

A Different Dynamic? Explaining Prejudice Against Muslims in the Russian Federation: Islamophobia or Internalised Racial Hierarchy?

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Abstract

Prejudice against Islam and Muslims in Russia is shaped by distinctive national factors. These include the reactivated antagonism between Russia and the West, producing different representations of the „Islam versus the West“ framework prevalent in Western Europe; state policies and official institutions which promote Russia as a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state, and their interplay with diverse Russian nationalisms; and post-socialist upheavals which have produced high levels of insecurity and internal migration, especially from Muslim majority southern republics to Russia’s major cities. These conditions have produced high levels of general xenophobia and its public expression, including some use of Islamophobic discourses, and a widely shared hierarchy of ethnic preference. However, the Russian case challenges the theories of prejudice developed in Western Europe: individual interest theories find little support, group threat theories account for limited variance, and the urban-tolerant/rural-intolerant association is reversed. Furthermore, while there is a long history of Orientalist representation in Russian culture that shapes popular discourse, it is not clear that an essentialized, specifically „Muslim Other“ has developed. This questions the validity of using the term „Islamophobia“ in the Russian context.

Introduction: Xenophobia and Islamophobia in contemporary Russia

Attitudes to immigrants in Russia are far from welcoming. The ESS in 2012 included a question on whether people coming from other countries made a country a better or a worse place to live, measured on an 11-point scale, where 0 was a „worse place to live“ and 10 a „better place to live“. The average response for Russia was 3.3. This made Russia and Cyprus the two countries with the strongest anti-

immigrant attitudes in the ESS sample of 29 European states.¹

On 24 July 2011, the *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, a major Moscow tabloid, ran an op-ed entitled „Black and Whites“ that claimed that the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik had „rebelled against ... the suicidal idea of multiculturalism, tolerance, and satiety“, and against a Norwegian government „blinded by treacherous tolerance“. ² These quotations suggest that intolerant personal attitudes towards immigrants and expressions of intolerance in the media and public sphere are widespread in Russian society. Given these conditions, one might expect Islamophobia as a specific form of intolerance to be widespread, too, particularly given the ideological mobilization of Islam against Russian nationalism in the war in Chechnya and the use of terror tactics in Russian cities by Chechen secessionists. The reassertion of Russian Orthodox cultural hegemony and the proliferation of nationalisms in contemporary Russia might also point towards identification of the Muslim Other as a key cultural enemy; indeed, the presence of public demonstrations in several Russian cities in 2011-13 in support of Breivik³ might be taken as evidence of such a development. Furthermore, the close historical conjunction of the 9/11 attacks in 2001 with the second Chechen war (1999-2000), and of the jihadist attacks on Western European cities in the mid-2000s (e.g. Madrid 2004, London 2005) with the Beslan School siege (2004) might suggest that the Islam-versus-the-West narratives which have gained considerable traction in Western Europe might also find resonance in Russia.

However, a closer look suggests that the situation is more complex; Western Islamophobic discourses have limited traction, and, while xenophobic attitudes are widespread in Russia, negative attitudes towards immigrants from Muslim ethnic backgrounds are (unlike in

¹Alexey Bessudnov, Ethnic Hierarchy and Public Attitudes towards Immigrants, in: *Russia European Sociological Review* 32 (2016) 5, pp. 567-580.

²Johannes Due Enstad, „Glory to Breivik!“: The Russian Far Right and the 2011 Norway Attacks, in: *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29 (2017)5, pp. 773-792.

³Johannes Due Enstad, „Glory to Breivik!“, pp. 776-7.

Western Europe⁴) at a similar level to negative attitudes towards people of non-European ethnicity such as the Chinese.⁵ And, while the evidence is limited, hostility towards Muslims as a religious group seems to be lower than hostility towards, for example, Americans.⁶ Furthermore, the longstanding presence of Muslim minorities from a diversity of ethnic groups across the South and East of the Russian Federation, together with the presence of a Western ideological Other, raises the question of whether it is appropriate to use the category of Islamophobia at all, as it is not clear that an essentialized „Muslim Other“, as distinct from a broader racialized ethnic hierarchy, has crystallized in the popular imagination in the way that it has in Western Europe.

