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**STEREOTYPES ON RELIGION IN MEDIA:  
A CASE OF MUSLIMS IN RUSSIA AND THE USA**

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The mediatization of Islam and Muslims as a religious community is gaining interest in media studies due recent political events. The coverage of Islamic structures in institutional media as a particular case of mediatization is important for understanding the mechanisms of shaping public opinion and mass attitudes towards this religion and its followers. Moreover, quite often the image in the media becomes the basis for political decision-making. This article, based on an analysis of a large volume of publications about Islam from 2000 to 2022 through “Factiva” service, examines its coverage in the two media spheres – Russian and US, drawing attention to the similarities and differences in the formation of a predominantly negative image of this religion. In conclusion, the author offers some recommendations to journalists covering the religious sphere.

**Keywords:** mediatization, religion, Islam, Muslims, Russia, USA, journalism.

**СТЕРЕОТИПЫ О РЕЛИГИИ В СМИ:  
ОБРАЗЫ МУСУЛЬМАН В РОССИИ И США**

**Хруль В.**

Медиатизация ислама и мусульман как религиозной общности вызывает повышенный интерес в связи с рядом событий политического свойства. Освещение деятельности исламских структур в институциональных СМИ как частный случай медиатизации важно для понимания механизмов формирования общественного мнения и массовых установок по отношению к этой религии и её последователям. Более того, довольно часто образ в медиа становится основанием для принятия политических решений. Данная статья на основе анализа большого массива публикаций об исламе с 2000 по 2022 гг. при помощи сервиса «Фактива» исследует его освещение в двух медиасферах – российской и американской, обращая внимания на сходства и различия в

формировании преимущественно негативного образа ислама и мусульман. В заключении автор предлагает некоторые рекомендации журналистам, освещающим религиозную сферу.

**Ключевые слова:** медиатизация, религия, ислам, мусульмане, Россия, США, журналистика.

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## **Introduction**

Muslims are a religious minority both in Russia and the US, but their position in Russian and American societies differ significantly due to political, social and historical contexts. Negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims in both countries are reflected and in many cases initially formed in the media. Most widely spread are the connotations of terrorists and “fundamentalists”, but the strategies for constructing images of Islam and Muslims in the media discourse in Russia and the United States are different. Russian stories are related to separatism and wars on the territory of the country in the recent past, while for the US the problem of terrorism coming from other regions is more acute. There is a notable lack of scholarly knowledge in this area. S. Ahmed and J. Matthes consider that comparative analysis is generally rather poor in studies of media images of Muslims and Islam [q.v.: 7].

The main research questions of this article are: 1) What kind of discursive practices of image making of Islam and Muslims are used in Russian and American media? 2) What are the similarities and differences between them?

The representation of Muslims in the Western media was researched by R. Pennington and H. Kahn [31], S. Schiffer [33], Bleich E., Souffrant J., Stabler E., van der Veen A. [10], E. Schlueter, A. Masso and E. Davidov [34], in Russian media by E. Said [5], Y. Gilichinskaya [1] and T. Shaikhidinov [6].

This article is based on the results of a qualitative and quantitative analysis of Russian and American media texts about Islam and Muslims from 2000 to 2022,

conducted during the seminar “Religion and Media” at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow in 2021 and during the research fellowship at Robert Morris University (Pittsburgh, PA, USA) during 2022.

### **Mediatization of Islam: theoretical frameworks**

Teleological perspective is important to examine the media coverage of any phenomenon, especially religious life, because the goal-setting is of fundamental importance for context and formats. Agenda-setting theory developed by M. McCombs and D. Shaw [25; 26], E. Goffman [17] and J. Kuypers [22] is focused on the way media attempts to influence audiences and establish a hierarchy of news and therefore is very relevant to the research of the mediatization of religion.

The question “for what purpose?” has been missing in different models of communication for quite a significant amount of time. In particular, the first Lasswell’s model – “who – says what – in which channel – to whom – with what effect?” – did not contain the question on purpose [23, p. 37]. A question about the effect of communication contains a latent question about the purpose (as the effect is the result of the process of achieving the goal), but the question itself “for what purpose?” appears in an improved model in the late 1960s, as D. McQuail and S. Windahl wrote [27, p. 13-15].

