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ISLAMIC FACTOR IN FOREIGN POLICY OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Zuzana Duda – Ľubomír Čech*

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary international arena, religion plays an increasingly pivotal role in shaping diplomatic strategies. This paper investigated the growing significance of Islam in shaping the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, aiming to examine the ways in which the religious factor is included in Russia's foreign policy and the tools the Russian Federation uses to defend its interests abroad through Islam. Our study, structured into three chapters, provided insights into the multifaceted role of religion in Russian foreign policy, as well as the specific ways in which the Islamic dimension influences it. Additionally, it presented selected activities carried out by Islamic religious organizations with the aim of supporting the country's foreign policy. We found that Russia integrates religious considerations into its diplomatic initiatives and employs Islam as a tool to advance its interests globally. Russian religious leaders, aligning with the country's rhetoric of patriotism, traditional values, and antagonism towards the West, play a crucial role in legitimizing domestic and foreign policy agendas and effectively complement state authorities involved in Russia's foreign policy. While the impact of Islam on Russia's foreign policy is significant, its evolving potential remains subject to ongoing developments and challenges. The compatibility of religious imperatives with the complexities of multi-religiosity and political elites within the Russian Federation continues to be a topic of exploration.

Key words: Russian Federation, Islam, Foreign Policy, Religion, Religious Organisation

Introduction

Not only does religion influence people's worldviews, thinking, behaviour and identity, but it is also the source of legitimacy, including the political one. In

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addition, religion is associated with formal institutions that can affect political processes. **S. Huntington**, who wrote *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), and **M. Juergensmeyer**, the author of *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (1993), both claimed that religious conflicts would replace ideological confrontations of the Cold War. These two publications were among few exceptions to the more general rule, according to which international relations and foreign policy studies usually avoided religious issues. Recent discussions on the role of religion in international politics have focused on the way it inspires people and how it is used by various social movements, political parties and militant groups. This regards state support for transnational religious propaganda, support for religious interpretations that ensure regime survival and competing visions of the so-called global religious soft power. The concept of soft power was coined by **J. Nye** in the book titled *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990), in which he describes different sources that countries can use to persuade others to do what they want without force or coercion. Besides international institutions, **J. Nye** (1990, p. 188) also defines other key elements of soft power, such as the attractiveness of the country's culture, values and ideology.

Religion and politics became increasingly intertwined at the beginning of the 21st century. The 9/11 terrorist attacks organised and committed by religiously motivated Al Qaeda in the heart of the Western world sparked a new era of global politics, in which religion became the subject of foreign-policy analyses. **Falk** (2001), **Fox and Sandler** (2004) as well as **Haynes** (2014) point to the global revival or return of religion. They all refer to the changing paradigms of international relations and the rise of faith-based diplomacy. The religious factor in international relations is becoming an increasingly popular topic of research. **E. S. Hurd** (2008) emphasizes that the observed strengthening of religion in international relations should not be interpreted exclusively as a manifestation of socio-economic problems or as a desperate struggle for the survival of anachronistic religious institutions, but also as an attempt to enforce a new definition of the relations between what is "political" and what is "religious".

The issue of the Islamic religion itself in the Russian Federation (RF) is wide-ranging. This topic has particular importance in the Russian Federation due to the historically poly-confessional composition of the population, as well as due to the sensitivity of the Islamic factor in many Russian regions. Various aspects of this topic, both in the present and in the historical context, have therefore become the subject of research by political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists and

other academics. Among such studies, the work of **A. Malashenko** (2007, 2010), **G. M. Yemelianova** (2002, 2010, 2019, 2020), **S. T. Hunter** (2004) or **S. E. Merati** (2017). Russian domestic and foreign policy is also favourite and frequent topic of the research. However, it should be noted that the studies that deal with religious elements in foreign policy focus particularly on the Orthodox Church, which has been the largest religious denomination in Russia for centuries. Atheisation and secularisation that Soviet citizens were exposed to, consolidated Russian orthodoxy, according to which religion is a traditional element determining Russian exclusiveness in relation to Europe and Asia. In this regard, we can mention publications written by **A. Curanović** (2012), **C. R. Blitt** (2011), **K. Richters** (2013), **G. Soroka** (2022) or **M. Avensova** and **V. Naxera** (2018) and **M. Solik** and **V. Baar** (2020), who perceive the Russian Orthodox Church as an important partner of the Russian state as well as a tool of the Russian soft power.

It is important to realise that the religious factor in Russia concerns not only Orthodox Church, but also Islam, Buddhism and Judaism (so-called “traditional religions”). Seeking identity in this country means re-evaluation of the role of Islam and Muslims, which significantly affects public discourse and state policies. Russia is today confronted with its own reality and the global impact of Islam as well. Thus, this paper examines and focuses on the Islamic factor in Russia's foreign policy.

The purpose of the paper is to explain how and why the Islam is becoming a significant factor of foreign policy in the Russian Federation (RF). As a result, we formulated the following research questions: In what way is the religious factor included in Russia's foreign policy? What tools does the RF use in order to defend its interests abroad by means of Islam? This article is based on the qualitative research, which analyses the religious factor in Russia's foreign policy. We used qualitative data in our research as most of our primary sources were scientific texts. Having collected the sufficient number of information sources focused on the examined issues, we analysed and sorted the obtained data, which we used to draw our conclusions while utilising an inductive approach. The authors try to answer the research questions by studying scientific papers, official documents, legal regulations as well as public statements made by political and religious figures. The sources are written in English and Russian languages. The paper aims to deepen understanding of a significant actor in Russia's foreign policy. It provides a specific example of how a religious organisation can be used as an effective institution that becomes involved in international relations. In addition,

this article analyses the way some religious organisations and political actors inspired by faith support the country's foreign policy agenda.

