

**Jews and Muslims in Russia:  
the problem of “good” versus “bad” minorities**

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Not only were tsarist Russia and the USSR multi-ethnic states, but present-day Russia is one as well. Throughout the centuries, the Russian elite has engaged in complicated relationships with a wide gamut of minorities, favoring or repressing sometimes one group and sometimes another. Minorities' responses have been diverse. Some have accepted Russification wholeheartedly and been faithful servants of the state. Others resist being second-class citizens; still others resist the state entirely.

Yet the positions of Russian Jews and Muslims—the latter embracing people of various ethnic backgrounds, from bellicose Chechens to mostly moderate Tatars—have been fixed in the minds of Russian nationalists for centuries, regardless of dramatic changes in the country's history. Especially for rabid nationalists, Jews have perennially been the country's major evil, and Muslims either not evil or less a problem. This view has been constant through the tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras. At the same time, Muslim minorities had often looked at Jews with some sympathy, seeing them as essential allies against Russian nationalists, especially when nationalism has influenced the policies of the Russian government. This model has now started to change.

Recently several leading Russian Muslims sent a letter to the country's authorities demanding a change in the country's coat of arms. They argued that because the symbols are related to Orthodoxy—historically the religion of ethnic Russians and increasingly the quasi-official ideology of the state—they should be removed. This action is hardly an isolated event in Russian Muslims' increasing assertiveness and demand to share power with ethnic Russians on an equal footing. Some Muslim leaders, for example, asked now that one of the Vice-President of the country be a Muslim. They want the role of the Orthodox religion changed and they are dissatisfied by the way Islam is treated in Russia.

Thus, not long ago they also expressed outrage over a book on Russian Muslims. The author held an important position in the Inter-confessional Council, an organization responsible for the coordination of the relationship between the various religions practiced in Russia. The critics claim that the author slanders Muslim clerics and Islam in general going as far as proposing that all Muslims should be assimilated and should become Orthodox. However, the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church did not endorse the book, and stated openly that such a view actually encourages Islamic extremists. Still, the Muslim critics insisted that the author's views are actually shared by the Orthodox hierarchy. They did not accept any explanation or apology and declared that Russian Muslims should drop their membership in the council.

All these recent declarations were taking place in a specific context: a rebel attack in Nal'chik, the capital of Kabardino-Baklaria, a territory close to Chechnya. The attack was further proof of the spread of violent extremism in other regions of the Caucasus than Chechnya. The attack took an especially dangerous meaning because, as some Russian observers pointed out, extremism in Chechnya and other parts of Russia have been undergoing important modifications. In the past, Chechens fighting Moscow were just nationalists fighting for independence of their homeland; nowadays they have become more and more Islamic fundamentalists who, while incorporated in the international Islamic fundamentalist movement, drive for a global Khalifat.

For the Russian analysts, this transformation from parochial Chechen nationalism to Islamic fundamentalism, which disregards ethnicity and, quite similar to Communism in the past, embraces all true believers regardless of their national origin, is particularly worrying. International events, such as the Muslim youth riots in France, an event that highlighted the threat of large Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries, also alarmed the Russians.

Last but not least, in the ongoing transformation was the fact that the Russian Muslims who launched such a challenge to the State were not Muslims from the Caucasus, known for a long time as harboring dangerous ideas and engaging in violence, but Tatars. Tatars, while insisting on the broad autonomy of their ethnic enclave, had so far been perceived as model moderate Westernized Muslims, therefore people unlikely to create major problems for Russia as a whole.

All these circumstances have led to an unusually harsh response even from some members of the Russian elite who generally do not engage in religious/ethnic controversies, profess tolerance in dealing with minorities, and have always been strong supporters of a Russian/Muslim alliance. Maxim Sokolov, a leading columnist for the foremost liberal vehicle *Izvestia*, responding to the demands to remove the Christian symbols from Russia's coat of arms, stated that the demand sounded absurd even from the Western political perspective saturated in political correctness, with its implied separatism of church and state. Indeed, the demand was all the more unacceptable in Russia, that the state is not separate from the church, yet rather tolerant of other religions. The Orthodox religion has been a part of Russian national identity for hundreds of years, minus, of course, the Bolshevik period, but Russian Muslims never before had problems accepting its leading role in the country. Muslim leaders who do not stick to the centuries-old tradition should therefore not be surprised if the State uses force to defend its identity and its sovereignty.