The formation of strategic and tactical agendas and the configuration of information filters at all levels of communication are directly related to the goal-setting media activities which form the primary, basic system of goals, that later develops into an extensive network of more concrete objectives and aims. At all levels, goal-setting is based on the will of editors, journalists, publishers, business and political actors, etc. Some of them are internal players, some act from the outside of media institutions, but in any case, goal-setting is a natural arena of their conflicts, mediated via negotiations or fights, finished with victory, defeat or compromise.

The accountability of journalism – in any society – starts with goal-setting (at all levels), therefore the teleological approach is considered to be an integral part of any media accountability analysis. If you are not able to retrieve and reconstruct the goals of media – how can you evaluate and measure their accountability?

Dmitry Kiselev, the head of the International Agency *Russia Today*, who is also the author and presenter of the program *Vesti Nedeli* on the TV channel *Rossiya 1* put the social mission of Russian media in the following statement: “Russia, of course, wants to compete in the field of international information, as information warfare has become the practice of modern life and the main type of warfare... Earlier there was artillery action before the attack; there is information warfare now” [3]. According to Kiselev, propaganda is acceptable in journalism: “I am accused of the fact that I’m doing propaganda. But "propaganda" from the Greek is just "the dissemination of information, ideas, thoughts, and philosophical positions”” [3].

The differentiation between goal-setting of the media system in longer terms and goal-setting in the texts, in the content, leads to two possible levels of teleological analysis – sociological systematic analysis on a macro-level of the national or even transnational media system and content analysis on the micro-level of journalistic texts transmitted by all kinds of media.

The evaluation of the goal’s effects on the audience consciousness presumes the third kind of analysis on the level of public opinion. However, academic discourse on the effects of journalistic texts and the effectiveness of the media in general in many cases does not take into consideration real objectives of journalists and media managers.

But, unfortunately, the attempts to discover the agenda-setting principles in media coverage of Islam failed in our particular research, because the top media managers avoided the in-depth interviews with the researchers in the frame of “Religion and Media” seminar at Moscow Higher School of Economics. And the US media teleological perspective was too far from research from Moscow. Another possible approach – to reconstruct, retrieve the goals from the media texts in the frames of “intent-analysis” – seems to be not reliable and valid in our case.

One more popular analytical frame is based on the theory of mediatization.

*There are three main ways of the mediatization of religions:*

1. Media allow, enable and assist the self-presentation of religions, observes their activity in the public interest by keeping religious formats (broadcasting services, funerals, weddings etc).

2. Media covers religious life (news reports, feature stories etc) and may have a critical approach towards some social activity or religious institutions.

3. Media outlets may use religion for their own aims: selectively importing well-known religious symbols into entertainment, keeping out sacral meanings and secularizing the essence of religion. This process is out of the control of religious authorities and therefore causes many complaints and conflicts.

The above first-mentioned way of mediatization is more or less understandable and depends more or less on the goodwill of media institutions' and on audience demand. In most cases, it keeps the religious format "untouched" and the media are used more as a channel of transmission rather than actively interacting with the subject.

The second and the third ways presume a more active role of journalists covering religion. The process is becoming more important and at the same time more problematic. Conflicts and scandals are rooted in misunderstanding or in bad reporting on religious issues.

The results of the research, conducted in 2017, revealed facts and trends of dysfunction and corruption in the religious life coverage in Russia:

- a) biased approach among journalists, tolerated by their colleagues;
- b) lack of education in religious issues and therefore lack of understanding of what is really going on;
- c) urgent need of specialized media focused on religious life.
- d) secular media dependence on political and influential Russian Orthodox Church elites;
- e) and, therefore, religious minorities are marginalized in the public sphere [q.v.: 20].

The term “mediatisation” is increasingly being used – despite its problematic and debatable nature – and, according to some colleagues, it signifies a “metaprocess” on a universal scale alongside globalization and commercialization [q.v.: 18] and marks a “paradigm shift” not only in media studies, but also in other social sciences [q.v.: 28]. The British researcher R. Silverstone has described the term in general terms as follows: “Mediatization involves understanding how the process of communication changes the social and cultural environments within which it takes place, as well as the relationships of actors, institutions and individuals to those environments and to each other” [35, p. 189]. Processes of mediatisation take place at different levels (micro, meso and macro), from everyday practices in the inner circle to society as a whole.

