

Political and Social Attitudes of Russia's Muslims: CALIPHATE, KADYROVISM, OR KASHA?

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Russia has the largest Muslim population of any European country. Although precise numbers are lacking, estimates usually range from 16-20 million. To what extent do Russia's Muslims represent a community with distinct political attitudes from non-Muslim Russians? We answer this question using data from a 2015 survey that included a purposeful oversample of residents in four heavily Muslim provinces in the North Caucasus and Volga regions. In doing so, we provide empirical data to address which of three competing metaphors for Russia's Muslims' opinions is most accurate: Caliphate, Kadyrovism, or something coarse, inchoate, and possibly lumpy, which we liken to a "bowl of kasha." We find that Muslims do stand out from non-Muslims on a variety of political issues and that these views are better described by the logic of Kadyrovism than caliphate or kasha. At the same time, we demonstrate that the views of Russia's Muslims vary by geographic region in important, yet potentially counter-intuitive, ways.

Three Contrasting Metaphors for the Views of Russia's Muslims

"*Caliphate.*" Russia's Muslim population are often seen as a potential source of instability, given perennial concerns about the threat of extremist movements, particularly in the North Caucasus, and the efforts of global jihadist organizations to inspire radical Islam in Russia. Some Western observers have raised alarms regarding the dangers of "Russia's Islamic Threat" (the title of a 2007 [book](#) by Gordon Hahn), pointing to the emergence of religiously-motivated radical groups like Doku Umarov's "Caucasus Emirate," repeated acts of terror within Russia by affiliates of such groups, persistent violence between Russian federal troops and local extremists in the North

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Caucasus, the emergence of Chechens and Dagestanis as prominent actors in global jihadist organizations such as the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, and the June 2015 declaration by Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of a North Caucasus province as part of his caliphate. The Russian government has dramatized the threat posed by radical Islam, as it has sought to suppress extreme Islamist groups with brute force, ramping up such efforts in the years preceding the 2014 Sochi Olympics. These considerations all form a conceptual image of Russia's Muslims as sympathetic to the ideas of radical jihad and, correspondingly, hostile to the Russian government. We call this the "caliphate" metaphor for Russian Muslim public opinion.

"Kadyrovism." The Putin administration has taken less recognized but potentially more important measures to enlist the loyalty of Russia's Muslims. It has worked with official Muslim clerics—often using patronage—to secure their endorsements of Russian domestic and foreign policies. Moscow has touted the consistencies between the government's conservative social agenda and traditional Muslim values, highlighted the supposedly distinctive features of Russian Islamic traditions as potential models for the rest of the Muslim world, and built the magnificent Moscow Cathedral Mosque (the opening of which in September 2015 was presided over by President Vladimir Putin himself). These policies continue a historical practice of cooptation of Muslim elites by Russian authorities that goes back centuries. An example of the success of these efforts is the fiercely expressed loyalty to Putin, support for his policies, and social conservatism espoused by Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov. Kadyrov's popularity is a potential double-edge sword for the Russian government, because he also espouses local autonomy from federal control and regularly threatens (and practices) lethal violence against his and Putin's perceived enemies. But so far, Kadyrov has rewarded Putin's patronage with hyper-loyalty and a successful campaign to suppress violent secessionism and Islamic radicalism in Chechnya. If the Russian government's efforts to co-opt Muslims are by-and-large successful, "Kadyrovism," a combination of hyper-loyalty to Putin, support for his policies, insistence on local sovereignty, and social conservatism, is an appropriate designation for the main tendency of public opinion in Russia's Muslim community.

"Kasha." It is possible that the long history of Muslim integration into Russian society and political culture and the suppression of distinctive religious-based identities during the Soviet period may have produced a Muslim population that is indistinguishable from ethnic Russians in terms of its political and social orientations. Russian society lacks consensus on the vast majority of political and social issues facing it, and this may be the case among Russia's Muslims as well. Adopting an expression used by Gerber and Mendelson in a 2009 [article](#) comparing the views of young men in Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and North Ossetia to those of young men living in other Russian regions, this perspective portrays Russian Muslim public opinion as akin to a "bowl of kasha."

