



RUSSIA'S MUSLIM LEADERS ON WOMEN'S AND LGBT+ RIGHTS

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Russia has been a prominent player in global culture wars. It positions itself as a defender of “traditional values” across the post-Soviet space and seeks to expand its clout [internationally](#) by providing support to transnational conservative organizations. In its critique of cultural liberalism, the state heavily relies on the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which resolutely upholds traditional gender roles, heterosexual family models, and a prohibition of abortion. Such standpoints also enjoy popular support: in 2021, 69% of Russians indicated that they were [against](#) homosexual relations (compared to 61% in 2013), and 60% viewed a family without a child as [incomplete](#).

Official representatives of Russia's second-largest religion, Islam, have little choice but to endorse this state-backed conservative rhetoric. Spiritual boards (muftiates) operate under strict government control and have less room for ideological maneuvering than their Christian counterparts. As Russia's Muslims continue to be the object of intensive security surveillance, expressions of religious conservatism and contacts with international Islamic organizations remain severely curtailed. As a result, Muslim religious elites have to find a difficult balance between an endorsement of normative family models and gender roles, on the one hand, and maintaining a moderate interpretation of Islamic norms, on the other. In order to stay on the safe side, a few Muslim leaders follow the tactic of simply approving the ROC rhetoric. In particular, Patriarch Kirill's comments on sensitive issues related to (for instance) abortion and domestic violence demarcate the boundaries of “permitted” conservatism that Muslim leaders are allowed to support. Anything that lies to the right or left of this discursive safe zone usually becomes side-lined as the opinions of individual renegades.

Abortion

In 2016, Patriarch Kirill [signed](#) a public petition for a total prohibition of abortion in Russia. The document proposed to ban surgical and medical termination of pregnancy, contraceptives with abortive effects, and assisted reproductive technologies. Leaders of two major muftiates, in Moscow and Ufa, declared their readiness to endorse the petition. [Rushan Abbiasov](#), the First Deputy Chairman of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Russian Federation (DUM RF, Moscow), used the opportunity to stress the proximity between Islam and Christianity; according to him, both religions are unanimous in viewing abortion as a grave sin. [Talgat Tadzhuddin](#), the head of the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia (TSDUM, Ufa), played into popular anxieties related to Russia's continuous population decline: the country needs to stand up against the “murder of children,” he argued, for “[the country's population] is only 145 million [people].”

In 2018, Salakh-Khadzhi Mezhev, Mufti of the Chechen Republic, issued a separate [fatwa](#) (a non-binding legal opinion) on abortion. According to Mezhev, an abortion that takes place up to forty days after conception is permissible but undesirable. After forty days, abortion is prohibited unless there is a valid medical reason (e.g., danger to a woman's health or fetal abnormality) confirmed by a medical specialist. Importantly, the [fatwa](#)



recognizes the significance of women's well-being: it suggests that in complex cases, the mother's life and health should take precedence over that of an unborn child. Although the document provided a nuanced ruling that was close to the common consensus, it received little public attention. Another *fatwa*, issued in 2006 by Nurmukhamet Nigmatullin, the chair of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Republic of Bashkortostan, was similarly set aside. In that earlier text, Nigmatullin suggested that rape should not be viewed as adultery, an act that compromises a woman's honor. However, he ruled that forced sexual intercourse did not constitute a valid reason for abortion.

Family and domestic violence

For several years, a group of Russian legislators has been trying to pass a law that will tackle the problem of domestic violence. An initial 2016 bill did not pass its first reading in the Duma, and, in 2017, there was a severe setback: on the initiative of the ultra-conservative senator, Yelena Mizulina, beatings from family members were decriminalized. A new version of the bill was published in 2019 on the website of the Federation Council, and, among other provisions, it could prohibit perpetrators from contacting their victims. Open to public discussion, the bill quickly encountered fierce opposition from the ROC, which saw it as a threat to the institution of the family.

The Muftiate of Dagestan expressed solidarity with the Church. Deputy Mufti Magomed Magomedov described the law as an intervention into family affairs, as it would violate established, traditional gender roles. For him, the bill would undermine a husband's dominant position, thereby preventing him from fulfilling his duties. The Mufti of Moscow, IP'dar Aliautdinov, also spoke against the bill. In his opinion, it is alcoholism and drug addiction that ruin families; schools and universities should play a more visible role in educating students and explaining "what it means to be a husband, father, wife, and mother." Aliautdinov warned against following the example of European countries where laws against gender violence "reach the point of absurdity" and are "used for selfish purposes" (e.g., to claim the spouse's finances).

