



ARTICLE

Strategies for Forming the Image of Islam/ Muslims in the Media Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the process of constructing the image of Islam and Muslims in media discourse, focusing on publications from Saint Petersburg and the Leningrad Oblast (Russia) over the past two decades. The research employs the analytical reading of text data, following the grounded theory method. The focus is made on themes such as the European migration crisis and the rise of Islamic migration to Europe and Russia, debates over wearing the hijab in Russian schools, and coverage of Muslim religious holidays and ethnic festivals like Sabantuy. The study also addresses city incidents, events linked to extremist and terrorist activities, and the portrayal of Muslims in the context of Russia's demographic landscape. Additionally, it highlights how the Muslim community is represented within the framework of a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic urban environment. The analysis of the empirical material leads the authors to identify two primary strategies employed by local media in constructing the image of Islam and Muslims. These strategies reflect both challenges and opportunities for fostering understanding and cooperation within diverse societies. The authors conclude that promoting inclusion and ensuring a peaceful future require long-term efforts, including educational initiatives and consistent work to combat stereotypes and prejudice in media narratives.

KEYWORDS

image of Islam, image of Muslims, media discourse, grounded theory, migration, religion

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Introduction

Over the past decade, Russian scholars have increasingly turned their attention to media analysis, particularly in the contexts of migration and religion. This field encompasses two distinct but largely disconnected research streams: the first focuses on how migrants are portrayed in media (Ablazhey, 2012; Azhgikhina, 2012; Fuller 2024; Ivleva & Tavrovsky, 2019; Karpenko, 2002; Mak, 2019; Stolic, 2019; Triandafyllidou & Monterio 2024; Ureta, 2011; Varganova, 2012; Vasiliev & Vlasova, 2020), while the second examines the construction of Islam’s image in media discourse (Elimam, 2019; Li & Zhang, 2022; Moore et al., 2008; Poole, 2002, 2005; Ragozina, 2017, 2018; Saifuddin & Matthes, 2016). Despite these parallel lines of inquiry, the intersection of migration and Islam remains on the periphery of scholarly discourse. One possible reason for this gap lies in the historical framing of migration research. As Malakhov and Letnyakov (2018) observed, until the early 2010s, migrants in Russia were predominantly analyzed through the lens of ethnicity, with little attention given to their religious affiliations. Consequently, the role of Islam in migration narratives has often been overlooked.

This study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing how media representations of Islam and Muslims are constructed and exploring their connection to migration processes. The analysis focuses specifically on media discourse in the city of Saint Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast, providing insight into how these portrayals shape broader perceptions of migration and religion.

This study employs the method of analytical reading of text data based on grounded theory. This approach involves interpreting text fragments, statements, and articles during the selection process, enabling the development of new theoretical positions. This study employs the method of analytical reading of text data based on grounded theory. In line with the study’s objectives, the theoretical sampling model is employed as a flexible tool for selecting articles and news reports, helping to compare diverse data from different platforms and time periods.

While the grounded theory method provides valuable insights, it has limitations—most notably, the need for a diverse mix of qualitative data to construct a comprehensive theory. By incorporating data such as interviews, observations, and media text analyses, this approach overcomes these limitations and aligns with the study’s objectives, structuring the material and building a theoretical foundation from the ground up. In this research, grounded theory serves as a tool for categorizing data and is complemented by content analysis, enhancing the depth and reliability of the media discourse study.

Muslims of Saint Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast

It is practically impossible to provide an exact estimate of Russia's Muslim population, as religious affiliation has not been officially recorded since the All-Union Population Census of 1939. Islam, however, is recognized as the country's second-largest religion by number of followers, with expert estimates ranging between 14 and 20 million. According to the 2017 Pew Research Center survey, 10% of respondents in Russia identified as Muslim, compared to 71% identifying as Orthodox Christian, and 15% professing no religion. Regions traditionally associated with Islam in Russia include Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and the North Caucasus. Additionally, the growth of the Muslim population is closely tied to labor migration from Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan (Cooperman et al., 2017).

Saint Petersburg is the largest industrial metropolitan area in the northwest of the country, with the population of 5.6 million people; the population of Leningrad Oblast is more than two million people. According to Gaidukov, the head of the Association Etna Research and Expertise Center, the number of Muslims in Saint Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast varies from 200 thousand to 1.4 million people (V Kazani Obsudili, 2018).

Since the 2000s, there has been an increase in labor migration from Central Asian countries and the Transcaucasian republics, which has led to the emergence of new prayer rooms, the exact number of which is difficult to determine. As Gladkii and Eidemiller (2018) note,

one of the most difficult challenges not only for the large Christian community of Saint Petersburg but also for the Muslim Ummah is labor migration, including from near and far abroad. Muslims joining the local, internally unstructured Ummah lead to misunderstandings, to the loss of control over the management of new communities by the Saint Petersburg Mukhtasibat Administration, not to mention the growing wariness of other residents of the megalopolis. In this regard, solving the problem of migrants' adaptation, as well as their religious education, could remove many pressing issues (Gladkii & Eidemiller, 2018; Trans. by V. Slivkina—V. S.).

Analysis of Media Discourse of Printed Publications and Online News Portals

In order to analyze the media discourse of printed publications and online news websites, articles were selected from top-rated periodicals and online resources: *Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti*¹, Fontanka.ru², RBC.ru³, *Vyborg*⁴, and *Luzhskaya Pravda*⁵. Articles were selected using one of the three thematic tags: "Muslims,"

¹ <https://spbvedomosti.ru>

² <https://www.fontanka.ru>

³ <https://www.rbc.ru>

⁴ <https://gazetavyborg.ru>

⁵ <https://lpravda.ru>

“Muslim migrants,” or “Islam.” The discourse connection between the articles and the city and region was also considered. The three central categories identified are conceptually linked to the increasing migration flows from Muslim-majority countries to Europe and Russia.

