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Sibgatullina, G.

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# Chapter 4

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## **The *Russkii* Islam: Discursive Strategies in Conversion Narratives of Russian Muslims**

This chapter continues the discussion about users of the Russian language of Islam and their goals. It is not only Islamic “turbaned” elites who use the Russianism variant to rise in power and ensure their embeddedness in Russia’s power structures; a community of ethnic Russian converts to Islam also embody another type of authority that employs this variant of Islamic Russian to pursue a political agenda, and they therefore contribute significantly to the conventionalization of the variant. For these converts, “purified” Islamic Russian is a tool to create a legitimate space and facilitate their acceptance by Russia’s mainstream society. By constructing the *russkii* Islam – expressed in familiar (Orthodox Christian) religious terms – these converts aim to distance themselves from prejudices associated with ethnic Muslims. Another result of this discourse is the racialization of Islam, with claims to national, moral and cultural superiority of Russian Muslims over ethnic minorities.

## 4.1 Introduction

In the post-Soviet period, the renewed interest in Islam affected not only Russia's indigenous Muslim communities, who in the 1990s rediscovered their religious identity; hundreds of ethnic Russians were also exposed to the variety of choices on the thriving religious market and opted for the religion of the Other. For Russians, conversion to Islam even today continues to involve a struggle against the entrenched identity formulae, for in the last two decades Russianness has been increasingly defined by belonging to the ROC. By becoming Muslim, a convert opposes the dominant discourse and is therefore prone to becoming marginalized in the mainstream society; but the risk of social ostracism has risen drastically since the image of Islam and Muslims in the popular perception deteriorated following the launch of the global "War on Terror". Whereas the state praises Russia's multicultural nature with reference to the alleged centuries of peaceful coexistence between Orthodox Christianity and Islam, throughout 2001-2014 public opinion polls registered increased negative attitudes toward Muslims.<sup>1</sup> This caused Russia to experience outbursts of Islamophobia toward groups that have been part of the country for many centuries, as well as toward Muslim labour migrants coming from Central Asia. This chapter explores how, in such an antagonistic climate, Russian Muslims justify their conversion to Islam and accommodate their new religious views to the Russian identity.

To deal with their experiences of exclusion and discrimination, the Russian Muslims construct a kind of Islam that is different from the religion of Russia's Muslim ethnic groups and the Islamic traditions that have been introduced to Russia by immigrant communities. This distinct *russkii* Islam, converts argue, does not contradict Russian culture but, to the contrary, enhances it. Being a Russian Muslim therefore means having a patchwork identity, where the converts stress their self-identification as ethnic Russians and claim to "re-discover" what they perceive as genuinely Russian values that became blurred during the Soviet period. Most of these converts emphasize

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<sup>1</sup> On the rise of anti-Muslim sentiments in Russia, see Sova, "Levada-Tsentr o ksenofobii v 2017 godu", *Sova-Tsentr*, 28 August 2017 <<http://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/discussions/2017/08/d37-739/>> (Accessed on 15 May 2018); also M. Laruelle and N. Yudina, "Islamophobia in Russia: Trends and Societal Context", in *Religion and Violence in Russia: Context, Manifestations, and Policy*, ed. O. Oliker (Lanham, MD: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018), 43-63. As Vera Tolz observes, since 2012 the Russian state broadcasters use more radical, simplistic binary contrasts between the nation and its Others, which continues to jeopardize the societal consensus; see V. Tolz, "From a Threatening 'Muslim Migrant' Back to the Conspiring 'West': Race, Religion, and Nationhood on Russian Television during Putin's Third Presidency," *Nationalities Papers* 45:5 (2017), 742-57.

the moderate character of their newly acquired religious views and insist on the rationality and freedom in their spiritual search.

To examine how this identity is constructed discursively, in this chapter I analyse a corpus of conversion narratives published online. The collected data demonstrate that there are three strategies that the converts use most often in their personal stories: (1) purifying the Russian-language Islamic discourse from Arabic loanwords, (2) emphasizing their intellectual and rational motives for embracing Islam, and (3) defining Russianness beyond the traditional religious boundaries of Christian Orthodoxy.

These strategies manifest the converts' call for a "purified" form Islam. This, first of all, concerns the language they use to communicate with each other and to reach out to non-Muslims: as opposed to the heavily-accented and broken Russian of an imagined ethnic Muslim, the converts avoid using Islamic terminology and fiercely guard the grammatical and syntactic rules of the language. Second, the converts de-traditionalize and de-ethnicize the Islam with which they want to be associated: the *russkii* Islam is free from stigmatized traditions of ethnic Muslims, which makes it appear to be closer to its original intent and more appealing to the rational individual. Russian Muslims reject any association of their conversion to Islam with radicalization or obscurantism ("brainwashing"), emphasizing instead the guide of reason in their spiritual search. Yet implicitly they denounce and stigmatize the "cultural", "ethnic" Islam of Russia's existing Muslim communities and make it subordinate to the "noble" Islam of ethnic Russians.

Moreover, conversion to Islam of an ethnic Russian involves symbolic reversion from Orthodox Christianity – the religion that in the mainstream discourse is seen as the core of being Russian. Therefore, the act of becoming Muslim also looks like a social protest, even if the convert has absolutely no political agenda on his or her mind.<sup>2</sup> By converting to Islam, Russian Muslims challenge the dominant discourses on the Church being the moral pillar and Christianity functioning as a distinctive marker of Russian identity; in a broader sense, the act of conversion symbolizes opposition to the current state regime.

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<sup>2</sup> For discussion on a political dimension within the act of conversion to Islam, see the study on German Muslims by E. Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); also the work by W. Jansen, "Conversion and Gender, Two Contested Concepts", in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. K.v. Nieuwkerk (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), ix-xii (Foreword).

This symbolic power of conversion significantly increased in the 2000s, when Russian Muslims entered Russia's political scene. Their active presence in social and mass media sparked interest in Islam among many Russians, who felt uneasy about the transformations in society at the turn of the century. The following section will briefly introduce the major landmarks in the process of converts' politicization, when at its peak they were able to contribute to the public discussions on religion, national identity and belonging. A more detailed analysis of the data underlying this study and an examination of the discursive strategies will then follow in the remainder of this chapter.

