the national community must be upon a more or less secularly civic basis of self-identification, otherwise the differential among Muslims and ethnic Russians will be necessarily conflicted. This difference between “ethnic” Russians and Muslims in the Russian Federation may also help to account for the curious phenomenon of religionized politics more than the more commonly used description of “politcized religion.” We consider this below. Along with such theoretical considerations, however, is the matter of how citizens actually get along together. What sorts of attitudes exist among ethnic Russians toward Muslims, and vice versa, within the Russian Federation?

Anti-Islamic feelings did not predominate among ethnic Russians up to the time of the Putin regime, despite the Chechen conflict, the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and the early involvement by Russia with the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism”. Sociological research has indicated that over 60% of the population of Russia expressed a “good” or “very good” assessment of Islam, despite an “Orthodox consensus” of values and identity across nationality groups and across religious orientations. These data suggest that an attitudinal basis for peaceful coexistence within Russia exists in the realm of religious tolerance and acceptance. The fact that some minority religious groups (e.g. Baptists and Jehovah’s Witnesses) tend to be viewed negatively does not necessarily signify a culture of intolerance. The contribution by Karpov and Lisovskaya that appears in this special issue deals with this matter in much greater depth, detail, and with recent empirical evidence.

Yet deepening xenophobia in Russia during the Putin years became particularly evident and politically ominous, especially since ethnic and religious identities are so politically intertwined. The emergence and growth of xenophobia are incisively
explored by Emil Pain in this special issue, who calls the problem “uncontrollable.” A deputy official of the Federal Migration Service gave voice to this attitude in recent comments, warning against “ethnic enclaves” (areas where the foreign population outnumbers ethnic Russians by more than 20%) as potential sources of “discomfort.”

The Kremlin’s proposal in 2006 to the UN, which outlines its positions against racism and xenophobia, appears designed to cater to ethnic Russian self-interest, vis-à-vis the EU, and at the expense of Latvia and Estonia. In January 2006 Putin called upon the Public Chamber in its very first meeting to engage in a “fight against ethnic hatred.” (This body was established in the spring of 2005 to augment the formation of civil society, according to Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov.) Perhaps symptomatically, the Duma considered a bill in spring 2006 to define Russian national identity; the short-term effect of that bill, however, was to exacerbate social tensions, particularly among Muslims. In late October 2006 a group of over 50 social organizations, including religious ones, calling itself “The All-Russian Social Movement ‘Our Russia’” (OOD-Nasha Rossiya), signed a declaration critical of the increase in xenophobia and nationalism in contemporary Russia. Thus it is not only the Putin regime that believes Russia’s social and political well-being is threatened by the rise of xenophobic extremism, nor even the Orthodox-identifying majority: the Muslim representatives at this meeting concurred regarding the urgency of addressing this matter.

Ravil Gaynutdin, the prominent Islamic cleric and chairman of the Council of Muftis of Russia, offered that “without peace and accord between nationalities, our country faces inevitable disintegration.” While perhaps hyperbolic, this expression indicates that the matter is an important issue among religious leaders in the Muslim community.

Russia has a wide array of religious associations among scores of religious denominations, numbering well over 21,000. Inter-confessional conflict among these groups was fairly minimal until the end of the 1990s, notwithstanding the Chechen conflict. During the Putin administrations, however, relations among religious groups (both at the popular and at the leadership levels) have become increasingly delicate and strained. At the 10th World Council of Russian People in April 2006, Metropolitan Krill offered a stern observation on the supremacy of Russian Orthodox Christian morality and his opinion of those in Russian society, presumably foreigners and Islamic extremists, outside the Church:

We should not shed any tears about rising xenophobia at a time when we open opportunities for a person, who is not restrained by any moral force, to ravage sacred places, spit on his fatherland, and destroy his culture. Such a person will go and kill someone else on the basis of race of faith. There is one single and indivisible morality.

But can civic unity be obtained by such a mentality, given the complex religious and ethnic landscape of Russia? Serious and complex lines of division exist among Muslims in Russia, with much of the animating energy beneath these divisions deriving from the question of the nature of the political relationship with the central government.
government in Moscow. The oft-noted distinction between the Muslim communities in central Russia (the general Volga region) and those in the North Caucasus is significant, but this geographical line of division is but one of numerous divides that exist among Russian Muslims. All must deal with the central authorities in Moscow either directly or indirectly, and this also makes their connection with the Russian Orthodox Church more or less inevitable, even if the linkage among these various actors is indirect or oblique.