Media of Saint Petersburg

In urban media, the analyzed news discourse is grouped around several storylines: “European migration crisis,” “risk zone,” and “preventive work with Muslim migrants.” An example of such discourse can be found in publications from *Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti*, a daily newspaper that has been in circulation since 1728, covering cultural and social events in the city and across the country. Nine articles were selected for analysis, covering the period from August 2009 to January 2019, using the search tag “Muslim migrants.” Notably, this issue does not appear in the news discourse for the period from 2019 to 2024. It can be inferred that this shift is due to the sensitivity of the topic and the editorial board’s reluctance to provoke criticism from the Muslim community.

Migration to Western countries is primarily framed in the context of the European migration crisis. Recurrent discourse units, such as “Islamic expansion,” “refugees,” “Islamists,” and “sleeping terrorists,” are often accompanied by vocabulary with negative connotations, including “explosive blend,” “fraught with excesses and provocations,” and “interethnic conflict.” For instance, in the article “Balkany propuskaiut skvoz’ stroi” [The Balkans are Running the Gauntlet] (Podoprigora, 2015), migration and refugees in Serbia are discussed through the lens of the perceived threat of growing Islamic extremism among newcomers:

Young people who do not speak Serbian and do not look like refugees have started to be regularly encountered in Belgrade ... Most of the aliens who have appeared in Serbia are men under 27, almost all are of the Islamic faith, 56% do not have families with them, they do not like to be photographed, and are not constrained by money. The first thing that comes to mind is that well-trained Islamists who have been through war zones are arriving in the country under the guise of refugees. (Podoprigora, 2015; Trans. by V. S.)

There are currently about 1,000 jihadi warriors concentrated in Serbia, of which about 200 are in Belgrade. (Podoprigora, 2015; Trans. by V. S.)

Such presentation of the topic of migration and Islam contributes to the formation of a negative image of Muslims, thereby fueling the spread of Islamophobia: “Muslims already evoke complex associations among Serbs”; “potentially dangerous subjects capable of committing terrorist acts”; “a continuous belt of Muslim states in the underbelly of Europe” (Podoprigora, 2015; Transl. by V. S.) The connection between Muslim migration and the threat of religious extremism and terrorism is a recurring theme in European migration discourse. For example, several articles in the regional newspaper *Vyborg* and on news portals like Lenta.ru and RIA Novosti highlight this issue. Lenta.ru published articles such as “Evrope ukazali na skrytuiu

v migrantakh opasnost” [Europe was Shown the Hidden Danger in Migrants] (2019), “Liviia predupredila Evropu ob ugroze novogo nashestviia migrantov” [Libya Warned Europe About the Threat of a New Migrant Invasion] (2019), and “Svoi-Chuzhoi, Evropa priniala milliony bezhentshev. Pochemu teper’ ikh nenavidiat, schitaiut terroristami i khotiat vygnat” [‘Friend’ or ‘Foe’? Europe Has Accepted Millions of Refugees. Why Do They Now Hate Them, Consider Them Terrorists, and Want to Kick Them Out?] (Shvartsman et al., 2021). Similarly, RIA Novosti featured pieces like “Chechentsy napugali nemtsev. Te uzhestochaiut pravila migratsii” [Chechens Scared the Germans: They are Tightening Migration Rules] (Ibragimova, 2018) and “IG (zapreshchennaia v RF terroristicheskaia organizatsiia) gotovit novuiu volnu migratsii v Evropu, zaiavil glava WFP” [ISIS (a terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation) is Preparing a New Wave of Migration to Europe, Says the Head of the WFP] (2018).

As shown by the examples above, it could be concluded that there is a strategy of negative stereotyping of Muslim migrants, which plays a significant role in the spread of Islamophobia. However, when the media shift to the Russian context, the discourse changes. In addition to the theme of terrorism threats, other aspects emerge, with formulations such as “victims of recruiters,” “migrant safety,” and “how to resist the influence of extremist ideology.”

The victims of ISIS⁶ recruiters (a terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation) are most often young Muslim men who find themselves in conflict with the society and the state. Those who think that our region is not threatened by this are mistaken: it is in our large urban centers and their peripheries where one can find more sympathizers for the cause of the “Islamic State” (a terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation) than in remote areas of the North Caucasus, because migrants come to us in masse. (Podoprigora, 2015; Trans. by V. S.)

According to the mufti, the spiritual department is also ready to join in the explanatory preventive work with migrants, providing its platform ... Legalization, the legality of stay on the territory of Russia is the cornerstone of migrants’ safety per se as well as in the face of ISIS recruiters (a terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation). (Iushkovskaia, 2015; Trans. by V. S.)

Every year about 1.5 million migrants from Uzbekistan come to Saint Petersburg, 5 thousand Uzbeks study at universities in the so-called Northern Capital. Experts say that by helping them adapt here, it is possible to reduce the risks for the newcomers, protect them from the networks of extremist recruiters. (Iushkovskaia, 2018a; Trans. by V. S.)

⁶ ISIS has been designated a terrorist organization and is banned from all activities by the United Nations, United States, European Union, Russia, and many others. We condemn all forms of terrorism, particularly this organization's activities. ИГИЛ была признана террористической организацией; любая деятельность ИГИЛ запрещена в России, США, Европейском Союзе и многих других странах. Мы осуждаем любые формы терроризма, в том числе деятельность этой организации.

Thus, we observe a shift from negative judgments to neutral conclusions or statements that can be interpreted in different ways. These changes in discourse are reflected in the vocabulary used: “hidden danger” (1. European context)—“risk zone” (2. Russian context), “terrorists” (1)—“victims of recruiters” (2), “they are hated ... they want to kick them out” (1)—“preventive work” (2).

The issue of the hijab ban, which has been a topic of public debate for several years and is directly related to Islam, also received coverage in the media of Saint Petersburg. One such article, “Khidzhab razdora. Pochemu v shkolakh v Rossii zapreshchaiut musul'manskuiu odezhdu” [Hijab of Discord: Why Muslim Clothing is Banned in Schools in Russia] (Studenikina, 2019), exemplifies a discourse that contributes to the negative image of migrants. This is achieved through strategies that describe clothing and behaviors unfamiliar to local residents, reinforcing the cultural divide between locals and (im)migrants.

