Languages of Islam and Christianity in Post-Soviet Russia: institutional discourses, community strategies and missionary rhetoric

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Chapter 5

Viacheslav Ali Polosin: Envisioning a Russian(-speaking) *Umma*

This chapter examines how not only institutions and communities, but also individual religious entrepreneurs contribute to the politicization of Islamic Russian. Viacheslav Ali Polosin (b. 1956), a former Orthodox priest who converted to Islam and rose to power as a mediator between Islamic elites and the state, instrumentalizes the Russian language to develop an Islam that is both suitable for "the mentality of a Russian" (where 'Russian' is broadly defined) and beneficial for the political goals of the state. His interpretation of Islam at various points combined elements of both previously analysed discourses – of "traditional" Muslim elites (Chapter 3) and of communities of Russian converts to Islam (Chapter 4). Against the background of an increasingly nationalist state agenda, this peculiar blend allowed Polosin to move away from the political margins, where he found himself in the early 2000s, and become an influential functionary in the state apparatus.

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how the third type of authority – individual religious entrepreneurs – makes use of the Russian language for Islamic discourse. I will discuss the changes in rhetoric of the ex-Orthodox priest and politician, Viacheslav Polosin (see Figure 3).[1]

Polosin converted to Islam at the end of the 1990s and rose to prominence as a vocal critic of the institutionalized Orthodox Christianity and of the Church-state rapprochement. In 2000-2006, Polosin envisioned Russian Islam as a new state ideology that could be the way to introduce liberal values into the political system and to create a monotheism-based moral framework for the country's entire population, including ethnic Russians. Polosin's programme of "The Direct Path", designed together with another convert to Islam, Valeriia Iman Porokhova, aimed to guide Russians toward the "genuine" monotheism, which, according to him, was embodied not in Orthodox Christianity, but in Islam. Similar to the rhetoric of other Russian Muslims, Polosin argued for a new, modernized and intellectual version of Islam. Although the former priest permitted selective elements of Russia's ethnic forms of Islam, he suggested transforming them to incorporate the norms and values of developed European societies.

To acquaint ethnic Russians with a Muslim way of life, Polosin focused on translation of Islam, so that it would appeal to the "Russian mentality": in the first years following his conversion, Polosin advocated making the Qurʾān and Islamic teaching not only accessible, but also attractive to native speakers of Russian. He also advocated the production of new literary translations of the Qurʾān that would be "immune" against Christian criticism. By presenting himself as a new type of Islamic scholar – more assertive and knowledgeable compared with the "turbaned" Islamic elites, and daring to engage in theological disputes – Polosin aimed to fill the niche of Islamic authority in Russia, to become a leader who is able to reach out to various groups within Russia's diverse and increasingly Russian-speaking Muslim community.

What is puzzling about Polosin's personality is that within the decade from 2000 to 2010, he changed from being an outspoken opponent of the political regime to being a staunch supporter

of the country's political course under President Putin. By 2010 he had abandoned his connections with other Russian converts to Islam, whom the mainstream

[1] The photo source: Alif-TV, <alif.tv/ali-polosin-ot-pravoslaviya-k-pravoveriyu-serdtse-so-shramom/> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

discourse portrayed as too "radical" and "non-conformist" to fit into Russian society. Instead, Polosin became involved in various Kremlin-supported projects to administer Russia's Muslim communities. I will study Polosin's career and the evolution of his political views in connection with the state's support of ethnonationalism, which has been gaining prominence since the end of President Putin's second term in 2008. The Kremlin has limited the freedom of religious expression and stated its need to have an interpretation of Islam that fits into its political course. Polosin, an ethnic Russian with experience in Russia's governmental structures as well as within Islamic official institutions, became the right candidate to offer and promote a new interpretation of Russia's Islam.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: first, I briefly introduce major landmarks from Polosin's biography; then the next three sections represent the stages in the evolution of Polosin's views on Islam and its place in Russian society.

Figure 3. Viacheslav Ali Polosin

5.2 Biography and conversion

In post-Soviet Russian history, Viacheslav Polosin became the first Orthodox Christian priest to openly convert to Islam. In his book *Why I became a Muslim. The direct path to God* (2003),[2] Polosin presents his life in the light of conversion: typically for the genre of conversion narrative, the author describes and reinterprets events from his

[2] Polosin, *Pochemu ia stal musul'maninom*. Here I give references to an electronic version of the book, available at <https://azan.kz/kutub/view/pochemu-ya-stal-musulmaninom-181> (Accessed on 2 June 2018).

biography that made him decide to embrace Islam in such a way that it sounds legitimate and convincing for the reader.

Polosin, born in Moscow in 1956, describes his childhood as "non-religious", but also as a time free of "atheist nonsense". Whilst his family members were "unbelievers", Polosin remembers himself having had a strong faith in God since childhood. With the goal "to learn the truth about God", he entered Moscow State University and graduated in sociology in 1978.[3] His secular education did not provide Polosin with the answers he longed for, and he attempted to enrol in Moscow Theological Seminary (*Moskovskaia dukhovnaia seminariia*). Yet the Soviet authorities blocked his way, according to Polosin, because he was not allowed even to work as a guard, let alone to study at the Seminary. In his conversion narrative, Polosin presents himself as a firm believer whose faith is a source of tenacity and courage: he emphasizes the fact that he did not change his mind about studying at the Seminary even when the authorities threatened to evict him from his apartment. Eventually Polosin was accepted; his graduation from the Seminary in 1983 was followed by his ordination as a priest. In his book, Polosin justifies this initial affiliation with Christianity as a desperate measure: back then the Orthodox Church was the only alternative to communism that was available to him, and priesthood symbolized "a spiritual and intellectual struggle against materialism".[4] He was not allowed to serve in Moscow, but instead was sent to Central Asia. Polosin presents this as God's challenge: the difficulties that he had to face during this "exile" were soon rewarded, for it was in Central Asia that he got to know Islam.[5]

A gradual relaxation of state policies toward religion in the late Soviet Union, marked by the popular celebrations of the 1000th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity in 1988, allowed Polosin to return to Russia. He was appointed priest to Obninsk, a town 100 km southwest of Moscow. The new political climate also gave Polosin an opportunity to enter politics. In his own words, it was "by chance" that in 1990 he was elected as a People's deputy in Kaluga, another small city near Moscow; in the same year, Boris Yeltsin, "who liked to do unexpected moves", appointed him Chair of the Committee of the Supreme Council (*Komitet Verkhovnogo Soveta*) of the Russian SFSR on Religion; in this office, Polosin participated in drafting the 1990 Law on Freedom of Worship.[6] In other sources, Polosin confesses that, in fact, it was he who

[3] Ibid., p. 7.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., p. 8.
[6] Ibid.; see also Svet Istiny, "Biografiia Ali Polosina," *Svet Istiny* 34:2 (2010), 5.

initiated the very creation of this office, which was supposed to "solve religious questions"; Yeltsin supported Polosin simply because the latter "had education in philosophy, was a priest, and religion came into vogue at that time".[7] In April 1990, Polosin launched the RCDM, together with liberal priest Gleb Iakunin, religious philosopher Viktor Aksiuchits (b. 1949) and religious activist Gleb Anishchenko (b. 1952).[8] However, the party suffered from internal struggles caused by conservative and liberal pulls; moreover, during the August Coup in 1991 it stood in opposition to Polosin's patron Yeltsin, which could be the reason why the priest left the RCDM. Polosin explained his withdrawal from the Movement and disinterest in further attempts to foster Christian Democracy in Russia by the lack of "humanistic (*gumanitarnyi*) traditions" in the ROC of the immediate post-Soviet period. In Polosin's opinion, the ROC turned its back on Western democracy and instead of following the path of Catholicism, which "was reformed and suited for the new time", returned to the less progressive Byzantine model.[9]

After obtaining his degree of candidate of sciences (*kandidat nauk*, equivalent to PhD) in 1993, followed by a doctoral degree in philosophy in 1999, Polosin worked as an adviser to the Duma Committee for Public Associations and Religious Organizations (*Komitet gosudarstvennoi Dumy po delam obshchestvennykh ob"edinenii i religioznykh organizatsii*). The increasing workload in secular institutions made Polosin leave church service; in 1991-1999, until his conversion, he remained an off-duty priest of the Moscow Patriarchate.[10]

Following the rules of the conversion narrative genre, Polosin reports on indicators that pointed toward the "right" religion long before the actual conversion: for instance, he remembers an episode from his period in Central Asia, when an elderly Tajik, allegedly a "secret Sheikh", saw Polosin's "Muslim eyes". This Tajik prophesied that in the future the priest would become a Muslim; in Polosin's words, instead of being confused by this sudden revelation he made it "sink into [his] soul".[11]

In the absence of "good (*gramotnyi*) literature about Islam in Russian", Polosin turned to lectures, books and the TV show "Nyne" of the Islamic philosopher Geidar

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[7] V.A. Polosin, "Zamysly i ikh realizatsiia", *NG Religii*, 12 April 2000 <http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2000-04-12/4_realisation.html> (Accessed on 6 February 2017).

