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Gulnaz Sibgatullina

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Translating Islam into the language of the Russian state and the Orthodox Church

Gulnaz Sibgatullina 

Leiden University Centre for Linguistics, Leiden, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This contribution analyses the discursive strategies exercised by Russia's state-appointed Islamic authorities. It draws on a linguistic corpus that consists of speeches and sermons by Mufti Ravil' Gainutdin, the head of a major Muslim Spiritual Directorate in Moscow. A multi-levelled analysis shows that the mufti's lexical and rhetorical choices correspond to the discourse of the Russian Orthodox Church elites. This affinity is a discursive strategy that allows Gainutdin to position himself as the authoritative leader of Russia's Islamic community and to construct Islam as Russia's 'familiar' and 'traditional' religion.

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Introduction

This paper analyses how Russia's official Islamic institutions that operate at the federal level contribute to the conventionalisation of the Russian language as the new *lingua franca* of Islamic discourse in the country (Bustanov and Kemper 2012, 2013). Using as an example the speeches and sermons by Mufti Ravil' Gainutdin, the head of a major Muslim Spiritual Directorate in Moscow, this study explores the lexical and discursive strategies that Russia's Islamic leadership uses to participate in public debate.

Ravil' Gainutdin, born in 1959 in the Tatar Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic, belongs to the old generation of the 'turbaned' Islamic elites who received their training from Soviet Islamic institutions in the last decade of the Union's existence. In 1984, Gainutdin graduated from the Mir-i 'Arab *madrassa* in Bukhara. Since its creation in 1994, he chairs the Moscow-based Spiritual Directorate of Muslims (since 2014 *Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, henceforth: DUM RF). Both the DUM RF and the Council of Muftis of Russia (*Sovet muftiev Rossii*, est. in 1996; henceforth: SMR) – another large umbrella organisation under Gainutdin's leadership – claim to represent Russia's Muslim community as a whole and act as the official Islamic authority in the country. But since religious institutions are heavily dependent on political and financial backing from the Russian state, and Gainutdin's personal relationship with the high-ranks in President Putin's administration has been vulnerable to vicissitudes, the mufti still cannot secure a firm grip on power. His position as head of Russia's *umma* is challenged by Talgat Tadzhuiddin, the leader of another federal muftiate (TsDUM), and by the chairs of the regional spiritual directorates (Bustanov

CONTACT Gulnaz Sibgatullina  g.sibgatullina@hum.leidenuniv.nl  Leiden University Centre for Linguistics, Leiden, The Netherlands

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and Kemper 2017; Kemper 2012). For the purposes of this contribution, it is relevant to note, however, that Mufti Gainutdin's discourse does not merely represent the position of an individual religious leader; he voices the standpoints of two influential official Islamic establishments – the DUM RF and SMR – with hundreds of local and regional affiliated organisations. Therefore, his style of speech, statements and rhetorical strategies potentially give direction to Russia's official Islamic discourse and function as examples that lower ranks of the Islamic elites tend to emulate.

One of the main features of Gainutdin's speech in Russian is that he tends to translate original Islamic terminology. A strong reason for the Islamic elites to use Russian, which is purified of Arabic and Persian borrowings, is that it constitutes a language that can be understood by the majority of the Russian-speaking Muslim community; that is, it is used to reach out to believers who may not be familiar with Islamic terminology, but also to Russian speakers who live outside Russia. Moreover, Gainutdin also addresses Russia's non-Muslim population and, most importantly, the state. The need for the official Islamic discourse to be transparent and understandable to the state goes back to the practices introduced by Empress Catherine the Great, who created the very institution of state-appointed Islamic leaders by establishing the first Imperial Muftiate in 1788. In the Soviet Union, although Islamic officials wrote primarily in ethnic vernaculars, their communication with secular authorities had to be conducted in Russian, not to mention the regular translations into Russian of all official documents issued by the muftiates, so that the Communist Party could survey their content. In the post-Soviet context, where numerous muftiates have been in competition for power and recognition, the language that communicates embeddedness in the mainstream discourse on religion also yields political advantages.