Regarding galoshes, slippers, and “weekend” tracksuits (alas, not such a rarity among migrants from Central Asia)—here it is difficult to disagree with the authors of the bill that was introduced in Tajikistan. In addition to this clothing and footwear, which is not typical for the cultural capital of Russia, city residents are often irritated by other habits of the newcomers. For example, collective squatting and cracking sunflower seeds on the street. (Studenikina, 2019; Trans. by V. S.)

The hijab, a women's garment that complies with Sharia law, has been described as “exotic clothing” and “Arab clothing” that “has recently acquired a negative connotation due to the rise of terrorism in the world” (Studenikina, 2019; Trans. by V. S.). The author employs a dichotomous description strategy, presenting mutually exclusive opposites, where one side is characterized solely by positive traits and the other by negative ones. The publication contrasts the hijab with the national costume of the Russian peoples, stating: “A quiet but consistent Arabization of Russian Islam and Russian Muslims is underway with the goal of making them ‘non-Russian,’ political and religious scholars warn us” (Studenikina, 2019; Trans. by V. S.). The author, however, fails to clarify that the hijab is primarily a modesty practice requiring women to cover their hair, neck, and shoulders, but not their face—unlike the niqab. Functionally, the hijab is similar to women's head coverings worn by adherents of other religions (such as the headscarves worn by Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, and Christian nuns). Mutual influences in clothing styles are common. This discourse, which focuses solely on negative aspects, contributes to the creation of a negative image of migrants, with their influence on Russian Muslim culture being framed exclusively in a negative light.

An even stronger “we—they” dichotomy is presented in the article “Peterburgskii parlament prosit gubernatora zakryt' ‘afganskoe kniazhestvo’ v tsentre goroda” [The Saint Petersburg Parliament Asks the Governor to Close the ‘Afghan Principality’ in the City Center] (2013), published by the news portal Fontanka.ru.

The article quotes Deputy V. Milonov, who spoke during a public discussion about the closure and subsequent reconstruction of the Saint Petersburg clothing market, Apraksin Dvor⁷:

Yesterday a famous holiday was celebrated. Some people who came to Saint Petersburg forget that they are no longer living in their village, and believe that their need to slaughter sheep should be fulfilled right on the street ... Milonov said that he visited the territory of Apraksin Dvor a day before and observed that “Instead of the city laws, the norms of medieval Sharia law are in effect there”, and that they sell extremely low-quality goods. He then advised “those who doubt the need to close Apraksin” to walk through the territory of this market and “try to find two signs of civilization on the territory of this Afghan principality.” (Peterburgskii Parlament, 2013; Trans. by V. S.)

This story addresses the contentious issue of city administration. However, the publication shifts its focus from addressing the real problems of the shadow economy and negative aspects of ethnic entrepreneurship to creating a negative image of the sellers and buyers at the Apraksin Dvor market, emphasizing their religious and ethnic backgrounds. The “authority strategy” is used here, drawing on Milonov’s position as a Deputy of the State Duma, which lends credibility to the discourse that portrays an antagonistic image of the “outsiders”—migrants from rural areas, adherents of Islam—who impose their own rules on the market in accordance with the “medieval norms of Sharia law” and refuse to integrate into Russian society.

The discourse concerning Muslim migrants on the news portal Fontanka.ru is realized in the context of the two main intersecting story lines: those involving holidays and those concerning various incidents. In total, our analysis included 144 articles from the “City” section, covering the period from January 1, 2000, to February 10, 2024.

The news block “Muslim Holidays” includes nine categories: “Eid Prayer”, “Holidays”, “City Disagreements/Controversies”, “Image of Islam/Muslims”, “Migrants”, “Law Enforcement”, “Number of Muslim Believers”, “Praying Muslims”, and “Cultural Code of the City”. The following categories are central (in terms of the number of generalized codes): “Holidays”, “Number of Believers/Praying Muslims”, and “Image of Islam/Muslims”. Most of the news articles in this section are centered around them.

For instance, the category “Holidays” includes two major Muslim holidays: Eid al-Adha (Kurban Bayram) and Eid al-Fitr (Uraza Bayram), as well as the national festival Sabantuy in the village of Syargi, which was attended by members of the city’s Muslim community. When describing Muslim holidays, the structure of the coverage typically includes three key elements: the estimated number of Muslims gathered for prayer, a brief cultural background on the history and significance of the holiday, and reports

⁷ At the site of the Apraksin Dvor market, Afghan trading points were located, as well as “the office of one of the cultural and educational organizations representing the interests of Afghans in St. Petersburg” (Ivleva, 2009; Trans. by V. S.).

on the maintenance of law and order, including any violations that occurred during the festivities. The image of Islam and Muslims constructed in these reports is closely tied to the portrayal of festive events. However, these descriptions often highlight incidents or facts that caused inconvenience for the local population. The frequent use of negative language in the discourse contributes to the formation of a negative image of Muslims and migrants:

It is mainly visitors who gather here ... people pray inside, in the courtyard and even outside the mosque fence—on the lawns and asphalt. (U Sobornoï Mecheti, 2007; Trans. by V. S.)

The prayer read by the muezzin is broadcasted via speakers placed on the street, the entire sidewalk near the building and the park up to Kamennooostrovsky Prospekt are covered with prayer rugs brought by the faithful. The mosque is very crowded and cramped. (Kurban-Bairam v Peterburge, 2009; Trans. by V. S.)

There was not enough space in and around the mosque for everyone, and during the prayer the faithful settled around the whole area: in Aleksandrovsky Park, directly on Kamennooostrovsky, near the Gorky monument. A large number of Muslims is still at the mosque. This year, many Africans are taking part in the celebration; they stand out with their colorful headdresses and clothing. (Musul'mane Peterburga Prazdnuiut Uraza-Bairam, 2019; Trans. by V. S.)