## 4.2 Conversion to Islam in the post-Soviet period

Conversion to Islam became a subject of public discussion after the wars that Russia conducted in predominantly Muslim regions: in Afghanistan (1979-1989), and later in the Caucasus (1994-1996, 1999-2009). Narratives of Russian captives who converted to Islam at gunpoint were taken up in several artistic and cinematographic works.<sup>3</sup>

Yet in the 1980s and early 1990s, other Russians were also attracted to Islam far from the battlefields. The works of European Traditionalists – “the fruit of the marriage” between nineteenth-century oriental scholarship and the Western esoteric tradition<sup>4</sup> – found converts in bohemian intellectual circles of Moscow. For these, the search for “another level of reality” and oriental metaphysics, including but not limited to Islamic philosophy, were a response to the degrading Soviet regime.<sup>5</sup> Within the Russian branch of Traditionalism, Geidar Dzhemal' (1947-2016)<sup>6</sup> and Alexander Dugin

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Vladimir Khotinenko's drama film “A Muslim” (1995) and the photo series by Aleksei Nikolaev “Forever captured” on Russian prisoners of war who remained in Afghanistan after the Soviet military withdrawal. See NG, “Navsegda v plenu”, *Novaya Gazeta*, 8 July 2015 <<https://www.novayagazeta.ru/arti-cles/2015/07/08/64839-navsegda-v-plenu-fotogalereya>> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Traditionalism is a twentieth-century anti-modernist movement, with René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon acknowledged as its pre-eminent exponents. See M. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> M. Laruelle, “The Iuzhinskii Circle: Far-Right Metaphysics in the Soviet Underground and Its Legacy Today,” *Russian Review* 74:4 (2015), 563-80; R. Bekkin, “Russian Muslims: a Misguided Sect, or the Vanguard of the Russian Umma”, in *Islamic Authority and the Russian Language*, ed. A.K. Bustanov and M. Kemper (Amsterdam: Pegasus, 2012), 361-401.

<sup>6</sup> On Geidar Dzhemal', see M. Laruelle, “Digital Geopolitics Encapsulated. Geidar Dzhemal between Islamism, Occult Fascism and Eurasianism”, in *Eurasia 2.0: Russian Geopolitics in the Age of New Media*, ed. M. Suslov and M. Bassin (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 81-100; G. Sibgatullina and M. Kemper,

(b. 1962)<sup>7</sup>, initially staunch supporters of the Evolian far-right fringe, were the ones who most vocally elaborated on Islam as a potent political force.

The fall of the Soviet regime made room not only for alternative political ideologies; a gradual relaxation of control over the religious market already during Perestroika resulted in new movements entering Russia in the immediate post-Soviet years. As in Western Europe and North America,<sup>8</sup> many ethnic Russians, disenchanted with the Church, embarked on a search for “non-traditional” religious practices. That is, in addition to the politicization of Islam, also many external factors – the emergence of new religious institutions and structures introduced from abroad, as well as the development of new media technologies – also facilitated the encounter with Islam and provided access to sources of information that were previously unavailable.

What makes accounts of conversion of ethnic Russians distinct from those of their Western co-religionists is a continued presence of ideas from Soviet and post-Soviet intellectual thought. Eurasianism, the state-promoted concept of the “Russian World”, Marxism and even Russian messianism give a unique twist to the discourse of Russian Muslims. Danis Garaev, in his analysis of speeches by convert Aleksandr Tikhomirov (1982-2010) – better known as Said Buriatskii – argues that the latter can be best “understood as a post-Soviet phenomenon”, and not merely as a propagandist of radical Islamic ideas imported from the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> The argumentation, terminology and strategies that Buriatskii used were not merely reflections of commonplace Islamist rhetoric tools, but relied heavily on the Soviet and Russian intellectual tradition.

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“Between Salafism and Eurasianism: Geidar Dzhemal and the Global Islamic Revolution in Russia,” *Islam and Muslim-Christian relations* 28:2 (2017), 219-36.

<sup>7</sup> M. Laruelle, “Aleksandr Dugin: a Russian Version of the European Radical Right,” *Kenman Institute Occasional Paper* 294 (2006), 1-25; Laruelle, “Digital Geopolitics Encapsulated. Geidar Dzhemal between Islamism, Occult Fascism and Eurasianism”.

<sup>8</sup> The literature on conversion to Islam in the West deserves a separate study; here I mention only a few sources that are of special importance for the arguments of this chapter: K. van Nieuwkerk, “Gender, Conversion, and Islam: A Comparison of Online and Offline Conversion Narratives”, in *Woman Embracing Islam*, ed. K.v. Nieuwkerk (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), 95-149; K. van Nieuwkerk, “‘Conversion’ to Islam and the Construction of a Pious self”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. L.R. Rambo and C.E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 667-86; T.G. Jensen, “Religious Authority and Autonomy Intertwined: The Case of Converts to Islam in Denmark,” *Muslim World* 96:4 (2006), 643-60; K. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008); L. Kong and S. Nair, “Geographies of Religious Conversion”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. L.R. Rambo and C.E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 65-83.

<sup>9</sup> D. Garaev, “Jihad as Passionarity: Said Buriatskii and Lev Gumilev,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28:2 (2017), 203-18. Here p. 203.

However, biographies of Russian Muslims such as Said Buriatskii, who join various radical militant groups, conform to the existing prejudice about the zeal of “new” Muslims, who are believed to follow the dogmas of their new faith with most unrelenting intolerance and cruelty.<sup>10</sup> Although this negative image of a convert is not specific to Russia but also dominates Western European media, some see the roots of the radicalization problem in Russia’s Islamic official institutions. A prominent Russian Muslim activist and journalist, Galina Babich, argues that converts face a “double marginalization” in Russian society: after conversion, they are excluded from their former social circles, but native Muslims also remain sceptical about the “new” co-religionists. For this, Babich blames the official Islamic institutions, where all important positions are occupied by “ethnic” Muslims. These institutions, she argues, refuse to bear responsibility for the accommodation of ethnically, and often also ideologically “non-traditional” Muslims; instead, the Muftiates continue to operate within the fixed and artificially created traditionalism framework.<sup>11</sup> This framework remains rigid in its definition of what is considered to be the “good, home-grown” versus “dangerous, Wahhabi” Islam, with clear preference given to the forms of Islam associated with Russia’s Muslim-majority ethnic groups. Criticizing the current Islamic elites, Babich also implicitly points at the lack of a strong leader who could reach out to Russia’s highly heterogeneous Islamic community.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, there were attempts to create alternative power structures to represent the interests of ethnic Russian converts to Islam. The mid-2000s marked the peak of political involvement of Russian Muslims. Converts were active online in the Russian-language blogosphere, and also offline: in this period they established their own communities, such as “Dagvat al’-Islami” (Islamic Call) in Omsk in Siberia, “Priamoi put’” (The Direct Path) and “Banu Zul’karnain” (Children of Alexander the Great) in Moscow, and the cultural centre “Ikhlas” (Sincerity) in Almaty in Kazakhstan.<sup>13</sup>

Let us now zoom in on the communities in Moscow – “Priamoi put’” and “Banu Zul’karnain”. The former was launched by an ex-Orthodox priest, Viacheslav Ali Polosin (b. 1956), who converted to Islam in the late 1990s and became a *murīd*, disciple,

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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., E. Milashina, “Rossiiskii eksport smerti”, *Novaya Gazeta*, 17 March 2016 <<https://www.novaya-gazeta.ru/articles/2016/03/17/67822-rossiyskiy-eksport-smerti>> (Accessed on 26 April 2018).