[8] A. Verkhovsky et al., "Khristianskie demokraty", in *Religioznyi faktor v politike i v ideologii natsional'nykh dvizhenii v Rossii i Kazakhstane*, ed. A. Verkhovskii et al. (Panorama, 1998).

[9] Polosin, "Zamysly i ikh realizatsiia".

[10] Svet Istiny, "Biografiia Ali Polosina".

[11] Polosin, *Pochemu ia stal musul'maninom*, p. 8.

Dzhemal' to learn about Islamic teaching.[12] He was also strongly influenced by Sufi Sheikh Said Chirkeiskii, whom he first met in Moscow in the late 1990s. After this encounter Polosin travelled to Dagestan in 1999 in order to be initiated into Chirkeiskii's Naqshbandiyya-Shādhiliyya Sufi order and to become his *murīd*.[13]

Around 1998-1999[14] Polosin converted to Islam and embraced the Muslim name Ali. Before the term gained negative connotations, Polosin claimed to be an adherent of Salafism; in his interpretation, this religious movement was "an orthodox Sufism that reproduces the Islamic way of life in its pristine purity".[15] To counter rumours that he converted to Islam because the ROC gave him no chances of promotion, Polosin claimed in his interviews that he became Muslim in order to bring his "social status in accordance with [his religious] convictions"; he emphasized that he did not leave the Church because of conflicts with its leadership.[16]

After his conversion, Polosin soon joined Muslim political networks that came into existence in the late 1990s. First, the former priest affiliated himself with the all-Russian public movement "Refakh" (Prosperity), established in November 1998. He became the associate chairman and editor of Refakh's main media outlet – the "Muslim Newspaper" (*Musul'manskaia gazeta*). When in 2001 "Refakh" transformed into the political party "Eurasia", led by another ethnic Russian convert to Islam, Abdul-Vakhed Niiazov (Vadim Medvedev, b. 1969), Polosin left the organization.[17]

Polosin also established connections with the umbrella organizations under Mufti Gainutdin's leadership – the DUM RF and SMR (see Chapter 3). As of 2017, on paper Polosin is still an advisor to Gainutdin and co-chair of several centres within the SMR that focus on research and culture. De facto, his involvement in these structures today is barely visible. In addition, Polosin heads the Union of Muslim Journalists (*Soiuz*

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[12] V.A. Polosin, "Uspokoites', ia nashel svoe mesto, i ves'ma schastliv svoim vyborom", *Portal-Credo*, 26 June 2003 <https://www.portal-credo.ru/site/print.php?act=authority&id=122> (Accessed on 25 April 2017); Polosin, *Pochemu ia stal musul'maninom*.

[13] Info-Islam, "Studenty Instituta teologii i mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii vstretilis' s Ali Viacheslavom Polosinym", *Info-Islam*, 19 April 2011 <http://www.info-islam.ru/publ/novosti/rossiya/studenty_instituta_teologii_i_mezhdunarodnykh_otnoshenij_vstretilis_s_ali_vjacheslavom_polosinym/1-1-0-7928> (Accessed on 20 February 2017).

[14] Various sources give contradictory information on the exact year of Polosin's conversion to Islam.

[15] Polosin, "Uspokoites'".

[16] N. Babasian, "Reshaite sami", *Russkii Zhurnal*, 2 July 1999 <http://old.russ.ru/ist_sovr/99-07-07/babas.htm> (Accessed on 8 May 2018); A. Iasin, "Protoirei Viacheslav Polosin prinial islam", *Why Islam*, 12 March 2010 <http://www.whyislam.to/forum/viewtopic.php?t=524> (Accessed on 25 April 2017).

[17] T. Gudava, "Evroislam. Chast' 1", *Radio Svoboda*, 7 June 2001 <http://archive.svoboda.org/programs/rtl/2001/RTL.060701.asp> (Accessed on 29 January 2018).

musul'manskikh zhurnalistov, founded in 2003), which, in fact, has not been active for years.

5.3 Islam as a liberal state ideology (2000-2006)

Polosin enjoyed the relative freedom of the media in the early 2000s and promoted himself as an Islamic scholar. He was a frequent guest on the TV programme "1000 and one day, Islamic encyclopaedia"; this program, shown on the state channel "Russia" from 1999 until 2003, was the first major media outlet to talk about Islam with barely any censorship.[18] In 2002, Polosin was invited to the "Gordon" talk show, where he disputed with biologist and priest Alexander Borisov (b. 1939) on the definition of paganism in Islam and Christianity.[19]

Polosin is a prolific writer: his books *The direct path to God* (2000), *Why I became a Muslim* (2003) and *The Gospel through the eyes of a Muslim* (2006) comprise articles and essays written in 1998-2006 on Islam and Orthodox Christianity in Russia.[20] Two other books, *Myth. Religion. State* (1999) and *Overcoming paganism. Introduction to the philosophy of monotheism* (2001),[21] Polosin envisioned as educational literature on Islam for Russia's secular universities and a broad audience of readers.[22] Another work, *Islam is not like that! But like what? 40 answers to the critics of Islam* (2008)[23] was written together with Azerbaijani scholar Aidyn Ali-Zade (b. 1963), seen back then as a representative of a small "liberal" scene within Russia's Islam.[24] Designed in a Q&A format, the book follows Polosin's agenda of Islamic apologetics, with the help of the Islamic theologian Ali-Zade, who covers topics directly related to the Qurʾānic texts and interpretations, and the contradictions that one may encounter there. Polosin's share of the book is

[18] M.A. Safarov, "Polosin Ali Viacheslav Sergeevich", in *Islam v Moskve: Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar'*, ed. D.Z. Khairetdinov (Moscow: Medina, 2008). Available online at <http://www.idmedina.ru/books/encyclopedia/?3076> (Accessed on 2 June 2018).

[19] A. Gordon, "Preodolenie iazychestva". Broadcast, distributed by *NTV*, 2002 (Accessed on 17 February 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFYPz-c4wAo>)

[20] Polosin, *Priamoi Put' k Bogu*; Polosin, *Pochemu ia stal musul'maninom*; V.A. Polosin, *Evangelie glazami musul'manina. Dva vzgliada na odnu istoriiu* (Moscow: Umma, 2006).

[21] V.A. Polosin, *Mif. Religiia. Gosudarstvo: Issledovanie politicheskoi mifologii* (Moscow: Ladomir, 1999); V.A. Polosin, *Preodolenie iazychestva: Vvedenie v filosofiiu monoteizma* (Moscow: Ladomir, 2001).

[22] T. Gudava, "Evroislam. Chast' 4", *Radio Svoboda*, 17 July 2001 <https://www.svoboda.org/a/242019-75.html> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

[23] A.A. Ali-Zade and V.A. Polosin, *Islam ne takoi! A kakoi? 40 otvetov kritikam Korana i Sunny* (Moscow: Ansar, 2008).