In the case of Sabantuy, an ethnocultural festival, the discourse shifts to create a positive image of the attendees. The “authority strategy” is also employed, as the words of G. Poltavchenko, the Governor of Saint Petersburg, are cited, thereby strengthening the positive connotations:

Tatars and Bashkirs have lived in Saint Petersburg since the city was founded. With their work and talent, they have enriched Saint Petersburg's culture and science, and contributed to the development of Saint Petersburg. And today, the sons and daughters of the Tatar and Bashkir people are fruitfully working for the benefit of the city on the Neva River. (Peterburg Otmechaet Sabantui, 2013; Trans. by V. S.)

The discourse encompassing the cultural background, history, and significance of holidays, along with the procedures for organizing festive events, is neutral in both content and social orientation:

Eid al-Adha is the main religious holiday of Muslims. It begins on the 10th of the month of Dhu al-Hijjah and lasts for three to four days. Historians believe that it originated in the pre-Islamic Arabia. For Muslims it is considered a time of strengthening of one's faith, liberating the soul from unrighteous intentions, and finding sincerity. The holiday is associated with the stories about Ibrahim (the biblical Abraham), who was going to sacrifice his son (Isaac in the Bible, Ismail in the Arabic tradition) and the construction of the main Muslim place of worship,

the Kaaba, in Mecca by Ibrahim and Ismail. Eid al-Adha coincides with the completion of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (the holy city of Islam). (Kurban-Bairam v Peterburge, 2009; Trans. by V. S.)

Eid al-Fitr is one of the two main days of the Islamic calendar. On this day, the fast which was observed during the holy month of Ramadan ends. Eid al-Fitr is officially a non-working day in the republics of Adygea, Bashkortostan, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Tatarstan, Chechnya and Crimea. (Bolel'shchiki iz Irana, 2018; Trans. by V. S.)

Descriptions containing historical and cultural information can be said to foster a tolerant attitude toward foreign cultural characteristics and their representatives by broadening readers' knowledge of other peoples' traditions. However, when juxtaposed with information that fosters migrantophobia and Islamophobia, references to the number of attendees and statements about the growing number of worshipers take on a negative connotation.

The number of Muslims gathered is not always explicitly specified. The vocabulary with a negative connotation contributes to the "mobility" of the discourse, shaping a negative image of Muslims and those attending the holiday prayer. For instance, instead of using neutral expressions like "a large number of people," terms such as "crowd" and "crowded" are employed, accompanied by phrases like "restrictions," "the area is cordoned off," "a pandemonium of Muslims" (Gor'kovskuii Osazhdaiut, 2011); "Gorkovskaya has been opened but with restrictions. Look how crowded it is there" (Iakovleva, 2023; Trans. by V. S.); "The surrounding area is cordoned off by the police, a bus with riot police is on duty nearby" (Kurban-Bairam v Peterburge, 2009; Trans. by V. S.). The negative aspect of the gathering is further highlighted by emphasizing the amount of trash left behind: "The Muslims have dispersed, but the trash near the mosque remains"; "The faithful laid newspapers on the ground, and now the entire avenue is littered with trash. However, street cleaners have already begun to tidy it up" (Musul'mane Razoshlis', 2007; Trans. by V. S.). For comparison purposes, it should be noted that the number of people attending Easter or Christmas services is generally viewed as positive or neutral.

Summarizing the data gathered from the "Traffic during Muslim holidays" news reports, it can be said that these reports primarily focus on the category of "change/restriction of traffic" in connection with "mass religious events" occurring in the city during the main Muslim holidays, namely Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr. Similar to the section on Muslim holidays, these news reports are supplemented with information about the number of Muslims attending the holiday prayers and a brief cultural background on the history and significance of the holidays. In describing the festive events, the authors also draw attention to issues within the city, such as the practice of sacrifice, restrictions or changes in traffic, and the coincidence or postponement of holidays.

The topic of migration in our analysis is represented by four publications. This section, which we have highlighted, includes only four articles that address issues related to Islamic migration. An uneven distribution of discourse is evident here. On the

one hand, there is recognition of the labor shortage and the fact that certain sectors of the economy cannot meet their needs without the recruitment of labor migrants.

Leningrad Oblast is experiencing a shortage of personnel when it comes to construction, agriculture, utilities, and seasonal work”, the Governor added. “Both permanent and temporary employees are needed, including unskilled ones. The construction of two large-scale facilities alone, Ruskhimalliance and the Baltic Gas Chemical Complex, will require 76 thousand workers. (Aleksandr Drozdenko, 2021; Trans. by V. S.)

On the other hand, there is a predominance of storylines, themes, and aspects where events that cause inconvenience for residents, pose a danger, and are described with either explicit or implicit negative connotations. According to some researchers, the term *Gastarbeiter* is ambiguously interpreted in public discourse and often carries a negative semantic charge, describing people who, “due to their ‘cheapness,’ present a ‘threat’ to Russian society” (Abashin, 2012, p. 7; Trans. by V. S.). The use of this term reinforces the stereotyping of Muslim migrants as a “problem group” and promotes a “paternalistic attitude towards them” (Abashin, 2012, p. 7; Trans. by V. S.), which can be illustrated by the article “V Peterburge sozhdadut tsentr pomoshchi gastarbaiteram” [A Center for Helping Gastarbeiter Will Be Created in Saint Petersburg] (2009).

In the media, the category “migrants” turns out to be closely linked with the topic of Islam:

Previously, as reported by Fontanka, the two-story barracks was a dormitory for migrants. It was regularly visited by migration service employees with riot police. Since 2009 businessmen from Central Asia have been hatching the idea of creating a mosque at Sennoy Market and having received the approval from the city, were able to rent the building legally. After the redevelopment, the second floor was turned into a prayer hall with an area of about 700 square meters. (Musul'mane Peterburga Zavershili Post Pod Dozhdem, 2017; Trans. by V. S.)