<sup>11</sup> G. Babich, “Pravovernnye bez ummy”, *NG Religii*, 15 December 2010 <[http://www.ng.ru/ng\\_religii/2010-12-15/6\\_umma.html](http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2010-12-15/6_umma.html)> (Accessed on 4 March 2018).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> V. Sidorov, “Russkie musul’mane: fenomen, sostoianie, perspektivy”, *Portal-Credo*, 29 March 2012 <<http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=911105>> (Accessed on 10 August 2017).



of an influential Sufi-Sheikh in the North Caucasus, Said Atsaev (Chirkeevskii/Chirkeiskii, d. 2012) (see Chapter 5, which is devoted to Polosin). Polosin's case of conversion to Islam was widely discussed in the Russian media and set the trend of Orthodox clergy "renegades" who followed Polosin's example.<sup>14</sup> In general, from the late 1990s until the death of ROC Patriarch Aleksii II in 2008, the boundaries between major religious communities were exceptionally porous. Polosin participated in religious debates against Orthodox Christians and argued that he represented liberal Islamic intelligentsia in Russia. At the same time, the Church closed its eyes to the practices of aggressive Orthodox Christian missionaries at the grassroots level and did not interfere with controversial practices of charismatic priests, such as Daniil Sysoev, who tried to revive the imperial style of missionizing among Turkic-speaking Muslim people in the Volga region and Central Asia (see further Chapter 6).

The second organization, the "Banu Zul'karnain", operated in the right-wing fringe of the Russian Muslim community. In the early 2000s, some far-right Russian nationalists were attracted to Islam: for them, this religion was associated with rebels fighting against the Russian army in the Caucasus, and therefore symbolized resistance to the ruling elites. They portrayed Islam as the religion of "passionaries" (*passionarii*) versus Christianity – "the religion of the weak".<sup>15</sup> The idea of a distinct *russkii* Islam was formulated as far back as the 1990s by Geidar Dzhemal'. Dzhemal', a half-Russian, half-Azeri Muslim from Moscow, later became the "Godfather" of Russian right-wing converts and a driving force behind their political manifestos. Like other groups within political Islam of that period,<sup>16</sup> the one around Dzhemal' flirted with the ideas of (neo-)Eurasianism. Dzhemal''s Indo-European Eurasianist project revolved around the figure of Alexander the Great (Dhū al-Qarnayn); according to legend, Alexander built a wall to protect the descendants of Noah from the destruction brought by the hordes of Gog and Magog. In Dzhemal''s project, Islam in Russia again needed to be protected against, or purified from "Turkic elements". The Turks, in his opinion, had brought about the contemporary stagnation in the Islamic world.<sup>17</sup> In 2003, his disciple Kharun

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<sup>14</sup> The ROC media also reported on the conversion to Islam of Orthodox priests Vladislav Sokhin, Sergii Timukhin and Mikhail Kiselev. See Iu. Maksimov, "Anatomiia izmeny", *Pravoslavie.ru*, 21 August 2006 <<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/put/060821104600.htm>> (Accessed on 6 February 2017); G. Maksimov, "Pravoslavnye sviashchenniki pereshedshie v islam", *Pravoslavnyi Vzgljad*, 1 December 2013 <<http://orthoview.ru/pravoslavnye-svyashchenniki-pereshedshie-v-islam/>> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

<sup>15</sup> V. Mal'tsev, "Ariiskii dzhikhad", *Lenta.Ru*, 22 February 2016 <[https://lenta.ru/articles/2016/02/22/nazi\\_islam/](https://lenta.ru/articles/2016/02/22/nazi_islam/)> (Accessed on 26 April 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Sibgatullina and Kemper, "The Imperial Paradox".

<sup>17</sup> Sibgatullina and Kemper, "Between Salafism and Eurasianism", pp. 228-29.

ar-Rusi (Vadim Sidorov, b. 1977) announced the creation of the Russian Muslim community “Banu Zul’karnain” – “a Russian ‘bastion’ of the Aryan race to deter the infernal hordes of Gogs and Magogs”;<sup>18</sup> in June 2004, “Banu Zul’karnain” and several other groups of Russian Muslims from Moscow (initially also Polosin’s “Priamoi put’”) created the National Organization of Russian Muslims (*Natsional’naia organizatsiia russkikh musul’man*, hereafter: NORM). Soon, however, internal disagreements about the ideological orientation of NORM resulted in a rift in its leadership.<sup>19</sup> The Shi’a branch, headed by Abdulkarim (Taras) Chernienko (b. 1976), withdrew from the organization in 2005-2006; NORM’s Sunnīs rallied around ar-Rusi.<sup>20</sup> By 2009 ar-Rusi distanced himself from the ideas of Dzhemal’ and became a disciple of Sheikh Abdalqadir as-Sufi (Ian Dallas, b. 1930), the leader of the global network of European converts to Islam – the Murabitun World Movement.<sup>21</sup>

The goal of both “Priamoi put’” and “Banu Zul’karnain” (later NORM) was to create alternative institutions to the numerous “spiritual administrations, *ṭarīqas*, [and] *jamā’ats*”,<sup>22</sup> which would help ethnic Russian Muslims coordinate efforts to promote *their* rights and interests. The Russian Muslims saw themselves as becoming the intellectual avant-garde that would be at the helm of Russia’s *umma*.<sup>23</sup>

The politicization of ethnic Russian Muslims in the 2000s was, however, “largely unsuccessful”.<sup>24</sup> Other, less fervent nationalist projects of Russian converts who attempted to construct political Islam within their vision of Eurasianism ideology were also doomed to fail. In 2001, for instance, another Muslim convert, back then a State Duma deputy, Abdul-Vakhed Niiazov (Vadim Medvedev, b. 1969) headed a founding

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>19</sup> S.A. Dudoignon, “Russia”, in *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam*, ed. J. Cesari (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 517-64. Here p. 546.

<sup>20</sup> A. Evstatov, “Novye musul’mane”, *MOST*, 21 June 2016 <<http://mostga.am/vzglyad/novye-musulmane-1085.html>> (Accessed on 15 May 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Around the same time, ar-Rusi and other prominent leaders of the NORM left Russia to escape legal prosecution by the state; in recent years, they have attempted to create new structures to unite European converts to Islam and promote the “White Islam” ideology. See, for instance, Sidorov’s website *Islam for Europeans* <<http://islam4europeans.com/>> (Accessed on 15 May 2018). On the Murabitun movement and its standpoints, see N. Brubandt, “Gold for a Golden Age: Sacred Money and Islamic Freedom in a Global Sufi Order”, in *Contemporary Religiosities: Emergent Socialities and the Post-Nation-State*, ed. B. Kapferer et al. (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2010), 103-22.

<sup>22</sup> V. Sidorov, “Russkie musul’mane i russkie – musul’mane”, *Al’manakh “Iskusstvo voiny”*, 12 December 2012 <<http://navoine.info/russian-muslims.html>> (Accessed on 26 April 2018).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*; also Bekkin, “Russian Muslims”, p. 381.

<sup>24</sup> M. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: an Ideology of Empire* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008), p. 155.