Data and Analysis

Which of these contradictory metaphors most accurately depicts the main tendency of public opinion among Russia's Muslims? Thus far, no empirical data have been available to answer the question. Expert observers, journalists, and scholars have studied shifts in Russian government counter-extremism policies, the rise and fall of various Islamic radical groups and leaders, and trends in the levels of violence in the North Caucasus. For example, they have documented a substantial decline in political violence in the region during the last two years, which probably reflects a combination of the stepped-up crackdown by federal authorities and the departure of many radicals to join ISIL. Other research has interviewed Muslims in Dagestan and elsewhere to try to gauge the responses of Muslims to Russian government actions and the arguments of extremist leaders. But no study has provided empirical information regarding the general public opinions of Russia's Muslims on the basis of survey data.

Here we analyze data from the Russian portion of the Comparative Housing Experiences and Social Stability (CHESS) survey, which the Levada Center carried out on our behalf in spring 2015.³ Although partly focused on topics related to housing, the survey included a wide range of questions pertaining to trust in Russia's leaders and institutions, political and social norms promoted by the Putin regime, and foreign policy issues. In addition to a nationally representative sample of 2,001 18-49 year-old respondents drawn using standard multistage techniques, the survey also included an oversample of 400 respondents in that age group from four regions with large concentrations of Muslims: two in the Volga region (Bashkortostan and Tatarstan) and two in the North Caucasus (Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria). These oversamples achieved our goal of yielding an unusually large number of Muslim respondents in our combined sample: overall, 407 of our 2,401 respondents declared themselves to be Muslims. Of these, 241 are from North Caucasus republics (including, in addition to the two oversampled republics, Karachaevo-Cherkessia), 105 live in the two Volga republics, and 61 live in other regions. This large subsample provides unprecedented statistical power for analyzing whether Russia's Muslims exhibit distinctive public opinion.

Given the particular history of the North Caucasus region and its prominence in the formation of both the "caliphate" and "Kadyrovism" images, we expected Muslim public opinion to vary by region. Accordingly, in all our analyses we distinguish North Caucasus Muslims from Muslims residing elsewhere (though most of the latter live in the two Volga republics). In order to assess whether either or both groups of Muslims hold distinctive views, we used regression techniques to compare each group to non-Muslim Russians with respect to three sets of opinions: 1) trust in leaders and

³ See: Theodore Gerber and Jane Zavisca, "[Housing and Political Grievances in Post-Soviet Eurasia](#)," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 415, January 2016.

institutions, 2) attitudes toward social and political norms, and 3) views of foreign policy.

Our statistical models control for gender, age, education, and urban vs. rural residence, because these characteristics may be correlated with our three-category “Muslim” status variable and may also influence public opinions, thus potentially conflating differences due to group composition and differences due to group membership as such. For simplicity, we express all our measures of public opinions as simple dichotomous variables. To facilitate interpretation, we present our findings in terms of “average marginal effects.” That is, we report the difference that being a North Caucasus or other Muslim typically makes (relative to being a non-Muslim) in the expected probability that someone would agree (or disagree) with a particular statement, controlling for other factors.

Trust in Institutions

A battery of questions asked respondents how much they trust Putin, the police, the Duma, courts, banks, and local government, offering the following response categories: completely trust, somewhat trust, somewhat distrust, and completely distrust. We analyzed variation in the probability of completely trusting and of distrusting (either completely or somewhat) each leader or institution. The key findings indicate that Russia’s Muslims differ from non-Muslims in their trust in leaders and institutions, but in opposite ways, depending on whether they reside in the North Caucasus or elsewhere (see **Table 1**). North Caucasus Muslims are more likely to completely trust Putin, but also more likely to distrust institutions (primarily the police, courts, and banks). In stark contrast, other Muslims are less trusting of Putin, but also less likely to distrust all other institutions. Neither group of Muslims is either more or less likely than non-Muslims to distrust Putin.