[24] V. Emel'ianov, "'Liberal'nyi' islam v seti", *Portal-Credo*, n.d. <https://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=netnav&id=81> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

primarily found in the section on comparative religious studies: for instance, he compares perceptions of Heaven in the Qurʾān and the Bible, and the concept of clergy in Islam and Christianity.

In 2000, together with Valeriia Iman Porokhova, Polosin launched "Priamoi put'" (The Direct Path), an organization created with the goal of uniting ethnic Russian converts to Islam. The ideology of this organization was based on Polosin's book *The Manifesto of New Russia: The Third Path is Direct!* (2001).[25] The book addressed not only Russia's Muslims, but to a great extent also ethnic Russians; Polosin constructed Islam as a religion that could play a central role in bringing democratic transformations into Russian society, which many in the turbulent 1990s and early 2000s hoped for.

In his early publications, Polosin denounced the dominant role of the ROC in Russia. He did not consider Orthodox Christianity among Russia's "genuinely" traditional religions, instead arguing that historically only Islam (in the Volga-Ural region and the Caucasus) and Tengrism (in Siberia) proliferated and were accepted by local peoples *voluntarily*; whereas Orthodox Christianity or, as Polosin defines it, the "Eastern-Roman (Byzantine) model of Christianity" was introduced "with fire and sword". Being inherently alien to Russian culture, the new religion had to be "forcefully inculcated", which, in Polosin's opinion, crushed the local, true "ancient monotheism" that was naturally developing in Kievan Rus'.[26]

When elements of Russian paganism were mixed with Byzantine and Judeo-Christian traditions, the new religion prevented the creation of a strong, independent Russian man, a national hero, whom Polosin would like to see as a Russian Odysseus; instead, the imported Christianity has been nurturing "a humble wimp" (*smirennyi khliupik*) with a guilt complex, who does not have an active social position and just keeps "turning another cheek".[27] Polosin regarded Islam as a special path for Russia to enter a new covenant (*zavet*) with God; because, in his opinion, it is the only monotheistic religion that obtained its revelation directly from God through the Prophet. Polosin's use of the word *zavet* resembles the lexical practices of Mufti Gainutdin; the latter, as I argued in Section 3.3, used the same word as a synonym of the word 'Qurʾān'.

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[25] V.A. Polosin, *Manifest Novoi Rossii: tretii put' — priamoi!* (Moscow: Ladomir, 2001). Originally published in Polosin, *Priamoi Put' k Bogu*, pp. 47-68. This chapter gives references to an electronic version of the book *Priamoi put' k Bogu*, available at https://namaz.today/books/pryamoj-put-k-bogu-ali-vyacheslav-polosin (Accessed on 2 June 2018).

[26] Polosin, *Priamoi Put' k Bogu*, p. 64.

[27] Ibid., p. 41.

If Russia adopts Islam, it can return to the true monotheism that was developing before the baptism of Kievan Rus' in the tenth century. Moreover, in contrast to Orthodox Christianity, Islam also promotes "social activity and volitional (*volevoi*) transformation of the world".[28] Here Polosin brings up a popular argument among ethnic Russians who feel sympathy toward Islam; namely, that Muslims maintain a healthier and more disciplined lifestyle in comparison with Christians. In the words of Polosin, "the utopia of absolute freedom" imposed by Western liberalism resulted in the "godlessness, drug and alcohol addictions, decadence, physical and spiritual decomposition (*rastlenie*)" of Russians; and Polosin saw Islam as "a spiritual alternative" to it.[29]

Polosin believed that at the political level, Orthodox Christianity divides the Russian population into "us", the bondmen (*kholopy*) and slaves, versus "them" – Russia's "god-bearing" elites.[30] The Church has replaced the Almighty Creator by an image of Jesus Christ, "the King of the Jews";[31] since then, Russia's state ideology boils down to "a blind obedience" to Jesus and his worldly vicar – the Russian Tsar.[32] Such an ideology has been and still is exceptionally lucrative for the country's elites, argued Polosin back in 2000. In alliance with the clergy, the state usurps the political freedom of people. Backed by the Church, its authority becomes "immune to prosecution (*nepodsudnyi*)". [33] The Byzantine political model, according to Polosin, imposes submissiveness toward the political elites,[34] whereas Islam promotes "natural and healthy patriotism": every Muslim is ready to bravely die in defence of "himself, relatives and the Motherland", and thereby become a *shahīd*, Polosin believed.[35]

5.3.1 Russian as the language of Muslim mission

In the absence of strong Islamic authority in Russia, Polosin attempted to represent a new type of religious scholars – *ʿulamāʾ*, who could mediate between modern context and Islamic doctrine. The traditional Soviet-style Islamic administrations were not ready to engage with the rapidly changing religious

[28] Ibid., p. 33.
[29] Polosin, *Pochemu ia stal musul'maninom*, p. 53.
[30] Polosin, *Priamoi Put' k Bogu*, p. 44.
[31] Here Polosin refers to the NT, e.g. John 19:3, which reads: "They came up to him [Jesus], saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands".
[32] Polosin, *Priamoi Put' k Bogu*, p. 42.
[33] Ibid., p. 31.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Polosin, *Pochemu ia stal musul'maninom*, p. 44.

communities, as members of the latter became more reflexive about their religious identity and expected more from religious affiliation than merely a sense of belonging. At the same time, a number of foreign charities brought substantial financial resources into the country and supported the quick multiplication of Islamic foundations, schools, and places of worship, which operated independently from Russia's official religious establishments. Moreover, the authority of traditional institutions was also challenged by the advent of satellite media and the Internet, which contributed to the rapid proliferation of new platforms presenting Islam and Islamic doctrine in accessible, vernacular terms. Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson, who observed similar tendencies across the Muslim World, already spoke in 2003 of a "re-intellectualization of the Islamic discourse"; accessibility and growing inclusiveness of the Islamic discourse, the scholars argue, question the authority of traditional *ʿulamāʾ*, who were previously credited as the only source that could interpret the doctrine.[36] What we see in Russia, however, is not so much a shift of power from the traditional to the newly-emerging leaders, but rather an attempt to fill the void left by Soviet policies on religion: the restrictions on Islamic education and the persecution of Muslim intellectuals resulted in a sheer lack of well-educated Islamic theologians when the USSR came to an end.

Polosin repeatedly stressed the paramount importance of Islamic religious education, which he aimed to promote by vernacularizing Islam. Without directly challenging the sacred status of Arabic, Polosin emphasized the need to also make Islam comprehensible in local languages and, first of all, in Russian. According to Polosin, this would help to lay foundations for a mass readership of the sacred texts, since every believer would be able to read the Qurʾān and interpret it in an autonomous way. For these purposes, he argued, we need "a good Russian translation of the Holy Qurʾān", which "would make Islam absolutely accessible to the Russian population", and take away any possible "repulsion or alienation".[37] Polosin believed that since "most people have no theological education and are not interested in the nuances of the text", they will not go to the original sources, but take "what is on the surface", i.e. the translation.[38]

[36] D.F. Eickelman and J.W. Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: the Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 12.
[37] A. Shchipkov, "From Orthodox Priest to Muslim (via State Duma)", *Keston News Service*, 29 June 1999 <http://www.keston.org.uk/kns/1999/3-FROMOR.html> (Accessed on 29 January 2018).
[38] Polosin, *Priamoi Put' k Bogu*, p. 16.

