

Radicalisation and Resilience Case Study

Russia

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September 2020

This case study is part of a series of in-depth reports on religiously motivated violent radicalisation - and resilience to it - in 12 countries. The series examines periods in which religious radicalisation and violence has escalated and analyses relevant policy and political discourses surrounding them. While seeking to identify factors that drove radicalisation and violence in each country, the case studies also critically assess programmes of prevention and resilience-building, identifying good practices. This series was produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, secularism and religiously inspired radicalisation.

Countries covered in this series:

Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, France, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Tunisia and the United Kingdom.

<http://grease.eu.eu>



The GREASE project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 770640

The EU-Funded GREASE project looks to Asia for insights on governing religious diversity and preventing radicalisation.

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

While exploring religious governance models in other parts of the world, GREASE also attempts to unravel the European paradox of religious radicalisation despite growing secularisation. We consider the claim that migrant integration in Europe has failed because second generation youth have become marginalised and radicalised, with some turning to jihadist terrorism networks. The researchers aim to deliver innovative academic thinking on secularisation and radicalisation while offering insights for governance of religious diversity.

The project is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Mila Mancheva from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Raciunas from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia). GREASE is scheduled for completion in 2022.

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GREASE - Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives

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Introduction

The analysis of radicalization in Russia by default refers to Islamist radicalization. Even though there are other groups and radicalized individuals, the focus of the public, politicians, and researchers stays predominantly with Islam and the North Caucasus. There are two reasons for this. First, this focus falls within the global trend, which associates the current wave of terrorism (also called “new”, “fourth”, or “religious”) with Islam (Githens-Mazer, 2012). Second, Islamisation and further radicalization of the Muslims in Russia gained its “fame” due to the Russo-Chechen wars of 1994-1996 and 1999-2009 (Dunnreuther, 2010; Hahn, 2007:1; Lieven, 1998: 363).

The groups and individuals that take inspiration for radicalization from other (than Islam) religions or ideologies attract less of public, scholarly, or political attention in Russia. These radicals are not considered the same dangerous as Islamists because they rarely resort to terrorism or oppose the existing political system violently. Furthermore, according to one of the explanations, such groups appear as a reaction to the threat created by a political or religious “other” (Arnold, 2010), which is mainly Islam and/or Muslims.

The reasons above justify the exclusive focus of this research on Islamist radicalization. The analysis presents probable roots of religious radicalization and considers factors that might have contributed or inspired Islamism in the country. It also assesses the success of the Russian Federation in countering it.

Conceptualizing radicalization in Russia

The term ‘radicalization’ entered our everyday life between 2005 and 2007 (Githens-Mazer, 2012; Sedgwick, 2010). Similar to two other related terms, namely extremism and terrorism, the term radicalization is used in a variety of ways. Each of these ways is determined by a different context and agenda (Sedgwick, 2010), which, according to Rae (2012), reflects a political and social conjuncture of relevant actors that use it (e.g. international organizations, states, NGOs, legal institutions within a state, etc.). Hence, there are many definitions of the concept, producing confusion. This situation leads to doubts regarding the possibility of having a universal definition of radicalization in general. Even if such a definition can exist, there is a question if it is necessary. There are always some disagreements that do not allow a consensus on the definition – the problem that scholars working on terrorism have already faced (Ramsay, 2015).

While acknowledging the importance of the search for the universal definition of radicalization and related phenomena of extremism and terrorism (see Berger, 2017; Githens-Mazer, 2009; Jackson, 2011; Richards, 2014; Schmidt, 2004; Sedgwick, 2010), this paper supports the view of Ramsay (2015) and advocates for working with the *ad hoc* definitions. This approach allows narrowing down the analysis and focusing on a part of the phenomenon, which adds only a piece to the jigsaw puzzle but avoids complications and ambiguousness of generalization and inclusivity. Yet, even this approach must rely on the research. Therefore, a further discussion regarding the specific characteristics of radicalization singled out by different scholars is presented in order to provide an *ad hoc* definition for this paper.

Skipping the simplistic approach – “you know it, when you see it”, adopted by many politicians (Githens-Mazer, 2012), the paper focuses on the characteristics of radicalization that can be agreed on. First of them is the view that radicalization is a process (Githens-Mazer, 2012), which is sometimes lengthy. As is noticed by Derluguyan

(2005, 39), people do not become killers, terrorists, or radicals overnight. Second, radicalization may, but not necessarily, result in an action (Sedgwick, 2010). In other words, radicalization can result in expressing some ideas, views, or attitudes but not the physical actions. Third, the action that is a consequence of radicalization may or may not be violent (Moskalenko and McCauley, 2009). Githens-Mazer (2012) brings an example of protest movements, the participants of which express radical ideas during their rallies but do not undertake any violent action. Fourth, such an action can be legal or illegal (Githens-Mazer, 2009). This depends on the legislation of a country and the essence of the action. Lastly, one should keep in mind that radicalization may be informed by a cultural-psychological disposition, it can be charged politically, ideologically, and religiously (Kundnani, 2012).

This variety of characteristics makes it difficult to identify what triggered the process of radicalization. Furthermore, it complicates the possibility of identifying a radicalized individual before s/he speaks or acts. This difficulty is especially observable in the context of authoritarianism, where there is little room for free expression of thought. Therefore, analysing radicalization in Russia, this paper refers to already committed actions but not speeches. Moreover, the context of authoritarianism forces the author to exclude all legal and non-violent actions from the analysis. Finally, the paper considers exclusively religious (read Islamist) radicalization without exploring all radical movements that are driven by non-religious ideologies or politics.

This frame of analysis necessitates further clarification of two aspects. First, the focus on violent and illegal actions, which is informed by the context of Russia, requires to consider radicalization through the concepts of extremism and terrorism. Second, the religious (Islamist) dimension demands further clarification what is “Islamist” radicalization?

Dealing with the first aspect, it is worth noting that in many cases radicalization is conceptualized through the phenomena of terrorism and extremism (Githens-Mazer, 2012). Both phenomena can be considered a consequence of radicalization. It is radicalization that instils in a person or a group the ideas that result in either extremist or terrorist actions, activities, or discourse. Since the concept of extremism is broader than that of terrorism and can include the latter (Githens-Mazer, 2009), some prefer to conceptualize radicalization through extremism (Berger, 2017; Hellyer and Grossman, 2019; Khalil, 2014). Indeed, the inclusivity of the latter provides a bigger room for claiming a closer link between it and radicalization. However, the focus of this paper considers a specific type of radicalization – the one that is related to religion, and that results in an illegal and violent action. This focus links the paper to the definition of terrorism or violent type of extremism. Despite a certain blender between these two (Sedgwick, 2010), the paper considers the concept of radicalization being closer to terrorism, because violent extremism includes actions such as hate crime, vandalism, and protest rallies, which have little to do with Islamist agenda.

The second aspect, namely the focus on Islamist radicalization, can be approached through the following questions: What do we consider religious radicalization? How do we know that radicalization was religious, and that religion was not just used as an instrument that helped an individual to complete the action? The complexity of these questions was noted by Githens-Mazer (2012), who indicates that we often follow cliché created by media, and Rapoport (1983), who argued that it has always been difficult to make a clear distinction between religious and secular terrorism. The way to solve this problem was proposed by Githens-Mazer (2012), who suggests defining the research object or the case. Following this suggestion, this paper will analyse only those cases that are attributed to religious (Islamist) radicalization either by perpetrators or by law enforcement agencies. This paper will approach chosen cases

raising the question to what extent they were religiously motivated. In order to do so, it is necessary to set up the context of the country, which will be done after a brief description of the research methodology.

Methodology

Besides the analysis of the available academic works, this paper relies on three more sources namely, media (including social media), statistics, and interviews.

The first source is the independent Russian media such as “Novaya Gazeta” and Kavkazskiy Uzel. Both are renowned for their non-biased publications that always try to bring the opinion of the local inhabitants rather than promoting the official view. In addition to this, the paper uses some video footage that the author regularly receives from different social media platforms personally. Some of these footages were widely circulated among the inhabitants of the Muslim republics of Russia. For instance, the video addresses of the analysed terrorist attacks were received through WhatsApp.