Congress for the Eurasian Party of Russia; the party participated in the 2003 Duma elections but did not win a seat and soon vanished from the political landscape.<sup>25</sup>

### 4.3 Data

In parallel with these political projects, a larger share of Russian Muslims, most of whom may have never been in touch with NORM, developed strategies of self-representation that would enable them to participate in Russian mainstream society. In this chapter, I examine the discursive strategies of Russian Muslims by analysing a text corpus of conversion narratives, all published online. This particular genre of spiritual autobiography is selected for two reasons. First, as examples below will show, Russian Muslims tend to produce first-person testimonies when they aim to reach out to broader audiences, i.e., when they reveal their Islamic identity and justify their conversion to non-Muslim readers. Second, this genre is of particular interest because it offers a broad range of tools that allow an author to stress preferred identities and omit undesired aspects and associations.

In 2015-2016, several secular urbanite magazines began to address the issue of Russian Muslims' marginalization. First, an article entitled "How do people come to Islam?" (*Kak liudi prikhodiat k islamu?*) appeared in the magazine *Afisha* in 2015; the article shared first-person stories of five ethnic Russians who became Muslims.<sup>26</sup> Later, the magazines *Col'ta* and *Snob* also opted for the format of conversion narratives, giving the floor to "ordinary" Russians – teachers, booksellers, journalists – to explain why they had chosen Islam.<sup>27</sup> By providing personified accounts on conversion (in the case of *Snob* and *Col'ta* also with portrait photos of the "new" Muslims), the magazines aspired to challenge the stereotypically negative image of Muslim converts and to present them as an inherent part of contemporary Russian society.

Here I argue that the genre of conversion narrative was a strategic choice by these media platforms. Such first-person stories presume that the interviewees, who decided to speak about their faith in public, would be sincere in their narrations and tell

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.; also Sibgatullina and Kemper, "The Imperial Paradox".

<sup>26</sup> M. Levin and N. Nazarova, "Kak liudi prikhodiat k islamu?", *Afisha*, 2015 <<http://mag.afisha.ru/stories/musulmane-v-moskve/kak-lyudi-prihodyat-k-islam>> (Accessed on 15 May 2018).

<sup>27</sup> S. Mokhov, "Russkie musul'mane", *Col'ta*, 3 June 2015 <<http://www.colta.ru/articles/specials/7528>> (Accessed on 4 March 2018); V. Prokhorova, "Novye musul'mane: shest' rossiiian - o tom, pochemu oni priniali islam", *Snob*, 1 June 2016 <<https://snob.ru/selected/entry/110377>> (Accessed on 4 March 2018).

the truth.<sup>28</sup> This perceived openness and sincerity of a convert-author helps to overcome the initial scepticism that the reader may have. At the same time, the very nature of this genre gives converts room for expressing their identities in ways that justify conversion to Islam.

Scholars repeatedly drew attention to how identities in first-person accounts, so-called “narrative identities”, can be intentionally constructed and modified by an author. “[Conveyed] through the narration of [a person’s] past, present and future, formulated at a specific point in time and in a specific situation of social interaction”,<sup>29</sup> these narrative identities are *neither stable, nor exclusive*. For instance, in a conversion narrative a Russian Muslim may place her or his ethnic identity (Russian) above a religious identity (Muslim), and then explain the conversion as a return to the genuine monotheism that she or he believes is the core of Russianness. This does not, however, exclude the possibility that in another setting, for instance in a mosque, the same convert will modify this hierarchy and perhaps downplay any ethnic and national identities, emphasizing only her or his belonging to the global or local Muslim community.

Moreover, it is also important to consider that all conversion narratives analysed in this chapter are pre-written; that is, they did not emerge in the interactive context of an interview. This means that, although the data includes personified profiles, the media and the Internet remain a space where “identities can be detached from embodiment and other essentialist anchors”.<sup>30</sup> While a few of the narrators are well known to the public, we have no information about the others, except for their names and the biographical details they reveal themselves in their publicized narratives. This relative anonymity provides an opportunity to safely express desired identities.

The implication of these observations is that my focus in this chapter does not lie on actual forms of or conditions for conversion, but on the narrative elements. I examine this corpus to distil common discursive strategies, which in some cases have been standardized by practice, and in others explicitly formulated by converts themselves. One has to consider that reconstruction of the conversion process – that is, telling the story of conversion – never takes place only at the individual level. Converts also share experiences among one another by telling their own and reading others’ stories.

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<sup>28</sup> On conversion and performance of sincerity, see W. Keane, “Sincerity, ‘Modernity’, and the Protestants,” *Cultural Anthropology* 17 (2002), 65-92. Here pp. 78-83.

<sup>29</sup> G. Sabirova, “Young Muslim-Tatar Girls of the Big City: Narrative Identities and Discourses on Islam in Postsoviet Russia,” *Religion, State and Society* 39:2-3 (2011), 327-45. Here p. 329.

<sup>30</sup> van Nieuwkerk, “Gender, Conversion, and Islam”, p. 100.

Thereby, they create the blueprint of a conversion narrative; elements from this blueprint are later incorporated into even more personal stories.<sup>31</sup> The result is a standard that is maintained, but also adapted, as more narratives are shared.

The data for the text corpus were collected in 2015-2016 and are based on fifty conversion narratives, all published online in 2004-2016. The narratives come from various sources: websites that focus exclusively on Islam, as well as media platforms that have a broader thematic coverage and address a broader target audience. To achieve gender balance in my sampling, I have analysed 27 narratives written by female authors and 23 written by male authors. In total, the corpus amounts to about 75,000 words. The list of conversion narratives included in the corpus is given in Appendix II.

The number of conversion narratives considered here does not correlate with the actual numbers of Russian converts to Islam, as there are no accurate statistical data on how many of them currently live on the territory of the Russian Federation. Sources that do provide estimations are often biased toward increasing or decreasing this number. The DUM RF claims that there are “tens of thousands” of ethnic Russian Muslims, and some converts speak more precisely of “fifty to seventy thousand” “new Muslims” in Russia.<sup>32</sup> The ROC leadership, by contrast, prefers to turn a blind eye to the issue and considers “apostasy” to Islam among ethnic Russians as a marginal development that does not deserve any attention of clergymen.<sup>33</sup> The pro-ROC experts on Islam speak of “five to seven thousand”,<sup>34</sup> “not more than ten thousand”<sup>35</sup> converts to Islam in the whole country, but they admit that these are merely “personal estimations” not supported by any surveys.

## 4.4 Discursive strategies in conversion narratives

### 4.4.1 First strategy: “new” Muslims as speakers of pure and correct Islamic Russian

Russian Muslims employ the ostentatiously “purified” Russian language, eliminating or avoiding what they see as unsuitable and undesirable borrowings from

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 97-98.

<sup>32</sup> Sidorov, “Russkie musul’mane i russkie – musul’mane”.