Paul Goble has identified a “three-way struggle for Chechen Islam,” and others have discerned significant divisions within Volga-region Muslim communities over the matter of how to deal with Moscow, even if that means competing with each other for favor from the center. Malashenko has noted that “Russian Muslims, except in the Caucasus, have displayed a consistent immunity to a radical brand of Islam the authorities label as “Wahabbism,” and that, although this version of Islam had not spread to other major centers of Muslim population (at least by late 2004), nonetheless “Islam remains an important factor in Russia’s political life, and there are enough reasons to worry.” Part of the problem, in his view, is the national leadership itself:

Religious radicals appeal to Islam; internal conflicts remain unresolved; foreigners continue to interfere across the borders; and that the ruling establishment is incapable (or unwilling) to understand Islam’s impact on Russia’s internal affairs. All these factors cause instability in the south of the Russian Federation. This instability, in turn, negatively affects the situation in the whole country.34

While this may be so, in fact President Putin publicly took a tough stance against “Wahabbism,” noting that it “in itself is not a threat, but any distortion of the norms of Islam, distortion of Wahabbism, certainly cannot be regarded other than as a call for terrorism.”35 The Kremlin’s tendency to brand all religiously oriented groups critical of the Putin regime as “Wahabbist” may well be little more than an excuse for suppressing, in the name of anti-terrorism, legitimate political opposition. If so, this would make short-term sense but would almost certainly create conditions for greater political opposition in the longer run.36

Yet others have characterized the changing nature and role of Islam in Russia as having occurred in a manner fully compatible with civic solidarity. Zagir Arukhov notes that even Dagestan, the most ethnically heterogeneous Federal Subject, is predominantly Muslim, and yet has:

... maintained institutional and territorial stability. Both because of Dagestan’s unique ethno-political social structure and the authorities’ measured policies, Dagestan succeeded in overcoming inclinations toward ethnic separatism. In this period, the politicized religious groups (the tarikatist clergy and the Wahabbis) represented the most serious threat to societal peace. However, Islam’s growing significance in political decision making led only to unrest in the Republic’s religious community, and not to a more serious political schism in the traditionally more tolerant Dagestani society as a whole.37 (emphasis added)
It is perhaps noteworthy that when in December 2005 over 800 Muslims protested the inclusion of Russian Orthodox symbols on the national insignia, they did so on quintessentially civic grounds, namely on the basis of the constitutional principles of equality of all religions and on the secular character of the state. More recent protests over proposed legislation to reintroduce military chaplains were framed in similar civic terms. Sheik Ravil Gaynutdin, head of the Russian Council of Muftis, offered that “We’re not ready for it, and what is more important, the legal basis does not exist. The draft law ... contradicts both the Russian Constitution and the Russian law on religious freedom and religious organizations.” While the nature of the relations between Russian Orthodoxy and Islam may prove congenial, if paradoxical, the epicenter of the Russian–Muslim divide is increasingly coming to focus on Chechnya and the southern flank of Russia more generally.

The Chechen Conflict and Russian–Muslim Relations

Survey evidence indicates that the Russian population is divided over the question of how to resolve the Chechen conflict. According to survey data from September 2005, most citizens are not particularly supportive of official policies regarding Chechnya: 68% preferred to enter into negotiations, 20% favored continuing military operations, and 12% “don’t know” (see Table 3). These data have been fairly consistent for the past several years, continuing even as general popular support for Putin persisted at around 70%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question: Do you consider it necessary to continue military action in Chechnya or begin peaceful negotiations with the Chechen leadership?</th>
<th>% of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continue operations</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enter negotiations</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question: How do you relate to the possible separation of Chechnya from Russia?</th>
<th>% of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It has already happened in fact</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be delighted by such a turn of events</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It wouldn’t make any difference to me</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m against such a turn of events but could accept it</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We must prevent that by any possible means, including military</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aLevada Center, Moscow, nationwide survey, 16–19 September 2005, N = 1,600.