The second source of data for this research is statistical information. The data is mostly taken from the special website demoscope.ru, which provides the data of official censuses conducted in Russia approximately every 10 years. The website also contains comments and analytical materials that analyse the collected statistics. The research also relies on other official Russian media sources and the peer-reviewed papers, which are taken with the pinch of salt due to the professional belonging of the Russian scholars to the state institutions.

The third source, where the data was collected from is the Russian community of experts and the general population. The data was collected using the method of a semi-structured interview. All in all, 28 people were interviewed for this research. Among the interviewees, there was 25% (seven people) of females and 75% (21 people) of male. Geographically the research covered Moscow, North Caucasus, and Volga region (republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan). In other words, the interviews were collected from the people who live in these areas. The choice was determined by the largest percentage of Muslim inhabitants in these areas.

Among the interviewees, there were people from different professions. Some of them represented institutionalized Islam meaning that they were associated with the official Islamic institutions in Russia. Others represented non-institutionalized Islam and presented the opposite point of view. Some interviewees were experts, who work in the state universities. Their affiliation with the state and the probable bias was balanced by the collected opinions of the representatives of the civil society. The opinion of the general public collected in the “Muslim” areas completed the picture.

The informants for this research were chosen from the pool that was built by the author during the time period from 2011 to 2019. Some of the interviews were recorded through Skype, others personally. One interview would, usually, last approximately between one and 1.5 hours. The formal consent was sought from the interviews collected online and in-person in Moscow and the Volga region. In the North Caucasus, neither obtaining personal consent nor recording the interview is advisable for the sake of the security of the interviewees and the researcher.

Country Background

The focus on Islamist radicalization in this paper implies the necessity to present the Muslim population of the Russian Federation. In other words, before moving further we should know: How many Muslims are in Russia? and What kind of Islam they follow?

Both questions are somewhat problematic. The exact number of the Muslim population in Russia cannot be calculated precisely. The regular Russian censuses, that are conducted every 10 years, do not include a question regarding the religious affiliation of people. Therefore, the censuses can only be helpful in identifying the approximate numbers of “ethnic” Muslims. But even this is very imprecise due to the volatility of the people's religious identity. Moreover, the last census was conducted already 10 years ago (the new one might be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic), which implies certain demographic changes. In addition to this, there are many Muslim migrants from the Central Asia in Russia. The question who can be considered a Muslim also undermines the precision of the calculations. Due to these reasons, the paper gives approximate estimations basing them on ethnic belonging of Russia’s population with the reference to the latest census.

The problem of the second question lies in identifying those Muslims who are more prone to radicalization. Those would belong to the branches of Islam known as political or/and fundamental (Salafism and Wahhabism) as opposed to “traditional” Russian Islam, which is a branch of Sufism (Malashenko, 2010). However, self-identification as a Salafist or Wahhabist, especially in the North Caucasus, can result in the negative (for a disclaimer) legal or extra-judicial consequences. Therefore, people try to avoid such identification or self-identification. Hence, it is nearly impossible to find out the number of Muslims in Russia, who follow branches of Islam other than Sufi.

Despite the said limitations, it is possible to calculate the approximate number of the Muslim population in Russia. Malashenko (2010) suggests that there were 14.5 million Muslims with Russian citizenship in 2010, that is about 10% of the population. The demographic growth and non-registered inflow of migrants since then give an approximate figure of 20-25 million people.

Although the Muslim population is present everywhere in Russia (see Map 1, p. 8), most of the Muslims are concentrated in three geographic regions, namely the North Caucasus (NC), the Volga republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan (VR), and Moscow – the capital of Russia. The largest Muslim ethnic group, the Tatars, accounts for 5.5 million people who are compactly living in Tatarstan and Bashkiria (see Table 1 below). In both Volga republics, Tatars and Bashkirs (the second largest ethnic group of Muslims) form a marginal majority of the population, no more than 60%. Being an attraction for the migrant workers Moscow also has a large portion of Muslims. Although official numbers indicate differently, the then Mayor of Moscow, Yurii Luzhkov, and chairman of the Council of Russian Muftiates, Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin claimed that there were no less than two million Muslims in Moscow in 2009 (Malashenko, 2010). This is probable having in mind many unregistered labour migrants from Central Asia, which are not included in Table 1.

Table1. Russian citizens of Muslim origin in Moscow, North Caucasus (NC), and Volga region (VR).

| Region | Ethnic Muslims | Others |
|----------------------------|----------------|------------|
| Moscow | 364,667 | 11,503,501 |
| Dagestan (NC) | 2,793,179 | 117,070 |
| Chechnya (NC) | 1,241,377 | 27,612 |
| Ingushetia (NC) | 408,625 | 3,904 |
| North Ossetia (NC) | 62,496 | 650,484 |
| Kabardino-Balkaria (NC) | 633,993 | 225,946 |
| Karachaevo-Cherkessia (NC) | 315,820 | 162,039 |

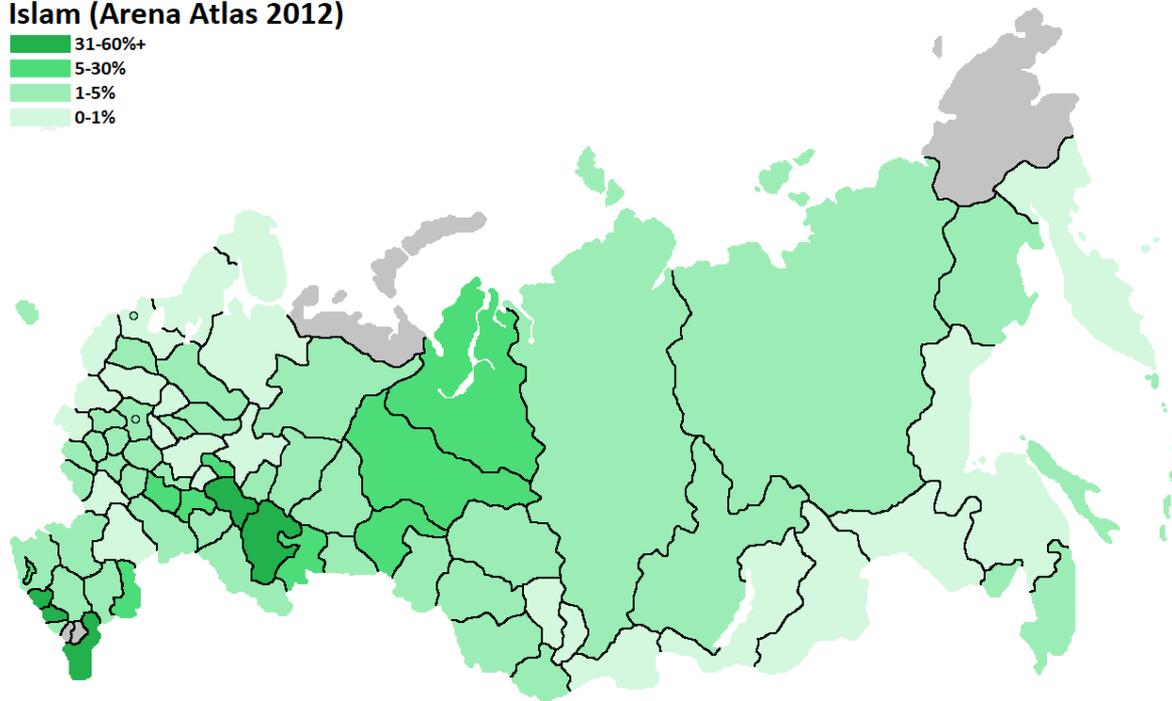
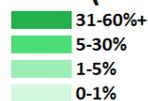
| | | |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Stavropol' region (NC) | 220,506 | 2,565,775 |
| Bashkortostan (VR) | 2,306,392 | 1,765,900 |
| Tatarstan (VR) | 2,064,877 | 1,721,611 |

Source: the Table is composed by the author using data of the whole Russia Census of 2010, available on http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_etn_10.php?reg=0.