Table 1. Differences between Muslims and Non-Muslim Russians in Trust in Institutions

	North Caucasus Muslims	Other Muslims
Completely trust Putin	.10	-.08
Distrust Putin	.01	-.01
Distrust police	.13	-.10
Distrust Duma	.04	-.16
Distrust courts	.17	-.18
Distrust banks	.11	-.18
Distrust local government	.04	-.14

Note: Boldfaced numbers are statistically significant, others are not. Table 1 shows average marginal effects from statistical models controlling for age, gender, education, and urban residence. The numbers represent average differences in probability relative to non-Muslim Russians when comparing individuals who are the same with respect to these other characteristics.

Domestic Policy

The CHES survey asked respondents for their views on a number of key social and political issues that relate to core norms promoted by the Putin administration. Here too, we found significant differences between Muslims and non-Muslims, with many of those differences varying in direction by the region where Muslims live (see **Table 2**). Both groups of Muslims are somewhat more likely than non-Muslims to agree that free and fair elections are important for Russia to flourish. But this question does not get to the heart of core Putin administration norms, as the regime has itself maintained that elections are vital. On the other hand, the administration has viewed the role of political opposition and freedom of assembly with great skepticism, portraying them as tools whereby external enemies of Russia undermine its sovereignty. Muslims outside of the North Caucasus are less likely than non-Muslims to agree with the regime; instead, they are more likely to consider both a strong opposition and freedom of assembly as very important for Russia to flourish. They are also less likely to support more government control over the Internet (which the Putin administration has pursued) and more likely to say that protests are good for the country.

That is, Muslims outside of the North Caucasus are more skeptical than non-Muslims of these core norms promoted by the Putin regime. But North Caucasus Muslims are not distinguishable from non-Muslims with respect to these specific issues. North Caucasus Muslims do evince especially strong support for other staple Putin policies on which other Muslims do not differ from non-Muslims: they are much more likely to oppose foreign funding of domestic NGOs that either monitor elections or work on environmental issues, and also to express antipathy toward homosexuals. Thus, support for Putinist political and social norms is stronger among North Caucasus Muslims and weaker among other Muslims. North Caucasus Muslims are also less likely to hold xenophobic views of immigrants, which is consistent with the Putin administration's encouragement of labor immigration. Finally, both groups of Muslims voice greater support for religious tolerance and a more positive view of relations between Muslims and ethnic Russians than do non-Muslims. These two findings offer strong evidence against the "Caliphate" image portrayed by alarmist observers. If extremist ideas were popular among either of the larger Muslim populations we would see a tendency for them to reject a neighbor with a different religion and more negatively characterize relations between Muslims and Russians.

Table 2. Differences between Muslims and non-Muslim Russians in Views on Sociopolitical Issues

	North Caucasus Muslims	Other Muslims
Free and fair elections are very important for Russia to flourish	.03	.06
Strong opposition is very important for Russia to flourish	-.01	.12
Freedom of assembly is very important for Russia to flourish	-.04	.09
Want more government control over the Internet	.04	-.04
Protests are good for the country	-.05	.07
Oppose foreign funding of NGOs that monitor Russia's elections	.21	-.01
Oppose foreign funding of NGOs that protect Russia's environment	.19	.03
Don't want homosexual as neighbor	.25	.05
Don't want foreign immigrant as neighbor	-.10	-.02
Don't want someone of another religion as neighbor	-.04	-.09
Russians and Muslims get along badly in your locality/region	-.08	-.08

See Note to Table 1.

Foreign Policy

The global nature of radical Islam and tensions between Russia and the West draw particular attention to the issue of whether Russia's Muslims are especially likely to support or oppose the Putin regime's foreign policies. The CHES survey asked respondents their views of the Ukraine conflict and also how they perceive the relationship of six different countries to Russia. We again find significant differences in opposite directions pertaining to North Caucasus and to other Muslims (see **Table 3**). Relative to non-Muslims, North Caucasus Muslims are more likely to endorse the Kremlin's position, while other Muslims are less likely to do so. This is evident in responses to: whether Russia should materially support the separatists in Ukraine, whether the United States is the main party to blame for the Ukraine conflict, whether China and Iran are Russia's allies, and whether Ukraine, Germany, the United States, and Georgia are Russia's enemies (as the Russian leadership has argued, though it has expressed some ambivalence in regard to Germany).