1. Religion in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation

Faith-based diplomacy involves state activities that incorporate religion into foreign policy. It entails different mechanisms for cooperation between the state and religious associations following national interests that are pragmatically defined. What is more, faith-based diplomacy is based on international activities of religious institutions, ideas and symbols that are adequately interpreted and aimed at achieving political goals. Actors (institutions / politicians / state authorities) that use the religious factor do not necessarily practise any religion. It should be noted that the state usually has control over religious institutions. What is more, the state's dominant position means that religious organisations submit to the state when their opinions or interests differ, not vice versa. Faith-based diplomacy is not used only by theocracies. Religious institutions, beliefs and symbols are regarded especially as instruments for achieving political goals (Curanović, 2012a, p. 7-8).

According to **J. Haynes**, some state authorities develop their relationships with religious organisations in order to enhance their foreign policy. That is to say, some faith actors try to influence the state's international relations by enforcing certain values, norms and denominations abroad. **Haynes** also emphasises the fact that the powerful influence in politics can be wielded by building strong relationships with key actors in society and politics, fostering good relationships with influential print and electronic media, shaping public opinion and lobbying. Religious actors' power to influence foreign policy is associated with their ability to exert influence in different ways. This public support is a mandate faith actors can use to participate in development of the state's domestic and foreign policy (Haynes, 2014, p. 194-196, 380). One of the most important facets of the state's involvement in international relations is formation of its identity. Both aspects of its international identity are influenced by the religious factor. Faith enhances integration when it comes to development of internal identity. In addition, it creates the state's image and defines its position in the religiously diverse international arena, i.e., its external identity. If religion is a part of the state's identity, it can serve as a tool for legitimization of foreign policy or as a mobilisation factor (Curanović, 2012b, p. 8-9). Legitimacy can be a strong asset for foreign policy makers, which can be aimed at multiple target groups. It can be used to persuade

policy makers from other states, it can help mobilize support for policies in one's own state, both among the population and other policy makers. It can also support activities that would not otherwise be popular, as well as the very form of support for activities and policies (Fox, Sandler, 2004, p. 46). If a policy, such as defining enemies of states, is promoted in religious terms, dissenting from that policy is not only dissenting from a political strategy, it is also against a religious precept. It means defying what is moral and right. A policymaker who can successfully portray a political cause as a religious one thus has a powerful tool for mobilizing support and silencing opposition. This is true whether or not the policymaker believes that his religious characterization of the policy is truthful (Fox, Sandler, 2004, p. 48-50).

Religion is also related to formal institutions that can influence international relations. In this context, it concerns the involvement of religious organisations in the framework of diplomacy related to the use of culture as a subject and means of achieving the main goals of foreign policy, creating a positive image of the country, promoting the values or language of its peoples, and supporting intercultural dialogue as a means of state development. **F. Munthe** (2017, p. 176) notes that churches, religious movements and private individuals are all actors that play a role in the provision of diplomatic services. A religious organisation can be an entity that carries out relatively free cross-border activity affecting relations within and between states (Curanović, 2012b, p. 7).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union undoubtedly altered the world power balance. The new world order meant that the Russian Federation was facing a double challenge: to define its identity and to develop its own visions for a new order. Indeed, both challenges are closely intertwined. Identity formation significantly affects Russia's visions of the international system in the 21st century. As a result, religion is a crucial element of Russia's national identity according to its foreign policy attitudes.

Religion, as part of culture and a defining characteristic of civilisations, is contained in the key documents of the Russian Federation's foreign policy. According to the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2016, *"a genuine consolidation of efforts of the international community requires a set of common values as a foundation for joint action, based on the common moral force of the major world religions as well as principles and concepts such as aspiration to peace and justice, dignity, freedom and responsibility, honesty, compassion and hard work"* (Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy federatsii, 2016). Furthermore, *"as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state with a*

track record of harmonious coexistence among various peoples, ethnic and religious groups that goes back centuries, the Russian Federation facilitates dialogue and partnership between cultures, religions and civilizations, including the United Nations and other international and regional organisations; supports corresponding initiatives of civil society and proactively works with the Russian Orthodox Church and the country's other main religious associations; counters extremism, radicalisation, intolerance, discrimination and division along ethnic, confessional, linguistic, cultural and other lines" (Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy federatsii, 2016). New Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2023 gives priority to *"promoting the development of international relations between religious organisations belonging to Russia's traditional religions"* (Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy federatsii, 2023).

Russia's National Security Strategy 2021 further defines that in order to achieve national and public security goals, the national policy also focuses on *"prevention and neutralisation of social, inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts, separatist tendencies, religious radicalism, destructive religious movements, ethnic or religious enclaves as well as social or ethno-cultural isolation of certain groups of citizens"* (Strategiya natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy federatsii, 2021). As regards protection and preservation of Russian traditional spiritual and moral values, culture and historical memory, *"imposition of foreign ideals and values as well as implementation of reforms in education, science, culture, religion, language and information activities regardless of historical traditions and experience of previous generations lead to increased disunity and polarization of nations. In addition, they destroy the foundations of cultural sovereignty and the cornerstones of political stability and statehood"* (Strategiya natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy federatsii, 2021). In addition, *"the USA and its allies, multinational corporations as well as foreign non-profit, religious, extremist and terrorist organisations actively attack Russian traditional spiritual, moral, cultural and historical values. They have information and psychological effects on individuals, groups and the public as they spread social and moral attitudes that are contrary to traditions and beliefs of the Russian Federation and its nations"* (Strategiya natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy federatsii, 2021). Thus, the policy emphasises the support for *"religious organisations with traditional denominations, their participation in preservation of Russian traditional spiritual and moral values, harmonisation of Russian society, promotion of an inter-religious dialogue, fight against extremism, protection of Russian society from external ideological and value expansion, external destructive information and*

psychological influences” (Strategiya natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy federatsii, 2021).