Polosin found such a translation in the work of Valeriia Porokhova;[39] for him, Porokhova succeeded in translating the Qurʾān into a "genuinely Russian text that transmits the meaning of the Revelation [Qurʾān]"; a translation that "is not only understandable, but is also poetically beautiful, [and] easy to remember".[40] Russia's scholars, however, criticized Porokhova's translation for corrupting the Qurʾānic message; [41] some regarded it as "full of Christian eschatological concepts" and exemplary for how Islam is understood "by a recently converted woman from the end of the 20th century".[42] Almost a decade later, Polosin acknowledged that Porokhova's work was "not a translation in a strict sense", but rather "a poetic call to Islam".[43]

At the same time, Polosin harshly opposed the other existing Qurʾān translations for not being sufficiently Russian. One of these is Ignatii Krachkovskii's (1883-1951) translation, which is widely seen as an imperfect, but reliable rendering of the Qurʾān;[44] for Polosin, it is "a word-for-word literal translation" that "does not transmit the meaning, but only the words".[45] In Polosin's opinion, Krachkovskii was not at all suited to do this kind of work, because the scholar was "maybe a Jew, but most probably an atheist". Krachkovskii's translation, according to Polosin, is not only difficult to understand, but also fails to transmit the literary greatness of the Holy Scripture, especially to newly converted Muslims who are not yet entirely familiar with it. This

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[39] V.I. Porokhova, *Koran. Perevod smyslov i kommentarii* (Moscow: Ripol Klassik, 2007). For a discussion of the existing Russian Qurʾān translations made in Tsarist Russia, see I.A. Gavrilov and A.G. Shevchenko, "Koran v Rossii: perevody i perevodchiki," *Vestnik Instituta sotsiologii* 2:5 (2012), 81-96; P.V. Gusterin, "Russkoiazychnaia koranistika dosovetskogo perioda," *Voprosy istorii* 5 (2015), 160-66; in the twentieth century: A.A. Dolinina, "Russkie perevody Korana v XX veke: kratkaia kharakteristika," *Uchenye zapiski Kazanskogo universiteta (Ser. Gumanitarnye nauki)* 155:3-2 (2013), 7-17; and in the post-Soviet period: R. Bekkin, "Nezamechennyi chitatelem. Retsenziia na perevod Korana B. Ia. Shidfar," *Uchenye zapiski Kazanskogo universiteta (Ser. Gumanitarnye nauki)* 155:3-2 (2013), 231-37; M. Iakubovich, "Russkie perevody smyslov Korana v iazykovom prostranstve gosudarstv SNG", *Islam v SNG*, 4 March 2013 <http://islamsng.com/rus/pastfuture/6402> (Accessed on 11 August 2017).

[40] Polosin, *Priamoi Put' k Bogu*, p. 16.

[41] E.A. Rezvan, *Koran i ego mir* (St. Petersburg: Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie, 2001), pp. 449-50; F.A. Dorofeev, *Koran: istoriia formirovaniia i problemy perevodov* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Izdatel'stvo NNGU, 2008), p. 27.

[42] E. Stupina and R. Bekkin, "Rabota vo imia islama ili rabota protiv islama?", *NG Religii*, 18 December 1999 <http://www.ng.ru/printing/1999-12-18/24_7_3.html> (Accessed on 12 August 2017). Polosin, being aware of these accusations, defended Porokhova and referred to the official document issued by Al-Azhar Academy in Cairo (Egypt) that approved the translation; see Polosin, *Priamoi Put' k Bogu*, p. 16.

[43] V.A. Polosin, "Kak peredat' Koran na drugom iazyke", *Islam.Ru*, 6 August 2011 <http://islam.ru/content/veroeshenie/43396> (Accessed on 6 February 2017).

[44] Krachkovskii's translation was compiled, edited and published posthumously as I.I. Krachkovskii, *Koran* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vostochnoi Literatury, 1963).

[45] V.A. Polosin, "Metodicheskie zamechaniia k perevodu Korana", *Minaret 4 (14)*, 2007 <http://www.idmedina.ru/books/history_culture/minaret/14/polosin.htm > (Accessed on 6 February 2017).

"raw [and] obscure text" would be "of interest only for professionals in Arabic studies", Polosin believed.[46] He also rejected another well-known Qurʾān translation by the Azerbaijani scholar of religion, El'mir Kuliev (b. 1975).[47] Kuliev's work, according to Polosin, is "incomprehensible for a Russian-speaking reader" and "horrible to the ear", because Kuliev – "an adherent of the literalist method" – did not adapt the Arabic text to the Russian context.[48] For Polosin, a formal or literal translation, which pays more attention to wording than to sense, is problematic because it fails to produce the same effects as the source text, and often leads to misunderstandings.[49]

In Polosin's view, a Russian translation of the Qurʾān should not only please a native speaker's eyes and ears; its content must also accord with the Russian system of values and allow no room for misinterpretation by the enemies of Islam. For instance, one of the epithets that the Qurʾān gives to Allāh is "mocking" and "the greatest Schemer" (Q 2:14-15 and Q 3:54); taken out of context, these titles have negative connotations and Christian missionaries often contrast them with images of the all-loving and all-forgiving Christian God. For Polosin, the blame for such misrepresentations lies with Qurʾān translators. In his article "How to transmit the Qurʾān in another language", Polosin compares lexical choices in verses Q 2:14 and Q 3:54 across the three most frequently cited Russian translations (by Kuliev, Krachkovskii and Porokhova) and discusses the "safest" options. Table 1 juxtaposes these translation variants and compares them with two variants of the Qurʾān in English, by Muhammad A. S. Abdel Haleem and Abdullah Yusuf Ali.[50] I chose the latter because Polosin regarded the work of this British-Indian scholar as a "correct" translation of the Qurʾān – even if, taken out of context, it cannot be used to support claims against Islam.[51] This Deobandi translation, accompanied by the author's

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[46] V.A. Polosin, "Otvet A. Kuraevu. Bibliia, Koran i Beslan...", *Islam.Ru*, 24 September 2004 <https://after-kuraev.livejournal.com/101098.html> (Accessed on 29 January 2018).

[47] Kuliev, *Koran. Perevod smyslov i kommentarii*.

[48] Polosin, "Metodicheskie zamechaniia k perevodu Korana".

[49] In this regard, Polosin's argumentation is close to that of Al-Tarawneh on English translations of the Qurʾān, who argues that the translator's role is to ensure that the Qurʾānic concepts are understood in the target language as they are in the source language. See A. Al-Tarawneh, "Re-examining Islamic Evaluative Concepts in English Translations of the Quran: Friendship, Justice and Retaliation", in *Translating Values: Evaluative Concepts in Translation*, ed. P. Blumczynski and J. Gillespie (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 101-22.

[50] Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*; A.Y. Ali, *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation & Commentary* (Lahore: Sh. M. Ashraf, 1983).

[51] Polosin, "Kak peredat' Koran na drugom iazyke"; also V.A. Polosin, "Iavliaiutsia li 'khitrost'' i 'izdevatel'stvo' atributami Allakha?," *Medina al'-Islam* 56:15-21 February 2008, 5.

commentaries and a detailed index, has been popular among apologists of Islam; in particular, it served as a reference book for South African Muslim missionary Ahmed Deedat (1918-2005).[52] Polosin's support of Abdullah Y. Ali's work may also explain why this translation was adopted as a basis for the Qurʾān in Russian, published by DUM RF in 2015 (see discussion in Section 3.3.1).[53]

On the question of the "cunning" nature of Allāh, Polosin examines the translation of verse Q 2:15. He cites Krachkovskii, who translates *āya* as "Allāh will mock (*poizdevaetsia*) them", which, according to Polosin, is an "extremely poor (*neudachnyi*)" variant; it means that God may assault someone directly. The translation suggested by Krachkovskii resembles the text by Abdel Haleem in English ("mocking them").

	Abdel Haleem	Ali	Krachkovskii	Porokhova
2:15	God is **mocking them** […]	Allāh will **throw back their mockery on them** […]	Allāh **will mock them** (*poizdevaietsia*) […]	But Allāh **will turn their jeering** (*nasmeshki*) **against them**
	Abdel Haleem	Ali	Krachkovskii	Kuliev
8:30	They schemed and so did God: He is **the best of schemers**	They plot and plan, and Allāh too plans; but **the best of planners** is Allāh.	And they contrive, but Allāh also contrives; Allāh is **the Best of contrivers** (*luchshii iz ukhitriaiushchikhsiia*).	And they schemed, but Allāh also schemed; Allāh is **the best of schemers** (*nailuchshii iz khitretsov*)

Table 1. Translation variants of Q 2:15 and Q 8:30 in Russian and English

Polosin gives Porokhova's variant – "will turn their jeering against them (*obratit protiv*)" – as the correct translation. In his opinion, Allāh does not feel the desire to mock, but merely "mirrors" unbelievers' behaviour. A similar approach is found in Ali's English translation, which reads "Allāh will throw back their mockery on them" (see Table 1).