The fact that Putin raised the possibility of dialogue with separatists in early 2005 indicated some measure of flexibility:

Yes, we should hold dialog with them. We can’t do without it. We should engage them in normal life, otherwise they will be cut off from this process. ... [But] no civilized state allows itself such a luxury as talks with terrorists, because any talks with terrorists weaken the state and give strength to the terrorists. However, if this or that structure has laid down arms and declared that it is determined to refrain from all aspects of the military struggle with the leadership and the state, then it deserves dialog.41

Yet his April 2005 address before the Federal Assembly addressed the matter head-on, promising greater security, democracy, and stability for the region.42 However, no coherent policy emerged to deal with the increasingly complex problem of the broader social and political fallout from Chechnya.43 This is not surprising, perhaps, given the exceedingly complex nature of the relationship between Islam and ethnic conflict, as explored by Shale Horowitz in this special issue. Some observers view the Chechnya conflict as having aggravated relations among ethnic Russians and Muslims and placed those relations on a different plane than would have been the case if the problem had been approached differently. Galina M. Yemelianova curtly and forebodingly offers:

The Russian–Chechen war which began in 1994 in order to restore Moscow’s effective control over Chechnya has inflicted terrible damage to Russian federalism and Russian–Muslim relations. In particular, it has undermined the historically favourable basis for the viable and productive coexistence of Russian and Muslims within Russia.44

She concluded in 2002 that the escalation of tensions and difficulties between ethnic Russians and Muslims was not the result of a “clash of Christian and Islamic civilizations,” but in fact worse, representing a departure from positive aspects of past experience and undermining the prospects for a more positive future:

... the favourable historical and cultural conditions for the formation of new and civilized relations between Russians and Muslims have been fast disappearing as a result of Moscow’s official policies. The Russian leadership has yet to generate a coherent national and religious policy, which could provide a framework for the democratic and stable development of Russia as a multi-ethnic and poly-confessional state. Such a policy has to serve the long-term objective of Russia’s gradual transformation into a modern civic nation; but at the same time, it has to deal with the existing ethno-political and confessional realities.45

The handling of this problem, indeed the larger question of the role and place of Muslims in the Russian Federation, has been viewed as emblematic of the nature of the entire political system. Dmitri Glinski suggests that “the status of Russia’s largest majority is an important indicator of the country’s democratic development”; similarly, Jeffrey Thomas offers:

The treatment of Islam and Russia’s predominantly Muslim ethnic groups will serve as an important barometer of whether the reassertion of central authority devolves intolerance and repression of national minorities ... The Russian leadership’s willingness
and ability to resist this trend and protect the rights of Muslim ethnic minorities and to
guarantee the free expression of Islamic religious and cultural practices—while sup-
pressing the extremist elements—will be crucial determinants of how the Russian pol-
tical system evolves.46

In this respect, Moscow’s “managed pluralism,” in conjunction with the Church’s
“ecumenical hegemonism,” may represent more of a problem than a solution for
Russia’s numerous issues of identity and security. The most pressing of these is argu-
ably terrorism. Thus a key question is the nature of the connection between aggravated
inter-communal relations and the escalation of terrorism. Numerous observers are
reaching the conclusion that they did indeed become related during Vladimir
Putin’s second term. Emil Pain argues that the Chechen Wars, and more generally
the entire approach taken by both the Yeltsin and Putin administrations, has had the
effect of undermining stability in the country as well as sowing the seeds for more
terrorism:

Neighboring Ingushetia has been a permanent front of the Chechen war since 2004. Other
neighbors of Chechnya—Dagestan, Karachai-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria—are
increasingly becoming battlefields in the struggle against armed terrorism ... The
“war against terrorism,” and the consequential state reforms it has prompted, has not
brought any more order to Russia. The Kremlin has made its choice—instead of
authoritative but inconvenient regional leaders, it has begun to place them with weak
but obedient ones. However, such leaders cannot ensure stability in their regions ... The
network of armed fundamentalist organizations has acquired an unprecedented
scope.47

The prevailing view prior to the “reassertion of vertical authority,” however, seems
to have been that Muslims in the Russian Federation were largely accepting of the
general post-Soviet conditions. As recently as December 2002, for example, Jeffrey
Thomas suggested that “[w]ith few exceptions, Russia’s Muslim Republics have
acquiesced to Putin’s recentralization initiative. Although insurgents in Chechnya
continue to resist Russian forces, the Russian military has retaken most of Chechen
territory.” While quite true, this situation has simply shifted the focus of the problems
of order, identity, and security to other domains, as indicated above by Emil Pain.