<sup>33</sup> G. Maksimov, “Neudobnoe’ interv’iu diakona Georgiia Maksimova”, *Pravoslavie.ru*, 30 May 2014 <<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/71036.html>> (Accessed on 15 May 2018). See also J. Sweet, “From the Post-Soviet Godless Legacy to Radical Islam: Russian Converts,” *Global Security Studies* 7:1 (2016), 21-34. Here p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> R. Suleimanov, “Russkie musul’mane: klassifikatsiia grupp, problema radikalizma, otnoshenie k nim v Rossii,” *Musul’manskii mir* 4 (2015), 8-39. Here p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> R. Silant’ev, “Russkikh musul’man malo. No oni radikal’ny”, *RusNext*, 16 April 2016 <[http://rusnext.ru/recent\\_opinions/1460810444](http://rusnext.ru/recent_opinions/1460810444)> (Accessed on 15 May 2018).

foreign languages. This is visible at different linguistic levels, and particularly with regard to orthography and lexicon.<sup>36</sup> Along with the analysis of the corpus, here I also draw on two online publications written by converts themselves; in these publications, Russian Muslims elaborate on ways to keep the language “pure”, and discuss common “mistakes” in Islamic Russian, giving advice on how to correct them.<sup>37</sup>

The ultimate goal of this “purification” strategy is to produce an Islamic discourse in grammatically and stylistically correct Russian, without using original Islamic terminology. In the mind of a convert, excessive use of Arabic loanwords leads to “Arabization” (*arabizatsiia*) of the Russian language, which must be avoided for at least two reasons. First, converts see these borrowings as “some sort of linguistic perversion” (*izvrashchenie*) that “pollutes” the language and violates the aesthetic beauty of Russian.<sup>38</sup> Second, in the event that speakers of Russian attempt to integrate an Arabic word into their speech, they transform these borrowings into “ugly creatures” (*urodtsy*), something that should not be done out of respect for Arabic as the sacred language of Islam.<sup>39</sup>

The first argument is usually explained by referring to the historical circumstances in which the Qur’ān was revealed: the converts argue that Muslims should speak to each other using “an easy and understandable language that Allāh and the Prophet [...] employed when talking to the Arabs, without jargon and foreignisms [*inostranshchina*]”.<sup>40</sup> Translation of some Islamic terms and expressions is straightforward, because their Russian variants are commonly accepted and used;<sup>41</sup> however, the issue of rendering specific Arabic verbs, or verbs that collocate with Islamic terms, remains a sore point. For example, those familiar with the Tatar tradition

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<sup>36</sup> G. Thomas, *Linguistic Purism* (New York, NY: Longman, 1992), p. 2. See also an overview on Linguistic Purism in O. Walsh, *Linguistic Purism: Language Attitudes in France and Quebec* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2016), pp. 7-35.

<sup>37</sup> M. Ural’skii, “Eshche o iazyke musul’man”, *LiveJournal*, 21 October 2013 <<http://russ-muslim.livejournal.com/23609.html>> (Accessed on 16 June 2017); A. Kobulova, “Musul’mane i russkii iazyk (“Zametki o musul’manskom russkom’)”, *Annisa*, 13 December 2013 <<http://annisa-today.ru/socium/musulmane-i-russkij-yazyk-zametki-o-musulmanskom-russkom>> (Accessed on 7 October 2016).

<sup>38</sup> Ural’skii, “Eshche o iazyke musul’man”.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> These standardized, but still mostly word-for-word, stylistically unsmooth translation variants have also become a subject of criticism, see M.U. Iakh’ia, “Desiat’ stilisticheskikh oshibok v islamskikh perevodakh”, *Annisa*, 9 November 2017 <<http://annisa-today.ru/aktualno/desyat-stilisticheskix-oshibok-v-islamskix-perevodax/>> (Accessed on 9 May 2018).

are likely to use in their narratives *chitat' molitvu* 'to read a prayer', while others will choose between *delat'* 'to do' and *sovershat'* 'to perform' a prayer. In the corpus we find:

"And inside of me a burning curiosity began to kindle, I wanted to know how many times one should perform [*sovershat'*] a prayer, in what language, [and] what all this means".<sup>42</sup>

"I really liked that before praying, a Muslim should perform [*sovershit'*] ablution [*omovenie*]"<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, when translating the Arabic *ghusl* as *omovenie* 'ablution', the Russian Muslims choose between the verbs *vziat'* 'to take' or *sovershat'* 'to perform' an ablution.

The second argument that the converts often give for not using Arabic words is that in Russian any Islamic loanword becomes an "ugly creature". This argument is related to the fact that there are no commonly accepted rules for transliterating Arabic words, and some speakers tend to introduce additional symbols to transmit the Arabic sound system into Cyrillic, which results in a bulky combination of letters and diacritics:<sup>44</sup>

"[Some Muslims] write [additional] hard and soft signs or some other marks, which results in transliterations such as "Аллагъу акъбар"<sup>45</sup> or "БисмиЛлаги ллази ла илагъа илла гъува РрахИману РрахИм, Аллагъумма азгъиб гланныи гъамма вал хлузна"<sup>46</sup> – to be honest, I still do not understand what these symbols mean, and what Arabic letters they correspond to"<sup>47</sup>

Another convert also recommends using the standard variants of spelling for words that are already rooted in Russian: e.g., 'Qur'an' should be spelled as *Коран*, but not as *Куран* or *Кур'ан*. Deviations from established orthographic conventions, in his opinion, only place an unnecessary burden on the reader.<sup>48</sup>

The converts acknowledge that from time to time one has to use an original Islamic term in order to maintain nuanced meanings that a Russian word does not transmit. In such cases, it is advisable to use borrowings that are already standardized

<sup>42</sup> Conversion Narrative (CN) #12 as given in Appendix II.

<sup>43</sup> CN # 50.

<sup>44</sup> Converts also disapprove of practices of code switching in spoken Russian, when Muslims tend to maintain (or imitate) the Arabic pronunciation of Islam.

<sup>45</sup> The standardized version of *takbir* in Russian is *Allakhu Akbar* 'God is Great'.

<sup>46</sup> Here it seems that the convert is quoting from an entry in an Islamic forum, where participants discuss the trustworthiness of a *hadith*. A quote from this *hadith* is thus given in Arabic, but transliterated into Cyrillic; in English, it would correspond to: 'In the name of God, [I bear witness] that there is no God but Allāh, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. O Allāh! Relieve me of grief and distress'.

<sup>47</sup> Kobulova, "Musul'mane i russkii iazyk".

<sup>48</sup> Ural'skii, "Eshche o iazyke musul'man".

in Russian. That is, when there is a synonym pair of an Arabic and a Persian word, the choice is determined by the most commonly used term. For example, in the analysed narratives, the Persian word *uraza* (*rūza*), which entered Russian through the languages of Russia's Muslim minorities, occurs more often than the Arabic *saum* (*sawm*), both meaning 'fasting'. A similar approach is observed in pairs such as *namaz* (*namāz*) and *salat* (*salāt*), meaning 'regular prayer'; and *takharat* (*ṭahāra*) and *vudu* (*wuḍū*), meaning 'ablution'. The first variant of the pair is preferred in both cases. Among the analysed conversion narratives we find a following instance:

"There [in the city of Noril'sk] I learned to read *namāz*, and it was the beginning of my journey to Islam".<sup>49</sup>

As a note for those who continue using Arabic words, for instance in addressing fellow Muslims, some converts suggest that one should avoid attaching Russian plural endings to Arabic loanwords that are already in their plural form:

"If a person [already] uses an Arabic word in its plural form, is it necessary to put it again in plural in Russian? Therefore, we have "tullaby" [Arabic *ṭullāb* plus the Russian plural ending *-y*, 'students'], "askhaby" [Arabic *aṣḥāb* plus *-y*, 'companions of the Prophet Muhammad'], "ikhvany" [Arabic *ikhwān* plus *-y*, 'brothers']".<sup>50</sup>

The underlying idea is that the overly "Arabized" Russian of some converts not only grates on the ears of their fellow Muslims, but also makes a conversation with a "new" co-religionist or a non-Muslim almost impossible. One convert complained that as soon as she began conversing with Muslims, no one "bothered to translate" unknown terms to her. The expression *astaghfiru Lllāh* (I seek forgiveness from God) she first mistakenly thought to be a curse.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the author continues, Muslims should bear in mind that the standard formulae, such as *al-ḥamdu li-Llāh* 'praise be to God' and *in shā'a Llāh* 'if God wills', are often incomprehensible even to some Muslims, let alone "interlocutors ignorant of religion". She suggests translating *al-ḥamdu li-Llāh* into Russian as *slava Bogu* 'praise be to God' and *in shā'a Llāh* as *Bog даст* 'God will give, let' or *po vole Bozhiei* 'by the will of God'. The fact that Russian-speaking Orthodox

<sup>49</sup> CN # 18.

<sup>50</sup> Kobulova, "Musul'mane i russkii iazyk". There is no consensus on the use of singular and plural forms of Arabic words in Russian, even in academic literature on Islamic studies. Most often, Arabic words enter Russian in their singular form and receive standard Russian endings (*-y/-i*); very occasionally, the words do not change at all. However, we also infrequently find cases where an Arabic noun in its plural correlates with a Russian verb in the singular, e.g. *tullab delaet* (lit. 'students does'). See also a note on this in A.N. Bakhtiarova and F.G. Fatkullina, "Arabskie zaimstvovaniia v leksicheskoi sisteme russkogo iazyka," *Fundamental'nye issledovaniia* 2:27 (2015), 6124-28. Here pp. 6126-27.

<sup>51</sup> Kobulova, "Musul'mane i russkii iazyk".



Christians also use the expressions that she suggests, does not seem to be an issue to her. To the contrary, the “purified” Islamic Russian is the right tool to use when engaging in religious mission. One should not construct sentences such as “I have a *niyya* [intention] to do you *da’wa* [mission]”, but something along the lines “I would like to talk with you about religion”.<sup>52</sup>

In the analysed conversion narratives we also find hybrid expressions, where the Russian word *Bog* is replaced by ‘Allāh’; this enables a convert to differentiate herself or himself from Orthodox Christian speakers of Russian at lower cost than would be the case for using an Arabic formula:

“We, praise be to Allāh, do not have such problems as Muslims have in other parts of the world”;<sup>53</sup>

“And I will – by the will of Allāh – perform my deeds in this world in His name”.<sup>54</sup>

The characteristics of this first discursive strategy match the definition that Bustanov and Kemper give to the “Russianism” variant in their classification of Islamic Russian. The authors argue that speakers of this variant render foreign Islamic religious terminology into Russian, and in order to do so, they often resort to the Orthodox Church lexicon.<sup>55</sup> Whereas Bustanov and Kemper mention only Russia’s Islamic officials as the main users of “Russianism”, I argue that ethnic Russian converts to Islam also tend to employ it actively when talking about their experience of conversion. In addition, while this variant allows the Muftis to reach out to political and Church authorities and place Islam within the “traditional religions” paradigm, Russian Muslims pursue somewhat different goals.

Linguistic purification practices of converts unfold against the background of the popular perception that Russia’s ethnic Muslims and labour migrants coming to the country from Central Asia speak “broken”, “Arabized” and heavily-accented Russian. Therefore, the grammatically and stylistically correct Islamic Russian of native speakers acquires symbolic prestige and becomes associated with power of the dominant class. Thus, “Russianism” in the speech of converts is an in-group marker, which, on the one hand, facilitates their reintegration in small social circles (e.g., family or networks of friends and colleagues) or Russian society at large; on the other hand, these linguistic

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> CN #5.

<sup>54</sup> CN #47.

<sup>55</sup> Bustanov and Kemper, “The Russian Orthodox and Islamic Languages in the Russian Federation”, pp. 270-72; Bustanov and Kemper, *Islamic Authority and the Russian Language: Studies on Texts from European Russia, the North Caucasus and West Siberia*.

practices place an implicit emphasis on the superiority of Russian culture over that of ethnic Muslims.

#### 4.4.2 *Second strategy: intellectual motives for conversion to Islam*

Another feature that we can observe in the conversion narratives is a recurrent trope about intellectual motives for embracing Islam. Thus, converts deny any external influence on their decision to convert, whether it be adversarial circumstances (prison<sup>56</sup> or war), threat or manipulation, or – in the case of women – the influence of their spouse and family members. According to the categorization by Lofland and Skonovd, who distinguish six types of conversion, the motifs described by Russian Muslims match the definition of the intellectual mode of conversion.<sup>57</sup> Ali Köse, who studied conversion motives among Muslims in the United Kingdom, argues that in this intellectual mode, “a reasonably high level of belief is attained prior to actual conversion”.<sup>58</sup>

Explaining how they discovered Islam, Russian Muslims often speak about their journey toward knowledge; a convert usually first becomes acquainted with various religious teachings, for instance by reading books or engaging in dialogue with members of the respective religious communities, and only chooses Islam after comparing them all. Muslim converts frequently emphasize that they accepted Islam “not by heart, but by head”, and reports of spiritual or mystical experience are fairly rare. This primacy of reason over tradition is also found in narratives by Muslim converts in the West; converts there likewise argue that they acted primarily as a completely free and rational individual, whose interest in Islam is unbiased.<sup>59</sup> As Esra Özyürek rightly observes, Western European converts in particular often draw on the

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<sup>56</sup> In the media, places of confinement are often presented as an environment where ethnic Russians “become infected” with radical Islamic views; see, for instance, R. Vol’f, “Tiur’ma i lager’ – kuznitsa ‘russkogo islama’”, *Stavropol’skii reporter*, 16 October 2012 <<http://vatslav-rus.livejournal.com/2053.html>> (Accessed on 9 May 2018); S. Mel’nikov, “Islam strogogo rezhima”, *Kommersant*, 26 August 2013 <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2259024>> (Accessed on 9 May 2018); E. Trifonova, “Tiuremnye dzhamaaty otmeniaut vorovskie poniatii”, *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 22 August 2017 <[http://www.ng.ru/politics/2017-08-22/1\\_7056\\_fsin.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/2017-08-22/1_7056_fsin.html)> (Accessed on 9 May 2018).

<sup>57</sup> The other five modes are mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalistic and coercive. See J. Lofland and N. Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20:4 (1981), 373-85; also L.R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>58</sup> A. Köse, *Conversion to Islam: a Study of Native British Converts* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 96.