A 2022 report about taxi drivers illustrates the connection between the categories of “migrant” and “Muslim,” contributing to the formation of a negative image of Muslim migrants. The report highlights the social boundary between the host society and migrant taxi drivers, specifically those from Uzbekistan. These Muslim taxi drivers are portrayed as a large group violating Russian laws—such as driving without a license—and are depicted as a tight-knit community, united through Telegram8 channels:

The fact that despite the ban there is not just a large number but a very large number of taxi drivers with Uzbek documents in the city is evidenced by their activity in thematic chats on Telegram. There they speak mainly in Uzbek, discuss their various taxi driver things, congratulate each other on Muslim holidays, and solve some everyday issues. (Gorbunova, 2022; Trans. by V. S.)

⁸ Telegram™ is a trademark of Telegram Group Inc., its operational center is based in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates.

The publication states that Uzbeks communicate in Uzbek in their Telegram channel and that many taxi drivers in the city have Uzbek documents. However, no specific figures or comparisons are provided. This discourse reflects a negative attitude toward Uzbek taxi drivers, potentially fueling ethnic hatred. At the same time, it fails to address specific issues that may be real but require a more nuanced approach.

This section also touches on the integration and legal status of migrants and their religious communities. The use of negatively colored vocabulary and negative portrayal of the events described is evident. The article “Albin i Kirillov lideriuit v media reitinge Smol'nogo” [Albin and Kirillov Lead in Smolny Media Rating] (2015) mentions that during a regional meeting of the Federal Migration Service, Vice Governor A. Govorunov highlighted the increase in the number of prayer rooms in Saint Petersburg that are “not under the control of the authorities or official clergy.”

The article “V Apraksinom dvore iskali ‘Brat’ev-musul’man’” [They Were Looking for the Muslim Brotherhood in Apraksin Dvor] (2013) covers the detentions of migrants in Apraksin Dvor. This story warrants special attention because it received double coverage: once in the “Incidents” section of Fontanka.ru and again in an article by journalist Timur Zainullin, who was detained during the raid in a prayer room. In the first case, the event is presented in the formal language of an official report, using negatively charged terms such as “trade is paralyzed” and “the faithful are loaded into *avtozak* [police van]:”

The operation is being carried out as part of the investigation of criminal cases initiated under Article 205.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (public calls to commit terrorist activity or public justification of terrorism) and Article 282 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (incitement to hatred or enmity, as well as humiliation of human dignity). As noted by the Federal Security Service, this concerns not only Russian citizens but also the foreigners who participated in the activities of (this) religious organization. However, not all of those present in the prayer rooms are connected with the alleged crimes. (V Apraksinom Dvore, 2013; Trans. by V. S.)

The second publication, “Oblava na Aprashke: Vzgliad iznutri” [The Raid on Aprashka: A View From the Inside] (Zainullin, 2013), was posted on media platforms on the same day, signed with “Interrogation room visited by Timur Zainullin.” This article provides an on-the-ground report, with the journalist’s own narrative reflecting his perspective on the events. Unlike the formal tone of an official report, the article begins with a description of the prayer room and the people gathered, using vivid language and a touch of irony:

It was quite cramped due to the number of the faithful. One can see various clothing brands flashing from all sides: Dolce&Gabbana, Armani, Pierre Cardin. Most of them were market employees. They were wearing whatever they themselves were selling. (Zainullin, 2013; Trans. by V. S.)

The article then describes the confusion of the people who came to pray but were detained by the security forces: “The people rushed to the door again. They were being waited for ... in masks, bulletproof vests, and with machine guns” (Zainullin, 2013; Trans. by V. S.). The journalist notes an attempt by the outraged people to resist the special forces, but this was stopped by a religious leader who demonstrated his authority among the believers: “‘No need,’ a tall man in white robes said, ‘everything will work out, let’s show them our strength but in prayer’” (Zainullin, 2013; Trans. by V. S.). The author reflects on his own feelings, but it is clear that many of those gathered shared the same emotions:

In order to avoid a stampede, people were asked to sit on the floor. Out of habit, the believers knelt down. One by one, they crawled on their knees toward the special forces, rubbing their knees on the cold floor, looking down the barrel of a machine gun. It was uncomfortable. (Zainullin, 2013; Trans. by V. S.)

The journalist also notes that the employees of Center E⁹ knew many things about Islam and Muslim organizations better than those detained.

From the Fontanka.ru “Incidents” section, during the first stage of the analysis, we selected 144 articles published between January 1, 2000, to February 10, 2024 using the search query “Muslims.” In the second stage, we examined 36 articles related to events in Saint Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast, which accounts for 24.3% of the total articles considered. The reported incidents can be divided into crimes committed by Muslims and crimes committed against Muslims. In the first case, the image of Islam/Muslims is primarily presented in connection with the threat posed by the terrorist organization Islamic State, which is banned in the Russian Federation.

News items related to the activities of Islamic State, a terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation, make up 30.5% (11 articles) of the articles under review. Based on the text analysis, the following *in vivo* concepts—concepts rooted in the data around which the logic of the news story is built—can be identified: “IS¹⁰ recruiters,” “IS sympathizers,” “IS fighters,” “IS supporters.”

In this case, the image of migrants from Central Asian and Transcaucasian republics is linked to terrorist and extremist activities. As Ivleva and Tavrovsky note: “‘Villains’ are ‘young people, their images are individualized, their names and individual aspects of their biography are known,’ and ‘their ethnicity is usually emphasized’” (Ivleva & Tavrovsky, 2019; Trans. by V. S.). Additionally, we would add, their religious affiliation is often tied to confrontational groups within Islam.

⁹ Center E refers to the Center for Combating Extremism, a division in the Russian police responsible for countering extremism, including terrorism, radical ideologies, and any activities deemed a threat to public order or national security. The center is involved in surveillance, detaining suspects, and conducting operations against organizations or individuals accused of extremism.

¹⁰ ISIS has been designated a terrorist organization and is banned from all activities by the United Nations, United States, European Union, Russia, and many others. We condemn all forms of terrorism, particularly this organization's activities. ИГИЛ была признана террористической организацией; любая деятельность ИГИЛ запрещена в России, США, Европейском Союзе и многих других странах. Мы осуждаем любые формы терроризма, в том числе деятельность этой организации.