A reinterpretation of M. McLuhan’s ideas, with his particular attention to the medium as a medium that determines formats, ways of “packaging” and transmitting meanings, is becoming popular again. In particular, D. Meyrowitz in 1985, even before the stable emergence of the term “mediatisation”, showed how the emergence of television has changed the behaviour patterns of men and women, relationships in families and other certain social practices [q.v.: 29]. What used to be described in term of “media effects” is now increasingly labelled “mediatisation”. In addition, the approaches of materialist phenomenology have become popular. In particular, N. Cauldry and A. Hepp, in their work “The mediated construction of reality”, develop a materialist phenomenology that analyses the role of media technologies in the construction of the social world. They argue that social theory without taking mediated processes into account becomes “unviable” [q.v.: 13].

At the same time, the academic discourse on mediatisation is becoming increasingly polemical, with both the optimistic voices of the enthusiasts already mentioned promoting the project [q.v.: 19] and the sceptical objections of critics urging against reinventing redundant terms [8; 14; 15]. Critics cautiously remind us that mediatisation has originated and developed in a Western academic narrative that describes mainly the problems of post-industrial societies and therefore cannot claim to be universal. Moreover, sceptics draw attention to the fact that the concept of

mediatization is rather an intellectual fashion, it is not yet sufficiently developed to show, as is customary in science, its real discerning power and heuristic ability, so it is called a “container” [15, p. 1039] or “umbrella concept” [8, p. 112]. Among the “problem areas” of mediatization are the underdeveloped basic concepts about which there is no consensus, as well as determining its place among other theories and research paradigms.

The conciliatory voices of British researchers Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt, who suggest that mediatization should be qualified as a kind of hash tag (#) to mark this field of study so that interested researchers can “identify” it and further construct it by comparing their ideas, data and evidence, seem reasonable to us [q.v.: 24].

Examining the development of the mediatization theory we observe both optimistic (medialization as a global “meta-process”) and sceptical (mediatization as a fashionable “umbrella concept” or “bandwagon”) arguments. The heuristic value and empirical significance of the mediatization theory is still doubtful. In its application to religion, mediatization is confronted with additional difficulties due to the specific characteristics of the object: a special language, special forms of manifestation, a fundamental dichotomy of the sacred and profane, which limit the depth of the research. We consider the concept of mediatization to be a “theoretical avant-garde” in media research, which further dynamics, and, in particular, the future of media and religion studies depends on the results of the recent mediatization debate.

Waiting for its operationalization, we still apply to media coverage of Islam in Russian and US media reliable and proven methods of quantitative and qualitative content analysis.

As it comes to the domain of political science and sociology, E. Said describes the concept of Orientalism, which involves the perception of the East (and Islam as a key component of its culture) as a single force hostile to the West and at the same time something sensuous and exotic – something to be explored, but with the sole purpose of capturing and subjugating itself [q.v.: 5]. In reality, the Orientalist

approach does not allow us to truly study the East, and media materials created under this approach do not bring the audience any closer to an understanding of Islam – they only give the illusion of understanding.

At the same time, there is still a perception of Islam as a monolithic threatening force in today's Western media. This is evident in the linguistic picture of the world, which is largely shaped by the media. According to a study of print media carried out by Z.S. Guseikhanova and K.G. Sultanov within the framework of the theory of framing, Islam is most frequently associated with such concepts as “dogmatism”, “globalism”, “orderliness”, “fundamentalism” and “violence” [2, c. 52].

The focus has shifted towards the fundamental threat that Islam poses to Western civilization. The media and their main tools, extrapolation and indexation, play an important role here. In particular, by pointing out the religious views of people who commit terrorist acts, they form a stable association of terrorism with that religion, in our case Islam, in their audience. As a result, any reference to Islam and anything related to it creates such an association.

The resulting negative stereotyping of Islam leads to a phenomenon that many researchers refer to as “Islamophobia”. Although it is often linked to a fear of, in particular, the terrorist threat mentioned above, it is primarily based on hatred. It manifests itself in unconstructive criticism, demonization and a deliberately biased attitude towards Islam. This is pointed out by L. Moosavi points out that the term “phobia” does not necessarily mean fear – the situation is similar with the term “homophobia”, which indicates a dislike of a particular social group, rather than a fear of it [q.v.: 30].

On the other hand, some oppose the use of the term “Islamophobia” – E. Poole, for example, suggests that anti-Muslimism might be a more appropriate description of the phenomenon [32, p. 30]. It should be taken very seriously because the beliefs of some representatives of religion may not correspond to its dogmas and may even contradict them. For instance, the Islamic scriptures stipulate that a thorough investigation and trial be conducted before the death penalty is passed. If some



Muslims believe that it is permissible to execute an alleged criminal on the spot, that in itself does not change the norm of Islamic law.

