

## Promoting Islam within the “Russian World”

### THE CASES OF TATARSTAN AND CHECHNYA

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Tatarstan and Chechnya, two federal republics with strong Islamic elements in their regional identities, have nimbly positioned themselves within the “Russian world,” an ideological concept that has increased in prominence since the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict. Both republics have sought to raise their visibility within the Russian Federation and promote themselves as regional success stories, but their policies differ in many respects. Tatarstan promotes itself as a region where Islam and Orthodox Christianity harmoniously coexist, while the republic’s leadership avoids overt political or ideological agendas in pursuit of federal resources for regional development. Chechnya, on the other hand, has been a republic of extremes: President Ramzan Kadyrov has fostered a resurgent fundamentalist Islam and vigorously defended his region’s autonomy, all the while playing the role of stalwart defender of the Putin regime and – paradoxically – of the “Russian world” as its ideological core.

#### **The Russian World and Non-Russian Identities**

Despite the fact that Putin himself only occasionally comments on the “Russian world,” the ideational underpinning of his third-term discourse is a combination of technocratic, civilizational, and Orthodox approaches, which can be characterized as inherently conservative. Added to this blend is a “biopolitical” component: in a speech on the first anniversary of the “reunification” of Crimea and Russia, Putin denied the territorial importance of annexation (“we have enough lands”) while emphasizing its unity to Russia by blood, a family-type relationship and a “source of Russian spirituality.”

Such a civilizational view of Russian identity, grounded in mutually reinforcing ideas of common language and culture, combined with traditional Orthodox values, poses a challenge to the non-Russian Slavic cultures within the newly constructed “Russian

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world.” The concept encourages integration into the dominant cultural and political framework of Russian civilization, but it also encourages Russian republics with strong non-Slavic, non-Orthodox cultural identities to build their own “blood-based” connections with countries and institutions that have common identity characteristics.

### **Different Republics, Different Outlooks**

As the leaders of two prominent Muslim regions in Russia, the presidents of Tatarstan and Chechnya, Rustam Minnikhanov and Ramzan Kadyrov, are often linked together in the Russian public eye. It is wrong, however, to consider the two republics as sharing a common approach to the “Russian world.”

Tatarstan’s approach is embodied in its strategy of “Euro-Islam,” a concept fully articulated by local historian Rafael Khakimov. Euro-Islam is characterized by a harmony with secular policies, including promoting education and a liberal economy. It also emphasizes Tatarstan’s exceptionalism, both in its interpretation of Islam and in the building of a special type of relationship with Moscow. Local advocates of Euro-Islam link the religious underpinnings of Tatar identity to European civilization and values, detaching “Tatar Islam” from the practices of the North Caucasus, a region historically more isolated from non-Muslim peoples.

In Chechnya, a stricter version of Islam dominates. Kadyrov wears Islamic beads and cap, and he favors *sharia* laws (and polygamy) even when they contradict Russian legislation. He keeps in close contact with the Saudi elite, sharing experiences in the security realm and acting as an intermediary between Russia and Saudi Arabia. Kadyrov is also known for his explicit anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-LGBT utterances that are almost identical to those made by Russian conservatives. This may make his vehement rhetorical support for the “Russian world” appear less paradoxical.

Shifting from rhetoric to practice, Tatarstan uses its identity resources and good relations with the federal government to its advantage. The Euro-Islam branding has had the practical benefit of putting Tatarstan on the national—and international—map. The “northern capital of the Islamic world” has hosted the KAZANSUMMIT, an international summit of Islamic business and finances, and the Russia-Islamic World Strategic Vision Group. In the meantime, Tatarstan has also hosted a series of international sporting mega-events, including the 2013 Universiade, 2015 FINA World Swimming Cup, and 2018 FIFA World Cup matches, for which funds from Moscow were secured for modernizing regional communication infrastructure and tourist facilities.