Gainutdin's Islamic Russian draws primarily on translation – a translingual adaptation of sacred terminology derived from Arabic or Islamic vernaculars to Russian. Some terms are easily translatable and find common acceptance, while for others, there is a wide spectrum of possible translations. By opting for a full translation of Islamic terminology into Russian, Gainutdin prioritises the domestication (sometimes referred to as 'acculturation') translation strategy. The concept of 'domestication', first formulated by translation theorist Lawrence Venuti as opposed to 'foreignisation', indicates the assimilation of a text to the target cultural and linguistic values, whereby the signs of otherness are blurred and disguised (Venuti 1995; also Bassnett 2014, 47). In the Russian context, this strategy minimises the perception that Islamic discourse is inherently 'foreign' to the Russian culture; it also helps construct an image of 'familiar', 'peaceful', that is Russia's 'traditional', Islam. By and large, translation here is not so much a technical act of communication between two languages, but more of a complex negotiation between two cultures – Russian and non-Russian (i.e. Islamic, ethnic minority culture). These cultures are not equally powerful and it is the Islamic elites who have to adapt their texts to the specific readership – high-ranking politicians, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) clergy, the Russian ethnic majority – according to the norms defined by that readership. It is my hypothesis that by formulating an identity that is acceptable to the dominant culture, the translator – in this case, the mufti – uses only those texts, words and symbols that help construct a positive image of Islamic culture. Obviously, such practices involve intense manipulation and simplification for the sake of gaining recognition by the dominant culture.

Data and method

In the following two sections, I examine the discourse of Mufti Gainutdin using methods of qualitative discourse analysis in order to reveal and explain the symbolic power of certain linguistic (e.g. lexical and style choices) and rhetorical practices. These methods draw upon the theoretical works of Foucault (1980) who argued that language is instrumental in constructing ‘regimes of truth’ – a set of established assumptions about what is right and wrong. I use Fairclough’s (1992) three-step approach: 1) text analysis; 2) study of discourse practice (context of the statements); and 3) analysis of social practice (relation to broader discourses and ideologies).

The first part analyses the lexical characteristics of Gainutdin’s discourse; thereby, the focus lies on Gainutdin’s choice of particular religious terms. The analysis is based on data from a linguistic corpus that consists of 70 texts authored by Mufti Gainutdin. These texts were written and published in the period between 2001 and 2017 and include the mufti’s conference presentations, open letters to public figures and transcripts of Friday sermons. They have been randomly selected from the official website of the Council of Muftis (www.muslim.ru) and analysed using the software Sketch Engine (Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery 2013; Pearce 2008). It is important to note that the language corpus comprises only the mufti’s texts in Russian and does not include his few publications available in Tatar. This part also introduces some arguments from scholarly discussions in favour of and against translating Islamic religious terms into Russian. Reference to academic discourse and expertise is one of the tools that helps Gainutdin justify his linguistic practices.

The second part of this contribution analyses Gainutdin’s landmark ‘*Rozhdestvenskoe poslanie*’ (Gainutdin 2015). *Poslanie* (message) was delivered on 27 January 2015 on the occasion of Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. This part examines Gainutdin’s rhetorical strategies, namely how the mufti employs religious reasoning and authority to enter public debate. Here, I analyse two examples of Gainutdin’s references to other prominent discourses: first, his evocation of the popular image of the West as the enemy challenging Russia’s integrity and security; and second, Gainutdin’s adaptation of the state- and church-supported narrative on Russia’s ‘traditional religions’ and ‘traditional values’ (e.g. du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy 2018; Kovalskaya 2013).

Lexical aspects

The analysis of the selected linguistic corpus shows that Gainutdin frequently replaces original Islamic terminology in Arabic and Persian with what he perceives as its Russian equivalent. Based on the frequency with which Arabic and Persian loanwords and their Russian equivalents occur in the analysed corpus,¹ the following examples illustrate and discuss the main strategies used to translate Islamic terms into Russian.

Key terms of the Islamic tradition have become already conventional in Russian so their meanings are familiar to the broader public, including non-Muslim audiences. Nevertheless, in Gainutdin’s speeches, Arabic and Persian loanwords are used interchangeably with, or fully replaced by, concepts borrowed from the Church-Slavonic lexicon: for example, *namāz* is rendered as *molitva* (prayer), *hajj* as *palomnichestvo* (pilgrimage). Although these non-Islamic variants often refer to shared concepts

among all Abrahamic religions, their semantic fields in some cases do not cover the whole range of meanings that are present in the original Arabic or Persian words. For instance, the Russian *molitva* does not make a distinction and is used for both *namāz*, which stands for obligatory ritual prayer, and *du‘ā* – a general term for an act of supplication.