Another argument frequently used by critics of Islam is that, according the Qurʾān, Allāh secretly makes plans that may be harmful for believers (Q 8:30). Commenting on the respective verse, Polosin argues that the word *khitrets* ('schemer') in itself does not have negative connotations, but may acquire them within a certain context. He notes that even Jesus, in some Christian texts in Church Slavonic, is called

[52] A. Deedat, *Christ in Islam* (New Delhi: Islamic Da'wah Centre, 1991); *What the Bible Says about Muhammed* (Los Gatos: Smashwords Edition, 2012); *Muhammed: The Natural Successor to Christ* (Adam Publishers & Distributors, 1992).

[53] DUM RF, *Sviashchennyi Koran. S kommentariiami Abdully Iusufa Ali*.

vsekhitrets, i.e. 'the deviser of all'.[54] However, Polosin denounces Kuliev's variant – "the best of schemers"– as "a very grave mistake". Krachkovskii's variant – "the best of contrivers" – he considers "doubtful in terms of style", but an accurate translation from a theological perspective. [55] The Russian verb *ukhitrit'sia* has mainly positive connotations, as it means 'to manage', 'to be lucky to accomplish something', although it is cognate with the words *vsekhitrets* and *khitrost'* ('cunning'). Similar variations are also found in the analysed English translations. Although the word 'schemer', which Abdel Haleem uses, may not immediately invoke negative connotations, Ali preferred to use the word 'planner' as a "safer" translation variant.

By selecting and opting for what he saw as "optimal" translation variants, Polosin aimed to minimize "foreignness" of Islam in the eyes of an ordinary Russian citizen and to make it "bullet-proof" against Christian critics. This also links to Polosin's advocacy of the use of Russian for the Islamic mission, *daʿwā.*

For Polosin, *daʿwā* was not the same as proselytism, which he defined as "luring a believer away from one religion to another", often in a forced way; rather, he saw it as an "invitation" to Islam. The former priest did not use either the Arabic word *daʿwā* or its common Russian translation *islamskii prizyv* 'call to Islam'. Instead, he proposes the word *priglashenie* 'invitation'; the latter, in his opinion, does not "sound bellicose" and has no "element of coercion".[56] Polosin repeatedly appeared in public disputes with Orthodox missionaries, such as Daniil Sysoev (Chapter 6), where he claimed to represent Russia's entire Muslim community. He also adopted new media technologies with the aim of delivering *daʿwā* activities effectively. Prior to Polosin's media appearances, there were already numerous grassroots initiatives on Russian-language Islamic forums and web platforms, which shared video sermons of foreign Muslim missionaries with subtitles or voice-overs in Russian. Although Polosin used the experience of foreign charismatic religious figures, such as Ahmed Deedat (1918-2005) and Hamza Yusuf (b. 1960), in his argumentation and persuasion strategies, he attempted to apply their methods within the social context of post-Soviet Russia. For instance, he dedicated one of his books to Deedat,[57] but at the same time argued that

[54] See, for instance, Sunday Ochtoechos, Tone 7, Ode 9. Available at <http://st-sergius.org/services/services-2.html> (Accessed on 6 February 2018).
[55] Polosin, "Kak peredat' Koran na drugom iazyke".
[56] V.A. Polosin, "Kakim dolzhno byt' priglashenie v islam?". Video, distributed by *Al'-Vasatyia*, 2013 (Accessed on 18 July 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2QcOyK4eAw>), 0:30-1:02.
[57] See Polosin, *Priamoi Put' k Bogu*.

Deedat's strategy of "trampling" the Christian opponents would bring more harm than good to any theological dispute in Russia.[58]

Polosin's books and videos caused much public discontent. Patriarch-to-be Kirill (Gundiaev), who at that time headed the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, called Polosin's publications "a blasphemous anti-Christian attack"; and the Council of Orthodox Citizens (*Soiuz pravoslavnykh grazhdan*) accused the former priest of promoting a "fiery *jihād*".[59] This, coupled with Polosin's participation in disputes against Sysoev, increased the confrontation between the ROC and Gainutdin's umbrella organizations, with which Polosin was directly associated. After 2003 Polosin gradually softened his critique of the ROC and Orthodox Christianity.

In many respects, Polosin's efforts to "russify" Islam in the early 2000s resemble the "Russian Islam" project of Sergei Gradirovskii, who was an advisor to Volga Federal District chief Sergei Kirienko (b. 1962).[60] Both Polosin and Gradirovskii attempted to frame the renaissance of Islam in Russia as a specifically Russian-speaking phenomenon. Back in 2002, Gradirovskii's project stated that the use of the Russian language by Muslims is not just a pragmatic response to communication challenges, but the development of an entirely new "community of identity", "the Russian-speaking *umma*".[61] In fact, Gradirovskii aimed to foster the development of "an Islam of Russian culture" (*russkokul'turnyi islam*).[62] Both Gradirovskii's and Polosin's interpretation of Russia's Islam assume an accelerated modernization of the Muslim community, where the authority of small mosque communities with *imām*s preaching in national languages will be replaced by a unified Russian-language discourse on the "correct" forms of Islamic practice. Ultimately, Gradirovskii's project caused a heated debate among Russian Muslims, especially in Tatarstan, who saw it as an attempt to russify ethnic minorities and to create an official "Russian Islam" that does not protect the interests of

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[58] V.A. Polosin, "Kak musul'mane otnosiatsia k Akhmadu Didatu i ego lektsiiam?", *Forum Slovo*, 28 August 2009 <http://forum-slovo.ru/index.php?topic=6835.5;wap2> (Accessed on 29 January 2018).

[59] Sova, "Ali Polosin i Ravil' Gainutdin obviniaiut RPTS v prozelitizme", *Sova-Tsentr*, 5 March 2003 <http://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/interfaith/christian-islam/2003/03/d150/> (Accessed on 25 April 2017).

[60] As of 2017, Kirienko holds office as the deputy head of the Kremlin administration; Gradirovskii's most recent affiliation is membership of the Expert Council under the Russian government. See, e.g., E. Rykovtseva, "Pod diktovku Kremlia", *Radio Svoboda*, 21 February 2017 <https://www.svoboda.org/a/28323367.html> (Accessed on 12 June 2018).

[61] Graney, "'Russian Islam' and the Politics of Religious Multiculturalism in Russia", pp. 104-05.

[62] Kemper, "Islamic Theology or Religious Political Technology?".

ethnic Muslims living in the country.[63] As for Polosin's projects, they likewise did not succeed among ethnic Muslims but only among Russian converts, and even then for only a short period of time. In 2006 Polosin's "Priamoi put'" merged with NORM, the National Organization of Russian Muslims (see Chapter 4); this was possible, argues Polosin, because the NORM leadership adhered to a "more Orthodox" form of Islam, which coincided with the ideological orientation of "Priamoi put'".[64] After the conflict with the NORM leadership and emigration of prominent Russian Muslims from Russia to Europe,[65] Polosin dismantled his organization.[66]

5.4 The path of moderation (2007-2015)

In 2006 Polosin travelled to Kuwait to establish contacts with the newly opened al-Wasatiyyah Centre, which to this day functions as a government think tank that aims to vindicate the rhetoric of Islam as the religion of the middle ground (*al-wasaṭiyya*). This ideology has been elaborated by the influential Egyptian Islamic theologian, Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926), and is promoted in the spheres of Islamic education, social norms and culture.[67] Polosin facilitated the opening of the Russian branch of the Centre in Moscow in 2010, which he headed a year later.[68]

Polosin openly states that it was Russia's official Islamic leadership and presidential administration that initiated this rapprochement with Kuwait.[69] The *al-wasaṭiyya* ideology endorsed by a respectful Egyptian theology was envisioned to become a "peaceful" alternative for Russia's Muslims who took an interest in foreign Islamic movements. At the same time, Polosin tried to downplay the political agenda of his travel to Kuwait and argued that negotiations with the al-Wasatiyyah Centre and

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[63] Graney, "'Russian Islam' and the Politics of Religious Multiculturalism in Russia", pp. 104-05.