Negative stereotyping in the media and, as a consequence, in the public consciousness, along with Islamic doctrine, Muslims as a religious group are indeed also subject to negative stereotyping. This can be seen, for example, in the phenomenon described by E. Bruneau, N. Kteily and E. Western society blames all followers of Islam for violent acts committed by specific Muslims, especially when their actions cause real harm and loss of life. This is not usually the case with crimes committed by Christians [12, p. 430]. Such bias in the media is transferring to public opinion. Polls show that people in Western countries regard certain illegal acts of Muslims as terrorist while they do not regard identical acts of white non-Muslims [36, p. 211]. A propensity for terrorism is probably the main negative stereotype that has been fixed on Muslims in Western society, but it is by no means the only one. They are attributed, including through the media, other actions and beliefs that are reprehensible from the point of view of a modern Western citizen, such as disrespect for freedom of speech and lack of respect for women's rights. A. Feddersen draws attention to the fact that the media, on average, portray Muslims worse than foreigners of various faiths [16, p. 292]. That is, the prejudiced attitude towards representatives of other states and ethnic minorities exists in the Western media, but yields to the prejudiced attitude towards representatives of Islam. The religious aspect of identity and intolerance towards "the other" is sharper than ethnic and civil ones.

As a rule, open Islamophobia is aired only by fairly marginal media, regardless of political stance. Large publications do not usually use direct language that could clearly read hatred towards Muslims. They have a so-called "hidden ideology" and resort to implicit means of forming negative images: emotionally coloured headlines, lexical and grammatical structures with certain connotations.

All the aforementioned practices of presenting Islam and Muslims in fact lead to the same main result – they make the audience feel rejected when they interact with this religious group.

However, there is no need to exaggerate and absolutize the media's role in forming a negative public attitude towards Islam and its followers. The image of Muslims in the media is not the only factor contributing to Islamophobia, and may not even be the main one. The proportion of immigrants professing Islam among the country's population, state policy on the integration of these immigrants into society, and the place of religious practices in the life of most citizens are also important. If the combination of these characteristics leads to a negative perception of Muslims, more positive media coverage alone will not change the situation dramatically.

Positive representation exists alongside negative representation. Western media describe certain features of Muslim life, such as piety, with rather positive connotations, as pointed out by E. Bleich, J. Souffrant, E. Stabler and A.M. van der Veen [10, p. 1]. Today, the increasing prevalence of such materials can be linked to the rhetoric of multiculturalism, which is becoming increasingly popular in the West. A sign of a genuine change in the situation and a decrease in Islamophobic attitudes in the media and society would not be the prevailing coverage of Islam in a positive way, but the absence of inappropriate references to it in the first place. As an example that is still relevant for the Russian media, we can cite the obsessive reference in news texts to the religious affiliation of criminals, especially those whose motives were not connected with religion. Such journalistic practices promote the association of Islam with lawlessness and danger to others, and the perception of Muslims as "others" who pose a threat.

The model of "peace journalism" can play a key role in combating Islamophobia. It is a trend in media development that seeks dialogue in society, opposes racial, religious and other forms of intolerance, and refuses to focus entirely on elites and their interests in its work. It has not yet reached its full capacity, but it is already proving effective in eliminating negative stereotyping and the climate of hostility.

T. Shaikhidinov states largely obvious recommendations, yet often ignored by journalists, regarding the representation of Islam and Muslims and media work in general. They are based on the need to respect the basic rules of communication, to

avoid “informational anarchism” and “informational extremism”, which are manifested in almost total permissiveness and lack of self-censorship, which leads, among other things, to the expression of rather radical views through the media and subsequent conflicts [6, c. 127].

However, one should not absolutize the role of the media in spreading Islamophobic sentiments and assume that such sentiments supersede all other sentiments. Even negative representations can cause a “boomerang effect” and lead to an improvement, rather than a deterioration, in public perceptions of Muslims. In addition, there are sufficient examples of positive coverage of Islam and means to overcome Islamophobia in the media. When presented appropriately, it can be a key factor in building dialogue and compromise between Muslims and members of other religions or non-religious people.

### **Representation of Islam and Muslims in Russian media**

The specifics of how images of Islam and Muslims are formed in the Russian media are largely connected with the place this religion and its followers have historically occupied in Russian culture and the social and political structure. Whereas in European countries and the USA Islam was predominantly “imported” by migrants from Muslim states, in Russia it is traditionally practiced by many peoples. For this reason, the Western view of Islam as a foreign, alien religion, which exists in media materials and public consciousness and becomes one of the key bases for negative stereotyping, does not practically correlate with Russian realities.