Also in 2019, Aliautdinov faced criticism for his calls to legalize polygamy, which he believed would solve many social problems in the country caused by the numerical advantage of women over men. His proposal was supported by the DUM RF head, Ravil Gainutdin. According to Gainutdin, polygamy is more desirable than Muslim men having many mistresses, "not bearing any responsibility" towards them, and having children born out of wedlock.

Cautious support in favor of institutionalized prohibition of family violence was expressed by Rustam Batyr and Damir Mukhetdinov. Both are known as disciples of philosopher Taufik Ibragim, recently attacked for his liberal "Qur'anic humanism" theory, which sought to demonstrate the humanist character of Islam. Batyr, who until 2017 served as a Deputy Mufti in the Republic of Tatarstan but was fired for overtly unorthodox and liberal views, condemned his co-religionists for keeping in place "medieval falsifications" of Islamic ethics. In his opinion, if contemporary Muslim leaders cannot look past outdated provisions that permit physical violence against women and children, the state should force religious modernization by making such acts of violence illegal.

Mukhetdinov, the second man in the DUM RF, wrote an extensive commentary, arguing that Islamic ethics in its core opposes domestic violence. Protecting the social status of women for Mukhetdinov is not equal to "mechanically copying the 'Western model'." However, he notes that everything "Western" should not be rejected on that basis alone. In the commentary, Mukhetdinov refers to his 2020 paper co-authored with philosopher and linguist Sergei Borodai. In it, the authors suggest developing an Islamic feminist hermeneutics that would draw on modern gender theory; the result should provide a new definition of "equality" that is more inclusive to believers and recognizes the variety of context-specific gender identities. Mukhetdinov's move is evidently bold and daring, but he cannot help but fall through the cracks: for mainstream Muslims, his theology



remains too liberal and too academic, whereas broader scholarly circles see him primarily as a state functionary. The paper with Borodai could be a valuable contribution to the field of Islamic feminist studies in Russia, but it is unlikely that such a field will have a chance to blossom any time soon.

Women's rights in the North Caucasus

A Russian region that participates in culture wars in its own right is the North Caucasus. When it comes in handy, Muslim leaders of Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria may show support for the ROC and state agendas. More often, however, they endorse locally defined “traditional values” that are deemed too restrictive and ultraconservative by Russian mainstream society. Muslim women and girls in the region are at high [risk](#) of honor killings, abductions for marriage, early marriage, and female circumcision. Many of these practices are silently endorsed by a significant part of society, and religious structures are often mobilized to maintain them.

For instance, in 2016, amidst heated debates about whether female circumcision was a religious requirement, the Chairman of the Coordination Center for Muslims of the North Caucasus, [Ismail Berdiev](#), spoke in favor of it. The practice, he argued, would “decrease debauchery and [obsession with sex].” In response to numerous critics, he clarified his initial statement by adding that “women are created [by the Almighty] to give birth to children” and take care of the family, thus suggesting that female sexual pleasure is of secondary importance and seeking it may distract women from fulfilling their duties. Several years later, under pressure from human rights organizations, Dagestan issued a [fatwa](#) that dealt specifically with the issue of female circumcision. Experts [praised](#) the [fatwa](#) as the first step in solving the problem of female genital mutilation in the region but noted that the document did not discuss and thus did not prohibit the most common types of female circumcision.

LGBT+ rights

Prior to Putin's third presidential term (2012–2018), Russia's executive branch unsuccessfully tried three times (in 2003, 2004, and 2006) to pass the “gay propaganda” bill that would make it illegal to equate straight and gay relationships and to distribute gay rights material. Although bigotry against LGBT+ persons in the period was not rare, offenders could face some kind of public backlash. For instance, in 2006, responding to the plans to host a gay pride parade in Moscow, [Talgat Tadzhuiddin](#) called homosexuality a “crime” and urged Muslims and Orthodox Christians to “thrash” (*lupit'*) representatives of sexual minorities. In Tadzhuiddin's words, Prophet Muhammad ordered the killing of homosexuals because “their activity leads to the termination of the human race.” LGBT+ rights activists condemned the Mufti's words, as did the co-chairman of the Council of Muftis, [Nafigulla Ashirov](#), who advised Tadzhuiddin to soften his rhetoric. Ashirov, however, stated that public demonstration of the lowest vices—for example, a gay pride parade—was an even greater sin than homosexuality itself.