In 2002 Glinski expressed concerns about the role and place of Muslims in Russia
which could hardly be alleviated by simply retaking Chechnya with brutal force; he
offered that Russian Muslims were:

increasingly alienated by the persistent denial of political representation and social rec-
ognition at the nationwide level—that is, in the Moscow establishment and social
circles. The existing asymmetry between the proportion of Russia’s Muslims and
their representation in the national elite breeds trouble by encouraging radicalism
and the use of undemocratic means of political struggle.48

As evidence, he notes that during 1992–2002, only 3 of 154 Cabinet-level officials
were Muslim. This aspect of contemporary social and political life is also evident in
the growing perception of many Muslims that they are systematically discriminated
against, and that prejudice, racism, and xenophobia are increasing. Unfortunately their suspicions are supported by credible evidence; the recorded incidence of such acts has tended to increase during the Putin years. Public protests have occasionally been held, which is something of a departure from their conventional quiescence; in fact a “wave of protests was triggered by the arrest and reported mistreatment of Muslims from the [Middle Volga] region” in March of 2005. Concerning such protests, Glinski continues:

Their expressions of protest often have little to do with their religious identity—which for most of them is still very much in the making. It is rather, vice versa: religious identity is discovered as a weapon and as an ideology of protest against exclusion, and for these purposes it occasionally has to be created from scratch. This applies even more to converts from “ethnically” non-Muslim populations, including ethnic Russians themselves.

Thus we observe an increasing tendency to “religionize” politics instead of the more commonly assumed pattern of “politicizing religion.” Without passing judgment on the degree of rationality that might be involved in such “religionization” or on the rational content of the religious concepts being invoked, it should be noted that the resort to a transcendental reference point both to express and justify political disaffection has been prone, historically, to encourage excess and frequently violence. Unfortunately the circumstances in early twenty-first-century Russia are proving to follow suit, at least regarding the interaction of ethnic Russians and Muslims.

Increase in Terrorism and Problems of National Identity, Security, and Governance

The incidence of terrorism steadily increased from the outset of the first Chechen War and gained in frequency and scale during the Putin years. The years 2004 and 2005 witnessed not only the continuation of the conflict in Chechnya but its spreading elsewhere in the Caucasus mountain region. Well over 400 people died by terrorist acts in the fall of 2004 alone: 40 were killed in a Moscow subway in February, sabotage-attacks on aircraft killed 89 people in August, and finally the Beslan school horror killed over 300 people, most of them children. For the next several years the violence did not recede but spread throughout much of the North Caucasus region.

The official view is that much of the political resistance and militarized separatist activity in the Caucasus region is very much connected to international Islamist terror groups, particularly al-Qaeda. While the Orthodox Church has condemned violence and terrorism, it has generally supported and followed the Kremlin’s lead on matters of national security, terrorism, and especially on questions dealing with the territorial integrity of the Federation, including, of course, the Chechen conflict. The horrors of the Beslan tragedy reinforced this tendency, causing the Putin
administration to become even more determined to stay its course. The question is whether a sense of genuinely democratic civic nationhood can be constructed simultaneously with the struggle against terrorism, given the complex and dynamically changing range of factors involved in Russia’s changing sense of identity as Muslim numbers and influence continue to grow.

Some have argued that the underlying social conditions in the Caucasus region of Russia have contributed significantly to the radicalization of Islam, and especially in Chechnya. Karen Hertog notes that “[t]he socioeconomic situation, the influence of radical Islamic organisations from abroad, and the second Russian invasion in 1999 consequently all helped the growth of fundamentalism in Chechnya,” and further that “the Chechen example shows clearly how a war plants the seeds of religious extremism in a society that would not be inclined to this otherwise. Injustice and violence all too often transform moderate believers into extremists: the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy.’ ” Significantly, Putin shared this view at least in part, maintaining that the socio-economic conditions in the Caucasus region were fertile soil for political disaffection (which he termed radicalism and extremism). This view is generally corroborated by Tishkov, who presents the Chechen conflict not as a product of deeply rooted mutual distrust and hatred between Chechens and Russians but more as a product of post-Soviet policies along with the psychological and material conditions created by those policies.