Compared with Western Europe, the likelihood of a movement in Russia that would base its programme primarily on ideas of opposition to “Islamisation” is very low.

There are two perspectives on the origins of Islamophobia in Russia. According to the first view, Islamophobia is originally alien to Russia and was introduced by the hostile West, probably deliberately in order to weaken the political and military potential of the country and facilitate its disintegration into separate territories through irreconcilable contradictions between religious and ethnic groups. Proponents of another position argue that the roots of the current problem should be

sought in the history of Russia, where there have been many manifestations of suspicion and mistrust of Muslims by the authorities and society, as well as open aggression. It has been suggested that Russia is gradually returning to the pre-revolutionary model of coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims in which non-Muslims, primarily Russians, dominated and controlled the expression of Islamic religiosity.

In regions with a significant proportion of Muslims the non-Muslim audience has an alternative source of information about this religion – life experience, based on direct contact with Muslims. The role of the media in forming an image of the representatives of a particular religion, in this case Islam, is particularly great in areas where the followers of different faiths interact little with one another. In this situation, local people have essentially no opportunity to confirm or refute information from the media through the prism of personal experience – the media become the main (if not the only) factor that determines attitudes towards people of other faiths. This problem is acute in Russian regions where Muslims make up a small part of the population, including Moscow and the surrounding regions.

Under such conditions, journalists need to be particularly careful with the materials they publish to avoid negative stereotyping of Islam and Muslims. This, however, is not always done. A study of lexical compatibility conducted as part of the seminar “Religion and Media” shows that the lexeme “Islam” in the Russian print media is often used inside phrases that construct a deliberately negative image around it. Islam in such texts is associated with violent struggle, justifying wars, not forced defensive ones, but aggressive ones, and other destructive actions carried out to achieve one's own goals.

Expressions that are not emotionally coloured or even positively coloured are placed in contexts within which they have opposite, negative meanings. Examples are the phrases “Muslim literature” and “Muslim holiday”. Intuitively, the reader expects the former to provide rather neutral, background information on the history of this area of religious literature and on specific works and authors.

The historical contexts found in Russian media coverage of Islam and Muslims are also negative. Islam is associated with events negatively perceived by Russians, such as the wars in Chechnya, in particular the Second Chechen campaign, as well as the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was an indirect cause of these events. The spread of Islam is thus portrayed as a factor in the disintegration of Soviet citizens and the subsequent territorial division of the country.

However, it would not be correct to speak of a complete identification of Islam with terrorism in the Russian media. In the rhetoric of journalists and media personalities, a division of Islam on the basis of the dichotomy “traditional”/“radical” is also evident. The main criterion for such a classification is not understanding of the doctrine, its dogmas or ideas about the proper order of society, but the attitude of this or that Islamic association to Russia as a state and to Russian power. Islam that is politically loyal to the government is defined as “traditional” and is presented with respect; discriminatory and stigmatising language is much less frequently permitted in relation to it. As S. Ragozina points out, those manifestations of Islam that are combined with views unfriendly to Russia are interpreted in the media and the Russian public sphere in general as 'radical', i.e. hostile and dangerous [4, c. 286].

For quantitative and qualitative content analysis we used *Factiva* – the research tool owned by Dow Jones that examines 32,000 sources – newspapers, journals, magazines, television and radio transcripts in 28 languages, including more than 600 continuously updated newswires. We analysed the coverage in the Russian media for the years 2000-2022 (up to August) in which at least one of the words “Islam”, “Islamic” or “Muslim” was encountered. The choice of this particular time period was determined by the desire, on the one hand, to analyse relatively recent data in order to get an idea of the current situation (for this reason earlier publications are not considered) and, on the other hand, to trace the dynamics of the last decades in the context of momentous events. Such as the September 11, 2001 attacks, which affected not only the USA but also the rest of the world (to study the picture before and after, 2000 was taken as a “baseline” in this work).

On the basis of the *Factiva* data we can conclude that 9/11 terrorist attack had little reflection in Russian media space. In 2000 the words “Islam”/“Islamic”/“Muslim” appeared in 1 849 publications, in 2001 – in 2 551, which is not a significant increase. There was a sharp jump in 2006: from 5 346 texts in 2 005 to 1 1582, i.e. more than doubled. This can be explained by the proclamation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), a group then transformed into the banned in Russia terrorist organisation ISIS. The Second Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah, which was widely covered in the Russian media, may also have played a role.