<sup>59</sup> E.g., J. Aleccia, “Not ‘Brainwashed’: American Converts to Islam Speak Out”, *NBC News*, 3 April 2013 <<http://www.islamicity.org/5243/not-brainwashed-american-converts-to-islam-speak-out>> (Accessed on 9 May 2018); Köse, *Conversion to Islam: a Study of Native British Converts* pp. 96-101; K. van Nieuwkerk, “The Quest for Peace in Submission: Reflections on the Journey of American Women Converts to Islam”, in *Women Embracing Islam*, ed. K. van Nieuwkerk (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), 19-47.

Enlightenment ideas about human reason and religion in order to open up a legitimate space for Islam.<sup>60</sup> In their discussion of ethnic German Muslims' attempts to create an Islam that fits into European society, Özyürek and another anthropologist, Ruth Mandel, define discourses of German converts as attempting "the intellectual reappropriation of the Other".<sup>61</sup>

Because many Russian Muslims embraced Islam after disenchantment with institutionalized religion, particularly the ROC, they experience the Orthodox Christian faith as illogical: the Orthodox faith is monotheist and yet Trinitarian, Jesus Christ is both divine and human, Mary is the mother of God and at the same time God's creature; as opposed to "logical" Islam:

"I was buying all sorts of encyclopaedias on religions, esoteric and other literature, wanting to compare religions and find something that would be closer to reason, because when reading Christian books, more and more [often] I [was feeling compelled] to turn off the mind and perceive what was written as given, without questioning it".<sup>62</sup>

However, despite this general characterization of Christian teaching, we do find attempts to construct bridges between Islam and Christianity, as in the following excerpt, for instance. Here the Islamic concept of *hijra*<sup>63</sup> is linked to 'exodus' and the convert interprets both in terms of an arduous transition, a forced move or journey that, although difficult in the beginning, turns out to be beneficial in the long run:

"My exodus is my personal *hijra* towards the covenants of God, the Only and Merciful".<sup>64</sup>

In the narratives we also find links to the Russian religious philosophy of *bogoiskatel'stvo*. Translated literally as 'God-seeking', the term *bogoiskatel'stvo* in its broader sense refers to an individual's interest in religious and philosophical problems and search for truth. Originally, the concept emerged in the philosophical circles led by Nikolai Berdiaev (1874-1948) and Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944), who suggested not searching for a "new God", but for "new paths towards God".<sup>65</sup> Islam is thus, for ethnic Russian Muslims, one of these paths in search of God: in the narratives analysed here,

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<sup>60</sup> Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim*, p. 49.

<sup>61</sup> R. Mandel et al., "Islamophobia, Religious Conversion, and Belonging in Europe," *History and Anthropology* 26:3 (2015), 362-79. Here pp. 363, 374.

<sup>62</sup> CN #18.

<sup>63</sup> The Arabic term refers to an episode in the early history of Islam, when the Prophet Muhammad and his first followers fled from the persecution of the ruling Quraysh tribe of Mecca to the city of Medina.

<sup>64</sup> CN #16.

<sup>65</sup> G.G. Kirilenko and E.V. Shevtsov, "Bogoiskatel'stvo", in *Kratkii filosofskii slovar'*, ed. G.G. Kirilenko and E.V. Shevtsov (Moscow: AST, 2010), 27-29. Here p. 27.

one convert referred to the actual term *bogoiskatel'stvo* as something “currently central for Russia”, and added that Islam helped her to finally reach the goal of this search.<sup>66</sup>

But only a religion that is stripped of the seemingly patriarchal, intolerant and undemocratic cultural traditions attributed to Russia’s ethnic Muslims is best suited to the rational mind of a Russian convert:

“The Russian Islam is pure Islam. There are no national customs that contradict the canons. In [the Russian Islam], the text (*predanie*) is more important than [ethno-national] tradition. Therefore, the Russian Islam is closer to the truth, if one can say so”.<sup>67</sup>

The author of the following quote distinguishes herself from the members of her new religious community. She does this not only by stressing her ethnicity – “a Russian girl” – but also by implicitly suggesting that ethnic Muslims often do not practise their faith (“non-observant”) and are less knowledgeable about Islam; these Muslims, in her opinion, do not know their own religion, and hence cannot understand why a Russian would convert:

“Everyone was curious: I was a Russian girl, not married – why would she have this religion [Islam], if all her life she considered herself a Christian. Even Muslims ask these questions (most often [those who are] non-observant, who do not understand the meaning of religion)”.<sup>68</sup>

In general, Russian Muslims claim to have a “noble” access to Islam, as opposed to that of “cultural” Muslims; the latter are presented as if they just happened to be born to a Muslim family and have never reflected on their religious identity or put any effort into studying Islam properly. Consequently, converts reproduce and further enroot racist prejudices directed against ethnic Muslims and immigrants.<sup>69</sup>

In the conversion narratives, this racialization of Islam is often implicit. It resonates with ideas propagated by some prominent Russian Muslim activists, such as Vadim Kharun Sidorov, who argues, for instance, that the communities of European converts to Islam are “the most valuable resource” of not only Europe, but also the Islamic world. In his opinion, these “organic communities” of Spanish, German, Ukrainian and Russian Muslims continue and advance the “true” and “genuinely” European values and cultures; at the same time, they are also the hope for reformation of the Islamic world, which would bring Muslims back to the Islam of the Prophet

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<sup>66</sup> CN #29.

<sup>67</sup> CN #33.

<sup>68</sup> CN #19.

<sup>69</sup> Similar arguments are also to be found in conversion narratives of German Muslims, see Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim*, pp. 37, 68.

Muhammad.<sup>70</sup> Sidorov defines Russian Muslims as the “Kulturträger” (transmitters of cultural ideas) of Western Islam in Eurasia; seen from a cultural perspective, he places Russia in the same Western European civilization to which converts from England, Germany and Sweden also belong. This Western Islam is portrayed by Sidorov as the true religion of the “white”, “Normannic” (*normannskii*) people, blending elements of religious and racial exclusivism.<sup>71</sup>

Some converts took their decision to become Muslim after encountering prominent ethnic Russian Muslims such as Sidorov:

“Of course, I first met with Russian nationalists who converted to Islam. With Kharun Sidorov, the founder of the NORM, and Salman Sever [Maksim Baidak, b. 1986, since 2013 on the federal wanted list]. I do not know what he did in life, but I have never met a greater intellectual. These people impressed me with their intellect. I thought they would call [to carry out terrorist attacks by] explosions. But they only convinced me that my [way of living at that time] leads to a dead end”.<sup>72</sup>

In the scholarly literature, the mode of conversion when an individual is motivated to embrace religion by a personal attachment is defined as “affectional”.<sup>73</sup> Among the analysed conversion narratives, it is the second most frequent mode of conversion, which also contributes to the image of the *ruskii* Islam being the religion of the enlightened (*prosveshchennyi*): some converts report that they embraced Islam after being impressed by the intellect of Russian Muslims such as Kharun Sidorov or Salman Sever.