Table 3. Differences between Muslims and non-Muslim Russians in Views of Foreign Policy Issues

	North Caucasus Muslims	Other Muslims
Russia should materially support separatists in Ukraine	.10	-.07
The US is the main party to blame for the war in Ukraine	.12	-.08
China is an ally or partner of Russia	.13	.01
China is an enemy of Russia	-.01	.01
Iran is an ally or partner of Russia	.31	-.03
Iran is an enemy of Russia	-.03	.00
Ukraine is an ally or partner of Russia	-.04	.01
Ukraine is an enemy of Russia	.18	-.01
Germany is an ally or partner of Russia	.00	.10
Germany is an enemy of Russia	-.02	-.07
US is an ally or partner of Russia	-.02	.02
US is an enemy of Russia	.04	-.10
Georgia is a partner or ally of Russia	-.05	.05
Georgia is an enemy of Russia	.09	-.08

See Note to Table 1.

Conclusions

Our empirical results show that with respect to trust in leaders and institutions, views of sociopolitical issues that are at the core of Putin’s agenda, and attitudes toward Russia’s foreign policies, the political views of Russia’s Muslims are distinct from the views of non-Muslims in Russia. Moreover, there is a clear-cut geographic division within Russia’s Muslim community:

- Muslims residing in the North Caucasus regions of Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia tend to be: more supportive of Putin but more distrustful of other government and social institutions, stronger advocates of Putinist social and political norms, and more likely to endorse the Kremlin’s recent foreign policies.
- In contrast, Muslims who reside elsewhere—most of whom are in the Volga region republics of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan—tend to fall on the other side of all three issue sets: they are less enthusiastic about Putin but also more trusting of other government and social institutions, more skeptical of Putinist social and political norms, and less supportive of Russian foreign policy.

- Muslims in both regions exhibit higher levels of religious tolerance and voice more positive assessments of relationships between ethnic Russians and Muslims than do non-Muslim Russians, which is evidence against the validity of the alarmist “Caliphate” view.

In broader terms, the data indicate that “Kadyrovism” – hyper-support for the Kremlin, particularly its foreign policies and social conservatism, coupled with suspicion of other government institutions (which may be linked to insistence on local sovereignty) – may be a stronger force than Islamic radicalism in the North Caucasus. Muslims elsewhere in Russia are more skeptical toward official Russian government positions on some issues. If there is any tendency toward the emergence of a distinctly critical perspective within Russia’s Muslim population, it is more likely among Muslims residing outside of the North Caucasus. However, it appears to be born of more general discontent with Putin and his policies.

Overall, the differences between both Muslim sub-populations and non-Muslims are modest in magnitude. Nevertheless, they are worthy of close attention in the coming period. The data indicate the importance of monitoring differences in the public opinion dynamics within Russia’s Muslim community due to the apparent divergence in the views between North Caucasus and Volga Muslims. Failure to account for the regional differences among Muslims could easily lead researchers to mistakenly conclude that the Muslim population closely resembles the non-Muslim population, as per the “kasha” image, because most of the differences cut in opposite ways across geographic lines.

The findings suggest that policymakers should view claims of a burgeoning “Islamic threat” in Russia with suspicion. This is not to suggest that Islamic extremists do not pose a threat: even a small number of dedicated radicals can cause tremendous damage through terrorist acts. However, to exaggerate the popularity of extremist ideas in the larger population is to encourage harsh crackdowns that are likely to spur further radicalization in the long run. It also leads observers to overlook the considerable efforts of the Putin administration to secure the loyalty of Muslims, which appear to be especially effective in the North Caucasus. Few accounts of the social bases of support for the Putin regime have identified the Muslim community as a possible pillar of Putinism. The overwhelming attention to the threat of radicalization and jihad may have blinded observers to the effectiveness of the regime’s long term cooptation strategies. At the same time, the greater skepticism toward the Putin administration observable among Muslims mainly in the Volga republics points to a potential source of growing opposition within Russia not linked to Islamic radicalism.

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