The third Muslim region of Russia is the North Caucasus (the left down corner of Map 1 marked by the darkest green colour). This region consists of eight Federal units, seven of which are national republics. In six of them (labelled as NC in Table 1), ethnic Muslims constitute most of the population. In total, there are around seven million Muslims in the region, most of who belong to the traditional Russian Islam. The number of those who follow Salafi Islam is also substantial, which makes the region “vulnerable and susceptible to radicalization” (Kurbanov, 2010). Indeed, as statistics confirm, most of the Islamist radicals in Russia come from there.¹ Hence, further research will be mostly focused on this region.

Map 1. The distribution of ‘Muslims’ in the Russian Federation

Islam (Arena Atlas 2012)



Source: Research Service “Sreda” <http://sreda.org>

In sum, it is difficult to have a precise picture of the Muslim population in Russia. The existing estimates suggest that Islam is the second-largest religion in the country after Orthodox Christianity (Aleinikova and Burianov, 2015; Krzhevov, 2011; Leksin, 2009). The Muslim population with Russian citizenship can comprise from 15 to as many as 24 million people out of 146.7 million², which constitute approximately 9-16.5% of the whole population.

¹ Most of the extremists listed on the website of the Federal Service of Financial Monitoring are originally from the North Caucasus. The document is available on <http://www.fedsfm.ru/documents/terrorists-catalog-portal-act> accessed 05/06/2020.

² The preliminary estimate of the Russian State Statistics Service <https://showdata.gks.ru/report/278928/> accessed 27/5/2020.

Drivers of Islamist radicalization in Russia

Political drivers

The tension between state and Islam in Russia began in the 1990s. At that time Russia tightened its regulations regarding religious freedom in general and Islam in particular. If at the beginning of the 1990s Russia was an 'Eldorado desired by all kinds of religious organizations' (Yakhyaev and Kamyshova, 2013), later regulations restricted the possibilities to set up a religious community and proselytize freely (Leksin, 2009; Mitrokhin, 2002: 54-55). However, this period was long enough for different religious organizations to sow the seeds of their ideologies. These new to Russia religious groups were considered hostile and were marginalized by the authorities (Verkhovski, Kozhevnikova, and Sibireva, 2010). At the same time, they were welcome in the self-declared Chechnya, which due to the traumatic collective memory tried to distance from Russia (Williams, 2000). The hostility between Islam and Russian authorities grew even bigger with the beginning of the first Russo-Chechen war in 1994. The new branches of Islam (mainly Salafism) supported the Chechen cause and the followers of it joined the resistance and brought financial support to it (Al-Shishani, 2006; Moore and Tumelty, 2008).

The Russian defeat in the first Russo-Chechen war contributed to the spread of radical ideology. The bearers of the new ideology settled in Chechnya, where they were popular as war veterans and as those who could bring vital to the republic finances (Al-Shishani, 2006; Moore and Tumelty, 2008). The spread of their ideology and their active intervention into the state affairs of the Chechen Republic provoked new Russian aggression in 1999, which in turn contributed to further spread of Islamist ideology. As it is popularly claimed, the Islamists "hi-jacked" the Chechen secular and nationalist agenda (Hughes, 2013; Johnston and Alimi, 2012; Kroupenev, 2009) and ensured the spill-over of the armed conflict. The Chechen government that led the resistance agreed with this move as it desperately needed resources and volunteers. The secularists in the resistance realized that volunteers would be willing to fight for Islam but not for Chechen independence (Hahn, 2008). This victory of the Islamists happened in 2007, when the Chechen independence cause was declared as abandoned by the armed resistance for the sake of a wider and inclusive political entity named the Caucasian Emirates. The armed resistance in the North Caucasus became linked to Salafism completely.

Russian military success led to the decline of the Caucasian Emirates, which was also losing the popular support due to fear instilled by the repressions of the authorities. Since the beginning of the second Russo-Chechen war 1999, the adherents of Salafi Islam (popularly known as Wahhabis in Russia) were effectively made illegal (Malashenko, 2014). Salafism was equated to terrorism (Dannreuther, 2010) and everyone who possessed exterior attributes of Salafists (long beard, short trousers) were subjects of police attention and persecution across the country. The harsh methods of control and suppression adopted by the government led to further radicalization of those devoted to Salafism. This further radicalization was facilitated by the appearance of the Islamic State on the world arena and the discrimination of the non-institutionalized Muslims in Russia. According to some of the informants, who were interviewed for this research, Russian law enforcers often arbitrarily label people as Salafi to arrest them as extremists.

“Who is an extremist in Russia today? An extremist is the one who was assigned this label to. It is up to *siloviki*, the law enforcers to make one an extremist if they want to. The reasons might be different. Maybe they did not like what you have written on your Facebook page, or maybe they just need to show the result and want another star on their epaulettes. Either case, no one is guaranteed that tomorrow he will not appear on the list of the wanted. Of course, people are upset with this situation, and having in mind the Caucasian 'hot blood', it is possible to understand why the youth are taking up arms so willingly” (Skype interview, Dagestan, 15/01/2019).

In terms of foreign politics, Dannreuther (2010) reminds that the Soviet Union, despite being an atheist state, supported some Islamist movements in the Middle East (Hamas, Hezbollah). On the other hand, it waged an “anti-Islamic” war in Afghanistan (1979-1989). This could have produced mixed feelings among the Muslims of Russia. However, the reference to the Soviet foreign politics can be heard very rarely in the public discourse, therefore it is questionable if foreign politics is an important factor of radicalization at all. This can drive towards a conclusion that the radicalization did not have a significant transnational religious component in it. In other words, Russia's Muslims were not very much pre-occupied with the situation of *the ummah*. Dannreuther (2010) confirms it partly. He agrees that during the reign of Boris Yeltsin in Russia (1991-1999) there was little evidence that Russian Muslims were considered vulnerable for Islamist radicalization. Moreover, even during the Chechen wars, to a large extent radicalization was driven rather by non-religious factors (Wilhelmsen, 2005). In other words, the interaction between state and Muslims was upsetting enough to have people radicalized without bringing in the religious dimension.

The level of radicalization (or rather the number of terrorist attacks) went to its lowest point and stayed there since 2014. The armed resistance in the North Caucasus pledged its allegiance to the rising Islamic State, where many fighters moved to (Sagramoso and Yarlykapov, 2020). This swap can be attributed to “the initial military and administrative success of the ISIS” and the defeat of the Caucasian Emirates (Al-Tamimi, 2014). The movement of the Caucasian fighters (and civilians who were unhappy with Russian politics) to the Middle East was also encouraged by Russia's military involvement in the Syrian conflict. In contrast to the Afghanistan war, the latter is seen as a fight against Islam, despite the Russian attempts to posit itself as an Islam-friendly country. The perception of Russia as an anti-Islamic country was proposed by several of my interviewees from the North Caucasus.

“Russians hate Muslims. Look what they do in Idlib (province of Syria). They do not even try to distinguish the civil population from the rebels. They bomb everyone. They pretend to be anti-American, anti-Western, or anti-Semites, but in fact, all that they do indicates the opposite. All their policies in the Middle East are in line with the general Judeo-Christian vision, which aims to suppress Muslims.” (Interview, Chechnya, 06/01/2020).

Similar ideas were stated by some other of my interviewees, mostly men of 30-44 years old, who strictly observe all requirements of Islam and who spoke under the condition of strict anonymity.

To sum up, the recent Russo-Chechen wars were the main factor that radicalized the population of the North Caucasus, where most radicals come from. Furthermore, the centralizing and repressive politics towards Islam within the country (Dannreuther,

2010) and Russian president Vladimir Putin's aggressive foreign politics could have driven religious radicalization in Russia further.