Thus, notwithstanding the military lockdown of Chechnya by early 2007, Russia appears characterized more by rising tensions among groups and the danger of increased tension than by increased national unity. Rising Russian nationalism and xenophobia among ethnic Russians, and increasing political and religious assertiveness, if not radicalism, among Russia’s Muslims are symptomatic of this syndrome. While the former may be spurred on by increased Russian political self-awareness deriving from high rates of economic growth since 1999, both the rise of Russian nationalism and the reactive Muslim assertiveness place the issues of Russia’s identity, security, and effective governance in a different light from that facing the country immediately after the collapse of the USSR. The robust macro-economic growth Russia has experienced under Putin may ironically serve to accentuate rather than ameliorate these issues by creating more hospitable material conditions for an escalation of political demands by both ethnic Russians and ethnically non-Russian Muslims.

The federal Ministry of Regional Development produced a draft Concept Paper in October 2005 in response to the above issues, calling for a reconceptualization of the country’s identity that some observers view as a resuscitation of the old Brezhnev-era notion of the USSR as a “new historical community of peoples.” The tone of the document, and the ensuing commentary in Russian and Western media, suggested the Putin administration’s keen interest in pursuing a sense of united nationhood. The influence of presidential adviser Vladislav Surkov on this document only reinforced that sense.

While the Russian Orthodox Church might rather easily adapt to such a reconceptualization, it would almost certainly be problematic for many of the estimated 20
million Muslims of Russia. Compounding this, a significant out-migration of ethnic Russians from the North Caucasus area has been occurring, along with an increase of ethnically non-Russian (meaning predominantly Muslim) citizens. Such demographic change is almost certain to have the effect of reinforcing a sense of distinctiveness among ethnic Russians and non-Russian Muslims, and to do so in a manner that reciprocally reinforces distrust and alienation. The Kremlin has indicated the demographic situation in the country as a whole to be gravely serious, and a “national priority.” These factors make the formation of a “monocultural Russia” seem increasingly remote, rather than imminent; they also pose difficult but unavoidable questions about Russia’s identity and security.

Part of the search for a workable sense of national identity and effective national governance has involved the centralization of power to handle problems that emerged under the Yeltsin years and that were perceived as having left the country vulnerable to weakness and fragmentation. There was a growing sense in both Russia and the West by the end of the 1990s that Russia faced an array of problems that could be resolved only by the more effective mustering of state power; far from being too strong, the Russian state during the Yeltsin years was too weak.

The Putin administration responded with a stated determination to “reassert vertical authority,” and with the implementation of various policies to bring this about. But has the “reassertion of vertical authority” contributed to a greater sense of civic solidarity and, along with it, greater security? Sergei Markedonov, head of the Department of Inter-Ethnic Relations at the Institute of Political and Military Analysis (Moscow) perhaps states the situation most succinctly:

The job of the state is to stifle terrorist acts and, if necessary, strongly to counteract xenophobia and radicalism, whatever the source. In the case of Islamic extremism, the difficulties lie in the ability to keep an equal distance from all sides. The problem is not that we need to make peace with Wahabbism. A different approach, however, has become necessary. Without an effective dialogue with moderate and responsible representatives of “Islamic renewal,” the problem of religious extremism in the Caucasus will not leave the Russian political agenda for a long time.

The centralizing thrust of the Putin regime has manifested itself in numerous ways and has been pursued with a calculating relentlessness. The Russian Orthodox Church tended to support this, or at least to offer little, if any, resistance. Particularly with respect to the Chechen conflict, there has been little commentary except general and rather politically antiseptic calls for peace and national unity. The drive to further centralize authority only accelerated in the fall of 2004 in response to the Beslan tragedy; as before, this drive was undertaken ostensibly to preserve and further enable civil society to develop, and to deliver Russia from the scourge of further terrorist acts. In early 2006 the Duma passed a bill expanding the powers of the Russian state to counter terrorism; shortly thereafter President Putin decreed the establishment of a National Counterterrorism Committee (NAK); following these, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov called for an “international front” to combat
terrorism.\textsuperscript{68} Also during 2005 legislation was crafted to more closely control nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and particularly foreign ones.\textsuperscript{69} Since many of these NGOs presented themselves as working in the area of protection of minority rights, a constriction of their activity is certain to affect the political climate in Russia; their exclusion altogether, of course, would do so even more.\textsuperscript{70}