[64] A. Sharipov, "Ali Polosin: Bolotnaia ne put' k blazhenstvu musul'man", *Islam News*, 4 April 2014 <http://www.islamnews.ru/news-145283.html> (Accessed on 20 February 2017).

[65] On Polosin's conflict with Kharun Sidorov, see R. Silant'ev, *Noveishaia istoriia Islama v Rossii* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2007), pp. 346-48.

[66] Sharipov, "Ali Polosin".

[67] On the principles of *al-waṣatiyya*, see, e.g., M.H. Kamali, *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam: The Qur'anic Principle of Wasatiyyah* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[68] Info-Islam, "Ali Viacheslav Polosin vozglavil rossiiskii Tsentr Al'-Vasatyiia", *Info-Islam*, 30 June 2011 <http://www.info-islam.ru/publ/novosti/rossiya/ali_vjacheslav_polosin_vozglavil_rossijskij_centr_al_-vasatyjja_umerennost_v_islame/1-1-0-8485 > (Accessed on 9 February 2018).

[69] S. Mamii, "Ali-Viacheslav Polosin: 'Tselenapravlennoi raboty po bogoslovskomu razoblacheniiu radikalizma ne bylo'", *Caucasus Times*, 8 July 2012 <http://caucasustimes.com/ru/ali-vjacheslav-polosin-celenapravlen/> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

opening of a branch in Moscow happened with the blessing of Polosin's spiritual mentor – Sheikh Said Chirkeiskii.[70]

The project was supported in Russia by influential political functionaries,[71] as well as by secular academic expertise: Leonid Siukiiainen, Professor of Islamic Law at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, argued that *Sharīʿa* principles understood in accordance with the *al-wasaṭiyya* ideology are not only compatible with Russia's modern socio-political system but even beneficial to it.[72] In 2007 Siukiiainen stated that Russia's Islamic elites demonstrated their inability to offer an official and "convincing" position regarding social and political problems of Russia's Muslim community; instead, they hold on to "traditional" Islam, but its ideological potential is rather limited. It is therefore the task of the state, he continues, to take matters into its own hands and elaborate a meaningful policy on administering Islam in Russia. The experience of some Muslim countries, such as Kuwait, which developed the concept of *al-wasaṭiyya,* could be an example to follow.[73]

Al-wasaṭiyya – translated into Russian as *umerennost'* 'moderation' – was to become a remedy to cure Muslims "who fall into extremes", to bring them back to "*Sharīʿa* and the Qurʾānic understanding of the golden mean".[74] In fact, the project of implementing *al-wasaṭiyya* in Russia was intended to facilitate state control over Muslim communities and to address security threats associated with radical Islam. The state envisioned transplantation of *al-wasaṭiyya* ideology to Russia, and official Islamic elites

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[70] V.A. Polosin, "Komu v Rossii meshaet umerennyi Islam", *Islam News*, 18 December 2017 <https://www.islamnews.ru/news-komu-v-rossii-meshaet-umerennyj-islam/> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

[71] Consider, for instance, statements by Aleksei Grishin (b. 1963) – back then an influential politician in the presidential administration and a self-proclaimed expert on Islam; he actively promoted *al-wasaṭiyya,* arguing that this ideology is "wholly consistent with the ideas of the traditional Islam for Russia", for it is "alien to extremes and radicalism". See Islam News, "Grishin: 'Nel'zia dopustit' diskreditatsii al'-vasatyii'", *Islam News*, 25 May 2011 <https://www.islamnews.ru/news-A.Grishin-Nelzja-dopustit-diskreditacii-al-vasatyji> (Accessed on 30 November 2017).

[72] L. Siukiiainen, "Umerennost' kak strategiia sovremennogo islama", *NG Religii*, 1 March 2006 <http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2006-03-01/4_umerennost.html> (Accessed on 18 July 2018). On Siukiiainen's understanding of *al-wasaṭiyya,* see also S.E. Merati, "Islamic Views of Peace and Conflict among Russia's Muslims", in *Islamic Peace Ethics: Legitimate and Illegitimate Violence in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, ed. H. Shadi (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2017), 163-80.

[73] L. Siukiiainen, "Musul'manskaia pravovaia kul'tura, dukhovnyi potentsial i natsional'naia bezopasnost' Rossii," *Vestnik Evrazii* 3:37 (2007), 22-40.

[74] V.A. Polosin, "Umerennost' – ne znachit passivnost'", *Golos Islama*, 28 September 2012 <https://golosislama.com/news.php?id=11744> (Accessed on 25 April 2017). *Al-wasaṭiyya* ideas have also been used as a political instrument in Central Asia; for instance, the DUM RF cooperated with Uzbek Sheikh Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf (1952-2015) and translated his books on *al-wasaṭiyya* into Russian (edited by Polosin). See, e.g., M.M.S. Yusuf, *Vasatyia – put' zhizni* (Moscow: Khilal, 2010).

were supposed to "interact with reputable scientists of the Islamic world"; with their help, a theological school specific for Russia's Islam could be created.[75] Polosin acknowledged that Russia's DUMs have no political influence over Russia's *umma*: Islamic "administrators" (*administratory*) – heads of various Muslim organizations (DUMs) and centres – do not have any political weight; while "real" Islamic scholars, whom believers would follow, are almost absent in Russia.[76]

In 2012-2015, through the Foundation for the Support of Islamic Culture, Science and Education (*Fond podderzhki islamskoi kul'tury, nauki i obrazovaniia*),[77] of which Polosin has been a board member since 2007, Russia's Islamic leaders cooperated closely with the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS). The IUMS is a Qatar-based theological organization, also founded by al-Qaradawi. In a short period of time, most of the key figures of Russia's official Islam, including the DUM RF leader Ravil' Gainutdin, became members. Polosin explained that such a large delegation from Russia was necessary in order to enable Russia's participation in the discussion of theological documents that are important for the Islamic world, and to make sure that the position of Russia's Muslims is also taken into account.[78]

At the peak of the cooperation between Russia's Islamic elites and the IUMS, several big international conferences with the participation of prominent theologians from the Muslim world took place in Moscow, Dagestan and other regions in Russia with large Muslim populations. To chair these conferences, the Kremlin succeeded in persuading Ali al-Qaradaghi (b. 1949), the Secretary General of IUMS.[79] The cooperation resulted in a series of documents, including the Moscow Theological Declaration (2012), the *fatwā* on Dagestan (2012), the Makhachkala and Nalchik Declarations (2014), as well as "The Social Doctrine of Russia's Muslims" (2015).[80]

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[75] Polosin, "Komu v Rossii meshaet umerennyi Islam".

[76] Mamii, "Ali-Viacheslav Polosin".

[77] The Foundation was, in fact, established as a state-controlled organization to accumulate and redistribute funds transferred to Russian Muslims from Islamic states within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

[78] Polosin, "Komu v Rossii meshaet umerennyi Islam".

[79] M. Vatchagaev, "Qatari Sheikh Becomes Tool for Kremlin in Struggle Against North Caucasus Militants", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 13 November 2014 <https://jamestown.org/program/qatari-sheikh-becomes-tool-for-kremlin-in-struggle-against-north-caucasus-militants-2/> (Accessed on 29 January 2018).

[80] "Moskovskaia Bogoslovskaia Deklaratsiia", 25-26 May 2012; available at www.islamnews.ru/uploads/library/1366634369/library-k6gZiywDGW.pdf; "Fetva o primenimosti termina dar as-sil'm va l'-islam ("territoriia mira i Islama") k Dagestanu i podobnym emu oblastiam", 17 November 2012; available at https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/216435/; "Itogovaia deklaratsiia Mezhdunarodnoi bogoslovskoi konferentsii "Rossiiskie musul'mane: prava i obiazannosti"", 6 March 2014; available at www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/241091/; "Itogovaia deklaratsiia Mezhdunarodnoi mezhkonfessional'noi nauchnoi

Polosin not only headed the organization committees for these conferences but is also believed to have contributed to drafting these documents, which were envisioned as cornerstones for creating a corpus of Islamic legal documents in the Russian language, justifying compatibility of the Russian secular legislation with the principles of Muslim law.