The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (2014) also considers provoking of inter-ethnic and social tensions, extremism, ethnic and religious hatred or enmity to be the main internal military risks. According to this document, *“spiritual and patriotic traditions”* constitute the part of Russian national security (Voyennaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii, 2014).

New Concept of the Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad 2022 describes Russian Federation, as a multinational and multi-confessional state, which promotes the establishment of an equal and mutually beneficial dialogue and partnership between cultures and religions. *“Russia actively supports the development of intercultural and interreligious dialogue both in bilateral and multilateral formats. Religion occupies a special place in the development of such a dialogue”* (Kontseptsiya gumanitarnoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii za rubezhom, 2022). According to this policy international interfaith cooperation of the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian Islamic organisations and other organisations representing traditional confessions for the country makes a significant contribution to the establishment and development of spiritual ties between people and nations. Participation of representatives of traditional faiths for Russia in international humanitarian events also allegedly contributes to the strengthening mutual understanding and respect, dissemination of the unique Russian experience of joint work of representatives of different confessions in the humanitarian sphere (Kontseptsiya gumanitarnoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii za rubezhom, 2022).

The aforementioned facts clearly show that the current faith-based diplomacy of the Russian Federation is motivated by the necessity to ensure spiritual security, which involves preservation of Russia's identity, traditions and culture. As a part of national security, spiritual security is closely associated with cultural (civilization) sovereignty, which does not represent complete independence from external influences (which is hard to achieve due to globalisation), but rather an ability to withstand pressures from civilisation. Experts acknowledge the fact that Russia's foreign policy is profoundly shaped by domestic issues, especially the security affairs. In the 21st century, it is becoming increasingly historical and messianic and the developments on the domestic front are very similar. From philosophical and theoretical perspectives, **Dugin's** concept of geopolitics defines Russia as a Eurasian power whose key role is to bridge western and eastern civilisations. Russian official representatives of the Russian Federation

headed by President **Vladimir Putin** support the “multi-ethnic and multi-religion” national model (Merati, 2017, p. 163-164). Russia wants to present itself as a unique civilisation with the long-term harmonious coexistence of Islam and the Orthodox Christianity. The Kremlin prefers the interfaith dialogue as a key element of Russia’s new global role. Given these objectives of the Russian foreign policy, the faith-based diplomacy seems really useful. Its effectiveness depends on two factors. Firstly, relations between religious institutions and the state require a minimum level of mutual trust. Secondly, religious institutions become useful to state diplomacy provided that they are able to act on the international stage. The Kremlin considers the Russian Orthodox Church to be an essential element in the formation of Russia’s new identity and it supports the interreligious dialogue as a key element of the Russian mission. Authorities perceive the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and muftiates¹ as loyal institutions that work for the sake of the country. The Kremlin, therefore, seeks to support its “actors” and develop its “assets”. This is not about faith, however, but rather about political calculations that motivate decision-making bodies to develop the potential of the ROC and muftiates as supranational entities. Authorities are convinced that the ROC and muftiates act on behalf of Russia and this belief is a cornerstone of faith-based diplomacy. If the Kremlin did not trust them, it would not support religious institutions within the international arena. The state supports and protects them as it believes that such protection brings political advantages (Curanović, 2012a, p. 15-16).

2. Islamic vector in Russia’s foreign policy

Even though the Russian Federation is rarely associated with Islam and Islamic identity, this faith has deep historical and cultural roots. Muslims actively built the Russian civilisation for centuries and Islam became an inseparable part of the Russian history. It is not easy to determine exactly when Islam first arrived in Russia due to the fact that the countries into which this faith penetrated at the beginning of its expansion did not belong to Russia, but were later annexed to the Russian Empire. Islam continued to spread and it became an official religion within the territory of modern Russian Federation, beginning with the Rashidun period. Islam in the Russian Federation is neither a religion of post-colonial

¹ Muftiates are self-governing religious entities under the supervision of muftis (Muslim religious leaders) that associate Muslim religious institutions and Muslims living on a certain territory with the aim of professing and spreading Islam.

immigration, nor a consequence of deepening globalisation and cultural exchange. There are some regions where Islam is a major religion. This monotheistic faith has influenced social, cultural, political and economic life in the country for centuries.

Manipulation of Islam for political purposes has a long tradition and is reflected in both domestic and foreign policies of the Russian Federation. Given the long presence of Muslims within their territories, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union both watched the international dynamics of Islam carefully. Depending on rulers and different historical periods, Muslims were regarded as enemies but also as potential allies and valuable diplomatic and economic instruments used in building of relations with the Muslim world. The enlightened attitudes and policies adopted by **Catherine the Great** brought many advantages and benefits to Russia, including economic prosperity and cultural development of the Volga-Ural region. The cities of Kazan, Ufa and Orenburg became important centres of Islamic education. What is more, Tartar merchants started to act as the main intermediaries in trade between Russia and its Muslim neighbours – Central Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, India and Western China (Hunter, 2004, p. 9-10). The Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany presented new challenges regarding the relationships between the state and Muslims in the Soviet Union. **Hitler** promised Soviet Muslims political independence in exchange for their cooperation. **Stalin** responded to this German propaganda by appealing to transnational patriotism of the Soviet multi-faith and multi-cultural population. Patriotic propaganda and the pro-Islamic concessions made by Stalin's rule managed to achieve their objectives – the majority of Soviet Muslims became more loyal, the efforts of the Nazis to gain adherents among the Soviet Muslim community were in vain and Islamic religious leaders promoted jihad against **Hitler** (Yemelianova, 2002, p. 47).