Translation, rather than simple transliteration, of Islamic terminology into Russian yields tangible advantages for the speaker. We have to keep in mind that Gainutdin’s audience includes not only Muslims, but also a large number of non-Muslims, many of whom are not familiar with Arabic terms and Islamic theology. To make sure that the broader public accepts his messages, the mufti avoids ‘foreign’ words and thereby deconstructs the image of Islam as the religion of the Other.

It is also noteworthy that Gainutdin prefers to use Orthodox Christian vocabulary instead of introducing or coining confession-neutral terms. There are two possible explanations for this. The strategy could be an attempt to emphasise the theological closeness between Islam and Orthodox Christianity, where, as the mufti suggests, key notions are full synonyms across languages. Another explanation could be hidden in the symbolic value of Orthodox Christian vocabulary: it is often etymologically linked to Church Slavonic, which many Orthodox Christians perceive as the ‘sacred’ language of the ROC. That is, the use of a religious language is seen as a sacred act in itself and a form of religious expression (Liddicoat 2012, 122). Thus, when the mufti uses Church Slavonic terms, he elevates the status of his speeches. Also, one could argue that the ‘sacredness’ of Church Slavonic words transmits the symbolic value of original Islamic terms in Arabic, which also enjoys the status of the sacred language in Islam.

The pitfall of this strategy is of a theological nature since the terms selected to render Arabic words fail to communicate the variety of meanings associated with the original Islamic concepts. The mufti suggests that Islam bears a close resemblance to the Orthodox Christian theological tradition, although he does not further elaborate on this. For instance, Gainutdin uses the Arabic word *Allāh* [455] interchangeably with Church-Slavonic concepts, such as *Bog* [35] (God), *Gospod’* [56] (Lord), *Tvorets* [41] and *Sozdatel’* [34] (Creator). Interestingly, the word *Vsevyshnii* [231] (Exalted), which in Soviet dictionaries was still regarded as part of the Church lexicon, has been completely forced into the Islamic discourse, since ROC spokesmen barely use it today. Gainutdin also introduces phrases like *edinyi i edinstvennyi Bog* [4] (the single and only God), to restrict semantic fields associated with the word *Bog* in Russian and not to include the concept of the Holy Trinity.

The word *Koran* [158] (Quran) is another key Islamic term, which in Gainutdin’s texts is often rendered by Orthodox Christian notions, some of which bear additional exclusively Christian meanings. For instance, the mufti translates the word as *Zakon* (*Vsevyshnego/Boga/Allah*) [3] (Law of God), *Zavet* [2] (Covenant), *Slovo Bozh’e* [1] (Word of God). Using the Russian forms *Zakon* and *Zavet*, Gainutdin attempts to situate the Quran in the series of agreements made between God and the human race; for Orthodox Christian speakers of Russian, however, these words primarily refer to the New Covenant (*Novyi Zavet*) that replaced the Old Covenant described in the Old Testament (*Vetkhii Zavet*). In his speeches, the mufti obviously does not dwell on the relationship between the New Testament and the Quran, although Gainutdin’s critics could argue that he implicitly suggests that the Quran must enjoy greater importance, as it was delivered after the

New Testament and, as Muslims believe, through God's last Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad.² Gainutdin does not use these terms too often, perhaps realising that he risks arousing resentment. More frequently, we encounter 'safer' translation variants, such as *Sviashchennoe Pisanie* [20] (Holy Scripture) or *Sviashchennaia Kniga* [2] (Holy Book) that have been used also outside of Islamic contexts to refer to the sacred scriptures of all Abrahamic religions.