Socio-economic and psychological drivers

Besides the presented political, there is a whole bunch of socio-economic and psychological drivers that radicalize people in the North Caucasus today. One of the most important of them is the feeling of being a second-class citizen in the country. The inability of the Russian Federation to integrate North Caucasians placed them in an even worse situation than they used to be in the Soviet times when a certain level of social equality was guaranteed by law. The growing number of Muslims (Dannreuther, 2010; Ilyasov, 2019) encourages them to be more active in protecting their rights and, at the same time, strengthen the perception of Muslims as vulnerable for Islamist radicalization people.

“It is difficult to live in Russia, especially for people from other places. Russians are very xenophobic. They label us as “black” and Central Asians as “narrow-eyed”, let alone more humiliating names for Armenians, Azerbaijanis, etc. They hate others and do not consider them as humans. Even if I am a Russian citizen, I do not feel like home in Russia, because I am from the Caucasus and because I am a Muslim. The only option for me is to answer aggression with aggression. I do not expect justice from the Russian police. They have the same attitude. They do not even investigate if a person from the Caucasus or Central Asia dies.”³ (Skype-interview, Moscow, 20/11/2019).

This assessment of the situation that is coming from a 56 years old North Caucasian cannot be taken as a representative view of all ethnic, professional, gender, or age groups. However, his opinion is considerably wide-spread and finds support in the scholarly analysis of the hate crimes in Russia (Arnold, 2015). The rise of ultra-right violence in Russia⁴, to some extent, was facilitated by the Russian policies pursued in Chechnya (Laryš and Mareš, 2011) and marginalized North Caucasus inhabitants making them a target for the hate attacks. The peak of hate crimes in Russia was in 2007-2008. Around that time, as Tarasov (2006) claims, an estimated half of the world's racist skinheads lived in the Russian Federation. More recent data suggest that hate crimes and xenophobia in Russia are still present. A simple Google search gives several instances of hate crime in Moscow each year, even though the capital of Russia turned into a multi-ethnic city long ago. The headlines such as “Skinheads attacked a Daghestani/Kyrgyz/Uzbek” are not unusual for the Russian media, where the subjects of attacks are usually migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia (Arnold, 2015; Light, 2010; Vendina, 2013). Scholarly research confirms that hate crimes follow the trend outlined by the official propaganda campaigns. Russian state-controlled media resources, as Wilhelmsen (2016: 3) notes, are capable and even successful in determining the threat, which translates into identifying the target for the skinhead attacks.

Even though the amount of hate crime diminished in Russia, the North Caucasians are still considered as Others. The migration from the North Caucasus to Moscow and other big Russian cities is perceived as a negative phenomenon by the “hosts” (Arnold,

³ Arnold (2015) claims that law enforcers tend to qualify hatred crime as hooliganism, which implies much lesser penalty.

⁴ The number of hatred crime, according to the NGO SOVA was the highest between 2005 and 2009. In 2007, SOVA recorded skinheads as killing 97 people and beating 623. In 2009, the respective numbers were 94 and 443. (Verkhovskii, 2005, 2006, 2007; Verkhovskii et al., 2010, 2012, 2013).

2015). This negativity extrapolates to the whole population of the North Caucasus, which is demonstrated through the slogan “Stop feeding the Caucasus”. As many as 65% of the Russian population in 2012 supported this slogan against the Federal social program designed for the development of the North Caucasus (Holland, 2016). Apparently, such a negative attitude produces a correspondingly negative reaction from the North Caucasians, who demonstrate their disagreement and disregard to the State and society through arrogant and troublesome public behaviour (Molodikova and Watt, 2014: 135) and actions that could be classified as extremist.

The local tradition of vendetta also contributes to the image of the Caucasians as radicals. The obligation to retaliate throws a person into the lines of armed resistance, as it is the only possible way to seek revenge, especially if it is to be sought against law enforcers. For instance, one of Starodubrovskaya’s (2013) respondents argues:

“Today my father may be killed, somebody else's father may be killed, the same thing over and over, and people think of revenge, what to do. They would need arms. Where? Where to go? To the woods. People in the woods are driven to despair, because of what has been done – the permissible and the forbidden – with their honour and dignity. ...They have realized that those who did it to them represent this country, they will fight against this country and destroy everything it has. In other words, they don't even realize what consequences it might lead to.”

In his narrative, the respondent from the Dagestan republic of the North Caucasus depicts how a new radical is being formed. According to the respondent, it is the arbitrariness of law enforcers that deny the local people the dignified life. The local tradition of vendetta obliges to revenge, which is possible if one joins already existing resistance groups. The new radical is automatically labelled as Wahhabi/Salafist – the identity, which implies Islamist radicalization and makes a person an enemy of the state and the subject of extermination, even if the initial motive of joining the resistance is personal. The opinion of Starodubrovskaya’s informant resonates with Kuchins et al. (2011: 13) observation, which indicates that much of the unrest in the region stems from the rampant violation of the human rights, a climate of violence, and impunity of the law enforcers. The Dagestani expert Ruslan Gereyev adds to this that had the Salafism not existed, the North Caucasian youth would have found another channel to express their frustration with injustice, corruption, unemployment, and nepotism (Aliev, 2013).

Another psychological driver for radicalization is belonging to a family of a fighter or former fighter. Being a male child in such a family implies the constant attention of law enforcers, which is exacerbated by humiliation, deprivation, and repressions. Not surprising that this category is susceptible to radical propaganda (Sokirianskaia, 2020: 1). The state attitude towards these families can also radicalize their close relatives, neighbours, and friends. As Molodikova and Watt (2014: 133) noticed, Caucasians have a very strong family, kin, and even neighbourhood bonds. This way of becoming a radical is explained theoretically by Janeczko (2014). He claims that a member of the same group can share a feeling of deprivation if s/he sees another member of the same group being deprived.

One more socio-economic driver of radicalization is high unemployment, which is accompanied by nepotism and corruption. The North Caucasus is renowned for its low level of industrial production, high unemployment, and the smaller GDP per capita than Russia’s average. For instance, the level of unemployment in Ingushetia in 2014 was 48.8% and in the Chechen Republic 36.7% (Trukhachev et al., 2014). As Holland (2016) claims, the economic situation, corruption, and nepotism are identified as a primary

concern by residents. This translates into economic marginalization and grievances due to the limited possibilities of employment and career options. According to Aliev (2013), such a miserable situation in the economic sphere can motivate young men to join the insurgency. This possibility was recognized even by the Russian leadership. For instance, in his speech in Dagestan capital Makhachkala in 2009, the then-president Dmitry Medvedev claimed that “low living standards, unemployment, and corruption are the root causes of violence” (Holland 2016).

However, neither massive investment into the region⁵, nor some anti-corruption measures (the arrest of corrupt officials)⁶ helped to root out radical extremism completely. Moreover, as the data on the recent attacks of the radicals suggests, some of them come from wealthy families or even from the families of the officials. In the words of the Russian expert on radicalisation, Akhmet Yarlykapov, “it is not the terrorism of the poor anymore”, at least not only.⁷

Summing up, it can be argued that socio-economic factors play a certain role in creating an atmosphere, which facilitates radicalization of youth. In addition to discussed xenophobia, ethnic hatred, corruption, unemployment, nepotism, there is an assemblage of other reasons that experts identify as contributing to the overall radicalization of youth. Among those is: 1) homogenization of the region (Holland, 2016), which leaves the North Caucasian youth without the possibility to socialize and develop tolerance to other cultures; 2) comparatively fast population growth and its high density in the North Caucasus, that increases competition for the limited structural resources, despite the fact that, in general, Russia is underpopulated (Starodubrovskaya, 2013; Iliysov, 2019); 3) the context of the structural changes that the state and society lived through, after the dissolution of the USSR, which triggered “the collapse of the traditional society, active urbanization, and economic changes” (Starodubrovskaya, 2013). None of these drivers has a direct link with religion.