Why is the Islamic factor today an essential tool of Russia's foreign policy? Islam is currently the world's fastest growing religion. Its adherents make up a majority of the population in more than 40 countries. The modern Muslim community comprises almost two billion followers. While the world's population is expected to increase by 32 percent over the next few decades, the number of Muslims is projected to grow by 70 percent – from 1.8 billion in 2015 to almost 3 billion in 2060. In 2015, Muslims made up 24 percent of the global population. This number is projected to increase to more than 30 percent (Lipka, Hackett, 2017). Islam is the world's second largest religion after Christianity and the same concerns the Russian Federation. It is estimated that there are around twenty

million Muslims living in Russia, which means they make up 14 to 15 percent of the country's population. Following the demographic trends, representatives of Russian Muslims expect that almost 30 percent of the Russian population will practise Islam over the next 15 years. Population projections indicate that Islam will be Russia's dominant religion by 2050 (The Moscow Times, 2019). **P. Goble** claims that the Russian Federation is undergoing a religious transformation that will be of greater consequence for the international community than the collapse of the Soviet Union. He predicts that the Muslim demographic surge will greatly affect Russia's foreign policy (Antunez, 2016, p. 19).

External observers usually perceive the Muslim population growth in Russia as a significant challenge or even a threat to the country and its government. However, we need to consider the opportunities arising from this demographic surge, including Russian diplomacy in the Middle East and in other regions of the Islamic world. On numerous occasions, the Russian Federation emphasised its respect for Islam, the Muslim countries and their leaders as well as the need to promote reconciliation between different cultures and civilisations. Russia also seeks to foster Russians' shared moral values and to connect Russia's "traditional" values to those in the Middle Eastern, Asian and other non-Western countries. **A. Malashenko**, an expert on Islam in the Russian Federation, argues that the most important thing for Russia was to find its place in the world and compensate for its worsened relations with the West by a more active policy in other regions. When **Putin** came to power, the Muslim vector of Russia's policy increased (Malashenko, 2007). Indeed, the countries of the Islamic world are Russia's natural allies in its confrontation with the West. **P. Saunders** notes that, besides religion, Russia counts on its attempts to be appealing to Muslim communities in the Middle East and on fostering traditional values (Saunders, 2014). These features and the belief that the USA and the West aggressively disrespect local traditions provide a potentially firm basis for an alternative to U.S. unipolarism (Merati, 2017, p. 193-196). The Kremlin has been long seeking to strengthen its relations with the Persian Gulf region also due to its economic interests. The region offers export markets, investment opportunities, resources for investments in the Russian Federation and partners in increasing prices of oil – the main source of income that Russia and the Gulf countries depend on.

Russian policymakers are particularly interested in the Middle East also due to its proximity to the turbulent southern borders. **A. Curanovic** (2012b, p. 195) claims that Russia is worried mostly about two things. Firstly, it is the global order destabilisation caused by terrorist activities carried out by Islamic

fundamentalists. Clashes between Muslims and followers of other religions might, in extreme circumstances, lead to religious conflicts in the country. Secondly, Russia is concerned about increasing cooperation between the USA and the Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia or Turkey, which is in contradiction with the multipolar world order theory that Russia approves of. It is important to note that Muslim countries perceive Russia as a powerful actor, which has veto power in the United Nations Security Council, and an alternative supplier of technologies and raw materials. Russia appreciates the respect held by these countries, remembering its low status in the global arena in the 1990s. By strengthening its ties with the Muslim world, the Russian Federation can make its presence in the Middle East more assertive. In addition, it can extend its influence over the decisions regarding exports of strategic natural resources, develop a mechanism for cooperation in the fight against Islamic terrorist groups and minimise the support for Chechen rebels among Muslim politicians. Russia is pragmatic when it comes to its interests concerning the relations with the Islamic world, which enables it to use the religious factor as a foreign policy instrument. The image of a state that fights for or favours Islam has profoundly affected relations with the Muslim world. **Vladimir Putin** has managed to improve dynamics of Russia's policy toward Islamic countries after its ties with the Muslim world weakened in the 1990s. Russia gradually restored its relations with former Soviet allies (including Libya, Algeria, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen), intensified its diplomatic efforts regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and began to establish bilateral relations with the U.S. traditional allies (such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Turkey).

It is important to take the major Muslim republics of the former U.S.S.R. into consideration as well. Even though they became independent, their dependence on Moscow continues in many aspects owing to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Community. The key geopolitical significance of the region along with security risks and enormous resources are essential components of the Kremlin's policy toward Central Asia. It entails security and energy cooperation, trade and economic relations and Russia's efforts to remain an important partner of Central Asia. Terrorism is another reason why Russia is keeping a close watch on this region. If radical Islam seized political power in the Central Asian republics, Russia would be in serious trouble as it regards this vast region as an integral part of its privileged zone of influence (Laqueur, 2009).

In the early 21st century, Russia's reputation in the Muslim world was probably

at its lowest point due to the Second Chechen War. It grew a bit when the Russian Federation vigorously condemned the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The country's image and status in the Muslim world generally improved later in the same year, when Russia became an observer member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). While the western official discourse is somewhat sceptical when it comes to evaluation and perceptions of Muslims and their world, recognition of traditional Islam as part of the Russian civilisation turned out to be a good idea. Since Muslims are officially acknowledged as full-fledged members of Russian society and its history, Russia can proclaim itself a "Muslim state". As a result, it has become a legitimate member of international Muslim organisations, including the aforementioned OIC, which have only few or no representatives from the West (Merati, 2017, p. 163). According to the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation *"Russia will use its observer status in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to foster its relations with Muslim countries and to promote partnerships in different areas"* (Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy federatsii, 2016).