Both Muslims and Christians responded with harsh criticism to some of Gainutdin's translations. For instance, in his *Poslanie* (analysed in the following section), the mufti translated *mi' rāj* – the Prophet's Night Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and thence to heaven – as *vozneshenie* (ascension). Used in a religious context, the Russian noun refers to 'one of the twelve main holidays which commemorate the ascension of Christ to Heaven' (Ozhegov and Shvedova 2006). Similarly problematic was another word that appeared in the same speech – *rozhdество* – which Gainutdin used to translate *mawlid an-nabī*, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. A dictionary entry for the word *rozhdество* reads as follows: 1) one of the Christian holidays, commemoration of Jesus Christ's birth; 2) the birth of Christ (Ozhegov and Shvedova 2006). To be able to use this word in an Islamic context, Gainutdin coined the phrase *rozhdество proroka Mukhammeda*, which in English would mean 'Christmas of the Prophet Muhammad'. The mufti, himself aware of the ambiguity of this term, explains his word choice in the same speech. He argues that the word *rozhdество* was neutral in medieval Russian and just meant 'to be born'. Therefore, as Gainutdin argues, the new phrase with an Islamic meaning is 'justified' (*zakonno*) in the Russian-speaking space and does not distort the Islamic nature (*sushchnost'*) of *mawlid al-nabī* (Gainutdin 2015). Not everyone found this explanation entirely convincing and the speech stirred up controversy in mainstream media (e.g. Mukhametov 2015; Silant'ev 2015).

For terms like *prikhod* [4] (parish), *prikhozhane* [1] (congregation), *pastva* [2] (flock), Gainutdin does not even offer an Arabic equivalent, implying that these pose no semantic challenges when used in an Islamic context. The concept of 'Muslim clergy', following the Imperial and Soviet traditions, is rendered either as *islamskoe dukhovenstvo* [48] (Islamic clergy) or *sviashchennosluzhiteli/sluzhiteli ku'lt'a* [2] (servants of the faith/cult).

Also, it is important to note that most DUM RF spokesmen, including Gainutdin himself, translate quotes from *suras* and *ayas* without references to the already existing translations of the Quran in Russian. Basically, these speakers use El'mir Kuliev's translation (Kuliev 2003), but do not refrain from 'looking for inspiration' also in the Russian translation of the Quran from 1878 by Gordii Sablukov (1803–1880), the nineteenth-century Orthodox Christian scholar on Islam (Sablukov 1907).³ Within the DUM RF and the SMR, Gainutdin's strategies of translating Islamic vocabulary into Russian enjoy the support of other prominent figures, who at various points in time have also spoken in favour of 'purifying' Russian from Arabic and Persian loanwords. In the early 2000s, Viacheslav Ali Polosin (b.1956), a former Orthodox Christian priest who converted to Islam, called for new, more 'understandable' translations of the Quran into Russian, arguing that aesthetical features of the text and transparency of meaning should rank above literalness (e.g. Polosin 2000, 2003). Also, Gainutdin's outspoken and assertive deputy, Damir Mukhetdinov (b.1977), has been a keen promoter of the mufti's approach

to use shared vocabulary with the ROC, diligently warding off the critics who disagreed with Gainutdin's translation strategies (Mukhetdinov 2015a, 2015b).⁴

By placing his stakes on the linguistic Russification of Islam, Gainutdin faces difficulty reaching out to Muslims in Russia's ethnic republics and to regional Muslim spiritual directorates. The extensive use of Russian, among other factors, alienates the DUMs where Russian is perceived as a threat to the local ethnic identities and languages. For instance, the Mufti of Tatarstan, Kamil' Samigullin (b.1985), went against the Russification trend and determined that all mosques in the republic are supposed to conduct Friday sermons exclusively in Tatar, not in Russian (Lukmanova 2016). Samigullin's main argument was that Russian has been actively used by adherents of Salafism and, thus, serves as a means to promote 'non-traditional' forms of Islam in the region.⁵ Such tensions with regional Islamic authorities, especially influential ones like that of Tatarstan, compromise Gainutdin's aspiration to become the undisputed leader of Russia's *umma*.

Metadiscourse: academic discussions on translation of religious terms

The question whether Islamic terminology can and should be translated into Russian has been a topic of discussion also in Russia's academic circles. Already in 2006, Stanislav M. Prozorov from the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg expressed his discontent with the custom of using Christian religious terms in an Islamic context, although without attacking Islamic officials directly. Taufik Ibragim, a scholar of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, whose works the DUM RF actively promotes, countered Prozorov's points of criticism.

Prozorov argues that every religion should maintain its specificity. In countries where there is a dominant religion, like Orthodox Christianity in Russia, the 'foreignness' of other denominations should be respected. The full translation of Arabic-Muslim terminology into Russian, in his opinion, is not correct from a theological point of view because 'symbols in each religion are not interchangeable': to replace '*Allāh*' with an abstract '*Bog*' (from Judaism and Christianity) 'means to ignore the specificities of Islam as an ideological and theological system'. Prozorov supports ecumenism, if it means seeing Abrahamic religions as equal to each other, but he opposes their 'unification', where the peculiarities of one religion are dissolved into another, more powerful religious discourse (Ibragim and Prozorov 2006).