In 2013, Putin signed the “gay propaganda” bill into law, propelling anti-Western and pro-traditional-values rhetoric into the core of state ideology. The bill also made any public discussion of LGBT+ rights (and homosexuality in general) practically impossible: the topic has become taboo for some and an awkward subject to joke about for others. In 2016, for instance, the Mufti of Tatarstan, [Kamil Samigullin](#), when asked during an interview about homosexuality in Islam, said: “[I heard that] France is going to open a mosque for gays [...]; I would not pray in such a mosque, because it is dangerous to bend over there.”

The imam of Moscow's Memorial Mosque on Poklonnaya Hill, [Shamil' Aliautdinov](#), was among the few Islamic leaders who did not shy away from discussing the topic. In the past few years, he has risen to prominence as a Muslim business coach, and many of his theological opinions present an odd mix of excerpts from Islamic sources and self-development literature. A question posed on his website was “What to do if, while being a man, I feel attracted to other men?” The imam responded that a gay sexual orientation is a form of sin that is



embellished, justified, and promoted by Satan. Such an orientation, according to Aliautdinov, is not biologically defined but results from a person's thoughts: some men, given their innate (weak) temperament and socialization experience, arguably seek extra recognition from strong male figures. Aliautdinov claims to back up his arguments with scientific research, citing the work of controversial American psychologist Joseph Nicolosi. The latter has advocated so-called "reparative therapy," which was supposed to help people mitigate their homosexual desires.

Also in the North Caucasus, homosexuality is perceived as an acquired deviation, a result of being possessed by a [genie](#). It is framed as an illness that can be treated. According to a local imam, a genie usually nests in one of three areas within the human body: the brain (leading to mental disorders), spine (causing paralysis), or bladder (resulting in homosexuality in men and infertility in women).

Efforts to legalize same-sex marriage predictably meet a great deal of resistance as well. Family protection rhetoric becomes a convenient common ground for Orthodox and Muslim clergy to work together. For instance, in Tyumen' region in 2021, Metropolitan Dimitri and Mufti Zinnat Sadykov proposed to develop a joint [program](#) to promote traditional values. The program was supposed to teach the youth a "correct" notion of the family—understood as a union between a man and a woman—to counter the pernicious effects of Western influence.

Conclusion

The discourse of Muslim elites on women's and LGBT+ rights is largely in congruence with the official ROC position. The prohibitions of abortion and same-sex relations, as well as the legitimation of domestic violence, are framed as necessary means to defend the institution of the family, which is deemed the fundamental unit of a stable, moral society. Further, both muftiates and the ROC depict the heterosexual family as a requirement for births and the upbringing of healthy children: collectively, Russia's demographic resource determines the safety and future viability of the country. Any measures that could challenge the traditional family model and gender roles are consequently described as attacks from the West aimed at undermining the country's security.

The variety of religious practice, as well as a lack of clerical hierarchy, makes it difficult to develop a coherent position on women's and LGBT+ rights that would be accepted by the majority of Muslims in Russia. For the most part, the key muftiates elaborate on sensitive issues reactively—by providing a response to certain events, ROC propositions, or, as in the case of the North Caucasus, under pressure from human rights organizations. In general, the Muslim elites show little engagement with theology, and their efforts to root their opinions in Islamic legal tradition or back them up with reference to religious sources are limited. De facto, Muslim leadership has little authority in regulating family affairs or sexual norms and is perceived by the Muslim population primarily as a bureaucratic extension of the state.

For the spiritual boards, endorsement of the "traditional values" rhetoric means, at minimum, state protection, and at best, a share in government resources allocated to strengthen the so-called "spiritual bonds" (*dukhovnyye skrepy*). Thus, by and large, official Islamic organizations demonstrate practically no serious opposition to state rhetoric or policy decisions.

One of the few issues related to women's rights that prompted muftiates to speak against the state was the hijab question. In 2013–2015, Mordovia and the Stavropol region banned school children and teachers from wearing headscarves at school; in 2015, the Supreme Court recognized these decisions as legal. In 2017, Nafigulla Ashirov issued a [fatwa](#) instructing Muslim women to continue adhering to religious clothing rules. That same year, the Chechen parliament adopted a [law](#) that allowed school children to wear clothes in accordance with their faith. In this debate, the ROC expectedly remained silent, with exception of the controversial clergy member [Vsevolod Chaplin](#). Recalling traditional Russian headwear, Chaplin urged also Orthodox Christian



women to begin wearing headscarves; in his opinion, this would make them more attractive to men who have serious intentions to start a family. Through its mavericks, such as Chaplin, the ROC may test the waters, appropriating some of the original standpoints that stem from the muftiates. However, overall, high-level Christian–Muslim interactions remain a one-way street.