An example of such discourse can be found in the story about the preparation of a terrorist attack at Kazan Cathedral. The news first appeared in the “Incidents” section of the Fontanka.ru website in December 2017 under the headline “V Peterburge terroristy planirovali vzorvat’ Kazanskii sobor” [Terrorists in Saint Petersburg Planned to Blow Up Kazan Cathedral] (2017). The story was revisited in August 2018 when the verdict was announced, and two articles were published on the same day. One of them was titled “Sud po delu o podgotovke terakta v Kazanskom sobore zakryli ot pressy. Advokat zaiaivil ob ugrozakh” [Preparation of a Terrorist Attack in the Kazan Cathedral Trial Was Closed to the Press. The Lawyer Reported Threats]:

The investigators believe that Efimov, who had become interested in Islam, was planning to reserve a place in heaven by blowing himself up. The choice of the Kazan Cathedral was explained by the presence of the largest possible crowd and the minimum number of Muslims. (Sud po Delu, 2018; Trans. by V. S.)

In 2021, the editors revisited this story with the article “Otkrovenie terrorista: V 18 let on khotel podorvat’sia v Kazanskom sobore” [Confessions of a Terrorist: At 18 He Wanted to Blow Himself Up in Kazan Cathedral], based on a conversation between journalists and Evgeny Efimov, who is serving a sentence in a maximum-security penal colony. Such news attracts readers, boosting the publication’s ratings. According to the journalists themselves, the publication is meant to serve as a warning: “This candid conversation should be a warning to many Russian teenagers. As the prisoner told us, it is easy to get into a banned group but almost impossible to leave. The boys are literally being brainwashed” (Otkrovenie Terrorista, 2021; Trans. by V. S.).

Journalists emphasize that the young man could have studied at a university, enjoyed time with his peers, or gone on a date with a young woman, but due to his criminal choice, he ended up in prison. It is also noted that Evgeny admitted his guilt, acknowledging that “he could have done something terrible.” The publication highlights the danger of the planned terrorist attack: Saint Petersburg is a city frequented by many tourists from all over the world, and a “terrible tragedy” could have occurred. The article provides additional details not included in the first publication: “He [Efimov] was being prepared for the terrorist attack via the Internet, including psychologically: instructions came through Telegram channels” (Otkrovenie Terrorista, 2021; Trans. by V. S.).

The story of Efimov’s conversion to Islam is also shared: his father took him to the mosque for the first time to show that “Muslims and terrorists are not the same people, that it (Islam) is a peaceful religion” (Otkrovenie Terrorista, 2021; Trans. by V. S.). According to Efimov, his parents—“an Orthodox mother and an Old Believer father”—tried to “save him” from the influence of radical views. His mother opposed his conversion to Islam, while his father was not generally against Islam but did not accept radical movements. The publication concludes with the fact that Evgeny later wanted to study Orthodoxy. He even began studying it remotely and enrolled in a Sunday school.

This publication presents an ambiguous perspective on religions and inter-religious harmony. It contrasts religions by using a negative example to shape the

perception of one, while presenting another religion as an unequivocally positive alternative. However, the reality is much more complex. Overall, it can be concluded that the language of official news tends to be more neutral, whereas materials that include value judgments often contribute to the creation of a negative image of a particular religion.

The publication “lunoi peterburzhenke, zaderzhannoi za svastiku v metro, vmeniaiut eshche i ugrozu ubiistvom v adres musul'manki” [Young Saint Petersburg Woman Detained for Swastika in the Metro Also Charged With Threat to Kill a Muslim Woman] (2021) describes the actions of a young woman who, “threatening to use a knife, made unpleasant remarks about the nationality and religion of another passenger” (Trans. by V. S.). However, the text appears to downplay the young woman’s guilt by using language that minimizes the severity of her actions, portraying them as less intentional or harmful. For example, she is referred to as a “Valkyrie”—a mythological figure rather than a criminal—and addressed as a “young lady,” which softens the perception of her behavior. Readers quickly recognize this semantic manipulation, as reflected in comments like, “Fontanka is deleting unwanted comments condemning Nazis” (Trans. by V. S.).

This example illustrates how the choice of words in media coverage can influence public perception, subtly shifting focus or sympathy. RBC.ru, part of the RosBusinessConsulting Group of Companies, is a Russian information and analytical agency with “thematic verticals.” It has been operating as an Internet portal since 1993. For this analysis, we selected six articles published between April 4, 2017, and February 10, 2024. The articles were chosen by using the search tag “Muslim migrants,” and the selection included three general articles as well as three articles specifically related to events in Saint Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast.

Given the limited material, it is impossible to make quantitative generalizations regarding the strategies used to shape the image of Islam/Muslims. However, it is possible to illustrate certain topics covered by journalists and the corresponding structure of the media discourse under consideration. The collected material can be grouped into four main categories: “image of a migrant,” “migration process,” “adaptation and integration trajectories,” and “risk group.” It is important to note that RBC.ru more frequently than other publications employs the strategy of involving experts to assess and interpret issues and events.

For example, the image of a migrant is constructed around eight key concepts, primarily based on an interview with M. Khranova, head of the Institute of Demographic Research at the Russian Academy of Sciences (Tkachev & Vinogradova, 2024). According to the interview, which references a study by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM)¹¹, migrants from Central Asia, unlike Muscovites, prioritize strong family ties and children (42% of respondents favor a large family). National customs (80%) and religious traditions (74%) are also highly important to them. There is a tendency for migrants to settle on the outskirts of cities where housing is more affordable. In these areas, the proportion of migrant children attending schools is significantly higher than the city average. Regarding competition in the domestic labor market, “migrants often take jobs that locals generally do not want” (Tkachev &

¹¹ <https://wciom.com>

Vinogradova, 2024; Trans. by V. S.). At the same time, illegal migration contributes to the development of negative attitudes among the host society. As Khramova explains:

According to the common understanding, a migrant is often a semi-literate Uzbek or Tajik who does not have any professional competencies, is a hooligan, and does not speak Russian. In reality, such migrants are a small proportion, but they are the ones who constantly come to the attention of both our competent authorities and the population. (Tkachev & Vinogradova, 2024; Trans. by V. S.)