His opponent in this discussion, Taufik Ibragim, believes that pluralism 'will not work' in a single (*edinyi*) monotheistic tradition, and therefore should not be promoted. In his opinion, believers of all Abrahamic religions share the same understanding of the concept of God, and any differentiation, including a variation in terminology, would only distance believers from each other. Instead, he argues, the translations should emphasise that Jews, Muslims and Christians – who make up about half of mankind – believe in the same God; the prevalence of this idea would be an incentive for them to work together and to resist religious confrontation and the growth of atheism (Ibragim and Prozorov 2006). According to Ibragim, translating Islamic concepts into Russian and using this language as the *lingua franca* for Muslims is an adequate practice, since the language is already 'permeated (*proniknutyi*) by the monotheistic tradition' of Orthodox Christianity, and thus is suitable for meeting the linguistic needs of Muslims (Ibragim and Prozorov 2006).

Ibragim's position corresponds with the agenda of the DUM RF and the Council of Muftis to promote Russian as the language of Islamic preaching, education and publications. Using words and images that are 'familiar to the Russian culture', Gainutdin aspires to make the 'Islamic message accessible to our contemporaries' (Gainutdin 2015). In the context of the growing number of Muslims in Russia who use Russian as their preferred language of communication, Gainutdin attempts to fill in the niche of the authoritative translator. The DUM RF has been trying to create a canon of Islamic religious texts in Russian, which would represent the opinion of Russia's authoritative '*ulamā*' (Mukhetdinov 2007). Among their recent publications is the Quran in Russian, based primarily on the English translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872–1953) (Koran 2015). Also, an Islamic encyclopaedia and a *ḥadīth* collection in Russian have been on the roadmap.⁶ The DUM RF spokesmen believe that the standardisation of Russian terms in the Islamic discourse will put an end to Russia's Muslims being 'taught [with the help of] little brochures in bad Russian, which [contain] controversial statements and radical appeals' (Mukhetdinov 2007).

The DUM RF's cooperation with Ibragim reflects the efforts of the Islamic establishment in Russia to embrace academic expertise on Islam. To that effect, the DUM RF has been successfully incorporating Ibragim's 'Quranic Humanism' project, which allows the muftiate to define Islamic authority vis-à-vis the state by promoting an inclusive and flexible interpretation of 'traditional' Islam (Kemper and Sibgatullina, *forthcoming*).

Textual structures

To construct a positive image of Islam, Gainutdin also frequently draws on other texts and discourses that are prominent in the public discussion. Such interplay of different powerful discourses within a single text, referred to as interdiscursivity (Fairclough 2003), is supposed to increase the impact of Gainutdin's texts on his audience. The following section analyses Gainutdin's *Rozhdestvenskoe poslanie* from 2015 to demonstrate how the mufti constructs his speech in relation to the state- and church-supported narratives.

In his *Poslanie*, Gainutdin first introduces the term *rozhdestvo* and legitimises its use in the Islamic context (discussed above) and explains the value of *mawlid an-nabī* celebrations for Muslims and adherents of Abrahamic religions in general. He then discusses the attacks against the editors and journalists of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. The title of Gainutdin's speech – *Rozhestvenskoe poslanie* – is a direct reference to the Christmas messages traditionally delivered by the head of the ROC. In his yearly official Christmas message, the Patriarch addresses primarily the Orthodox clergy and flock. During the Orthodox Christmas celebrations, the Patriarch is also present at the Parliamentary Christmas Meetings in the state Duma, where his target audience is the political leadership of the country. Gainutdin's text, in fact, combines both types of audiences (which corresponds to the division of his speech into two parts) and is, therefore, oriented both *inwardly* and *outwardly*. On the one hand, it is inward-oriented because it addresses primarily the in-group of believers and religious leaders and communities, not only Muslim but also Christian and Jewish. The mufti uses the occasion of the speech – the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, which in 2015 coincided with Orthodox Christian Christmas celebrations – as a pretext to foster the interreligious dialogue that Russia's major religious institutions are expected to be involved in. On the other hand, the text is

also outward-oriented and reaches out to secular audiences. By delivering his version of a 'Christmas message', Gainutdin claims to be the authoritative leader of Russia's Islamic community. Thus, the mufti attempts to gain recognition and to secure special treatment for the Islamic institutions under his leadership, preferably similar to what the ROC enjoys.