For Russia, given the current state of the economy and a certain degree of political isolation, it is important to look for new sources of economic development and cooperation. In the context of economic and political conflicts with Western countries, Russia is turning to new markets and emphasizing the common values of non-Western countries. The prospect of cooperation helps break some of the isolation caused by sanctions and can provide economic relief. The vectors of Russian foreign policy are also clearly visible today in the countries of the Muslim world, where Russia uses the geographical proximity of the region and promotes active diplomacy there. According to the latest Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2023), the states of Islamic civilization are increasingly desirable and reliable partners of Russia in ensuring security and stability and solving economic problems at the global and regional level. According to the Russian leadership, these states have a great perspective to establish themselves as an independent centre of world development within the polycentric world, and Russia is therefore trying to strengthen their comprehensive and mutually beneficial cooperation, respecting their social and political systems and traditional spiritual and moral values.

Russian leaders and politicians have repeatedly emphasized the importance of Islam as an integral part of the political structure of statehood, both historically and today. The opening ceremony of the Moscow Cathedral Mosque in 2015 was a priority for Russian political elites. On many occasions, the Russian Federation

has emphasized its respect for Islam, Muslim countries and their leaders, as well as the need to promote reconciliation between different cultures and civilizations and to promote the common moral values of the Russians.

After the Russian Federation joined the OIC, **E. Primakov** and **M. Shaimiev** led the creation of the Group of Strategic Vision "Russia – Islamic World". The meeting was attended by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation **S. Lavrov**, the then secretary general of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation **I. Madani**, government and religious officials, diplomats as well as scientists from Russia and other Muslim countries. The group comprises 33 prominent state and public figures from 27 Islamic countries, including former prime ministers, ministers of foreign affairs, respected Islamic theologians and others. Its current members are the representatives of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, the heads of federal subjects of Russia's Muslim regions, the Advisor to the President of the Russian Federation, business, health, science and education representatives as well as religious representatives of Muslim organisations. The meetings are focused on *"the most acute and crucial issues regarding international relations, developments in the Middle East and the relations between Russia and the states of the Islamic East"* (Russia-Islamic world, 2023). The group has earned respect in many Muslim countries. It performs systematic and fruitful activities at international level and, thus, contributes greatly to strengthening of the ties between Russia and the Muslim world as well as between Russian Muslims and their fellow believers all over the world. At the moment, there is an active dialogue between the state departments of many Islamic countries regarding the use of Russian vaccines against COVID-19 on their territory. An important impetus was given by the theological conclusion that Russian vaccines are canonically permissible – *halal* (Russia - Islamic world, 2021).

As far as paradiplomacy² is concerned, we should highlight Tatarstan and the symbolic role its president plays. In the 1990s, this republic established special relationships with Turkey, Egypt, the UAE and Jordan. In Egypt, its former president **Shaimiev** was acknowledged as the head of a sovereign nation state. In 1997, the prime minister of Tatarstan met King **Hussein** of Jordan and was awarded the prestigious order of friendship between the two nations. The president of Tatarstan never missed an opportunity to meet the then Turkish

² International diplomatic activities conducted by subnational or regional governments, including symbolic activities.

President **Suleyman Demirel** (Sharafutdinova, 2003). In 2007, President **Shaimiev** was awarded the King **Faisal** Prize for his service to Islam (King Faisal Prize, 2023). The influence of the Chechen leader **Ramzan Kadyrov** also goes far beyond Caucasus. His personal ties with politicians from the Middle East and North Africa are of great importance to Russia's foreign policy. While the heads of other Russian regions travel abroad in order to meet their colleagues and entrepreneurs in other countries, **Ramzan Kadyrov** holds high-level meetings with partners from Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. During his visits to Russia, Ramzan Kadyrov met also representatives of the Middle East (some of whom undertook special visits to Chechnya): the Libyan dictator **Muammar Gaddafi**, King **Abdullah II** of Jordan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Vice President of Afghanistan **Abdul Rashid Dostum** and the Emir of Qatar. This is far from a complete list of his meetings with Middle Eastern and North African rulers with whom Russia often had very poor relationships (Luzin, 2018). He was dubbed Russia's "*cultural ambassador in the Islamic world*" (Leksika, 2018), "*Russia's top diplomat*" (Luzin, 2018) and "*Putin's point man in the Muslim world*" (Dorsey, 2018).

The Golden Minbar International Festival of Muslim Cinema, later on renamed the Kazan International Muslim Film Festival, is a significant annual event within Russia's Islamic diplomacy. Its purpose is to yield real insights into Islam and Muslims in the Russian and global community. What is more, Tatarstan has been holding the International Islamic Finance Summit since 2009. It is known as the Kazan Summit, later renamed the "Russia – Islamic World: KazanSummit". It is one of the leading international economic events of the Russian Federation and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The summit is held under the patronage of the President of the Republic of Tatarstan **Rustam Minnikhanov** and it is strongly supported by the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. This international investment conference is a unique platform for cooperation between the Russian Federation and the OIC member states (Rossiya-Islamskiy Mir: Kazanforum, 2023).

Putin's cabinet has also subsidised Russian Muslim communities, especially by means of the Islamic Culture, Science and Education Support Fund, which was used to build mosques and promote imam training programmes, Islamic education and scholarship. Most of the financial resources are used to fund official Islamic institutions and moderate Russian Islam, which reduces the attractiveness and appeal of more radical interpretations of Islam (Dannreuther, 2010, p. 120-121). The fund was created in 2007 by the Russian Federation along

with the prominent Muslim religious organisations. The fund closely cooperates with the presidential office, the government office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. The Islamic Culture, Science and Education Support Fund and similar projects create a positive image of Russia, contribute to reconciliation of its relations with Muslim countries and help in building Russia's diplomatic networks (Fond podderzhki islamskoy kul'tury, nauki i obrazovaniya, 2023).