Even in creating an appearance of stability, this concentration of vertical power raised important political questions, some of which more or less directly involve the Orthodox Church. Can the Church’s ecumenical hegemonism\textsuperscript{299} work in the long run in such a deeply divided country? Have the policies resulting from the general centralization of power created conditions in which a sense of civic solidarity is becoming more remote and problematic, given the differential bases of identity among ethnic Russians and Muslims? To the extent that these questions can be answered affirmatively, it hardly makes sense to consider Russia as moving toward a monocultural political orientation. But the possibility of breakup of the Russian Federation seems equally remote.\textsuperscript{71}

The question, again, is whether a sense of civic solidarity can emerge on some other foundation than a domestically and internationally dangerous version of Russian nationalism, and, if so, what might it look like? The dangers of Russian nationalism have been well explicated in this special issue by Emil Pain and Philip Walters. It is no wonder that some Russian politicians have called for a rethinking of the advisability of ethno-territorial federalism for Russia. Rightly or wrongly, sagely or ill-advisedly, their concerns are reflected in recent research that has illuminated the connection between formal provision of autonomy and propensity toward communal conflict. Svante Cornell, in particular, concludes:

\textit{[t]his study points to the merits of devising political structures that cut across ethnic and other communal divisions, encourage civic identities, but discourage the use of ethnicity in the political sphere. That does not mean that all autonomy solutions are necessarily destined to collapse or to lead to war. It does mean that whenever the ethnicization of territory can be avoided, it should be avoided. This study has attempted to show that the advocacy of resolving or preventing ethnic conflict through solutions based on the devolution of power along ethnic lines is at best a questionable and at worst a disastrous enterprise. The little publicized pitfalls of ethnofederalism hence need to be kept in mind while formulating policies in and toward multiethnic societies.}\textsuperscript{72}

The implications of his general conclusion, however, raise again in bold relief the age-old question of Russian identity, and how to most effectively govern the immense territory of Russia, occupied as it is by a population so ethnically and religiously diverse. It is important to bear in mind that while some aspects of identity may be immutable, other aspects, including even religion and even ethnicity, are matters of choice, and that the conditioning factors in that decision-making process are often directly political in nature.\textsuperscript{73} Thus the political environment shaping social and political identity is critical.
Conclusion: Social Identity—Nation, Religion, and Community

The perennially problematic questions of Russia’s identity, security, and quest for political order have resurfaced in the early twenty-first century in an especially ominous form regarding religious tolerance and civility among communal groups. Perhaps emblematically, President Putin called upon the Public Chamber at its inaugural convocation in January 2006 to “fight against ethnic hatred”; in October the “All-Russian Social Movement—Our Russia” formally and publicly decried the increase in xenophobia and nationalism. Is it possible to manage Russia’s highly multinational and religiously heterogeneous character while simultaneously cultivating a democratic political culture with regards to civil society? Perhaps at the heart of this question is another, deeper question: what role do the major religious institutions and ideas in Russia play in making the difficult but inevitable decisions about where to establish a balance between citizens’ rights and fending off credible, bona fide threats to the common good from religious and political extremists? In this respect it was certainly understandable that President Putin would find it appropriate to begin massing the political power of the state to enable the governance of Russia; after all, various Russian and even some Western observers had noted that one of the key problems of the Yeltsin administration was that the Russian state was not too strong, but rather that it was not strong enough to effectively govern. Yet the danger of continually strengthening political power (vlast’) is also clear: by creating a state that is sufficiently strong to wield necessary authority over a vast territory occupied by a multi-ethnic and poly-confessional population, the ideals of citizenship must not fall victim to the dictates of power.

Perhaps the key now, as offered long ago by Aristotle, is the concept of citizenship defined by two core components: the capacity to obey duly constituted authority, and the capacity to rule—that is, by both the demos (people) and the kratos (state as authority). But for such true citizenship and thus true democracy to prevail, these two components must not be the exclusive domain of either the “state” or the “people,” respectively. Rather, both the kratos and the demos—and in Russia’s case, this means all of the demos: Muslim, Orthodox, Baptists, Jewish, Buddhists, etc.—must in fact know how to do both, and in practice to do so: the state knowing how to rule and to obey popular will, and the populace knowing how to rule and to obey duly constituted authority that respects ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences. And for this to happen, the state must genuinely listen to the popular voice, as well as wield power. But for that to happen, perhaps a shift in political culture commensurate in magnitude to the shift in the socio-political landscape of communal identity in post-Soviet Russia may be necessary. In the meantime, the increase of vertical authority, even if couched in terms of “sovereign democracy,” will paradoxically remain to some degree problematic, both for Russian identity and security.
NOTES


2. Hunter et al., Islam in Russia, 204.

3. Ibid., 203, emphasis added. See also her “Focus on the Russian Federation.”

4. This trait has also been noted as common among traditionally Orthodox countries; see Jeremy Bransten, “Unholy Alliance? Nationalism and the Orthodox Church,” RFE/RL, 26 October 2004, <http://www.rferl.org/specials/religion/archive/orthodox-1.asp> (accessed 26 October 2004).