The state, non-state, and society-led approaches

Russia is a traditionally authoritarian state. This has always been the case since the creation of it, which dates to the 15th-16th century. Except for a short period of the quasi-democratic governance by president Boris Yeltsin in 1991-1999, the state always had a strong leader with the wide or even unlimited powers. This implies a strong control over the population, institutions, and processes. Hence, the state also plays a leading role in countering radicalization. The authoritarian set up also explains the state’s preference for the harsh and suppressive methods in dealing with the problems faced. Yet, some other methods are also employed by the government in its strategy of countering radicalization.

The first choice. Military and coercive methods

Since V. Putin ascendance to power in 1999, Russia returned to its hawkish stance in the foreign and domestic politics. The Chechen question was one of the most

⁵ In 2010, the Russian government approved the Strategy of socio-economic development of the North Caucasus for 2010-2025. The economic investment to the region, according to the Strategy should reach \$57 billion.

⁶ Baklanov, A. (07/02/2018). Aresty chinovnikov v Dagestane. Available online <https://snob.ru/news/157392/> accessed 23/02/2020.

⁷ Dzhaliyov, R. (04/01/2020) Analytiki ukazali skhozhest ataki v Magase s drugimi napadeniyami pod brendom IG. Available online <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/344290/> accessed 23/02/2020.

demanding on both fronts. Having inherited a problem of the broke-away Chechen Republic, Putin resorted to solve it relying on the state's military strength and coercion. This choice could seriously damage the state image globally and deteriorate relations with the Muslim world. Framing the Second Russo-Chechen war as a counter-terrorist campaign helped to resolve both, especially after 9/11 attacks. The harsh stance of Putin regarding everything related to terrorism/radicalization was not questioned anymore even after the hostage crises in Moscow in 2002 and Beslan (North Ossetia) in 2004.

After the Russian military might has crushed Chechen resistance in the early 2000s, Putin transferred the leading role in fighting the remaining groups of fighters in the North Caucasus to the local governments. The leaders of the federal units, who faced the problem of radicalization that spilled-over the borders of Chechnya, followed the example of Putin and use all available methods to counter radicalization and to suppress the dissent. Extra-judicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, etc. are among the methods employed in the North Caucasus and beyond since then (Sokirianskaia, 2019). The head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov publicly declared that adherents of Salafism ("the Satans" in Kadyrov's terminology) do not have a place in Chechnya and that they "should be killed". This attitude extends to their families and relatives, who on many occasions become hostages of the state (Yarlykapov, 2018). The practice of collective punishment is also widely used in Chechnya. As Kazenin and Starodubrovskaya (2014) note, there is no mechanism of protection from the terror of the state. Not surprising that the desperate youth consider taking up the arms as the only possibility to protect themselves from being arbitrarily accused, tortured, or humiliated.

The situation regarding the rights of non-institutionalized Muslims (read Salafists) was similar all over Russia in the early 2000s, but it improved significantly in Moscow and the Volga region (Tatarstan and Bashkortostan) after 2010. There were even attempts to incorporate Salafist Muslims into the official Islamic institutions in some places, but not in the North Caucasus, where the relations between the authorities and non-institutionalized Muslims remain tense (Sokirianskaia, 2019). However, even there the authorities are finding a fragile balance in their relationship with non-institutionalized Islam. Currently, there is official tolerance according to the formula: "the practice of Salafi Islam is not forbidden as long as it is not public or political".

"You are free to do what you want, to pray as you want, as long as you do not spread your ideas or do not blame the officials in being the followers of incorrect Islam. Do what you do silently, without advertising it, and you will be alright" (Interview, Chechnya, 05/01/2020).

In sum, the coercive methods were quite effective in dealing with the large-scale resistance and support to it. However, they were counter-productive after this initial goal was achieved and the required inclusion of other means.

Non-military prevention

Despite the considerable success in suppressing radicalization using military and coercive methods, the Russian government realized that it is impossible to win against religious extremism relying only on the brute force. Since 2010, authorities started actively employing non-military preventive methods to counter radicalization. The Federal government entitled the local authorities to design their own preventive programs and strategies, in accordance with the general guidance described in the strategies and other documents. Most of the programs adopted by the local governments can be united under the categories of informative-educative and ideological-repressive

with the aim of stopping or reversing the trend of radicalization. The informative-educative methods seek to achieve it through, 1) explaining the essence of religious extremism and its danger; 2) forming a negative opinion about it, and; 3) encouraging people to join a fight against it. The objectives of the ideological-repressive measures are, 1) to propagate socially important values; 2) to promote “peaceful” Sufi Islam, over the “dangerous” (Salafi) form of it, and; 3) to control the possible spread of radical ideas. The assessment and more detailed description of the said measures, which are practiced in the federal unites is presented below, with the focus on the programs implemented in the Muslim territories of the Russian Federation.

Informative-educative methods

Informative-educative methods include different types of preventive activities. The most popular of them are: re-education and reintegration of former fighters into society; conferences of youth organizations; lectures of politicians and law enforcers; marches “against terrorism” and “for peace”; informative advertisements and leaflets; games and simulations of antiterrorist activities; special programs on TV etc. (see Hmyzova, 2016; Kucheriavyi, 2014; Levkina and Shatskaia, 2014). These activities are usually being either organized or supervised by law enforcers or authorities. For instance, a round table “The territory of peace” (on 06/03/2019), where students of the Kazan Innovation University presented their ideas on how to counter extremism, was conducted under the auspice of the republic’s government and local representatives of the Federal Security Bureau (FSB).

In addition to the state-organized activities, NGOs are also entitled to work for the prevention of radicalization. For instance, the Chechen NGO, “Women for development”, spreads the information warning about the tactics of extremists, who recruit romance-searching females on the Internet. Another organization, “The Objective”, organizes trainings, invites psychologists and lawyers, and tries to discourage youth from visiting “dangerous” websites or from believing in ISIS propaganda. The NGO “Genesis” in Ingushetia works with high school and university students explaining to them the legal aspects of being involved in radical activities, what extremism differs from terrorism, how to avoid recruitment etc. As a rule, NGOs must inform law enforcers on their planned activities and receive permission for implementing them. Some of the activities can be disapproved by the authorities.

The involvement of NGOs has a positive but limited effect due to the non-voluntary collaboration with the law enforcers. One example of such a counter-productive approach is found in Sokirianskaia (2019). She describes how one of the local NGOs agreed to organize a meeting of the high-school students with a woman who returned from ISIS. The idea was to provide potentially vulnerable to propaganda youth with the first-hand experience. However, a two-hour meeting managed by the local law enforcers turned into already conventional praising of the Chechen government and personally Kadyrov. The woman, who had to play the central role during this lecture, was eventually allocated several minutes at the end of the meeting. Such a poor organization of the event, according to some participants, was rather counter-productive.

Same as the example above demonstrates, the success of the government’s adopted preventive methods is questionable. The effects of the state’s monitored or orchestrated public events remind of the Soviet-style propagandistic gatherings and hardly can be efficient in the modern setting. The reintegration programs are not trusted, as the official promises not to persecute fighters returned to peaceful life were not respected on many occasions. The narratives designed by the state to counter ISIS

propaganda are limited to criticizing Islamists and praising the local governments, which cannot compete with the sophisticated methods of ISIS promoters.⁸

Ideological-repressive methods

Ideological-repressive methods are closely bonded with the educative. The state tries to promote Sufi Islam (institutionalized) vis-à-vis Salafi branch of it. The former is considered to be not political and, hence, peaceful. The state supports the teaching and studying this type of Islam on the levels of universities, high schools, and even primary schools. The state links higher institutions of religious education with the secular state universities and allows optional religious education in school.