3. Selected Activities Performed by Islamic Religious Organisations with the Aim of Promoting Russia's Foreign Policy

In comparison to the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian Muslims lack one central representative body. The country's most important Muslim religious organisations are the Russian Council of Muftis headed by **Ravil Gainutdin** and based in Moscow, the Central Muslim Spiritual Directorate of Russia based in Ufa, Bashkortastan, headed by Mufti **Talgat Tadzhuddin**. These centralised Muslim organisations formulated the proposal for a uniform social doctrine of Russian Muslims. The year 2001 saw the first document of this kind – “Fundamental Provisions for Russian Muslim Social Programme”, which needed to be further updated. Its authors refer to the current document as “unique”, as it was written by all the leading centralised Muslim organisations in Russia. The doctrine was drafted by Islamic theologians, experts, scientists, representatives of the World Congress of Tatars and other public associations. The updated version entitled “Social Doctrine of Russian Muslims” was signed in Tatarstan in 2015 during the festival “Izge Bolgar Zhyeny”, which is dedicated to the official adoption of Islam by Volga Bulgaria in 922. This document is an effective tool Russian Muslims can use in order to represent their interests in the Russian Federation and abroad (TASS.RU, 2015). According to this doctrine, *“an organised Muslim community is one of the solid foundations of Russian civil society and state. According to basic Islamic principles, all Muslims have a sacred duty to defend their homeland's interests and security. Interaction between state authorities and Muslim organisations and their joint efforts to resolve issues regarding establishment of moral principles and spirituality of Russian citizens is absolutely crucial”* (Sotsial'naya doktrina rossiyskikh musul'man, 2015). It is of utmost importance to raise Muslims as Russian patriots and keep them far from radical Islamic groups. Islam, indeed, is a spiritual alternative to consumerism,

hedonism, mass culture and attempts to suppress national, cultural and religious identities of nations. The doctrine calls for preservation of ethno-cultural and moral traditions and promotion of positive moral ideals such as strong families, respect for elders, honest professional work and military service as well as prohibition against social vices. The main duties of Russian Muslims are to integrate into Russian society, obey civil laws and rules as well as to contribute actively and effectively to the progress of their country, its social and economic growth, security and stability. In addition, Russian Muslims are to participate in elimination of hazards and threats and, thus, act for the benefit of their homeland. The social doctrine suggests that *“it is essential to join efforts to preserve traditional Islam for the Russian Federation and bear in mind how important it is to consolidate peace and harmony, encourage interfaith dialogue and cooperation, prevent extremism and radicalism, promote respectful attitudes towards national, historical, cultural and religious traditions of our country and improve interactions between state authorities and local governments as well as between public institutions and society as a whole”* (Sotsial'naya doktrina rossiyskikh musul'man, 2015).

The centralised religious organisation called the Russia Mufties Council (Sovet muftiyev Rossii - SMR) was established in Moscow in 1994. Since its foundation, it has been chaired by Mufti Sheikh **Ravil Gainutdin** – a professor at the Moscow Islamic University and the member of the International Eurasian Academy of Sciences, the International Slavic Academy of Sciences, Education, Culture and Religion, the International Informatization Academy and the Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations headed by the President of the Russian Federation. **Ravil Gainutdin** is also the co-chairman of the Interfaith Council of Russia and the member of the Supreme Council of the Muslim World League and the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Madhabs. The spiritual board comprises the Department of International Relations divided into three sections responsible for relations with the OIC, EU and CIS member states (DUMRF, 2019). The authority of **Ravil Gainutdin** was repeatedly and rightfully exercised during official visits to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Israel undertaken by Russian delegations and arranged by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SMR, 2023). The SMR highlights also other events during which the Moscow Muftiate took an active part in addressing difficult global issues, such as the peace mission in the Middle East – Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan – conducted in December 1991 in order to free former Soviet soldiers. The main international activities performed by the muftiate included, for instance,

the meeting of the Christian Democrat International and the Muslim World League representatives in Moscow, the Peace and Tolerance World Conference as well as the interface forums in Rome, Vienna and Helsinki. The muftiate in Moscow cooperates with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OBSE) in preserving and defending religious freedom. **Ravil Gainutdin** has participated in numerous meetings with the ambassadors and SMR received numerous official visits. These were foreign delegations from the following countries: Indonesia, Oman, Denmark, Djibouti, Qatar, Sudan, Germany, Finland, Pakistan, Lebanon, United Arab Emirates, Syria, Afghanistan, France, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Jordan, Austria, Tunisia, Somalia, Brunei, Iraq, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan as well as, for example, the delegation of the Hamas Movement (SMR, 2023). The Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey presented joint projects with the SMR while emphasising the fact that the close cooperation was possible thanks to the friendship between the heads of the two states. In 2015, Russian President **Vladimir Putin** and Turkish President **Recep Tayyip Erdogan** attended the opening of the country's main Muslim temple – the Moscow Cathedral Mosque. The ties between the two countries are close also thanks to the friendly relationships between **Ravil Gainutdin** and the head of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs **Ali Erbas** (SMR, 2015a). **Mohammed Ahmed Al-Jaber**, the United Arab Emirates Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Russian Federation, highlighted the stable and positive dynamics of the bilateral relations with the Russian Federation in general and with the SMR in particular (SMR, 2021).

SMR has established Muslim International forum (Mezhdunarodnyy Musul'manskiy Forum, 2023), organize annual cultural and charitable project called "Ramadan Tent" (Shater Ramadana, 2023) and many international conferences. "Spiritual Silk Road" conference is a platform for the interaction of spiritual administrations and relevant government departments of Russia, China, Central Asia and Europe on the following issues: development of a common position on the challenges of the time, exchange of experience in the field of combating terrorism and extremism, practical methods of preventing these phenomena in the religious environment, coordination of work on education of youth in the spirit of traditional human values of justice, good neighbourliness, religious tolerance and protection of the image of Islam as a religion of peace (SMR, 2017a).