#### ***4.4.3 Third strategy: redefining “Russianness” beyond traditional religious labels***

In their conversion narratives, Russian converts first de-ethnicize and intellectualize Islam, making it go beyond the identities of ethnic and migrant Muslims. Yet separating Islam from the cultures of born Muslims does not mean emptying out the cultural content;<sup>74</sup> what Russian Muslims do instead is re-inscribe the religion with new, Russian cultural content. The “noble” and rational Islam that they construct is then

<sup>70</sup> V. Sidorov, “Islam, Evropa, Ukraina”, *LiveJournal*, 10 December 2014

<[http://www.harunsidorov.info/2014/12/blog-post\\_10.html](http://www.harunsidorov.info/2014/12/blog-post_10.html)> (Accessed on 23 December 2017).

<sup>71</sup> V. Sidorov, “Normannskii polius v islamskoi Evrazii”, *White Muslim's Tribune*, 12 November 2012

<[http://whitemuslims.blogspot.nl/2012/11/normal-0-false-false-false-en-us-x-none\\_12.html](http://whitemuslims.blogspot.nl/2012/11/normal-0-false-false-false-en-us-x-none_12.html)> (Accessed on 23 December 2017).

<sup>72</sup> CN #9.

<sup>73</sup> See Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs”; Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*.

<sup>74</sup> See also the discussion on “deculturation” and “deterritorialization” of religion in Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways*.

nationalized by the converts as the *russkii* Islam. This kind of Islam does not contradict the Russian values or a convert's self-identification as an ethnic Russian. Ironically, this makes Russian Muslims perhaps the first Muslims to feel comfortable and confident in their assertion of their Russianness.

In their narratives, converts argue that by practising Islam, Russians do not abandon their ethnic group, but quite the opposite: the new religion helps them to rediscover connections to ancestors and return to long-forgotten roots:

“Some believe that conversion to Islam, for example, by Russians is a betrayal, but it is not a betrayal at all, it is a return to the bosom of the true faith of our most ancient ancestors, this is a return to the path of ancient prophets such as Adam, Nuh (Noah), Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses), Isa (Jesus)”.<sup>75</sup>

Some cultural artefacts are then transplanted into the new Islamic context: these are elements that the converts usually see as “genuinely” Russian – for instance, parts of ethnic dress, such as the Pavlovo Posad shawl or *sarafan*:

“I want my wife to wear a Pavlovo Posad shawl, make a *hijab* out of it. We must preserve our Russian traditions – take *sarafans* [a traditional long dress], for example. I became a Russophile lately, also because all our traditions correspond to the norms of Islam”.<sup>76</sup>

Nevertheless, self-identification as Russian today becomes complicated when detached from the Orthodox Christian religious identity. The public involvement of the ROC has visibly increased since Patriarch Kirill took office, and the Church feels eligible to define what it means to be Russian. According to the recent ROC statement, “a Russian is a person who considers [himself or herself] Russian; [one who] does not have other ethnic preferences; who speaks and thinks in Russian; recognizes Orthodox Christianity as the basis of national spiritual culture; feels solidarity with the fate of the Russian people”.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, conversion to Islam also becomes a politically loaded act: converts thereby challenge the very notion of what it means to be Russian and, willingly or unwillingly, dispute the Church and state discourses on nationalism and ethnic identity.

In conversion narratives, the major argument against the statement “to be Russian means to be a Christian” is that Christianity has never been the religion of Russians; or that it already ceased to be so in the Soviet Union:

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<sup>75</sup> CN #18.

<sup>76</sup> CN # 32.

<sup>77</sup> See the document adopted by the Eighteenth World Russian People's Council “Deklaratsiia russkoi identichnosti”, which was published on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate on 11 November 2014. Available online <<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/508347.html>> (Accessed on 9 May 2018).

“If people say that Islam is the religion of Tatars and Arabs, it can be equally argued that Christianity is the religion of Jews and Greeks, while for Russians then the original religion is Russian paganism”.<sup>78</sup>

“If someone believes that a Russian person who accepts Islam betrays Christianity, this is absurd, because Christianity was massively and almost unanimously betrayed as far back as in 1917. Then, in 1991, ungodly communism was betrayed; people also refused this [communist] idea and set out on a free voyage, [which took place] in a spiritual vacuum. For the most part, people are still ideologically neutral, with a significant inclination towards atheism, more than towards Christianity. So, for many people there is nothing to betray”.<sup>79</sup>

For some converts this is also a way to defend themselves against public critique. By disconnecting Christianity from Russianness, they respond to accusations of betrayal of the Russian ethnic group, the nation or the state – the reproaches with which they are confronted as soon as the act of conversion becomes a matter of public debate.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

The implicit claim in the discourse of the converts is that being a Russian Muslim means embodying the very best qualities of both Russian and Islamic cultures. But to be able to openly show their mixed identity, they have to create a legitimate space that is free of negative prejudices about Islam and Muslims, which are so prominent in Russia’s mainstream society today. This can be achieved through keeping a distance from existing Muslim communities – Russia’s indigenous Muslims as well as immigrants from the Muslim republics of Central Asia. Converts draw a demarcation line between what they see as Russian versus non-Russian values and culture, and contrast the rationality of the *russkii* Islam against the “backwardness” of other kinds of Islam practised by ethnic minorities. The *russkii* Islam thus becomes the religion of a free, independent, rational individual, who feels that she or he is a part of Russian culture, not least through the knowledge of the literary language and familiarity with major philosophical ideas developed throughout the history of Russian intellectual thought.

Language, in particular, becomes an identity marker and helps to distinguish a “native” Russian from a non-Russian: an ability to speak the “pure” and correct language is seen as an exclusive feature of the dominant group and is associated with a higher social status.

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<sup>78</sup> CN #22.

<sup>79</sup> CN #18.

Paradoxically, a significant share of converts come from marginalized parts of the political spectrum, mostly from its far-right fringe. On a bigger scale, Muslim converts often “share [their] hostility toward Christianity with the neo-pagans, who are – culturally and politically – the most radical wing of the Russian nationalist movement”.<sup>80</sup> For a few Russian Muslims, conversion to Islam becomes a political statement, their way to manifest a nationalist political identity. By choosing an alternative religion – Islam, but also paganism or non-Orthodox Christian denominations – Russian nationalists distinguish themselves from a broad array of “national patriots” for whom the traditional orientation toward Orthodoxy is beyond doubt and who tend to be extremely loyal to the authorities.<sup>81</sup> In their identity-engineering, Russian Muslims racialize the practices of other Muslims and fall into Islamophobic tropes that are pervasive in the Russian nationalist discourse, which raises the issue of Muslim Islamophobia.<sup>82</sup>

The *russkii* Islam suggested by the converts is obviously extremely exclusive, and in the mainstream discourse on the definition of Russia’s Islam it remains marginal. In the following chapter, I will discuss a particular case of a convert, a Russian Muslim who envisioned projects of a new Russian(-speaking) *umma* that had the potential to fit into the mainstream discourse on religion.

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<sup>80</sup> Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, p. 154.

<sup>81</sup> See the discussion in Mitrofanova, “Russian Ethnic Nationalism and Religion Today”, p. 107.

<sup>82</sup> For cases of similar practices among European converts to Islam, see the discussion in Mandel et al., “Islamophobia, Religious Conversion, and Belonging in Europe”.