Another noticeable increase occurred in 2011: 20 315 articles mentioning the above words were published, compared with 15 644 in 2010. The most probable reason is the beginning of the civil war in Syria, which the Russian media were initially following quite closely. The general information background, which also had a significant impact on the media agenda, was the events of the so-called “Arab Spring”, which reached its climax this very year.

Another clear rise, albeit less rapid, dates from 2015, when there were 18 192 publications of interest (14 173 in 2014). The increase is probably due to the fact that in that year the Russian Armed Forces officially entered the war in Syria. Then there was a gradual decrease in the frequency of references to Islam and Muslims. In 2021 the indicator increased relative to the previous year, but only slightly: from 6 705 to 7 801. It can be concluded that the increased attention of Russian media to Islamic topics is caused by military actions and their potential threat associated with the spread of terrorism, but mainly in the Middle East - a region of strategic international and political interest to Russia.

In a separate column *Factiva* places the topics to which most of the texts with the given words are devoted. We have divided these topics into three conditional groups: negative, neutral and positive. Negative ones are highly likely to contain negative connotations and form unpleasant associations with the audience, including those about Islam and Muslims. Neutral ones do not in themselves increase the risk of constructing Islamophobic images, although some such material may still produce these images. The positive ones are generally characterized by positive connotations

and a desire to create an appropriate associative series – the existence of Islamophobia in such publications cannot be ruled out completely either, but their general tone indicates that it will appear less frequently than in the other two types of texts. Negative themes make up a significant but not predominant proportion of the total volume of publications (21%), neutral themes constitute the bulk, more than 3/4 of all publications (77%), and positive themes are a small, but still significantly complementary fragment (2%).

### **Representation of Islam and Muslims in the US media**

While in the Russian public sphere coverage of topics connected with Islam and its followers is often structured around the wars in Chechnya, in the US a similar role is assigned to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This event did not lead to a total spread of Islamophobia in American society. On the contrary, the majority of the country's civic organizations in their statements supported Muslims who advocate peace, disapprove of the terrorists' actions and do not share their beliefs. But such rhetoric, designed to reassure Muslims not associated with terrorists that they will not become a target of hatred and revenge, and to remind the rest of Americans not to equate any manifestation of Islam with terrorism, was more of an official, formal nature. Islamophobic sentiments in society have certainly increased, and this is reflected in public discourse and in the statements of some media personalities [9, p. 855]. After 9/11, media editors deliberately avoided making negative references to Islam and Muslims in order not to provoke the development of Islamophobic sentiment among their audience. When the public calmed down and the risk of widespread aggressive manifestations of Islamophobia diminished, journalists continued to produce stories in their usual style, including using a negative tone in their coverage of Muslim religious life.

B.J. Bowe and T.W. Makki point out that both Islamophobia and Islamophilia are present in American media, as well as in Russian media. However, the researchers are inclined to believe that these phenomena are not inherently opposing, but rather are close, both are based on the orientalist Western perception of the world. This view is argued that Islamophobia and Islamophilia offer two possible images,

one of which should correspond to a Muslim living in the West: “bad” and “good”. The first is radical, dangerous to others, seeks to impose his or her beliefs on them, and if they refuse, to do them harm. The second is peaceful, friendly, ready to adapt, to adjust to the norms of society in which it finds itself, to seek compromise in all matters. Both variants imply the existence of a single correct “Western” model of behaviour to which Muslims either adapt or not. Endorsing them on the basis that they can adopt this model is hardly conducive to full recognition of their equality with non-Muslim US citizens [11, p. 546].

Indeed, the stereotyping of Islam and its followers in the US media sometimes takes radical forms and reaches a stage where Islamophobia is no longer concealed behind implicit connotations and other lexical devices, but becomes more overt. Such radicalisation can occur not only in the means journalists use to create images, but also in the meanings conveyed. In this case, the ideological message of the publication may remain hidden, but it may be more unambiguous and intransigent than in the average media piece about Islam and Muslims. An example of such a radical attitude, promoted through some American media, is described by N. Kibria, T.H. Watson and S. Selod. They consider the parallel between the dichotomies “West”/“Islam” and “good”/“evil” and point out that the US media often portrays the West as absolute good and Islam (which, according to the Orientalist approach, is an expression of the East as the antonym of the West) as absolute evil [21, p. 193].

All of this illustrates the destructive impact that negative stereotyping of professing Muslim Americans has, not only on themselves, but also on the state and society as a whole.