If we look at the structure of this speech, the mufti starts his message with the traditional *basmala*,⁷ fully translated into Russian, and then ends with a prayer. Throughout the text, he uses references to religious authority, primarily to the Quran, to support his arguments, which allow us to characterise it as a religious speech. Gainutdin's argumentation leaves little room for discussion and excludes those who do not share his religious beliefs and assumptions (Blum 2018; March 2013).

From the perspective of rhetorical strategies, references to the Quran introduce God as the author of the message, while the speaker (Gainutdin) becomes only the utterer. This distribution of roles helps to displace responsibility for what is said from the mufti to an abstract figure of the Supreme Being (Keane 1997, 58). In the context of present-day Russia, actors who enter public debates with religious arguments and advance religious claims, enjoy the support of the conservative political establishment (Stoeckl 2017). For instance, the ROC leadership has been actively using religious arguments in public debates: supported by the state, the Church tends to act as a moral entrepreneur that promotes conservative norms (Stoeckl 2016). In his speech, Gainutdin also attempts to draw on the symbolic power of religion as an unhampered source of truth and moral norms. He uses religious argumentation to comment on the relationship between freedom of religion and freedom of expression in contemporary multicultural societies: in public and political discourses, these two fundamental human rights have increasingly been regarded as contradicting each other. In his speech, the mufti follows the ROC's discourse and introduces the image of the West as the common enemy of Russia's 'traditional religions'; Gainutdin then juxtaposes Russia's 'traditional values', guarded by its religions, against western 'fundamental', 'universal' values.

Metadiscourse: the image of the pernicious West

Less than a month before Gainutdin's speech, the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* published a series of satirical cartoons on Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. This publication 'brought back the spectre of the "culture wars" that erupted in 2005–2006' (Bergareche 2015). Back then, a Danish newspaper published 12 cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammad, which triggered a global controversy and an intense editorial debate. On 7 January 2015, gunmen stormed *Charlie Hebdo's* office in Paris, killing several journalists and editors; numerous rallies around the world took place in memory of the victims and to support freedom of expression. However, in Russia, protests broke out *against* the editorial practices of European media.⁸ Gainutdin's Council of Muftis 'angrily condemned' the attack, but placed some of the blame for the assault on the magazine's staff who, as Gainutdin put it, committed the 'sin of provocation' (SMR 2015).

In the second part of his speech, the mufti brings this issue into discussion. This part of his speech is clearly more emotional, in contrast to the first part, and contains many interrogative and exclamatory sentences. The use of emotional appeal helps Gainutdin engage with his audience and construct an in-group (us) and out-group (them) dichotomy. The in-group, which overlaps with Gainutdin's target audience, includes

'not only those who are born to Islamic families, [and] who have chosen the path of monotheism on their own, but [also] all honest people, the seekers of truth'. For Gainutdin, the latter are those 'who, in Muslim culture, are called the "people of the Book", i.e. believers in One God, the "children of Abraham", the Jews and Christians of all denominations'.

Thus, Gainutdin presents Russia's Orthodox Christians and Jews as belonging to the same in-group as Muslims; the mufti argues that anti-religious sentiments in the West pose a serious threat to Russia's non-Muslim religious groups. Gainutdin further implies that the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad are (or at least, should be) equally offensive to Christians and Jews. He supports his claim quoting a verse from the Quran proclaiming that the Prophet Muhammad is a 'mercy to all the worlds' (Q 21:107).⁹ Therefore, in Gainutdin's opinion, Russia's Abrahamic religions should join forces to protect the Prophet's image against mockery.

