

# Non-existent Islamism

How the Kremlin propaganda is affecting Ukrainian Muslims

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"Islam is a very difficult line of work," said the KGB agent in a 1990s comedy. Strangely, these words from an already forgotten Russian film turned out to be almost prophetic for Islam throughout the post-Soviet space. It is no secret that Muslims are perceived to be somewhat different to followers of other religions: the attitude towards them is much more suspicious and this is a trend that has been around for many years. More liberal Muslims will argue that all this is the result of false stereotypes and biases: "Islam is not like that", "Islam means salam, which is peace". Those more radical will quote the Koranic "And never will the Jews or the Christians approve of you until you follow their religion" (Qur'an 2:120). Regardless of who is right, a woman in a hijab (or especially in a niqab) will be perceived differently to how she would be without this garment, while a bearded man with an "eastern accent" will be looked at differently to any typical European. This is the reality of the modern Western world that has been formed over many years. I remember when I was in a small town in Bavaria in May, I was

ed by Member of Parliament Leonid Hrach, talked about "Wahhabi bases", the press was horrified about how "the Tatars will slaughter the Slavs" and news about land taken over by Crimean Tatars were regularly sensationalised. In Ukraine, almost every city has land that someone has illegally seized, taken over or "snatched", but this was only mentioned from time to time. However, the Crimean Tatars were spoken about constantly. In 2009, there was even a high-profile case on the peninsula that exposed an alleged organisation under the scary name Takfir wal-Hijra (Anathema and Exile). Paradoxically, members of the movement Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (Islamic Party of Liberation), repressions against which in Russia are often talked about today in our media, came under pressure from Ukrainian intelligence services. Few know this, but in Ukraine there are two Islamic books that one of our courts recognised as "extremist" a few years ago. Of course, comparing the level of attention our law-enforcement bodies pay to Muslim communities with that in Russia or other countries of the former USSR is pointless, because the level of religious freedom in Ukraine is relatively high, all the more so because in many cases the severity of the law is offset by its non-enforcement.

After 2014, when Viktor Yushchenko's almost-forgotten statement that "Crimean Tatars are the only true Ukrainians in Crimea" took on a new meaning with their critical position regarding Russia's occupation of the peninsula, a certain "pro-Islamic sentiment" came to light. Recently, the Day of Remembrance for the Deportation of the Crimean Tatar People has begun to be widely commemorated, various media lament the crimes committed on the peninsula by the Russian Federation, much is written about the Crimean Tatars and in general considerable interest in this subject is shown. Above all, this is the position of the government.

The analysis of the 2014 developments show clearly who and for what reason maintained a "level of tension" in Crimea and who wanted the demonisation of the Crimean Tatars. The Russian Federation played the anti-Tatar card to mobilise the pro-Russian part of the peninsula's population. Now, in the context of occupation, this move remains effective.

At the foreign policy level, Russia has been keeping quiet about the conflict, so that nothing, good or bad, would be said about Crimea at all ("the status of Crimea is not up for discussion"). Meanwhile, messages for internal audiences are broadcast on a regular basis. From the very beginning of the aggression, Russia directed efforts towards discrediting the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people, their highest representative body, as well

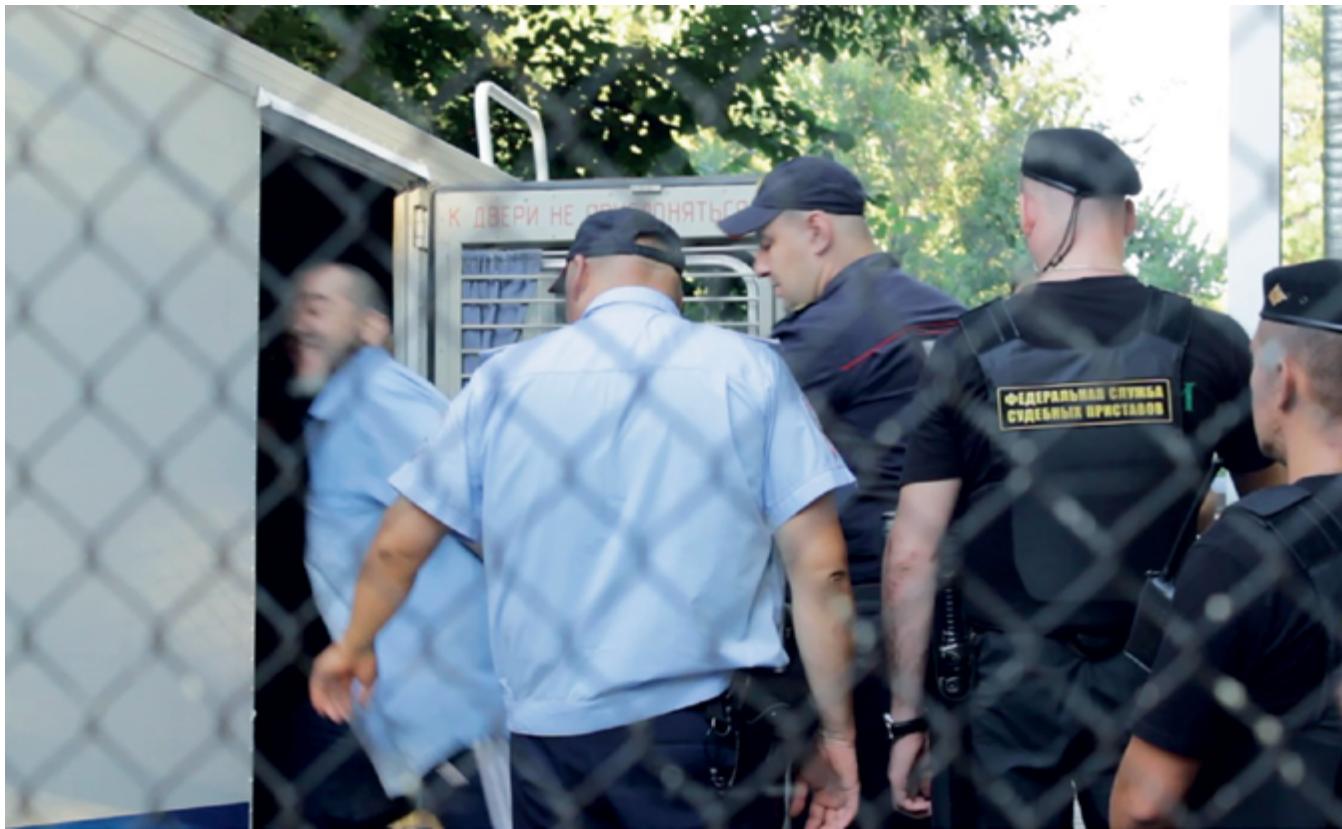
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once asked if I was scared to walk the streets at night, because, as they say, it is full of immigrants. I jokingly replied in the negative, because the gangs in dark alleys speak exclusively in Arabic, which I know well.