The authorities of some republics also try to minimize a threat of radicalization in another way too – they aim to register everyone, who practices the “dangerous” branch of Islam and monitor their lives after. The practice of registration is known since the late 2000s in Chechnya, where parents of the pupils must disclose the branch of Islam they practice, and since 2015 in Dagestan, where authorities register “potential Salafists” according to the criteria unknown to the public. The consequences of being in the “list” are tremendous in its negativity. As one of my informants explained:

If you are on the list, it means that you can be arrested at any time. You cannot go out of the republic. They border guards have the names of those “listed” too and they will not let you cross the border. It also means regular visits of police to your house. Besides the stress that these visits impose on the family, it means that neighbours start looking at you strangely and try to avoid you. Because if they are still friends with you, they can be suspects too. It means consequences to your kids at school. And the worst is that once you are on the list, it is nearly impossible to be crossed out of it. (Skype-interview, Dagestan 15/01/2018).

Closing Salafi mosques is another practice that was widely used in the North Caucasus. The actual closure would usually happen after several police raids on the chosen mosque during Friday prayers. These raids would result in detention of the believers, most of whom would be released after a few hours of detention or interrogation. These practices violate the Russian Constitution and the Federal Law “On the freedom of beliefs” (adopted in 1997). At the same time, the violation of the believers’ rights contributes to the creation of the negative image of law enforcers. Therefore, the effect of these methods is rather opposite to the anticipated. The focus on education does not bring the desired effect either, as “the teaching of Islam is usually delivered by poorly educated individuals” (Sokirianskaia, 2019).

To sum up, despite certain regional differences, in general, Russia tries to use some non-military means to countering radicalization. The inclusion of them into the strategy of countering radicalization gave some positive results, which are limited due to the overall control executed by the law enforcers.

Politics and religious governance

The political dimension of countering Islamist radicalization can be divided into Russian domestic and foreign politics, as Dannreuther (2010) does. However, it is rather unnecessary, as further investigation demonstrates. Besides the random declaration of officials that Russia is an Islam-friendly country, there is no real evidence that designing

⁸ The online discussion. Profilactika ekstremizma i terrorizma na Severnom Kavkaze, v poiskav idealnoi modeli. 28/02/2019. Available on https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/forum/online_topics/6160 accessed 28/02/2019.

its foreign or domestic politics Russia keeps in mind its sizeable minority of Muslims.⁹ Its support to some Islamist movements in the Middle East and the Observer's status at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation is rather dictated by security and geopolitical interests of the state. The developments in world politics after 2010, when the analysis of Dannreuther was published, demonstrate it too. For instance, the state pretty much ignored the question of Rohingya refugees, which was closely followed by Russia's (and not only) Muslims. Furthermore, it intervened in the Syrian war on the side of Bashar al Assad – the figure disliked by many Muslims in the world. In addition to this, Russia tries to develop friendly relations with Shia Iran, which is regarded negatively by the Sunni Muslims – the majority of Russian Muslims. In sum, it is hardly possible that Russia designs its foreign politics having in mind the Muslim population of the country or the world.

The domestic Russian politics is not influenced by the second-biggest religious group either. This claim finds its support in the analysis of Russia's religious governance. As is mentioned above, Russia has rather a harsh stance towards religious freedom. It allows only institutionalized Islam to function officially on the territory of the state. The branches of non-institutionalized Islam are considered to be vulnerable to radicalization being subjected to harsh counterterrorism and counter-extremist measures.

The roots of this approach are found in the autocratic nature of the state and history of the relationship between the state and Islam. As is known, Russia incorporated some Muslim populated territories as early as the 16th century. Since then Islam has been the second-largest religion in Russia and had to resist the pressure of the state and the dominance of Orthodox Christianity. The state always strived to impose effective control over Islam and followers. However, the non-hierarchic nature of Islam limited the possibility of the state to govern it in the same efficient way as in the case of Orthodox Christianity.

After the wave of religious liberalization that Russia witnessed in the early 1990s (Leksin, 2009; Mitrokhin, 2002: 54-55), the state returned to the model of controlling religion, which was designed during the Soviet times. Having failed to create a unified structure for governing Islam, the state opted to govern the Muslims through the three main bodies – the Council of Russian Muftiates, the Central Muslim Clerical Board, and the Coordination Center of Muslims of the North Caucasus. The location of these institutions represents the geo-demographic distribution of Muslims in Russia (see Map 1) and the attempt to unite them if not on federal then on the local level. The Muslims that do not belong to institutionalized Islam remain out of state control, which in some republics puts them out of the legal frame. This is also noticed by Verkhovski (2010), who describes the relationship between the state and Muslims/Islam as follows: "On the federal and regional levels, the authorities work almost exclusively with the three basic coalitions of Muslim organizations which are united around the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims, the Mufti Council and the Coordination Centre of North Caucasian Muslims. This automatically implies a marginalization of groups and organizations not belonging to these coalitions."

Affiliation with one of these institutions demonstrates a believer's loyalty to the state. It also means a possibility to receive the state's support and to obtain funding for religious activities. At the same time, this structure effectively marginalized the

⁹ Putin nazval Islam 'yarkim elementom Rossiyskogo kul'turnogo koda' 22/10/2013. Newsru media agency Available on <https://www.newsru.com/religy/22oct2013/ufa.html> accessed 08/02/20 See also 'Putin nazval islam neot'emlemoi chast'yu religioznoi zhizni Rossii'. 30/08/2012. Delfi News agency. Available on <https://rus.delfi.ee/daily/abroad/putin-nazval-islam-neotemlemej-chastyu-religioznoj-zhizni-rossii?id=64895248> accessed 08/02/20.

followers of the other, “foreign” to Russia, branches of Islam that appeared in the country during the said period of liberalization. Besides the state disregard of the non-institutionalized Muslims, such marginalization became possible due to two factors: 1) the regulations that restrict possibilities to institutionalize “non-traditional” (for Russia) branches of Islam¹⁰, and 2) the negative connotation that other branches of Islam acquired due to Islamization of the Chechen armed resistance of the 2000s. Both mentioned factors potentially contribute to the radicalization of the marginalized groups of Muslims, who might feel stuck between a rock and hard place. On the one hand, they do not want to join officialdom (institutionalized) as it had its reputation tarnished by the long history of collaboration with the KGB (Kazenin and Starodubovskaia, 2014), on the other hand, they cannot register any association of their own due to the restrictions and negative state attitude.

Legislative control

Russia has considerably well-developed legislation that is designed to provide a legal basis for countering radicalization. Faced with the problem of the inflow of the new religions and radicalization in the 1990s, Russia adopted laws that restricted the earlier available options and enabled law enforcers to use their preferred methods of countering radicalization.

The uncontrolled spread of foreign to Russian ideologies was aimed to stop with the laws ‘On the non-commercial organizations’ (N7-F3 adopted in 1996) and ‘On the freedom of conscience and religious associations’ (N125-F3 adopted in 1997). The said laws imposed additional regulation for registering religious organizations on the territory of the Russian Federation. In order to be registered, the organization had to prove that it operated in Russia for, at least, fifteen years. However, this, according to Verkhovski (2010) rather marginalized the religious groups and forced them to move underground.

The legal frame designed to counter and prevent radicalization is not perfect either. In its counter-radicalization strategy, Russia relies on two main laws namely, ‘On countering the extremist activities’ (N114-F3, 2002) and ‘On countering terrorism’ (N 35-F3, 2006). These documents aim to set the objectives and regulate all activities of the relevant bodies. The imprecision of these documents in defining the key terms, which persists till today,¹¹ has attracted harsh criticism from the human rights activists. Indeed, the vague formulation of the terminology propels misinterpretation and arbitrariness of the law enforcers, which is a very acute problem in Russia and the North Caucasus in particular. Moreover, the Russian police are notorious for forging the cases, which increase their “effectiveness” and helps to seek promotion. The courts support this practice too. Even a “like” in Facebook under a post that has a vague connection to terrorism can be interpreted as “terrorism support” by court, as the recent cases demonstrate.¹²

¹⁰ The law ‘On the non-commercial organizations’ (N7-F3 adopted in 1996) and the law ‘On the freedom of conscience and religious associations’ (N125-F3 adopted in 1997).