5.4.1 The doctrines of Russia's Islam

The purpose of the numerous declarations was to answer the cornerstone issue in the life of Muslims in the Russian Federation, namely: how Muslims who live in a Russian secular state, and consider themselves its loyal citizens, should follow the norms prescribed by Islam. The Moscow Declaration aimed to give theologically "correct" interpretations of the controversial concepts of '*jihād*' and 'caliphate', and of certain *Sharīʿa* norms, in order to "deprive the [Islamic] extremists of their ideological basis"; the latter, argues Polosin, often use these terms taken from the Qurʾān and Sunna to justify radical actions.[81] The conference organizers presented the Moscow Declaration as a valuable document not only for Russia, but for the entire Islamic World, on a par with the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (1990).[82]

The conferences in Makhachkala in 2012 and 2014 declared Dagestan to be *dār al-Islām*, the "territory of Islam," thereby forbidding *jihād* in the region as contravening Islamic norms. Later the Stavropol region was also included in the "territory of Islam". These region-specific declarations were made to support the local Muslim spiritual leaders in these "problematic" regions. The organizers hoped that the authority of Sheikh Ali al-Qaradaghi and *fatwā*s issued under his leadership would be suitable means to control the part of the Muslim community that did not recognize the authority of the local official Muslim clergy.[83]

In 2015, the DUM RF issued the major document "The Social Doctrine of Russia's Muslims". The document was a follow-up to the previous "Basic Provisions of the

konferentsii: "Traditsionnye religii: prizyv k umerennosti i k dobrososedstvu"", 30 October 2014; available at http://islamfund.ru/news-view-2467.html; "Sotsial'naia doktrina rossiiskikh musul'man", 14 June 2015; available at http://islam-today.ru/socialnaa-doktrina-rossijskih-musulman/. All resources accessed on 20 February 2018.

[81] Polosin, "Komu v Rossii meshaet umerennyi Islam".

[82] M. Rasulov, "Dzhikhad, khalifat i takfir. Kak v Rossii vybivali pochvu iz-pod nog radikalov", *Islam News*, 6 June 2017 <https://www.islamnews.ru/news-dzhihad-halifat-i-takfir-kak-v-rossii-v/> (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

[83] A. Malashenko, *Russia and the Arab Spring* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2013), pp. 17-18; Vatchagaev, "Qatari Sheikh Becomes Tool for Kremlin in Struggle Against North Caucasus Militants".

Social Program of Russia's Muslims" (*Osnovnye polozhenia sotsial'noi programmy rossiiskikh musul'man*) from 2001. Polosin drafted both documents, which aimed at "the inclusion of Islam as a social institution into the life of Russian society on a partnership basis".[84] Whereas the 2001 document primarily addressed questions related to Muslim life within a new, post-Soviet political system, the 2015 doctrine followed the provisions of Putin's "Ufa Theses" (see Chapter 3) and instructed Muslims on "socialization" within Russian mainstream society.

These documents, according to Polosin, also clarify the attitude of Russia's Muslims toward the Russian state and society; they are to show that "we [Russia's Muslims] harbour no evil plans to create another ISIS" in Russia. Moreover, the documents explain Islamic theology in "a social language that can be understood by secular people".[85]

Like similar Church documents, the Islamic doctrines were not so much about theological questions or teachings of individual thinkers; rather, they offered a codified and institutionalized position of the religious elites. It was also mandatory for the leading Muftis, and for *imām*s and teachers of Islamic educational institutions, to sign most of the documents. A refusal to sign could be interpreted as disagreement with the statements, which at best signalled unpatriotic views but could also be interpreted as support for "non-traditional" forms of Islam – an accusation that in present-day Russia leads to severe consequences.[86] For the Russian state, these documents were to be regarded as an authoritative expert opinion on Islamic issues.

Polosin clearly demonstrated a drastic change of his political views – while he presented himself in his early publications as an outspoken critic of the Church-state rapprochement, by 2015 he declared his support of the regime. He condemned the

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[84] R.R. Abbiasov, "Evoliutsiia programmnykh dokumentov rossiiskikh musul'man: ot sotsial'noi programmy k sotsial'noi doktrine," *Islam v sovremennom mire* 12:2 (2016), 127-34. Here p. 128. The "Social Doctrine" remained largely unnoticed by Muslims: as of 2014, a survey showed that about 85% of Muslims were not aware of its existence, see ibid., p. 129.

[85] V.A. Polosin, "Tainyi sheikh skazal mne: 'U tebia musul'manskie glaza, ty stanesh' musul'maninom'", *Business-Online*, 12 September 2016 <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/322390> (Accessed on 25 April 2017). Compare with Gainutdin's linguistic strategies described in Chapter 3 and Agadjanian's comment on the language of Patriarch Kirill: "Kirill sets forth a mission of 'translation' – in terms which strikingly remind one of the 'translation proviso' that Habermas developed upon the Rawlsian theory of public reason […]. His discussion of 'the eternal truth of the gospels' – a 'comprehensive doctrine' in Rawlsian parlance – should be expressed 'in intelligible terms' which would give 'a clear response to the challenges of our time'". See Agadjanian, "Tradition, Morality and Community", p. 40.

[86] Golos Islama, "Polosin: nepodpisanie nashei doktriny - 'signal'", *Golos Islama*, 8 September 2015 <https://golosislama.com/news.php?id=27702> (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

participation of Muslims in the Bolotnaia protests of 2011-2013, when a group of ethnic Russian converts to Islam joined the mass demonstrations criticizing the state for restricting the rights and freedoms of Russia's Muslims.[87] Polosin justified the Kremlin's policies as the only effective way to protect Russia against security threats and to rescue the country from an imminent collapse. Therefore, Polosin argues, those in opposition to President Putin are, in fact, Russia's enemies who aspire to make Russia "Europe and America's resource colony" (*syr'evoi pridatok*). Polosin uses a popular discourse trope on "the global war against Russia", in which demonstrations on Bolotnaia Square in Moscow are interpreted as an attempt by the West to undermine the country's power and integrity. For Polosin, "no matter what kind of *niiat* [intention] they have", Muslims who join demonstrations immediately become participants in this war, but on the enemy's side.[88]

5.5 Defining the "right" Muslims (2016-present)

The project of cooperation with Yusuf al-Qaradawi and the IUMS became a burden after affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood won elections in Egypt and Tunisia, and the Syrian crisis broke out in 2011. In 2012 al-Qaradawi, who is currently based in Qatar and is *de facto* the spiritual guide for the Muslim Brotherhood, denounced Russia as "enemy no.1" of the global Muslim community because of President Putin's support for the Syrian regime. In 2017 Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain launched an unprecedented campaign to isolate Qatar – al-Qaradawi's base – diplomatically and economically because of the country's links to the Muslim Brotherhood. Russia, which has economic relations with all of these countries, was again put into a difficult position. Even by the time of Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015, Polosin and Russia's Islamic leaders associated with the IUMS were having to downplay their connections with the organization.