In constructing a negative image of the West, Gainutdin uses a type of argumentation similar to that of Patriarch Kirill, who delivered his speech at the Christmas readings in the state Duma around the same time (Kirill 2015). For instance, 'western' values, according to Gainutdin, are mere 'ultraliberal ravishment (*upoenie*) by liberty' and 'the utmost egocentrism'. Kirill, in turn, called them 'wrongly understood freedom' and contrasted them with what he perceives as Russia's 'solidarity society' (Kirill 2015). For Gainutdin, the West is a place full of 'grimaces of neo-atheism' and 'non-adequate terror', where the most influential mass media support the mocking of religion; for the ROC Patriarch, Russia is challenged by a 'dangerous post-Christian and post-religious world' and the West is an embodiment of 'chaos and conflict', which is supported by 'politically and ideologically biased mass media' (Kirill 2015). The anti-western and isolationist rhetoric that Gainutdin fully embraces is part of the ROC's well-structured media strategy (Staehele 2018); such rhetoric is deeply rooted in Russia's political culture since the rejection of the imagined 'western liberal ethos' is something that the ROC today shares with the ideologised Soviet moral code. As Agadjanian argues, in the ROC's discourse 'such paradigmatic conservatism had been celebrated as constitutive to the Russian civilisation's uninterrupted religious inheritance' (Agadjanian 2017, 43). By drawing from this discourse, the mufti attempts to present Islam as an inherent part of this legacy.

The 'traditionalism' discourse

In their response to the *Charlie Hebdo* events, both Patriarch Kirill and Mufti Gainutdin mobilise 'traditionalist' rhetoric. This rhetoric has been incorporated into the language of the Russian government, and when used by the state, it portrays Russia as the defender of 'traditionality' against the country's domestic and foreign enemies. Starting in 2002, attacks on 'traditionality' were increasingly interpreted as 'religious threats' and led to introduction of the term 'traditional religions' (Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism), as entitled to state protection and preference (Verkhovsky 2018, 13). In opposition to 'traditionalism', there is 'radicalism' and 'extremism'. These concepts are relative, but they are 'generally presented as recognisable and concrete evils and threats to Russia'; they are either 'inherently violent [or] they seek to change Russia's moral character' (Oliker 2018, 4).

By 2012 another concept, that of ‘traditional values’, became widespread in the official discourse. Among official representatives of Christianity and Islam, there is a consensus that the idea of ‘traditional values’ has a religious connotation and that these are in fact religious values. Like the very institutions that guard them, ‘traditional values’ are believed to be under (western) assault and in need of defence. In official Islamic and Christian discourses, the primary meaning of ‘traditional values’ has revolved around principles associated with morality and the family (du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy 2018, 101).

In his *Poslanie*, Gainutdin refers to the concept of ‘traditional values’, arguing that they are shared by Russia’s monotheistic religions and challenged by ‘pernicious’ western liberties. In the context of the cartoons scandal, the mufti elaborates on freedom of speech. The French journalists, he argues, have committed the ‘sin of provocation’, condemned in the Quran; they are those who are mentioned in the Q 4:46, who ‘twist [the meaning of God’s revelation] abusively with their tongues to disparage religion’. Gainutdin thereby adopts a standpoint that is similar to that of the ROC as expressed in the 2008 document on human rights (*Osnovy ucheniia Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi o dostoinstve, svobode i pravakh cheloveka*). The Church recognises the freedom of speech as very important but assumes that it can be rejected if the spoken word instigates strife in society or spreads sin. The ROC document puts emphasis not on the *right* to exercise this freedom but ‘on the *responsibility* of an individual for his or her speech’ (original emphasis, Agadjanian 2010, 101).

In Gainutdin’s opinion, it is the task of religious communities and institutions to help those who ‘went astray (*ostupivshiisia*) and committed a crime’ (Gainutdin 2015), meaning the French journalists. Thus, Gainutdin criminalises the publication of the cartoons in the French magazine. He implicitly refers to the anti-blasphemy law adopted in Russia in 2013¹⁰ and claims that Muslims are also covered by the right to be protected against critical discourses by ‘the secular and anti-Muslim thinkers’ and ‘those who feel indignation (*negodovat*) at the belief of Abraham’s Children’ (Gainutdin 2015).

Gainutdin also introduces a novel argument in the public discussion on ‘traditional’ vs (western) ‘universal’ values: he argues that the anti-religious nature of the West is the result of ideas introduced during the Renaissance and Enlightenment. These ideas, according to Gainutdin, received a considerable boost from German philosophy, in particular, the works of the Frankfurt School of Critical philosophy.¹¹ The Frankfurt School, in the mufti’s opinion, is responsible for the very concept of ultra-liberalism. This argument may come as a surprise in such a message; and since Gainutdin’s deputy, Damir Mukhetdinov, previously expressed similar criticism in his programmatic paper on Russia’s Islam (Mukhetdinov 2014),¹² he may well be the author of this part of Gainutdin’s speech. In Russia’s religious context, the reference to the Frankfurt School is relatively safe, since many people are simply not familiar with this philosophical movement. As a rhetorical tool, the reference helps the mufti present himself as a reputable authority not only in theology but also in secular sciences.