The history of the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia (Tsentral'noye dukhovnoye upravleniye musul'man Rossii – TsDUMR) dates back to 1788, when

Catherine II officially established the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly in Ufa. In 1917, it was renamed the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Inner Russia and Siberia and, in 1948, its name was changed to the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the European Parts of the USSR and Siberia. In 1992, it was again renamed the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia and European Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Finally, in 2000, it was designated as the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia. The board has been headed by Sheykh al-Islam, Supreme Mufti, **Talgat Safa Tajuddin** since 1980. Over the years, Supreme Mufti has officially represented Muslims of the Russian Federation in UNESCO, the Organisation of Islamic Conference, the European Muslim League and the Soviet Peace Fund. He is also a member of the OIC's standing committee, the foundation member of the Islamic Council of Europe, the chairman of the Association for External Relations of Muslim Organisations within the Commonwealth of Independent States, the member of the supervisory board of Public Television of Russia, the member of the National Military Fund and the member of the Interfaith Council of Russia. Headed by Mufti **Talgat Tajuddin**, the TsDUMR has reportedly become one of the leading religious centres of Russia's spiritual and moral revival and the fight against the spread of extremism in the Russian Muslim community (TsDUMR, 2023a).

Today, the Russian Islamic University, which was established under the auspices of the TsDUMR and has branch campuses in several cities, is well-known at international level and belongs to the Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World. In addition, the TsDUMR established and actively seeks to strengthen its ties with traditional religions in the Russian Federation and abroad, international and regional organisations of Muslims, including the countries of the non-Muslim world such as Finland, the United Kingdom, France and many others, in which Islam is a minority religion. Nowadays, Russia's regional spiritual boards of Muslims closely cooperate with the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, the Federal Drug Control Service of the Russian Federation, military commissariats as well as the government and regional authorities. The regional spiritual boards also participate in government events. For example, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the regional Muslim spiritual boards signed the Agreement on Cooperation in Favour of Tolerance in Society and Prevention of Extremism. The Muslim clergy run courses at training centres of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and give lectures at different police departments and offices (TsDUMR, 2023b). The meetings between the President of the Russian Federation and the Supreme Mufti prove *"a great deal of attention the head of state devotes to problems and*

needs of Russia's Muslims and a strong desire of the Russian Ummah's leader to preserve the eternal values of traditional Islam on behalf of the common good" (TsDUMR, 2023a).

Mufti **Talगत Tajuddin** has repeatedly received delegations from Turkey, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Bahrain and the Ambassadors Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Kyrgyz Republic, the UAE and the Republic of Indonesia. He also makes official trips abroad. The members of the TsDUMR are honorary guests at various official ceremonies. The Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia also holds bilateral summits with the leaders of the Spiritual Board of other countries. During his state visit to Russia, Saudi Arabia's King **Salman bin Abdel-Aziza Al Saud** and T. Tajuddin talked about international cooperation, interfaith and intercultural dialogues for the sake of world peace and the fight against extremism and terrorism (TsDUMR, 2017).

Both aforementioned Muslim religious organisations run their official websites, on which they share political declarations, including **Putin's** public statements. What is more, they often publicly support the Kremlin in its domestic and foreign policy agendas.

Mufti SMR also highlights the special role of Russia in geopolitics and ethics, according to him, the country is becoming a great power that all supporters of traditional values of religious and secular humanism look forward to. *"It is obvious that the modern politics of our country and our experience of interreligious harmony and cooperation will become crucial for world politics. And this is our special responsibility as representatives and ministers of religion, as well as the public and workers of the state"* (SMR, 2015b).

SMR states that Muslims from Russia support President **Vladimir Putin** in his policy of "healthy conservatism". Deputy of **Gainutdin** says that *"Russian people are spiritually and morally wealthier than people in Western countries. We can maintain our own identity considering the Eurasian spirituality and the coexistence of Orthodox and Muslim cultures. While the West approves of permissiveness and promotes same-sex marriages and other phenomena that occur there, we are trying not to cross spiritual boundaries"* (RIA NOVOSTI, 2021).

In March 2003, when **George W. Bush** declared war against Iraq, T. **Tajuddin** made a bold and somewhat controversial gesture, which was covered by domestic and foreign media. While being in Baghdad, T. **Tajuddin** announced that he would stay in this country of the Arab world in order to endure hardships of the war along with the Iraqi people and **Saddam Hussain**. However, less than

one week after this extravagant statement, he returned back to Russia. In April, when U.S. forces invaded Iraq, Mufti brandished a sword at the rally held by the regional branch of United Russia and declared a jihad against the United States. He suggested that the jihad would take the form of a fund to buy weapons and food for the Iraqis (Rakhmatullin, 2020).

Furthermore, according to mufti TsDUMR, the geopolitical space of Russia is one of the key ones on the map, and thanks to the deposits of important mineral raw materials and the resources of human potential, it has a chance to regain its position as one of the leading industrial countries of the world. He also states that *"the peoples of Russia have preserved the God-given national genetic code, thanks to which we will have to strengthen our rightful independent place in the history of the world"* (TsDUMR, 2016).

In 2020, religious leaders discussed the amendments to the Russian Constitution. Despite its official secularity, Mufti **T. Tajuddin** supported the idea of using the word "God" in the constitution. *"Religion is separated from the state and we have got used to it but the preamble should stipulate that the state materially and morally supports our country's traditional religions, which became part of its history"* (TsDUMR, 2020). Other leaders also believe that this provision might foster the values of individual nations' beliefs that are historically and culturally associated with the religions that these nations practice. They call for the amendments that promote marriage as a bond between a man and a woman and norms preserving traditional family values (TsDUMR, 2020).