## LEANING IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS

In Ukraine, the topic of the Islamic threat has acquired somewhat new meanings. However, albeit surprisingly, they are not related so much to global trends (we, like all Europeans, are horrified by ISIS), as they are to our, post-Soviet ones. We have certain ultra-right forces that like to promote a phobia of migrants. Telling of that were the protests against the construction of a shelter for illegal immigrants in Yahotyn, Kyiv Oblast. However, this seems funny more than anything because it is probably not worth being afraid of migrants in a country that millions of citizens leave to work abroad (incidentally, the presence of Muslims on the streets of European cities does not stop them).

We can also look back on our history: 10 years ago, in the still Ukrainian Crimea, the problem of Islamists was also hyped up. Then, local communists, represent-



**A wave of repression.** Crimean Tatar religious actors are facing tough pressure from the occupation authorities in Crimea

as all groups that could not find a place in the new Crimean reality. Russian media accused migrants who left for the Ukrainian mainland for religious reasons of extremism, terrorism, aiding ISIS and so on. The Energy Blockade of 2015-2016 is another interesting topic: the Russian press wrote everything under the sun about Asker group of Lenur Islamov, Crimean Tatar businessman (the group was actively involved in the organization of the blockade) trying to drill it into the minds of ordinary Russians that "on the other side" – the Ukrainian one, that is – "Islamic extremists" are fighting alongside American mercenaries in the Donbas.

### PAWNS AND TRUMP CARDS

Recently a new trend has emerged. When, the "Donetsk People's Republic" authorities arrested well-known Ukrainian religious scholar Ihor Kozlovskyi in 2016 (he is still in detention), one of the explanations provided by "Secretary of the DPR Security Council" Oleksiy Khodakovskyi was Kozlovskyi's alledged attempt to inspire a "radical Muslim uprising" in the "DPR".

Over the past two years, several Islamic communities linked to the so-called Habashites (a Neo-Sufi group) and Madhalists (a kind of Salafism), have had their operations suspended in the occupied territories. Meanwhile, some controversial characters appeared, such as the "Mufti of the Donetsk People's Republic" Rinat Aisin, or the "War Mufti of the Donbas" (self-titled), Tanai Kholkhanov. Over the past few months, a series

of articles was published in the patriotic (read, national-chauvinistic) Russian press on the "criminal plan" of Turkey and the Kyiv authorities to unite Ukrainian Muslims against the Russian Federation. Some of these texts even "migrated" to the fairly liberal publications such as Novaya Gazeta. For example, a July piece entitled "The Mejlis Intends to Unify Muslims" talks about how, with the support of Turkey, the Ukrainian "Muslim Brotherhood" is planning to build a mosque in order to "neutralise" the influence of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Ukraine, which controls the Ar-Rahma mosque located in Kyiv. This mosque – as was covered more openly in other articles – is described as a future "breeding ground for extremism". The fact that a similar Muslim temple was constructed with the same support from Turkey and ceremoniously opened in August 2015 in Moscow and in December 2016 in Minsk ("Orthodox atheist" Lukashenko even took part in Muslim prayer) does not bother Russian propagandists. The Ukrainian Muslims are not allowed to do this, especially those belonging to organizations with an active pro-Ukrainian position or those who left Crimea because of their membership in political movements that do not agree with the presence of the Russian Federation on the peninsula.

