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RUSSIA: Moscow mosque plan pits Putin allies against each other

This photo illustration shows a mosque and a church. The rumored proposal of a mosque being built near a Russian Orthodox religious site in Moscow has raised religious tensions in the country. NEWSWEEK; SOURCE PHOTO BY GETTY

RUSSIA: Moscow mosque plan pits Putin allies against each other

BY BRENDAN COLE

NewsWeek (22.04.2023) – Far from the front line of the war in Ukraine, battle lines of a different kind were drawn when residents of a Moscow district opposed a rumored proposal for a mosque for 60,000 worshippers by a lake cherished by Russian Orthodox believers.

In February, people in Kosino-Ukhtomsky started to voice anger at the complex, which would include a Muslim center and educational facilities. President of the predominantly Muslim Russian republic of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, fiercely loyal to Russian President Vladimir Putin, called on anti-mosque demonstrators to “show your patriotism” by going to the trenches in Ukraine.

Prominent MMA fighters also weighed in opposing the mosque, while a video message by Chechens from the battlefield in Ukraine warned they could also wage war on the Orthodox protesters in Moscow.

After weeks of demonstrations, Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin announced on April 5 the mosque would be shifted to a much smaller site elsewhere. The decision got the backing of Patriarch Kirill, who as head of the Russian Orthodox Church and another close Putin ally, has given a canonical justification for the war in Ukraine.

The spat over the mosque, “is a part of an ongoing surge in religious tensions, including those among Russian servicemen and mercenaries fighting in Ukraine,” Denys Brylov, head of the Kyiv-based European Centre for Strategic Analytics, told *Newsweek*. “This tension is largely caused by the influx of Muslim soldiers into the Russian army.”

Along with Putin's arguments about about NATO encroachment on Russia and "de-Nazification" as reasons for the war, Kremlin propaganda has also portrayed the full-scale invasion as a fight for what Putin has dubbed the "unity" of Orthodox Christian Russians and Ukrainians.

Muslims make up roughly a tenth of Russia's population and adherents of the faith fighting in Ukraine for Putin are dying in large numbers. Kadyrov's forces, which are part of Russia's National Guard, Rosgvardia, but directed by the strongman ruler, have a prominent profile thanks to their videos from the battlefield.

Olga Lautman, senior investigative researcher at the Institute for European Integrity, said there have been clashes between Kadyrov fighters and Russian soldiers.

"We've seen the tensions already over the past year escalate," she said.

Cannon fodder

Brylov said that as well as Russian Muslims, a growing number of army personnel are migrants from former Soviet states in Central Asia. This follows a decree by Putin last September making it easier for foreign citizens who sign up for the military to get Russian citizenship.

"These amendments aim to make up for the attrition in the Russian army at the expense of migrant workers," he said, adding that many migrants are tricked into signing military service contracts or sent to a war zone instead of being deported.

Two men of Tajik origin reportedly got into an argument with a lieutenant colonel on a military training ground in Russia's Belgorod region in October 2022. Unconfirmed reports said they responded to an Islamophobic insult by opening fire and killing up to 22 people.

“Non-Slavic and non-Orthodox citizens of the Russian Federation are only second-rank citizens and just cannon fodder for Putin’s war on Ukraine,” Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, told *Newsweek*.

“The question is how long the ethnic political leaders of the non-Orthodox and non-Slavic populations of the Russian Federation will go on tolerating the instrumentalization of their peoples in the never-ending carnage of the ‘special military operation,’” Fautré added, referring to the Kremlin’s term for its invasion of Ukraine.

Muslims joining the Wagner Group of mercenaries headed by Yevgeny Prigozhin are on the increase, Brylov said.

“Discrimination against Muslims is not uncommon,” he said. “Although the number of Muslim servicemen grows, the Russian army does not provide Muslim servicemen with the necessary conditions for religious observance.”

However, there have always been tensions within the Russian armed forces.

“A lengthy history of the brutal hazing of new recruits is one issue, retaliation against superiors is another,” Robert Crews, history professor at Stanford University told *Newsweek*. “In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, who gets sent where, and with what resources has been a major fault line.”

Initially, the Russian military turned to poorer regions with less political influence, which made it more difficult to avoid service.

“Non-Russian recruits, including those of Muslim background, have played a prominent role,” he said. “But it’s not clear

that the Kremlin has treated them as cannon fodder because of their non-Russian ethnicity, though many observers have made this claim," Crews said.

Islamophobia

"Racism and Islamophobia are potentially unsettling elements in the Russian army, as in others in Europe and elsewhere," he said, although the Kremlin's position is that Islam is a "traditional" Russian religion, and that Muslims are essential to the war effort.

"Orthodox Christian symbols and imagery are dominant, but they do not exclude attention to Islam as a component part of a military that has been multi-confessional since at least the 16th century," Crews said.

Muslim leaders in Russia have backed Putin's invasion, repeating Orthodox Christian arguments about the "satanic" nature of the Western enemy. But troops of different faiths both being sold the idea of a "Holy War" could create a gap in logic that is tricky to bridge. Meanwhile, tensions can spill over between Muslim and non-Muslim personnel fighting for Moscow.

Brylov said that the idea that serving in the Russian armed forces is unacceptable, especially under contract, is spreading among some Russian Muslims, who may question the religious validation for the war.

"In the case of prolonged hostilities, lack of changes in the war zone, and, consequently, a growing number of dead Muslims, we can expect increasing dissatisfaction among Muslim servicemen," Brylov said.

After the war, a growing number of Muslim combat veterans will become more influential both in the Russian armed forces and among military and law enforcement agencies, he added.

There are Muslims fighting on both sides in the war, with adherents from Crimea and Azerbaijan among those who have joined the fight on the side of Ukraine. Anti-Russian Chechens received support from the Ukrainian authorities, which have recognized the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria—the name of the de facto independent Chechen state that existed in the 1990s—as being temporarily occupied by Russia.

Kadyrov, Prigozhin and military bloggers have all been critical of the Russian defense ministry, pointing to different views on how Moscow should fight the Ukraine war as Putin's efforts falter. Meanwhile, the dispute over the mosque in Moscow could be a prelude to tensions in Russian society after the war ends.

“Putin has been able to hold the different factions together through fear but over the past year, the Russian military continues to suffer these losses and humiliation on the front lines, and you are seeing more and more factions fighting,” Lautman told *Newsweek*. “And the fighting is spilling over publicly.”



Chechnya President Ramzan Kadyrov is pictured at the Kremlin in Moscow on September 30, 2022. The strongman leader of the predominantly Muslim Russian republic has publicly condemned

protesters lobbying against a mosque in Moscow. MIKHAIL METZEL/GETTY IMAGES

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