In 2014, the Interfaith Council of Russia, in which SMR and TsDUMR participate, issued an appeal in which religious leaders asked all believers in Ukraine to remember that the ability to open and maintain a dialogue is one of the main factors determining the prospects for humanity in the 21st century. This, however, does not correspond with the statements made by some politicians, in which they claim that every society must evolve along western lines and that Eastern European countries should integrate into the value system developed without their participation. *"We believe that our nations no longer passively accept what is presented to them. What is more, we have the experience that the modern West has not gone through: the long-term coexistence between different ethnic groups, cultures and religious traditions and the building of a diverse and complex civilisation"* (TsDUMR, 2014).

According to **Gainutdin**, Crimean Tatars believe in Russia and want to be part of their 20-million Muslim community (TASS.RU, 2014). In 2015, **Ravil Gainutdin** used his anti-Western rhetoric again at the rally held against the

publication of the Prophet **Mohammed** caricatures. *"The West is abandoning its moral and spiritual compass. It is building the world in which family values are not appreciated. What is more, the Western countries are now adopting laws that allow same-sex marriages"* (RIA NOVOSTI, 2015). **Gainutdin** believes that Russia should not repeat these mistakes and must cherish spiritual, moral and family values and traditions. *"It is our duty to build our spiritual state – Great Russia – the family all the nations in our country belong to"* (RIA NOVOSTI, 2015). **Gainutdin** also thanked Chechen leader **Ramzan Kadyrov**, whose speech followed, for promoting Islam and traditional spiritual and moral values (DUMRF, 2015).

TsDUMR also officially declared its support for the president and the proposal to authorize the use of Russian armed forces abroad, directed by the fight against terrorism, as well as the official request for assistance from the President of Syria, **Bashar al-Assad** (TsDUMR, 2015). In this regard, according to Mufti SMR, Russian Federation *"as one of the few strongest powers that stood against the destruction of the statehood of the Muslim Arab countries of the Middle East during the events of the Arab Spring, prevented intervention in the Syrian Arab Republic, played a key role in the ceasefire in Syria and the consistent struggle against international terrorism. The main credit for this goes to the national leader V. Putin, who strategically calculated the role and place of Islam in the geopolitical picture not so much of the present but rather of the future"* (SMR, 2017b).

Strong ideological alliance between the Russian leadership and the Russian Islamic organisations was confirmed in 2022 when both religious organisations approved the recognition of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) and the signing of the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the them and declared their strong support for the "special military operation" in Ukraine. They actually signed the document fatwa (legal ruling on a point of Islamic law) confirming *"that the Russian military operation in Ukraine with the aim of forcing the aggressor to peace is a forced defensive and preventive measure aimed at protecting Russia and all its citizens before the real threat of the use of nuclear and biological weapons by NATO and the "collective West". (...) We declare that all Muslims who were killed with faith in Allah while fulfilling their duty to protect their homeland, their fellow citizens, are martyrs"* (Nuretdinov, 2022). After **Putin** signed a decree on a partial mobilization in the country, Islamic leaders called on representatives of all faiths to unite in the face of a common threat – aggression from the West, and emphasized that a hybrid war has been waged against Russia in recent

years, aimed, among other things, at the destruction of universal human values. The statement emphasizes that by taking the military oath, believers are simultaneously fulfilling their civic and religious duties (Islam News, 2022). At the invitation of the president, **Tajuddin** and **Gainutdin** took part in the ceremony on the occasion of the annexation of four more new territories - Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporozhye Oblast and Kherson Oblast (Prezident Rossii, 2022).

Conclusion

Even though many scientists have long claimed that the world is secularised and that faith is losing its meaning and significance, the past few decades have seen the revival of religion and its increasing role in political life. The purpose of this paper was to explain why and how the Islam is becoming a significant factor of foreign policy in the Russian Federation. Paper presents the country's international relations from a different perspective. The increasing importance of religion in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation in the early 21st century corresponds to the thesis statement mentioned in the introductory paragraph.

Firstly, we focused on the ways in which the religious factor and Islam is included in Russia's foreign policy. The political discourses of the government and religious organisations present Russian Muslims as full-fledged members of the multi-ethnic and multifait state. The role of religion in society and the state corresponds with political goals. Russia intentionally uses the "Muslim" element of its identity in order to establish and strengthen its ties with the world inaccessible to the United States and the West. As a result, it gains a considerable advantage over the West as far as the relations with the Islamic world are concerned. The second research question examined the tools the Russian Federation uses to defend its interests abroad by means of Islam. Islam is spread by means of public events and conferences held in Russia and abroad as well as by Muslim religious institutions. Since **Putin's** rise to power, Russian Muslim elites have been instrumental in legitimizing Russian state policies at home and abroad. Religious organisations establish a public dialogue and their leaders are members of the most influential councils and administration bodies. They officially formulate and develop interfaith policies and state-religion relationships. The country's mainstream media regularly inform the public about their official statements. The country's religious leaders follow Russia's rhetoric of patriotism, traditional values and antagonism towards the West. In other words, this partnership is aimed at achieving common goals in domestic and foreign

policy, including consolidation of national identity, integration of Russian society by fostering a strong sense of community, prevention of interethnic and interfaith tensions, strengthening of Russian “spiritual” security, the fight against extremism and radicalism as well as spreading of Russia’s influence abroad. Religious organisations further these interests by means of official public statements and meetings between religious leaders and political representatives of foreign countries. Muslim organisations in Russia advocate and follow the official foreign policy agenda. They thereby perform diplomatic tasks and effectively complement the state authorities.

Russia’s faith-based diplomacy is still being shaped and, therefore, it is too soon to claim that it can become a transformation element of Russia’s foreign policy. Although the influence of Islam is undeniable, religion as such is a specific factor as is its political role. It is questionable whether it will show its full potential in the Russian Federation or it will encounter the boundaries and limits of multi-religiosity, multi-ethnicity and political elites.

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