6. Ibid.


11. Ryzhova, “Tolerance and Extremism,” 85. For an alternative view, see Knox, Russian Society and the Orthodox Church.


15. According to Shireen Hunter, these three factors are: (1) the lack of nationwide census data on the religious affiliation of Russian citizens. Neither the last census of the Soviet period in 1989 nor the first census of the Russian Federation in 2002 contained questions regarding religious affiliation. (2) The lack of consensus regarding the criteria by which religious affiliation should be determined, namely whether the level of religious observance or cultural affinity and self-identification are the best criteria. (3) Politically motivated estimates and manipulation of data regarding the number of Muslims. Hunter, “Focus on the Russian Federation,” <http://www.csis.org/islam/BriefNotes/v5n1.pdf>.


18. Matveeva, “The Islamist Challenge in Post-Soviet Eurasia.” Alexei Malashenko, however, concluded in 1995: “Political Islam remains a reality of Russian political life. The patterns of its presence are visible in the different Muslim territories of Russia. Its activity may increase or diminish. But it exists and will preserve its influence on Russia’s Muslim
community. Nor is it a deviation from ‘normal Islam’ as many scholars and statesmen would like to think.” (emphasis added) Malashenko, “Does Islamic Fundamentalism Exist in Russia?” 50.

19. Ethnic Russians tend to be ethno-linguistically homogeneous but religiously disparate in terms of confessional orientation (Orthodox, Baptist, etc.) and also in religious practice. Muslims in the Russian Federation, by contrast, are ethno-linguistically quite diverse (although predominantly Turkic) but religiously more or less homogeneous. However, both ethnic Russians and Russian Federation Muslims tend to be rather theologically ignorant of even the most basic concepts and ideas of their respective religious faiths; cf. Yunosova, “Islam between the Volga River and the Ural Mountains.”


21. Furman and Kaariainen (2003), 20–21. It is perhaps significant that Michael Rywkin’s 1982 book, *Moscow’s Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia*, tended to focus more on potential demographic and economic problems in confronting the “Muslim challenge” rather than having to deal with the prospect of an increasing number of Muslims whose politics were being “religionized” in resort to perceived mistreatment by the Soviet regime.


25. “We are creating an additional opportunity for the development of civil society in the country,” offered Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, as the Duma voted 345–50 in favor of establishing this body in March 2005. Others, however, have not been so accepting of the utility of the body, nor of the motives of its architects; cf. Jeremy Bransten, “Russia: New Public Chamber Criticized as ‘Smokescreen,’” [http://www.cdi.org/russia/346-5.cfm](http://www.cdi.org/russia/346-5.cfm) (accessed 18 March 2005).


34. Malashenko, “The Islamic Factor in Russia,” 4, emphasis added. See also Krindatch, “Patterns of Religious Change in Post Soviet Russia.” Noting the divisive element of personal political ambition and opportunism, he offers: “The examples of numerous splits and intra-Islamic tensions in Dagestan reflect the general contemporary situation within the Islamic community of Russia. The repeatedly declared aspiration for the unification of all Russian Muslims is still overwhelmed by disintegrative tendencies based not on religious but rather on ethnic tensions and the political ambitions of various Islamic leaders” (125).


36. Markedonov, “The Truth about Wahabbis,” 27–28. On the use and misuse of this term, he offers that “it would be highly incorrect to equate terrorism with Wahabbism . . . Today’s struggle against ‘Wahabbism’ counters not the causes but the effects of the affliction. The discrediting of communist ideology gave Islamic leaders a chance to fill the ideological and political vacuum in the hearts and minds of Soviet citizens in the Caucasus who were turning back to the spiritual heritage of their forefathers” (27–28).