Chechnya, on the other hand, may be verbally loyal to the Kremlin but has allowed the center less and less interference into what Kadyrov deems Chechnya’s “local affairs.” The more Kadyrov says about his loyalty to Putin and his conservative agenda, the more

autonomy he requires from Moscow. Arguably, Kadyrov both supports Russia's sovereignty on the global stage while de facto strengthening Chechnya's own autonomy. He helps Putin promote a conservative agenda while remaining a potential scapegoat that could at any time be accused of deviating from Russia's dominant normative standards.

### **The "Intermediary" and the "Foot-Soldier"**

The first president of Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimiev, promoted his region for years as a multicultural, peaceful meeting point of Islam and Orthodoxy. Moscow (re)assigned the function of potential cultural intermediary to Shaimiev's successor, Rustam Minnikhanov, in 2014, when it faced the challenge of convincing Crimean Tatars to peacefully accept the annexation of Crimea. In this case, Tatarstan's role as a cultural intermediary was assigned to it by the Kremlin, and the only advantage that authorities in Kazan could hope to get from it is raising their profile and importance as a useful region in the eyes of Moscow.

As a result of Minnikhanov's shuttle diplomacy, the World Congress of Tatars based in Kazan and the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People signed a four-year cooperation agreement—so far largely remaining on paper—soon after Crimea's annexation. Two elements were crucial in constructing this nexus: an emphasis on brotherly (blood-based) bonds between the two groups of Tatars in spite of their territorial distance, and the positive experience of Tatarstan's development as part of Russia, with all the ensuing pragmatic benefits.

Of course, elements of this relationship were contextual and politically motivated. The Kazan Tatars are culturally and socially dissimilar from their Crimean co-ethnics. The latter, according to Ildar Safargaleev, advisor to the Spiritual Board of Muslims in Moscow, are closer in mindset to Chechens, due to their common traumatic experience of deportation. Yet it was not the head of Chechnya who the Kremlin tasked with building bridges to the Crimean Tatars. The Kremlin wanted a consensual—and non-political—dialogue. Kadyrov, with his self-assigned role as militant "defender of Russian borders" and "personal foot-soldier of Putin" was obviously an inappropriate ambassador.

Yet Kadyrov used the crisis in Russia's relations with Ukraine in his own way, taking advantage of Putin's appeal for patriotism and the vulnerabilities of key elements of Russia's policies toward Ukraine. Kadyrov's "patriotic" narrative was grounded on a tacit request by Putin for support and even protection. Kadyrov's loyalists formed paramilitary brigades of professionally trained soldiers, dramatically raising his profile as the only head of a Russian region allowed by Moscow to command a de facto army. In May 2014, Kadyrov was also personally involved in releasing a captive Russian journalist in Ukraine. In his Instagram account, Kadyrov demonstrated his attachment to

and sympathies with the fighters in eastern Ukraine. Kadyrov used the war as a political tool, exchanging Chechen allegiance and fidelity for more benefits (greater autonomy) from Moscow. A telling illustration of Kadyrov's political weight was his announcement permitting Chechen police to open fire on Russian federal security personnel unless they coordinated their operations in Chechnya with him.

## Conclusion

Despite the apparent similarity of two Muslim regions that overtly demonstrate loyalty to the Kremlin, their strategies toward the "Russian world" are different. Via "Euro-Islam," Tatarstan emphasizes its ability to function as a mediator and bridge between Islam and Orthodoxy, while pursuing integration in Russia (and globally) through economics rather than politics, developing projects in energy, transportation, sports, and finance. Chechnya, on the other hand, tilts toward various demonstrations of "personal" fidelity of a "foot-soldier" to his sovereign, less for funding than to receive political *carte blanche* locally.

The "Islamic world," like the "Russian world," is a space of and for peoples, and thus is irreducible to specific states. The political ingredient of the Islamic world, for both Tatarstan and Chechnya, consists in harmonizing Russian citizenship with belongingness to the global Islamic community. It is likely that this strategy, even in its different incarnations, will define the content and the contours of the Tatarstani and Chechen identity-making in the future.