Conclusions

This contribution has analysed the discourse of Mufti Gainutdin as a representative of Russia’s official Islam. On the lexical level, Gainutdin employs the strategy of translating Islamic terminology into Russian using Orthodox Christian religious vocabulary. By

avoiding 'foreign' Arabic and Persian vocabulary, the mufti attempts to 'familiarise' Islam as a genuinely 'traditional' religion, integral to Russian culture. The mufti thereby assumes that Islamic and Orthodox Christian religious vocabulary can be used interchangeably in the Islamic context without elaborating further on the theological implications of such translation practices.

A textual analysis of Gainutdin's *Rozhdestvenskoe poslanie* has shown that the mufti relies heavily on the discourse of the ROC leadership; he also adopts exclusive Orthodox genres as well as argumentation strategies and references to other dominant political discourses that are prominent in the Patriarch's speeches. In using this strategy, Gainutdin aims to receive recognition as an Islamic alternative to the head of the ROC and claims to be the single, most authoritative leader of Russia's Muslim community at the federal level.

The degree of resemblance to the ROC is historically inherent in the very institutions of Russia's official Islam. Today against the background of close church-state relations and the threat of religion-inspired extremism, the Islamic authorities in Russia are left with even less room to manoeuvre. In a tough competition with other muftiates, Gainutdin uses the rhetoric of the ROC as a means to reach out not so much to broader audiences of Muslims, but rather to political elites. He also aims to promote a 'traditional' Islam that is embedded in Russia's mainstream patriotic discourses.

Notes

1. The number of occurrences is given in square brackets.
2. According to traditional Muslim belief, the Prophet Muhammad is the 'last and greatest of the prophets', which, as Frants Buhl et al. argue, is a concept that 'is most likely based on a later interpretation of the expression "seal of the prophets" (*khātam al-nabiyyin*)' that is applied to Muhammad in Q 33:40 (Buhl et al. 2018).
3. From the author's interviews with the DUM RF associates, who preferred to stay anonymous. These interviews were conducted in Russia and Sweden in October 2016.
4. On Mukhetdinov, see M. Kemper's contribution in this special collection.
5. Such binary oppositions, when Tatar is perceived as the language of 'traditional' Islam and Russian as the language spoken only by supporters of 'Wahhabi' Islam, are, obviously, simplified. On the challenges of applying the 'traditionalism' paradigm to languages spoken in Tatarstan, see Bustanov (2017).
6. The DUM RF has started these projects in cooperation with the Turkish Diyanet (Directorate for Religious Affairs), but following the deteriorating relationship between these two institutions (IslamNews 2017), the plans have been put on hold.
7. The word *basmala* refers to the Islamic formula commonly translated into English as 'in the name of God, the Clement, the Merciful'.
8. In Chechnya, one of Russia's predominantly Muslim republics, thousands of Muslims joined the protests against the French cartoonists, see, e.g. Luhn (2015).
9. This and the following references to the Quran in English are quoted from Haleem (2005).
10. According to the law, actions that can be regarded as a violation of the religious feelings of believers are illegal. It does not provide any definitions of 'religious feelings', which allows prosecutors to target any critical speech. Moreover, as Alexander Agadjanian rightly argues, although the law, in its essence, does not aim to protect the individual against offensive expressions, it does protect an Orthodox community's right not to be offended (Agadjanian 2017, 48).
11. The Frankfurt School refers to a group of intellectuals who applied Marxism to a radical interdisciplinary social theory. The group was closely related in origin to the Frankfurt

Institute for Social Research and included figures such as Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), and Eric Fromm (1900–1980).

12. For a more detailed overview of Mukhetdiov's essay, see M. Kemper's contribution in this special collection.

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Notes on contributor

Gulnaz Sibgatullina is a PhD candidate studying at Leiden University Centre for Linguistics (the Netherlands). Her research interests include sociolinguistics of the Russian language and the discursive construction of religious, ethnic and national identities.

ORCID

Gulnaz Sibgatullina  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5628-5920>

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