A complex situation with imperfect comparative data

Hostility to the West and antisemitism both contradict a straightforward alignment with Western European forms of anti-Islam sentiment, as does the considerable popularity of a state regime and a church hierarchy that are both highly critical of the West and supportive of the maintenance of the Russian federation as a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional entity⁷ in which Islam plays the role of a recognized, though subordinate, religion – indeed, Russia’s second religion. Hence, Russian nationalist groups are divided in their attitude to Islam; some Orthodox nationalists, for example, see Muslims as potential allies against Zionism and the godless West, while others see militant Islam as a tool of the West and of Zionism in their attacks on Orthodox

⁴In the ESS 2014, those wishing to restrict Muslim immigration to few or none was higher than for any group except Roma <http://nesstar.ess.nsd.uib.no/webview/> data extracted 31.10.2017

⁵Alexey Bessudnov, Ethnic Hierarchy and Public Attitudes towards Immigrants.

⁶Yoshiko M. Herrera / Kraus N. Butkovich, Pride versus Prejudice: Xenophobia and National Identity in Russia, unpublished paper, URL: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nicole_Kraus/publication/298734211_Pride_Versus_Prejudice_Ethnicity_National_Identity_and_Xenophobia_in_Russia/links/5797b46208aed51475e6a392.pdf, 31.10.2017

⁷Putin has not incorporated racism and ethnic hostility into government policy. On the contrary, laws against incitement to ethnic hatred have been actively used to curb offenders.’ Johannes Due Enstad, „Glory to Breivik!“, p.781.

Russia.⁸

Given this ideological complexity, what do empirical studies tell us about the prevalence of Islamophobic attitudes in Russia? Unfortunately, large-scale attitudinal research on Islamophobia is limited; of the large international surveys, the fifth wave of the World Values Survey (WVS, 2005-9), which included a question on attitudes to Muslim neighbours, did not ask the question in Russia; Russia did not participate in the fourth wave (1999-2004) and, in the sixth wave (2010-14), the closest equivalent is a question on immigrant neighbours, which lacks specific a reference to religion. Unfortunately again, Russia did not take part in the seventh wave (2012), which featured a detailed question on Muslim immigration in a special immigration module; again, the 2016 question „poor countries outside Europe“ removes any specific reference to the religion of immigrants. Hence, we lack direct comparisons with Western Europe on attitudes to Muslims. However, surveys specific to Russia can be compared with these international instruments, and this evidence then triangulated with material from international reports, ethnographic studies, work on far-right and nationalist groups, and on the influence of Orientalist discourses in Russian culture, to produce a multi-perspectival picture.

Quantitative studies

Three recent papers are most pertinent. First, Gorodzeisky and Glikman⁹ begin by describing a striking contrast between recent findings on the roots of anti-immigrant sentiment in Western societies and Russia: „across Western societies ... individual-level attributes, especially socioeconomic vulnerability and conservative views and ideologies, are likely to increase hostility and antagonism toward immigrant populations ... [whereas] in post-socialist Russia, the socioeconomic position of individuals – as well as conservative views and ideologies

⁸Alexander Verkhovsky, Who is the enemy now? Islamophobia and antisemitism among Russian Orthodox nationalists before and after September 11, in: *Patterns of Prejudice* 38 (2004) 2, pp. 127-143.

⁹Anastasia Gorodzeisky / Alvin Glikman, Two peoples – Two Stories: Anti-immigrant attitudes in Post-Socialist Russia, in: *Social Problems* 2017, pp. 1–21.

– are not effective in predicting anti-foreigner attitudes.”¹⁰

To investigate why this should be the case, they use ESS data from 2006-12 to examine the correlates of anti-immigrant attitudes in Russia. The survey used a representative national sample, which enables comparison with the rest of Europe. The researchers examined the relationship between anti-immigrant attitudes and three sets of variables – those pertaining to individual socio-economic characteristics, conservative views and ideologies, and assessment of state/collective vulnerability/functionality. They found that ethnic Russians expressed higher levels of anti-immigrant sentiment than non-ethnic Russians (20% of the sample). They also found that „perceptions of collective vulnerability play a more important role in explaining anti-immigrant attitudes among the ethnic majority group than among the ethnic minority groups“,¹¹ while individual economic positioning and social conservatism were more important amongst the ethnic minorities. Thus, while the attitudes of ethnic minority groups towards immigrants were shaped by similar factors to those that have been found to be influential in Western Europe, ethnic Russian views stand out as being shaped more by insecurities related to the basic viability of the national state. This is theoretically interesting in terms of the dynamics of prejudice in societies undergoing national crises, and may also be relevant to the specific dynamics of Islamophobia in Russia. As stated above, however, the years in which Russia took part in the ESS do not enable the latter issue to be investigated directly.