Despite the overall positive trend in the representation of Muslims and Islam, negative representations of this religion are still widely broadcast in the American media. Muslims are portrayed more negatively than followers of other faiths and non-white Americans. Non-white Muslims and Muslims from other regions, particularly the Middle East and North Africa, are portrayed particularly negatively. The authors resort to various means: they use visual formats, appeal to rather radical language and meanings, and use social justice rhetoric. Mostly negative images appear in media



outlets that adhere to extreme right-wing ideology, although they can also be found in media outlets with other political preferences. The popularity of such images leads to destructive consequences: American Muslims are afraid to discuss their religion and generally interact with others and do not trust the government; public fear of Islam is fostered, which serves the interests of real terrorists; there is growing approval among Americans of harsh restrictions on Muslims and military invasion of Islamic countries. However, it is important to bear in mind that some US media coverage of Islam and Muslims with negative connotations not only increases the risk of spreading Islamophobia, but also reflects the real issues at hand.

Once again, we used *Factiva* to search for US media stories from 2000-2022 in which at least one of the words Islam, Islamic and Muslim appears, and attempted to interpret the statistics provided by the site based on analysis of the database of such stories.

The annual dynamics of the number of publications in which the above-mentioned words are mentioned shows a sharp rise took place in 2001, when there were 38 111 such materials (in 2000 – 18 038, i.e. the indicator more than doubled). Obviously, this is explained by the 9/11 attacks. If, as we found out in the previous paragraph, this event did not have a significant impact on Russian media space, then the American media space was radically changed because it directly affected the USA and the citizens of that state. The next noticeable but much less dramatic increase in the number of publications is dated 2006 – 5 056 compared to 4 378 in 2005. This may be due to the same factors as the simultaneous increase in interest in Islam and Muslims in the Russian media during this period: the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq, which preceded the creation of the banned in Russia terrorist organisation ISIS, and the Second Lebanon War between Israel and the Hezbollah movement. Interestingly, the uptick was much less pronounced than in the Russian media. It is likely that the US audience, and therefore the media in this country, were not as concerned about what was happening in the Middle East. This is indicated by a relatively small increase after the Arab Spring and, in particular, the civil war in Syria: in 2010 there were 3 590 stories with the words “Islam”/“Islamic”/“Muslim”

in them, and in 2011 – 4 427. A more significant increase began in the mid-2010s: from 42 792 in 2013 to 56 074 in 2014 and to 78 806 already in 2015.

This process can be attributed to the persistence and development over quite some time of Middle Eastern conflicts, such as the official entry of the Russian armed forces into the Syrian war, which created fundamentally new risks for US troops in the region, or the escalating confrontation between Iran and Israel and, to some extent, with the US. In addition, this period saw the emergence of a migration crisis in Western countries and an increased terrorist threat, and the US media could regularly mention Islam and Muslims in such contexts. This episode of notable increase in the frequency of occurrence of the words of interest was the last, after which a downward dynamic prevailed. Occasionally there were slight rises, such as from 36 551 in 2018 to 42 082 in 2019 (possibly due to Trump's rhetoric, his rather regular controversial remarks about Muslims and Islamic countries), but these did not change the overall picture. We can conclude that the US media have paid particular attention to Islam and Muslims when topical news stories have arisen directly in the US or culturally close European countries, and these have tended to be major terrorist attacks or their high likelihood. Landmark events in other regions, particularly in the Middle East, also led to an increase in the number of publications, but it was not as pronounced.

We again divided the topics that are the focus of US media coverage of Muslims and Islam into negative, neutral and positive themes, depending on the connotations they contain and, accordingly, the possibility of constructing sharply negative images of the groups described. The negative themes included terrorism, military actions, criminal incidents and court proceedings. They were referred to in 426 thousand texts. Negative topics make up more than a quarter of the US media publications on Islam and Muslims (27%), neutral topics cover most of the stories, but not an absolute majority (71%), and the positive ones have the same small share as in the Russian media, which, however, cannot be ignored (2%).

Overall, an analysis of the data provided by *Factiva* gives the impression that the dichotomy of “right moderate” and “wrong radical” Islam, typical of the Russian

media, is partly retained in the US media, but presented differently. Increased attention is paid to events related to manifestations of this religion in the US and other Western countries, particularly in Europe, and which may, at least, significantly affect the lives of the citizens of these states. And predominantly such events are of a negative nature: terrorist attacks, migration crises and social upheavals. This is evidenced, in fact, by all of the factors discussed.