¹¹ The new strategy on countering extremism was approved in May of 2020. According to human right activist A. Verkhovskiy, the document, due to the imprecise definitions, poses a threat for everyone to be accused in extremism. See Nikitinskiy L. (2/06/2020). Stat’ ekstremistom mozhnet kazhdy. Novaya Gazeta. Available at <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/06/02/85655-stat-ekstremistom-mozhet-kazhdy?fbclid=IwAR2IdmUHATDIFpsYPu3-UWvULeAq7Sa4-K6MO88X8ACrc2C9YoVfoMik8FQ> accessed on 04/06/2020.

¹² Some of the cases are presented in the online media resource Lenta.ru. “Kogo nado privlechem” 24/07/2018 Available on <https://lenta.ru/articles/2018/07/24/likeshare/> last access 22/07/2020.

Local authorities, who are empowered to implement anti-terrorist and anti-extremist measures, complement federal laws with regulations adapted to the situation on the ground. The local legislation, some parts of which is a blueprint of the federal one, faces the same problem – it often contradicts the Russian constitution and provides room for the free interpretation of the key definitions. The minuses are obvious in the law N47-R3 “on the prohibition of the extremist religious activities, and administrative responsibility for the infringements of the rules that regulate religious activities” (Kabardino-Balkaria) and the equivalents of it adopted in Dagestan (in 1999) and Chechnya (in 2001). The law allows a loose interpretation of the key terms such as extremism and, according to the leading Dagestani sociologist Zaid Abdulagatov (2014), results in the rather unlawful behaviour of the police officers. The lack of accountability creates a negative image of the police force, the judicial system, and the state in general, which translates into people’s (sometimes radical) protest reaction.

To sum up, Russia has a harsh stance and favour power-based and coercive methods countering radicalization. Nevertheless, the strategy it has adopted is diverse and multifaceted. It includes soft power and educative methods besides anti-Islamist propaganda, which adds to legislative regulations and restrictions.

Crisis case studies

As the analysis above suggests, there are many drivers for radicalization in the Russian Federation. The state (partly successfully) tries to employ a variety of methods to deal with the phenomenon. It succeeded in quelling Chechen resistance and brought back the broke-away region. However, the sporadic outbreaks of violence demonstrate that religious radicalization is still not completely defeated. Moreover, the similarity of the recent attacks, presented below, allows us to consider the upsurge of the new wave.

Four attacks in two years

They stand holding knives in their hands, behind them is a standard yellow wall, which does not allow to identify where the video was filmed. “We pledge our allegiance...” – starts the voice behind the camera. Four boys repeat the words in Russian with a heavy Chechen accent in their childish voices, “...to the Amir of true believers Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi...”. This video recorded by the teenagers, the youngest of whom was only 11 years old and the oldest 18, became public only after they knife-attacked the Chechen police officers in the capital Grozny and one of the republic’s districts on August 20, 2018. Four of the attackers were gunned down on the spot, the fifth was wounded and died in a hospital. Before being killed, the boys managed to wound five policemen...¹³ Law enforcers designated this attack as a terrorist act assigning the responsibility to the Islamic State.

Three months before this, the calm service at the Orthodox Church of Archangel Mikhail in the capital of Chechen republic Grozny was disturbed by shouts “Allah Akbar” (God is great - Arabic) and shots. Only the quick reaction of the priest Father Sergiy and one of the believers prevented a blood bath. Two men managed to close the heavy door of the church and saved other people, who were attending the mass. Two policemen, who were stationed outside to protect the church, and one civilian died, two more

¹³ Video prislyagi IG chechenskih podrostkov opublikovano v Internete 22/08/2018 <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/324457/> accessed 12/06/2020

policemen and another civilian were wounded. All four attackers were gunned down by the special forces who arrived on the scene. According to the media, the attackers, who were 18-19 years old inhabitants of Chechnya and Ingushetia, had an arsenal of 10 bottles of Molotov cocktail, a sawed-off shotgun, knives, and small axes.¹⁴ “They were very young, did not even have beards”, Father Sergiy told journalists.¹⁵ The attack was qualified as a terrorist act with responsibility assigned to the Islamic State too, even though the attackers did not refer it.

This was already a second attack on the Orthodox churches in the North Caucasus during the same year. The first one happened in Dagestan town Kizlyar, where the local inhabitant killed five women, who came to the church. Strangely enough, this attack was categorised as a “terrorist act of an individual”, despite the fact, that 22-year-old Khalilov, who assaulted the Kizliar church, left behind a video address with the reference to Islamic State ...¹⁶

The fourth attack happened on December 31, 2019, which is the time, when everyone is looking forward to finishing their work and to celebrating the end of the year. The feeling of approaching festivity had probably relaxed the traffic police officers, who were finishing their shift in the post at the entrance to Magas, the capital of Ingushetia. Their calm routine was suddenly disturbed by the quickly approaching car, which hit the police officer standing on the road. Two young guys armed with knives jumped out of the car and attacked other colleagues of the driven over policeman. The officers opened fire. One attacker was killed on spot, another was heavily wounded. The responsibility for the attack was claimed by the Islamic State. The picture of both young men holding knives was circulated in social media later.

The drivers of the attacks

The four attacks have much in common. All of them are committed by radicalized youth that was willing to die. The attacks were committed without sophisticated weaponry and for the sake of or assigned to the terrorist organization Islamic State. The attackers were very young (11-22 years old), belonged to the local ethnic groups, and had very diverse social status. All attacks happened in the eastern part of the North Caucasus – the poorest, the least educated, the most Islamised, ethnically diverse, and unstable southern region of the Russian Federation, which is affected by the two recent Russo-Chechen wars. The latter fact removes the otherwise shocking effect of information regarding the frequency of such attacks in the territory, which is only twice bigger than Cyprus geographically and in terms of the population size. It is also worth reminding that majority of the inhabitants in the North Caucasus adhere to Sunni Islam. These characteristics of the attackers will be further assessed against the probable drivers just after the brief analysis of the targets.

As is known, the radicals chose to attack the Orthodox churches, the believers inside them, and the local traffic policemen. All these targets could be the representation of the Other for the attackers, who could feel humiliation for the defeat experienced by their “fathers” in the last Russo-Chechen war.

Indeed, Orthodox churches in the region represent the presence of the foreign (non-Muslim) element in the Caucasus. They associated with the Russian state and serve

¹⁴ Napadenie na pravoslavnyi khram v Groznom, est' pogibshie 19/05/2018 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-44183929> accessed 12/06/2020

¹⁵ Malaya krov'. Svideteli napadeniya na xram v Groznom ne veryat vlastyam 22/05/2018 <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29241385.html> accessed 12/06/2020

¹⁶ Napadenie na pravoslavnyi khram v Groznom, est' pogibshie 19/05/2018 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-44183929> accessed 12/06/2020

as a symbolic footprint of an “occupier”, the footprint that in another way asserts the presence and dominance of Russia in the region. Another reason that could have encouraged the attack on the religious institution is vengeance for an international “anti-Islamic” events (e.g. cartoons on the Prophet Muhammad, the prohibition to wear burka in schools of France etc.). The Christian symbols for them could be a representation of the larger Other, which is Judeo-Christian civilization.

The fact that the radicals chosen to organize their attack during religious ceremonies might demonstrate three things: 1) it was a sheer tactical step that ensured gathering of probable targets (non-Muslims believers); 2) they wanted greater publicity, which could have not been in place if the attacks were downgraded to the regular hate crime; 3) the radicals feared the disapproval of their communities, which would not forgive them killing their neighbours, which is a cultural factor that also cannot be ruled out completely.

Another target chosen by the radicals was police forces. All uniformed people in the North Caucasus are perceived by the radicals as a legitimate target, which is equal to the Russian military. This attitude was established during the Second Russo-Chechen war (1999-2009) and due to the process of conflict Chechenization (Russell 2008, Souleimanov 2015). As a result of this conflict, military forces completed of locals replaced other Russian military forces that fought against proponents of the independent Chechnya (both secular and religious). Since then even the traffic police are seen by many as those who serve the enemy. Most probably, radicals would prefer to attack Russian forces directly, but this target was hardly reachable to the poorly equipped attackers, who did not have any external support, logistics, or capacity for reconnaissance and planning, as it was the case of the Chechen suicide female bombers widely known as black widows (Kurz and Bartles 2007, Nivat 2005).