A study analyzed by Bessudov (2016) asked more detailed questions about people’s ethnic preferences than the international surveys available, enabling a more fine-grained analysis of prejudice against immigrants. He draws on a 2011 survey conducted by the Russian polling agency Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), which used a large sample of 24,500 people in 49 of the 83 Russian regions. The sample was not nationally representative, but multi-stage stratified sampling was used

in each region to enable valid inter-regional comparisons, and the regions sampled represent 77% of the total population of the Russian Federation.

The study indicates the strength of anti-immigrant sentiment across the Federation. More than half (53%) would support banning permanent immigration from outside Russia. A striking and unexpected finding was the „high degree of inter-group consensus on the ethnic hierarchy of immigrant groups“. Thus, while, at least before the Russian-Ukrainian conflict of 2014-15, only 15% were negative about the prospect of Ukrainian neighbours, the figures rise to 53% for the Caucasus, 54% for SE Asia, 56% for S Asia, and 61% for the North Caucasus, despite the fact that the North Caucasus is part of Russia. The preference for more European ethnic neighbours was shared by all groups. Thus, not just Russians preferred ethnically similar Ukrainians, but the „preferences of Tatars and Bashkirs are ordered in almost exactly the same way as the preferences of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians. Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Tajiks are more positive about Ukrainians and Moldovans than about immigrants from Central Asia and the North Caucasus.“¹²

This pattern suggests the internalization of a racialized ethnic hierarchy shared across the Russian regions, with those groups from Muslim majority backgrounds at the bottom of the pile. However, it is not possible to say from this data whether this is specifically Islamophobic, i.e. draws on an essentialized notion of Islam. Before considering data that may shed light on this question, two further findings from Bessudov’s study are worth noting for their possible implications for theorizing the causes and dynamics of prejudice.

The first is the finding that urban areas, the main centres of immigration, emerge as less tolerant than rural areas. This contrasts with Western European, and indeed North American, findings: An important difference between Russia and Western Europe is the effect of

¹⁰Anastasia Gorodzeisky / Alvin Glikman, *Two peoples – Two stories*, 1.

¹¹Anastasia Gorodzeisky / Alvin Glikman, *Two peoples – Two stories*, 14.

¹²Alexey Bessudov, *Ethnic Hierarchy and Public Attitudes towards Immigrants*, Table 4.

location. While in Europe people living in cities are more cosmopolitan and tolerant than those who populate the countryside, in Russia the effect is the opposite. London, New York, and Moscow all attract a significant number of immigrants, but while the former two generally welcome diversity, Moscow remains one of the most xenophobic places in Russia.

Thus, in Western Europe a range of studies using different methods – from attitude surveys to voter preferences to qualitative area-based case studies – show that larger urban areas with higher concentrations of immigrants are more immigrant-friendly than smaller towns and rural areas with less diversity. This is counter-intuitive in terms of a tolerance or group-threat model of prejudice, because higher concentrations of migrants with different cultures would be deemed more disruptive of social life than lower concentrations, an explanation which would seem to fit the Russian case. But, against this model, it has been theorized that, over time, cities develop social coping mechanisms – multicultural institutions – and that these facilitate the integration of migrants and so reduce the anxieties of at least most city dwellers. In Russia, this process appears not to have occurred.

Second, while statistical models – especially those based on group-threat theory – can explain some of the variation in results across Russia, their explanatory power is more limited than in Western Europe: A . . . fundamental difference between Russia and Western Europe is that in Russia, statistical models explain only a tiny part of the total variance of attitudes. While the direction of some effects is the same as in Western Europe, their size and predictive power are considerably smaller.

Thus, as predicted by group-threat theory, higher concentrations of immigrants are associated with higher levels of anti-immigrant sentiment, but account for only a small proportion of variation in the data: While the direction of some effects is the same as in Western Europe, their size and predictive power are considerably smaller. After incorporating all the individual-level predictors and accounting

for regional heterogeneity, our models leave about 95 per cent of the outcome variance unexplained.