### **Conclusion: similarities and differences**

The analysis of the coverage of Islam and its followers in Russian and American media makes possible to compare them and highlight the key similarities and differences.

*The main similarities are:*

1. The prevalence of negative images that arise in the context of terrorism and extremism and create an impression of an identity between them and Islam. This is usually done by insisting on the religious affiliation of criminals or suspected criminals as well as specific people with radical views. An example can be found in the Fox News article discussed. Another way of forming the same image presented in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*: securitisation of processes, which are far from posing a real threat to society, such as migration or the growing religiosity of the Muslim population.

2. The desire of some media outlets to shape a positive attitude towards Muslims by presenting them as an oppressed group. This approach can be seen in the article by *Kommersant* which, on the one hand, informs the audience about the statements of activists and media personalities about the infringement of Muslim religious feelings in France and, on the other hand, draws a parallel between the Muslims protesting at the French embassy in Moscow and the Russian political opposition. This strategy is also expressed in the CNN publication, which describes the negative consequences of Islamophobia and its manifestation in stereotypes about Muslims.

3. Another variant of the positive image is Islam as a path to success. This strategy aims to counter stereotypes about the dysfunctional and unfree life of

Muslims by colourfully describing examples in which adherence to religious values is combined with sincere enjoyment of life, freedom in many aspects and a favourable financial situation. The articles by *Novaya Gazeta*, which cites the UAE state as such an example, and *Forbes*, which refers to the example of educated and wealthy Muslim women, are illustrative here.

*The main differences are:*

1. The dichotomy of “correct”, i.e. “moderate” and “radical” Islam is prevalent in the Russian, but not in the American media. The grounds for this division vary in the domestic media: it may be the attitude of believers to Russia as a state, a readiness to resolve religious conflicts exclusively by peaceful means, a commitment to the progressive values of contemporary Western politics. However, the general perception that there are “acceptable” and “unacceptable” versions of Islam is quite clear. Such a phenomenon occurs sporadically in the US media, but does not play a fundamental role in the formation of images of Islam and Muslims – the *Fox News* article contains a contrast between “moderate Muslims” and “jihadists”, but it is presented rather ironically.

2. Russian media coverage of Islamic topics consistently raises political issues, which is not the case in the US media. In fact, Russian journalists use cases involving Muslims to promote an ideological position close to theirs, not necessarily related to religion. It can be support or, on the contrary, discrediting of the Russian government, the Russian opposition, foreign political forces – in all the mentioned situations Muslim examples can be used as media tools to influence the audience. Such mass references to politics in stories about Islam and its followers are not seen in the US media.

3. The representation of Muslims in the US media depends much more heavily on the political position of the publication than in the Russian media. This feature does not contradict the previous one: while there we are talking about the use of the media image of Muslims as a tool to achieve goals not directly related to religion, here – about different variants of a fairly sincere understanding of Islam, which are characteristic of publications occupying certain niches of the political spectrum. The

key strategies described above in the similarities are present in both Russian and US publications, but while images from Russian media largely overlap and complement each other, images from US media are clearly divided between republican, democratic and rather neutral media.

Comparing domestic experience with foreign experience provides an opportunity to adopt effective solutions that have not yet been widely applied in Russian media practice and to draw attention to mistakes that should not be repeated. On this basis, we can formulate several recommendations for journalists in Russia who write about Islam and Muslims in their materials:

1. To get rid of the dichotomy of “right” and “wrong” Islam.

This does not imply a shift to the idea of the complete monolithic nature of Islam that is characteristic of Orientalism. It is worth showing specific Muslims, who become the heroes of publications, as individual personalities with individual motives for action, largely due to the specifics of their biography, rather than as collective images of the adherents of Islam. This requires, first of all, minimising inappropriate references to religion in texts with negative connotations, e.g. about crimes. The use of dichotomous expressions such as “radical Islam”, “moderate Islam”, “peaceful Islam”, etc. should also be reduced. Islamic doctrine exists in a multitude of interpretations, and their diversity can certainly be told in the secular media, but without simplifying it to two versions, one of which is presented as the only true one.

2. To write more often about Islam and Muslims in the context of purely religious issues or positive connotations: culture, art, entertainment.

Political issues should be raised less frequently in such pieces than they are now, although they should not be glossed over if their mention is indeed appropriate and contributes to a better understanding of aspects of religious life and not just to promoting the views of the author or the editorial team.

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