In this period, the former priest also distanced himself from the Moscow-based DUM RF, siding instead with Gainutdin's competitor, the DUM of Chechnya, under the control of Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the republic. In 2016, the capital of Chechnya, Grozny, hosted a conference that received the explicit support of the Russian president and was co-organized by the Abu Dhabi-based Tabah Foundation. The latter is believed

[87] D. Kalder, "Russian Court Bans Qur'an Translation", *The Guardian*, 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/oct/08/russian-court-bans-quran-translation> (Accessed on 20 February 2017).
[88] Sharipov, "Ali Polosin".

to have come into existence to counter al-Qaradawi's IUMS.[89] The Grozny conference adopted a *fatwā* that was meant to consolidate Russia's Islam by excluding extremists; instead, it resulted in a deeper rift in Russia's Islamic leadership. The *fatwā* gives a definition of the *ahl al-sunna wal-jamāʿa*, 'people of Tradition and Consensus'; according to the document, "the sole true adherents of traditional Islam are those who abide by *kalām* scholastic theology, belong to one of the four legal schools, and follow the path of moral self-perfection espoused by the great teachers, primarily the Sufi sheikhs".[90] The Salafī strain of Sunni Islam was interpreted as a "dangerous and erroneous contemporary sect", along with the extremist group Islamic State, Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Ḥabashīs.[91] Not only al-Qaradawi's IUMS criticized the conference as "a shameful attempt to sow dissent within the Muslim community";[92] Kadyrov's connections with Saudi Arabia, where Salafism is a dominant stream, were also at stake and the Chechen president had to personally meet with leaders in the Arab world to offer his explanations.[93]

Russia's largest Islamic organizations, the TsDUM and DUM RF denounced the Grozny *fatwā* and refused to sign it. The critics argued that the document did not take a step toward reconciliation of the Islamic administrations within Russia's *umma*, which the conference organizers thought it would, but, to the contrary, increased the existing polarization between the DUM RF and Ramzan Kadyrov's DUM in Chechnya.[94] For Polosin, the Grozny conference marked the break with the Moscow DUM – the former priest publicly defended the propositions of the *fatwā* against the criticism expressed by Gainutdin and his allies, thereby taking the Chechen side in the conflict.[95]

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[89] J. Dorsey, "Fighting for the Soul of Islam: A Battle of the Paymasters", *Huffington Post*, 29 September 2016 <www.huffingtonpost.com/james-dorsey/fighting-for-the-soul-of_b_12259312.html> (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

[90] L. Fuller, "Analysis: Grozny Fatwa on 'True Believers' Triggers Major Controversy", *Radio Liberty*, 14 September 2016 <https://www.rferl.org/a/caucasus-report-grozny-fatwa-controversy/27987472.html> (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] L. Merenkova, "Kadyrovskaia fetva: istoriia ne zakonchena", *Kavkaz Realii*, 6 December 2016 <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/chelobitnaya-kadyrova-istoriya-ne-okonchena/28157353.html> (Accessed on 12 June 2018).

[94] D. Akhmetova, "Smuta iz-za odnoi fetvy", *NG Religii*, 7 December 2016 <www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2016-12-07/7_411_fetva.html> (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

[95] R. Silant'ev, "Groznyi obvinil Gainutdina v potakanii vakhkhabitam", *NG-religii*, 5 October 2016 <http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2016-10-05/1_grozniy.html> (Accessed on 8 May 2018); A. Abuarkub, "Strasti po fetve: otvet Ali Polosina Mukaddasu Bibarsovu", *Islam News*, 14 September 2016 <https://www.islamnews.ru/news-ali-polosin-groznenskaya-fetva-prizvana-zashhitit-musulman/> (Accessed on 8 May 2018).

5.6 Conclusion

Throughout the two decades since his conversion in the late 1990s, Polosin has demonstrated flexibility in adapting to the changing political climate. He has established and maintained ties with official Islamic institutions at the federal level as well as grassroots organizations, which often pursued opposite agendas (e.g., Gainutdin's DUM RF and NORM; DUM RF and DUM of Chechnya).

In the first decade after his conversion, Polosin advocated and, through his publications, contributed to the vernacularization of Islamic discourse in order to make it more understandable to those who have the "Russian mentality". His early projects of the Russian(-speaking) *umma* resonate with the one advocated by Gradirovskii (2002), while both of them predicted an inevitable growth in the political clout of Russia's Muslim population and suggested ways of integrating Russian-speaking Muslims into mainstream society. At this stage, Polosin tried to bring Islam and Russianness closer together, using strategies that were discussed in Chapter 3 with the example of Mufti Gainutdin. Polosin also attempted to "de-foreignize" Islam with the help of linguistic tools – by making this religion accessible and acceptable to ethnic Russians through "correct" translations of the Qurʾān and enrooting Islam in Russian history and culture. At this point, however, Polosin's ideological standpoints were also close to the position of the NORM leadership: his early interpretation of Russian Islam aimed to advance the role of ethnic Russians whose emancipation and development, the former priest believed, could be achieved through conversion to Islam.

During President Putin's second, and especially third term, Polosin's ideas moved from the ideological margins closer to the centre of mainstream discourse and he attracted the attention of the political elites. He now had to downplay his critical stance against the Church and the political regime; in exchange, he gained resources and authority to work within structures that monitor and govern Russia's Islamic community and its leaders. He turned into the *éminence grise* behind the Kremlin's efforts to support the authority of local spiritual directorates. Polosin's interpretation of Russian Islam in this period focused primarily on the compatibility of Islamic law and way of living with Russia's secular legislation. By hosting conferences with internationally recognized religious leaders, Polosin contributed to the creation of a series of documents that were supposed to provide Russia's Muslims with theological guidelines that did not contradict Russia's "traditional" values.

During this period, Polosin pushes for more far-reaching "churchification" of Islam (see Chapter 3), by insisting on the institutionalization of Muslim organizations as "corporations under public law".[96] He coordinates projects that urge Muslim leaders

[96] Vinding, "Churchification of Islam in Europe", p. 61.

to fit Islam into structural standards that build on the existing church and state relations in Russia. The ideology of *al-wasaṭiyya*, although imported from abroad, in fact provides the framework into which Muslims are expected to fit in order to be recognized and integrated according to the Russian paradigm of administering religions. However, as Niels V. Vinding rightly argues concerning the example of European Muslim communities, "it seems [that] the standards Muslims are expected to meet are impossible and the possibility of institutional recognition no more than a bar that keeps moving up".[97] In fact, one could question whether, in the current political context in Russia, one could still be both a "good" Muslim and a "good" Russian: because only those Muslim organizations that are willing to transform themselves and conform to Christian standards, which is something practically non-Islamic, can be regarded as "traditional" – that is, "good" – Muslims; whereas being a truly "Russian Muslim", as the analysis in the previous chapter has shown, entails racialization of religion and advocacy of ethnic nationalism. Moreover, attempts to institutionalize Islam and fit it into the model of the ROC only have the effect of furthering disunity in the Muslim community.

Efforts to create and define Islam that is *russkii*, in the broad meaning of the word, also cause much concern in the ROC's conservative camp, which contested the very possibility of a Muslim being *russkii*. Some argued that no religion other than Orthodoxy can be Russian, and the attempts to create a *russkii* Islam were merely provocations by "liberal" Muslim movements that pursued political goals.[98] Such arguments also resonated with the leaders of ethnic Muslim communities, who perceived the projects of Polosin and Gradirovskii as top-down initiatives by the Russian state to russify ethnic minorities.[99]

The very fact that religion is exclusive when associated with a particular ethnic identity became an issue that some Orthodox missionaries operating on the fringe of the ROC tried to address. The following chapter will present a case study of the priest Daniil Sysoev, who openly opposed (ethno)nationalist use of Orthodox Christianity and argued that it becomes an obstacle for the development of genuine religiosity and prevents non-Russians from discovering the word of God.

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[97] Ibid. For a representative case of *verkirchlichung* (churchification) of Islam in Germany, see G. Jonker, "Muslim Emancipation? Germany's Struggle over Religious Pluralism", in *Religious Freedom and the Neutrality of the State: The Position of Islam in the European Union*, ed. W.A.R. Shadid and S. van Koningsveld (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2002).

[98] M. Rebrova, "Russkii Islam", *Naslednik,* 2016 <www.naslednick.ru/archive/rubric/rubric_7527.html> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

[99] M. Laruelle, "How Islam Will Change Russia", *The Jamestown Foundation,* 13 September 2016 <https://jamestown.org/program/marlene-laruelle-how-islam-will-change-russia/> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

Part II

The Tatar Language of Christianity