The experts' opinions are supported by a statistical forecast on the growth of the Muslim population in Russia. For example, in the article "Glava soveta muftiev predskazal rost doli musul'man v Rossii do treti" [The Head of the Council of Muftis Predicted an Increase in the Share of Muslims in Russia to a Third] (Kaliukov & Kir'ianov, 2019), experts and Muslim spiritual leaders project that the Muslim population could grow by 2050 to 15%, 30%, 50%, or even 80%. Citing data from the Pew Research Center in 2017, the article also notes that Muslims tend to be more religious than Christians:

In Russia, the Muslim population follows religious rules more strictly than the Christian population, and there are more Muslims who consider religion a "very important" part of their lives, pray daily, and attend religious services at least once a week. (Kaliukov & Kir'ianov, 2019; Trans. by V. S.)

Leaving aside the forecast concerning the increase in Muslim population, it should be noted that the issue raised by the head of the Council of Muftis concerning the need to build new mosques and "corresponding cultural and educational infrastructure in the largest cities of Russia" (Kaliukov & Kir'ianov, 2019; Trans. by V. S.) is already relevant today. Educational efforts on the part of Muslim leaders can play an important role in the adaptation and integration of migrants.

An article dedicated to the terrorist attack in the Saint Petersburg Metro in 2017 raises the issue of migrant communities as a medium for the dissemination of radical ideas and views:

Recruiters find their targets in dormitories, markets, mosques, and construction sites. As a rule, they say that migrant workers are treated unfairly in Russia because they are Muslims, they deserve a better life, and they should not allow their fellow believers to suffer. (Dergachev et al., 2017; Trans. by V. S.)

Emigrants from Central Asia, especially those who currently live in Russia, are in a very difficult situation, they have difficulty finding work and housing ... Because of this, they accumulate aggression, their views become sharper day by day, and it is very easy to recruit such people. (Dergachev et al., 2017; Trans. by V. S.)

Therefore, it can be said that RBC.ru goes beyond simple news reporting, aiming to provide deeper, evidence-based analysis, drawing on statistical data from research centers and insights from experts.

Regional Media

The local newspaper *Vyborg* presents news concerning the Vyborg district of Leningrad Oblast. The newspaper has undergone several name changes over the years, starting from its establishment in 1940. As stated on its website, the newspaper covers the most important events in the spheres of economics and local government, culture and history, healthcare, education, and sports. Forty articles mentioning Muslims were selected for analysis from April 22, 2014, to May 10, 2024.

The data from these publications are grouped into two main categories that set the thematic framework for the news stories and articles:

1. Positive discourse: the portrayal of the city as a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic space, where meetings, exhibitions, festivals, tournaments, and conferences with the participation of the Muslim community are held;
2. Coverage of events related to extremist and terrorist activities in Saint Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast.

In these articles, we can see a dichotomy between “peaceful branches of Islam,” associated with peoples who “profess traditional values,” and “terrorist groups within Islam.” In the first case, Islam is presented as a peaceful religion opposed to terrorism, while Vyborg is depicted as a multi-confessional city where Islam and Christianity peacefully coexist:

Islam is a peaceful religion and its main goal is peaceful existence and friendly relations with all traditional faiths of Russia. (Liubov' k Rodine, 2016; Trans. by V S.)

Vyborg has always been a multi-confessional city, where many nationalities lived under one roof ... it could not be otherwise, because both Muslims and Christians have lived in Vyborg amicably and for a long time. (Karsakov, 2024; Trans. by V. S.)

In the second case, the storyline of news reports is centered around such events as complicity in “terrorist activity,” “cyberterrorism,” “extremist activity, the practice of recruiting ISIS¹²,” etc.

At the same time, unfortunately the whole world has already realized that terrorist Islamist movements also exist. In Leningrad Oblast active work to counter such organizations and those who assist them is underway. (Souchastie, 2021; Transl. by V. S.)

Although the distinction between “traditional Islam” and “radical Islam,” or between “peaceful currents of Islam” and “radical currents of Islam,” is challenging to verify from scholarly and expert perspectives, such dichotomies significantly oversimplify

¹² ISIS has been designated a terrorist organization and is banned from all activities by the United Nations, United States, European Union, Russia, and many others. We condemn all forms of terrorism, particularly this organization's activities. ИГИЛ была признана террористической организацией; любая деятельность ИГИЛ запрещена в России, США, Европейском Союзе и многих других странах. Мы осуждаем любые формы терроризма, в том числе деятельность этой организации.

the actual diversity of Islam, including its schools, trends, religious practices, and local traditions. Nonetheless, this binary framing is frequently reproduced in broad media discourse (Ragozina, 2018). A similar pattern appears in an interview with an individual convicted of terrorist activities and planning an attack on the Kazan Cathedral, where references were made to “peaceful currents of Islam” versus “radical currents of Islam” (Otkrovenie Terrorista, 2021; Trans. by V. S.).

Furthermore, the topic of Islamic migration is associated with two main narratives: one concerning an illegal Islamic school (madrasa) in Saint Petersburg, where children of migrants from CIS countries were educated, and another involving a series of reports about increasing migration flows from “problematic Muslim countries” to Europe, particularly to Denmark and Finland.