The mufti of the Ummah Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Ukraine, Said Ismailov (forced to leave his native Donetsk and move to Kyiv in September 2014), also came under a barrage of Russian criticism, as did other activists in the Crimean Tatar movement, participants in the EuroMaidan and ATO, as well as the »

Muslims from Russia who bade farewell to their homeland and found refuge in Ukraine. Unfortunately, some Ukrainian media that continue to be held in the grip of the Russian media scene often relay these phobias. In the perception of the Crimean Tatars, even today Islamophobic trends are still far from extinct in the press of certain oblasts (for example, Kherson in Southern Ukraine). There is a good reason why a poll recently conducted by the Razumkov Centre, a nationwide sociology group, shows that almost one in five residents of the south of Ukraine negatively perceives Muslims and Islam as a whole.

As the modern Crimean Tatar movement remains liberal nationalism (mainly of a secular type), Russian propaganda about it is also based on a certain level of ethnophobia. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry and other state bodies make statements about the persecution of Crimean Tatars by the occupying authorities in Crimea. Yet, they have to keep in mind that a potential conflict is quite possible in Ukraine: its society can be vulnerable to scandals stirred up out of nothing, especially in the context of future presidential and parliamentary election campaigns.

## THE NEED TO DECIDE

Somewhat strange situations are arising around the religious leadership of Crimean Tatars. The spiritual administration of the Muslims of Crimea has long been re-registered under Russian law and in effect operates as a typical religious institution of the Russian Federa-

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tion (also coming out with anti-Ukrainian statements). But just as with the Crimean communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, nobody in Ukraine has initiated a lawsuit to remove the separatists' registration. The motive is clear: Russia will immediately use this in its favour and statements will be issued (including on the international level) that Ukraine is refusing to support the Crimean Tatars and even persecutes those who welcome "reunification with Russia". But there is another path for Ukraine – to form an alternative. Such an alternative, namely, the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Crimea, based in Kyiv, is about to be registered with the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine. This process has been delayed for various reasons.

The same applies to the representation of the President of Ukraine in the Crimea, which is located in Kherson: according to the Crimean Tatar activists who have been protesting for a month next to its premises, this institution has not justified itself over three years of operation and demonstrated complete inaction, therefore it they demand an immediate change of its leadership. In response, the representative of the President accused the activists of attempting to seize the premises by force, so the conflict is continuing. No matter who is right, this situation requires some sort of solution. Like many other deoccupation strategies connected with Crimea and Crimean Tatars.

In the past few months (this information was already in the press, although it did not draw a widespread response), at least two mosques in Ukraine, namely in Sumy and Zhytomyr, have been searched by law enforcement agencies. In the first case, they were looking for literature, the second was linked to criminal proceedings alleging that an "unidentified person is propagating hatred in the mosque". Weapons were not found, but some Islamic books were seized for examination (who did this and whether it was done at all is unclear). Among the seized literature (incidentally, files on the search were provided to the imam of the mosque) were completely neutral publications, including a partial translation of the Qur'an into Ukrainian, accompanied by interpretations. Banning literature in the internet era may seem anachronistic to some of our readers, but this is possible in the post-Soviet space. For example, in Russia prohibited books can be planted in a "disloyal" mosque and be used to start a criminal case for extremism. This is exactly what is done – in particular, in the occupied Crimea. Will a similar thing happen here too? We hope not, although some Muslim groups in Ukraine have long been trying to brand their opponents as extremists. It is good that the authorities do not pay too much attention to this.

On the one hand, it is a purely internal affair for Islam, where some religious movements criticise others. However, unfortunately, this ultimately affects all Muslims without exception, because an average citizen will not understand who is part of which community. Because if someone in a turban said that almost everyone here is an extremist, then maybe that is the truth, many will think. In relation to Islam, there is noticeable selectivity: what is allowed to be said from the Orthodox church pulpit cannot be said in a mosque.

When certain Orthodox communities spread literature that states in no uncertain terms that Ukraine does not exist, only a "united Russia" with its centre in Moscow, this does not stoke such resentment as it would in Muslim literature. An average citizen perceives aggression in canonical-orthodox literature as an exception, whereas in Islamic writing, it is almost seen as a rule. Vigilance towards emigrants or people who may be truly affiliated with ISIS is necessary, but, as practice shows, they are often not looked for in the right place.

One other fact is that after the loss of opportunities to actively trade with Russia, many of Ukrainian enterprises have reoriented towards the Middle East and are almost queuing up in order to get "halal" status (certifying that products are suitable for consumption according to the requirements of Islam), which is basically equal to permission to export goods to Muslim countries. As Larysa Polishchuk, vice-president of Ukrhalal, the Ukrainian Halal Industry Association, reports, a Ukrainian state standard in this area is being developed. Middle Eastern investors are also interested in Ukraine, and if Islamophobic sentiments suddenly become a trend, our businesses will not receive their investments.

When Ukrainian officials say that the Russian Federation is prioritising "rocking the boat" over full-on aggression to undermine Ukraine, they are very close to the truth: in this way, we will never be able to form a more or less clear and consistent view on the "Eastern" topics that are extremely relevant to us. ■