Alexander Dugin, the leading Eurasianist in Russia, who always sees Orthodox Russians and Muslims of the Russian Federation as a healthy symbiosis of "Eurasian civilization," also voiced concern. To him too, a position of Muslim vice-president was absolutely unthinkable. He stressed that while Russian Muslims—mostly Turkic in ethnic origin—should live as brothers with Russians, they should understand that the leading role in the family belongs to the Orthodox Russians. Thus, broad segments of Russian intellectuals expressed indignation at the increasingly assertive demands of the Muslim leaders.

Meanwhile, President Putin, to stress tolerance by a symbolic gesture, visited the newly opened Moscow Synagogue in Mariana Roshcha, while, in summer 2005, he encouraged a meeting between a leading Muslim mufti and the Israeli ambassador. This kind of benevolent gesture toward Russian Jews and their juxtaposition as a "good" minority to Muslims is a new development supported by the moderate nationalistic Russian intellectuals.

Sokolov, while rallying against Muslims who challenge the role of Orthodoxy in Russian life and implicitly the leading role of ethnic Russians in the political/economic balance of power, actually stressed that only the Muslims were concerned with Christian symbols in the Russian coat of arms,

implying that other religions were not challenging the order. Other non-Christian groups—the allusion to Jews here was transparent—have no problem with Christian symbols on a coat of arms or elsewhere in Russia, he said.

What is remarkable is that Russian TV and historical movies about Brezhnev's era were dominated by Kremlin-made sarcastic comments about the pathological anti-Semitism of Brezhnev's party apparatus. The obsession with Jews as the primordial Russian enemy seems now to be declining even among the most extremist Russian nationalists. Notwithstanding, the various fascist groups that have been a part of the country's political landscape for almost a generation continue to express vicious anti-Semitism. But, even in their case, attention seems to be moving more and more toward Muslims. During the November 4, 2005, demonstration on the occasion of the new national holiday that has replaced November 7, the day celebrating the Bolshevik Revolution in the past, several thousands hard-line Russian nationalists marched through Moscow, urging fellow Russians to wake up and call for a cleaning of Russia from non-Russians. To be sure, these folks had no love for Jews. But their major preoccupation was “people of Caucasian nationality,” those who come from the Caucasus and, as it is, are mostly Muslim. These people are seen as responsible for taking over Moscow and for the cities' and country's problems.

The same can be said about the nationalistic frontrunner “Rodina” party (Motherland). Its political slogans remain loaded with racist and nationalistic innuendoes directed mostly against newcomers, albeit from the Caucasus and Central Asia, not against Jews. So the visible segment of Russian nationalists, if not turning tolerant to Jews, has at least removed them from the focal point of their attention and hatred. Why has this happened?

It is true that from the beginning of Gorbachev's and especially Yeltsin's reforms, philo-Semitism of a sort was a symbol as Russia began moving toward the Western order and allying with the West, the USA first of all. For an array of other folks, mostly Russian nationalists of various types, Jews were agents of the West and responsible for the collapse of the state and all the tribulations that had befallen their country. There were increasing rumors that a few Jewish tycoons, with Boris Berezovsky as arch-villain, actually ruled Russia. Quite a few of these people believed that Muslims were an organic part of Russia/Eurasia and that unity with the Muslim people would make it possible

to restore Russia to its previous greatness. In fact, it was at this time that Eurasianism became quite popular.

Eurasianism's traces can easily be found in the views of the majority of the Russia nationalist elite who opposed Yeltsin. Its roots go back to the 1920s, when a small group of Russian émigrés proclaimed that Russian Muslims, mostly Turkic in origin, had been Russia's historical friends. Genghis Khan was transformed into the founder of the Russian state. Eurasianists believe that Russians are not pure Slavs but a mixture of Slavic and Turkic blood. Even the beginning of the Chechen War in 1994 did not change their minds. In their view, Chechens were either poor and deceived or manipulated by the cunning West, the USA first of all, working in cahoots with them to destroy and conquer Russia. They believed that the Chechens' eyes would finally be opened and they would understand who were their real enemies and friends. At worst, Chechens were seen as the ugly ducklings of a generally loyal community of Russian Muslims. On the other hand, the Jews were the out and out enemies of the Russian people and state.