In our opinion, when covering events related to terrorist activity it is important to include expert assessments of the events by representatives of the scholarly and religious community (Muslim community) in publications, since the involvement of experts changes the nature of the discourse. For instance, consider a fragment from an interview with V. Achkasov, who provides insights into the migration situation in the city:

Around 70% of labor migrants come to Saint Petersburg from small towns and villages in post-Soviet states. The profile of a typical foreign worker is as follows: a man under 39 years old, a rural resident from Central Asia, who arrived in Saint Petersburg without a visa, with a secondary education, lacking specialized professional training, possessing minimal knowledge of the Russian language, and having low legal awareness; he is ready to perform unskilled work ... Today, more than 80% of migrants are Muslim or come from Muslim countries. More than half of new arrivals do not have a profession. The percentage of migrants who speak Russian even at a minimal level is rapidly decreasing. It should be noted that most labor migrants are poorer today than in previous years. This has become especially acute since the beginning of 2014 in connection with the devaluation of the Russian ruble. (Iushkovskaia, 2018b; Trans. by V. S.)

Achkasov views migrants as an integral part of the urban community. While discussing the challenges of migrants’ adaptation and integration, he highlights the city authorities’ lack of experience in managing the large-scale influx of international migration:

Saint Petersburg is in a rather difficult situation. This is caused by the lack of experience of the city authorities in dealing with a mass flow of international migrants of all categories, the absence of mechanisms for integrating newcomers through NGOs, social services and diasporas. (Iushkovskaia, 2018b; Trans. by V. S.)

Achkasov identifies several negative characteristics and examples but grounds his observations in specific facts and research materials. The balanced perspective of this expert is evident in an earlier publication, where he observes that the voices of migrants “are not heard at all, nor are there reports about the positive contributions they make to the development of our economy and culture, or to the improvement of our everyday life” (Achkasov, 2011; Trans. by V. S.).

An example of discourse informed by expert opinions from religious leaders is the article “We are United by Faith” [Nas Ob’ediniaet Vera] (2018), published in *Luzhskaya Pravda*, a sociopolitical local newspaper for the Luzhsky district of Leningrad Oblast. This newspaper has been published since 1918, has a biweekly circulation of 3,800–4,000 and its own website. For our analysis, we selected two articles, one from 2018 and the other from 2023. The 2018 publication centers on an interview with I. A. Abusarov, the chairman of the Muslim Community of Luga and Luzhsky district. This community, registered in 2018, is part of the centralized organization Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation. The interview explores concepts such as “traditional Islam,” “multinational community,” “features of adaptation and integration,” and “second generation.” According to Abusarov, the positive image of Islam is closely tied to the diverse Muslim community in Luga:

Among us there are Tatars, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Azerbaijanis—we are all united by faith ... traditional Islam preaches universal human values, condemns violence and bloodshed. (Nas Ob’ediniaet Vera, 2018; Trans. by V. S.)

The expert shares a distinct perspective and offers recommendations for fostering social harmony, emphasizing the importance of educational initiatives:

There should be no drug dealers or militant supporters of terrorist organizations banned in Russia among us; we are against extremism, violence and bloodshed ... All acts of religious extremism, nationalism and ethnic hatred come from an extreme ignorance and lack of knowledge of traditions, not only religious but also secular. In our multinational country, it is necessary to spread knowledge so that people strive to engage in dialog among traditional cultures and faiths. In this regard, religion plays an important role as an integral part of an established cultural tradition—which is true for any nation. (Nas Ob’ediniaet Vera, 2018; Trans. by V. S.)

However, the involvement of religious figures as experts is not always justified—the mentality of exclusivity pertaining to religions can lead to bias and prejudice in assessments. For instance, the statements of the Patriarch of the Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Rus’, the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, had a noticeable influence on the anti-immigrant discourse. At the 2023 World Russian Council, he remarked:

At first, Gastarbeiters appear as complete strangers, foreigners. They can’t speak, then they start to communicate in Russian a little, and then they marry Russians, register, and become citizens ... Such people do not become close to us either in faith or in culture. They have their own faith and their own culture. (Patriarkh Zaiavil, 2023; Trans. by V. S.)

His words were subsequently echoed through direct quotations or paraphrased by prominent speakers across various publications, such as the article “Patriarkh

zaiavil o riske 'poteriat' stranu' iz-za migrantov s inoi veroi" [Patriarch Warns of Risk of "Losing the Country" Due to Migrants of a Different Faith] (2023; Trans. by V. S.).

Conclusion

In response to the 2017 terrorist attack in the Saint Petersburg Metro, which received widespread coverage in local media, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Saint Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast strongly condemned the terrorists' actions. Additionally, they organized a blood drive for the victims among Muslims and hosted a conference:

In the days following this tragic event, an international conference aimed at condemning any form of violence was held in Saint Petersburg at the initiative of the Chairman of the Russian Muslim Spiritual Directorate and the Council of Muftis of Russia, Mufti Sheikh R. Gainutdin. The conference began with a collective prayer for the repose of those who died and the speedy recovery of those injured in the tragedy. (Akhmadeev, 2019; Trans. by V. S.)

However, the news itself was not broadcast on news channels, despite expressing an "open view" of Islam. This perspective emphasized that Muslims and Islam are not a source of terrorist threats, but rather a "partner" in opposing extremism and promoting peaceful coexistence and a shared future (The Runnymede Trust, 1997).

In this context, the mediatization of all aspects of modern life is reflected in the significant impact the media have on shaping perceptions of Muslim migrants. The spread of various phobias, including Islamophobia, serves as a simplistic means of consolidating society in response to the unpredictability and complexity of the adaptation and integration processes that migrants face in the new conditions of the host society: "These fears are based not on the presence of migrants themselves or even on their number, but on the increasing difficulties with their integration into the host society" (Dyatlov, 2011; Trans. by V. S.).

From a theoretical perspective, it can be concluded that the process of shaping the image of Islam/Muslims in the context of migration follows two main strategies:

1. By attributing and stereotyping negative characteristics, which contributes to Islamophobia and hostility towards Muslim migrants;
2. By informing, appealing to authority, attracting expert opinion, personification, exemplification, and other methods, which help reduce the social distance between Muslim migrants and citizens of the host society, thereby facilitating the process of social integration.

The first strategy may seem simpler for the media, but its negative consequences often lead to tension and conflict within society. The second strategy, however, focuses on long-term efforts and educational initiatives that promote inclusion, peace, and positive social change.

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