Having this context in mind, it is possible to switch to the analysis of the chosen cases in a frame of the factors of radicalization discussed afore.

First, it can be suggested that historical factors might have played only a very tiny role in the radicalization of the attackers. This can be concluded from their young age and a very low level of education in the region, which does not teach the history of the region. Even though the important for collective memory events could be learned from the Internet and daily communication, it is hardly likely that it was the main driver for the attackers. Even if, the Internet as a source is available for the majority of the population, self-education requires some skills in search and analysis, which the attackers hardly possessed. The oral transmission of information is also a powerful engine of teaching and learning in the region. However, this source is somewhat limited in Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan, where the local population tries to avoid talking about their negative experiences, because it could be interpreted as an anti-government activity.

Second, the economic factor as the one important for radicalization in the chosen cases could also be minimized if not ruled out completely. The collective support of the families in the North Caucasus keeps children considerably secure economically until they become adults and start earning. The young age of most of the perpetrators suggests that most of them could not have experienced financial difficulties or disappointments due to the low income or impossibility to have a career in the highly corrupted region. Of course, the different age of the attackers and the families they were coming from could have differed significantly in terms of economic well-being. However, the information that was circulating in social media about the attackers suggests that at least some of them were well-off. According to some claims, at least one of the attackers (a leader of the groups of five children) came from the family of the high-rank and rich Chechen official.

Third, the political factors might not have played a prominent role either. The youngsters, most probably, did not have a profound knowledge of the foreign or domestic politics in Russia and the pieces of information that they could have received from the TV would not encourage their radicalization due to the censorship that is prevalent in Russian media. The most important political event that the attackers could have been influenced by is the recent Russo-Chechen wars. The probability of them being witnesses of the Russian military actions is low due to their age. However, they could have had the common knowledge of these wars and the atrocities committed during them. They also could have witnessed or learned about the cases of repressions by the local law enforcers, which to some extent justifies the choice of their targets too.

Having minimized the historic, economic, and political factors, the prominence of the psychological and religious factors in the radicalization of youth could be claimed. The knowledge of people, who suffered at the hands of the “enemy”; the common knowledge of injustice and corruption prevalent in the region; the guilt for their older relatives, who collaborated with the “enemy”; having a member of the family who participated in the resistance and died or been arrested; the heroization of resistance and its leadership including those who resorted to terrorism, etc. All these ideas wrapped in Islamist propaganda – the image and the possibility of earning a place in paradise, could have had a definite impact on the radicalization. The desire to be significant and to be a “hero” coupled with the maximalist view of the youth could have pushed these young men and children to commit the analysed terrorist attacks. Their reference to the Islamic State in their last messages to the world indicates that to some extent they were a subject of ISIS propaganda. It is not clear if it was indirect propaganda released by ISIS or if they had direct contact with those who moved to live and fight for Islamic State. The latter option is probable too due to the high numbers of combatants from the North Caucasus in Syria and Iraq. Barrett (2017: 13) claims that there were at least 3-4 thousands Russian citizens fighting for the Islamic State in 2016. The lost course of the local resistance and the allegiance pledged by the prominent local commander to ISIS left no other ways for the radicalized youth but to follow the same path sacrificing the local and earthly struggle for the global and divine goal.

Best practices and conclusions

This paper analysed a phenomenon of Islamist radicalization in Russia today. The theoretical frame that was built to analyse this phenomenon helped to exclude all other expressions of radicalizations but those which resulted in terrorist action and those that were labelled as Islamist by the law enforcers or terrorists themselves. This solved the problem of definition and narrowed down the focus. Moreover, the theoretical part justified the said choices and the decision to focus on factors that facilitate radicalization rather than reasons that encouraged people to take up this route. This decision helped to circumvent the problem of collecting data directly from radicalized individuals.

Further, the paper provides a context in which Islamist radicalization develops in Russia. This is directly linked to the number of Muslims in the country and the branch of Islam that they follow. The autocratic setting of the country made it problematic to measure the pool of potential religious radicals or those who might support them. The free expressions of the religious and political views in the country might result in negative consequences for individuals. Therefore, the paper provides only approximate estimates and focuses its analysis exclusively on the already committed actions.

The paper identified four such attacks that were occurred in 2018-2019. There might have been more of this kind of attack in Russia, but these four were explicitly linked to Islam. The exclusive focus on the North Caucasus the paper justified by the

geography of these attacks, which all were committed in this region. The latter can be characterized as the most Islamized in the Russian Federation. The reasons for this characteristic are linked by the paper to the recent Russo-Chechen wars of 1994-1996 and 1999-2009.

Further, the paper explores and presents other characteristics of the governance and methods of countering terrorism in the North Caucasus. The socio-economic underdevelopment, corruption, the arbitrariness of the local authorities, collective memory of the negative experience of interaction with Russia, grievance due to the recent Chechen wars, and the injustice of the consequent counter-terrorist operations in the region are among the primary reasons of radicalization. This analysis of the methods used by the government to counter or prevent terrorism, extremism, and radicalization, adds to the general picture and to the understanding of the roots of radicalization. The opinion of interviewees supports the view that the harsh approach of the Russian law enforcers can be one of the reasons for current radicalization. The softer methods that are being employed in recent years are neither sophisticated nor applied efficiently to prevent radicalization.

Further elaboration on the characteristics of the terrorists and their targets placed vis-a-vis drivers of radicalization allowed to assess the significance of each driver individually. The paper concluded that the most probable drivers of the current wave of radicalization of youth should be searched in the local grievances (the memory or knowledge of the recent Russo-Chechen wars and injustice of the authorities) that were magnified by the Islamist propaganda. The state approach regarding the local population and the majority's attitude towards the North Caucasians seem to be considerably powerful engines of radicalization. The influence of other factors that usually play the role in the radicalization of the population in the chosen cases was calculated as significant but not primary due to the age of the analysed radicals.

Recommendations

The factors identified as significant for facilitating the process of radicalization in the Russian Federation are related to the problems that the country faces since the early 1990s. The endemic corruption, nepotism, and other socio-economic problems wrapped into the arbitrariness of authorities produced a constant demand for justice. This demand is especially felt among the Muslim population of the North Caucasus, which is regarded as somewhat second-class by the majority of Russia and authorities. Therefore, radicalization in Russia, which is propelled by this bundle of problems, demands a long-term, complex, and holistic approach. This approach should include measures oriented to ensure implementation of the rule of law principle, work on improving socio-economic climate in the country, and encouragement of civil society. More specific recommendations are:

1. The creation of the independent Sharia courts with the limited power of their decisions in the Muslim territories of the Russian Federation could help to satisfy the demand for justice. Even though Russia is a secular state, the authorities could have entrusted this independent institution with the power of decision comparable to the jury. The latter, if both sides agree, could also be entrusted with the decision on punishments.
2. Rehabilitation of the participants of resistance in the North Caucasus would also add to building trust in law, law enforcers, and authorities.

3. The eradication of corruption, ensuring equal work and study opportunities for everyone, raising the level of education would be the primary targets for improving social climate and reducing xenophobia.
4. Explanatory works in schools and universities reminiscent of Soviet-style propaganda should be replaced by the grass-root initiatives, scholarly research, and open debates that would challenge propaganda of the Islamic State.
5. Multi-ethnic children camps and participation in communal life would also help to fill the life of youth with meaning. Such activities must be supervised in order to minimize the probability of hazing.

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Project name: Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives

Project Acronym: GREASE

Project Coordinator: Professor Anna Triandafyllidou

Contact: anna.triandafyllidou@eui.eu

September 2020

Document series reference: D4.1 Radicalisation and Resilience Case Studies



This document can be downloaded from the publications section of the GREASE website at <http://grease.eui.eu/>

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The GREASE project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 770640