42. President Putin offered the following in that address: Рассчитывая на энергичную работу по укреплению безопасности на Юге России и утверждению там ценностей свободы и справедливости. Условиями этого являются развитие экономики, создание новых рабочих мест, строительство объектов социальной и производственной инфраструктуры . . . Поддерживаю проведение уже в этом году парламентских выборов в Чеченской Республике. Они должны стать и основой стабильности, и развития демократии в этом регионе. Отметчу, что уже сейчас в Северо-Кавказском регионе есть неплочие предпосылки для опережающего экономического роста. Accessible in text and video format at

44. Yemelianova, Russia and Islam, 200.

45. Ibid., 202.

46. Glinski, “Russia and its Muslims,” 72; Thomas, “Russia’s Evolving Political System.”

47. Pain, “Will Russia Transform into a Nationalist Empire?” See also idem, “Current Russian Policy in the North Caucasus,” Chechnya Weekly 5, no. 45 (8 December 2004); he notes: “The war caused an unprecedented surge of xenophobia in Russia. Anti-Chechen sentiment has been growing since 1994, and in 2004 over three fourths of those surveyed expressed feelings of resentment toward the Chechens . . . The war in Chechnya continues to be the main politically mobilizing issue in Russian society, which explains why president Putin pays constant attention to it . . . The Chechen war, more than any other factor, has led to the rise in traditionalist and state-centric attitudes in Russian society, and increased popular hope for the rule of a “strong arm” (3, emphasis added).

48. Glinski, “Russia and its Muslims,” 77. This reflects a certain pattern noted and explicated by Yaacov Ro’i, around the time of the collapse of the USSR: “the events in Iran and Afghanistan in the late 1970s and into the 1980s turned into political dynamite, as they enhanced the understanding that Islam was not only an integral component of the ethnos’s national culture, heritage and very existence that had to be defended against the encroachments of a foreign ruler, but also a potential instrument in the political struggle against Moscow for national assertion.” Ro’i, Islam in the Soviet Union, 711–12.


56. Hertog, “A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy,” 249, 250. This view is expressed also by Lawrence Uzzell: “Russia does face a genuine threat from radical Islamic terrorism, no less genuine for the fact that it is a threat created largely by the Kremlin itself as a result of its brutal tactics in Chechnya. But the suppression of all Muslim groups not effectively controlled by the state only aggravates that threat: independent-minded Muslims find themselves with almost no channels of action except extremist groups.” “Bringing Muslims in from the Cold,” International Religious Freedom Watch, 20 September 2005.


58. Tishkov, Chechnya. See also Yemelianova, Russia and Islam.


64. This theme is addressed throughout Lych, How Russia is Not Ruled.


68. See recent reports on these activities in RFE/RL, “Terror in Russia,” <http://www.rferl.org/specials/russia-terror/>.

69. This legislation appears to have been prompted by a number of concerns, including the perception that foreign NGOs had played a significant role in the “color revolutions” of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. Commentary on this legislation has been extensive and deeply disputatious concerning the motives and likely effects that it will produce;
see, for example, reports by Human Rights Watch, the US State Department, the Council of Europe (cf. <http://www.ifuw.org/uwe/docs/ingo-rec-russ-ngo.pdf>), and many others.

70. Nicolai Petro has gone on record as disputing this and similar views; see his “Russian NGO Legislation is a Step in the Right Direction,” Johnson’s Russia List (no. 7—JRL 9316), 9 December 2005, <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/9319-7.cfm> (accessed 9 December 2005).

71. After the collapse of the USSR, serious questions were raised about the continued ethno-territorial viability of the Russian state. The question of the geographical locus of Rossiya itself still yields an array of opinions: O’Loughlin and Talbot’s recent study of Russian popular views on this question is revealing: “[t]he question of where Russia’s borders lie persists, complicated by the large Russian diasporas in neighboring states and the long history of expansion and contact with Slavic and Islamic populations.” O’Loughlin and Talbot, “Where in the World is Russia?” 47.


73. For interesting and useful insights into the matter of political factors operating in the process of social self-definition, see Posner, Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa; and Hammond and Axelrod, “The Evolution of Ethnocentrism,” 926–27.

74. See Johnson et al., Religion and Identity in Modern Russia; Hellman, The Russian Idea; Franklin and Widdis, National Identity in Russian Culture.

75. Lynch, Engaging Eurasia’s Separatist States.

76. Aristotle, Politics.


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