Their mindset changed during Putin's tenure, with increasing acceptance of Jews by some segments of nationalists, or, at least, moving away from their traditional focal point of hatred, as they became increasingly preoccupied by Islamic extremism. There are several reasons for this evolution.

To start with, nationalistic-minded members of the Secret Police, which have become the major darlings of Putin's regime, have little problem with present-day Jews. The Jewish tycoons are tamed. Some, like Berezovsky and Gusinsky, have been driven into exile; others, like Khodorkovsky (the former oil magnate), have been thrown into prison and their assets nationalized. Those who still exist—like Abramovich—are under the de facto control of the state; in fact, they are “sharing” their wealth with the state.

This symbiosis of ex-KGB members and Jewish—but, of course, not only Jewish—oligarchs, could well be compared with the symbiosis of the members of the “third estate,” the new bourgeoisie and the feudal royal bureaucracy of early modern Europe. On one hand, the feudal lords understood that the rich members of the newborn middle class were much more apt at moneymaking than they—men of the sword—and for this reason they should

allow them to exist and even be protected. On the other hand, the rich merchants and businessmen understood that they needed “to share” with their royal patrons for not having trouble.

Moderate Russian nationalists also reconciled themselves with the Jews. In contrast to the Yeltsin era, Jews are no longer seen as a group that wants to control Russia, claims a special position in society, or challenges Russian Orthodox’ dominant position. Moreover, after almost 30 years of emigration and re-immigration back to Russia, quite a few Russian Jews realize that the West—the USA or their “historical motherland,” Israel—is not Paradise. Therefore, a considerable number of those who stay in Russia or return are not particularly pro-Western or even pro-Israel. They finally understand that they are Russian Jews, not just members of the universal Jewish nation. This helps moderate nationalists to accept Russian Jews as a “good” or at least “acceptable” minority.

Finally, even Russian extremists despite their prevalent vicious anti-Semitism, are nowadays more and more focused on the problems emanating from the Russian Muslim community, who, on its part, is becoming increasingly anti-Semitic. The Chechen website Kavkar blasted Jews who collaborated with Putin, stressing that they are collaborating with a regime that could be compared with the Nazis. Radical Islamist intellectual Geidar Dzhemal said that the meeting of one of the senior Muslim muftis of Russia with the Israeli ambassador to Russia was absolutely disgusting and “as if the mufti met with a representative of the Nazi state”.

What does the flirtation of the Russian nationalists with the Jews, and the increasingly assertive anti-Semitic stance of the Russian Muslim community mean for US foreign policy and for the West in general? The answer is certainly related to questions such as “Who is Putin?” “What is the nature of his regime?”

Recently Putin has been accused of being an authoritarian ruler, ready for reckless foreign adventure and confrontation with the United States in order to reestablish Russia’s preeminent global position. One of the most serious accusations seems to be his flirtation with Iran. Some went as far as saying that

Putin was moving dangerously close to Iran, providing her extremist government geopolitical patronage regardless of the consequences.

It is true that Putin, in search of a counterbalance to the USA and to some degree the entire West, could turn to Iran and similar countries. But in my view his dealing with the Iranians is driven more by economic considerations than by purely geopolitical ones.

Even less likely would it be Putin's desire to be part of a global Jihad. In fact there are many signs that Putin and a broad segment of the nationalist elite are more looking to the West than elsewhere. One of those signs is the rather benevolent approach of the regime and of a considerable number of the Russian nationalist elite to the Jews, historically a symbol of the West, at least in nationalist eyes.

Of course, the pragmatic and rather balanced course of Russian foreign policy could be altered, but this could only be if Russia were to suffer from direct Western pressure or, even more, felt being threatened by the West. In such a case, not only people but states could behave irrationally.