It may be that, as Gorodzeisky and Glickman suggest, the specific dynamics that come into play when national disintegration is feared account for some of the variance.

But what of specifically Islamophobic prejudice? One of the few studies to examine hostility towards Muslims is discussed by Herrera and Kraus¹³, who drew on a dataset of more than 11,000 individuals across 43 Russian regions in 2001-04. It should be noted that this precedes the Beslan school siege, and hence possibly an intensification of more specifically anti-Islam rhetoric; the separatists called themselves the *Riyah-us Saliheen Brigade of Martyrs*. 90% of the sample described themselves as ethnically Russian. Researchers found hostility towards Muslims running at 12.4%, much lower than towards Roma (38%) or Chechens (33.8%), and slightly lower even than towards Americans (13%). This finding perhaps suggests that the label „Muslim“ does not possess the same stigmatizing power in Russian racial hierarchies as it does in Europe and the US. A key factor in this may be the strong influence of the Russian state media, which may limit the impact of Islamophobic discourses circulating in the Western media.

This is not to say that specifically anti-Islam discourse is not present in Russia; on the contrary, as Shumsky argues, drawing on recent literary and historical¹⁴ studies, „the figure of the ‘despised Asian’ remains a constant in Russian culture over a number of centuries, from Pushkin’s and Lermontov’s works in the first half of the nineteenth century to our own days, a time when it is being widely disseminated in the Russian public awareness in connection with the discourse about the ‘Chechnyan’ and ‘Caucasian Mafia’.“¹⁵

¹³Yoshiko M. Herrera / Kraus N. Butkovich, *Pride versus Prejudice*.

¹⁴Ewa M. Thompson, *Russia and Literature and Colonialism* Westport, Greenwood (2000).

¹⁵Dimitry Shumsky, *Post-Zionist orientalism? Orientalist discourse and Islamophobia among the Russian-speaking intelligentsia in Israel*, in: *Social Identities* 10 (2004) 1, pp. 83-99, here p. 89.

However, the lower level of prejudice expressed towards Muslims and ethnic groups of Muslim heritage in the national studies reviewed suggests that conditions do not make these narratives salient in a way that translates into specifically anti-Muslim prejudice – unlike in the Israeli case discussed by Shumsky, where the same traditions are drawn on by Russian Jewish immigrants to Israel to make sense of very different local conditions.

Conclusions

The case of Russia raises significant issues for the theories of Islamophobia that have been mostly developed in European and US contexts. First, Russia inverts widespread patterns in the distribution of prejudice, with cities experiencing higher levels of prejudice than the surrounding countryside, an inversion which may reflect the absence of the kind of multiculturalist integration policies present in many large cities in (at least Western) Europe and the US (even if abandoned or opposed by national governments¹⁶). Second, socio-economic status fails to act as a reliable predictor of levels of prejudice, which may reflect high levels of insecurity across society as a whole. Third, in contrast to most Western contexts, and despite similar terror tactics by groups claiming inspiration from Islam, Muslims are not the group that attracts the highest level of prejudice. Rather, ethnicity appears to trump religion as a marker of difference, with distance from a „core“, essentialized Russianness, defined as white, European, and Orthodox, seeming to be the best predictor of how much prejudice is directed against a group, and with geo-political factors also playing a role (Americans described as more disliked than Muslims, for example). Thus, it appears that, while the same underlying explanatory mechanisms are at work (e.g. levels of existential security and sense of group threat), the societal context through which they are mediated differs significantly, so that a Russian sense of ethnic hierarchy remains more important than a specifically anti-Muslim Islamophobia. A key

¹⁶Steven Vertovec / Susanne Wessendorf, *Multicultural Backlashes: European Discourses, Policies and Practices*, London 2011.

factor in this may be the strong influence of the Russian state media, which mitigates the impact of Islamophobic discourses circulating in the Western media. However, where these seep in via the internet – as in the case of the far-right groups who mobilized in support of Breivik¹⁷ – Russia’s sense of ethnic hierarchy, traditions of Orientalism, and absence of positive multicultural policies ensure that they find fertile ground.

¹⁷Alexey Bessudnov, *Ethnic Hierarchy and Public Attitudes towards Immigrants*.