Diversifying the super-rich

Forbes-listed Russians from a Muslim background

Catherine Suart

Introduction

In September 2015, ahead of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha (Feast of Sacrifice), President Putin attended the official inauguration of the reconstructed Moscow Cathedral Mosque. Alongside the presidents of Turkey and the Palestinian Authority stood Dagestan-born businessman Suleiman Kerimov (45th on the Russian Forbes rich list), who had donated over half the mosque’s construction funds “as charity towards Allah”. Such philanthropy was not new to Russia’s business elite, but the overt association with the mosque and Islamic practices was a rare acknowledgment of Muslim identity among Russia’s hyper-rich. This chapter examines how such Muslim identities have shaped and diversified Russia’s business elite, as ranked by the most credible of the remaining Russian rich lists, published by Forbes Russia in 2016. It provides a new religious framework for exploring the popular topic of wealth generation and political influence in the early years of capitalism in Russia, and uses the same approach to examine more recent topics of scholarly interest such as power legitimisation and philanthropy, as investigated by Elisabeth Schimpfössl and Timothy Monteath in chapter 3.

Of the 200 businessmen and women listed by Forbes Russia in 2016, 21 had Muslim identities (see Table 2.1). Throughout this chapter, they are referred to collectively as the Muslim Business Elite (MBE). The methodology for this identification was based on an inclusivist, sociological approach to Muslim identity, including both Mosque-goers and those raised in ‘Muslim-heritage’ cultures or regions. This approach accommodates the broad array of ethnic groups that make up Russia’s Muslim population, which have largely developed in isolation from one another,
Table 2.1  List of Russia’s business elite with Muslim identities (2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>2016 rating</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age*</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Initial source of wealth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alisher Usmanov</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Uzbek</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Chust, Uzbek SSR</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vagit Alekperov</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Azerbaijani</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Baku, Azerbaijan SSR</td>
<td>Oil &amp; Gas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikhail Gutseriev</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Ingush</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Akimolinsk, Kazakh SSR</td>
<td>Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iskander Makhmudov</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Uzbek</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Bukhara, Uzbek SSR</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suleiman Kerimov</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Lezgin (Dagestan)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Derbent, Dagestan ASSR</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikhail Shishkhanov</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Ingush</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Chechen-Ingush ASSR</td>
<td>Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sait-Salam Gutseriev</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Ingush</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Akimolinsk, Kazakh SSR</td>
<td>Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farkhad Akhmedov</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Azerbaijani</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Baku, Azerbaijan SSR</td>
<td>Oil &amp; Gas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aras Agalarov</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Azerbaijani</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Baku, Azerbaijan SSR</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruslan Baisarov</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>Chechen</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Veduichi, Chechen-Ingush ASSR</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ziyavudin Magomedov</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>Avar (Dagestan)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Makhachkala, Dagestan ASSR</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airat Shaimiev</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>Tatar</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Muslyumovo, Tatar ASSR</td>
<td>Oil &amp; Gas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radik Shaimiev</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>Tatar</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Kazan, Tatar ASSR</td>
<td>Oil &amp; Gas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rustem Sulteev</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>Tatar</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Tatar ASSR</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert Shigabutdinov</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>Tatar</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Pervouralsk, RSFSR</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ziyad Manasir</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Amman, Jordan</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aleksei Semin</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>Tatar</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Kazan, Tatar ASSR</td>
<td>Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deni Bazhaev</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>Chechen</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Moscow, Russian Federation</td>
<td>Inheritance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musa Bazhaev</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>Chechen</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Grozny, Chechen-Ingush ASSR</td>
<td>Oil &amp; Gas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arsen Kanokov</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>Kabardian</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Shithala, Kabardino-Balkar ASSR</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rustam Tariko</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>Tatar</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Menzelinsk, Tatar ASSR</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Accurate as of 1 September 2016. The average age of the MBE is 53. Of the 193 businessmen for whom Forbes provides ages, the average is 53.5.
Source: Author’s own research files.
and the secularisation of many Muslim practices during the anti-religious campaigns of the Soviet Union. As Dominic Rubin observes in his recent travelogue of Russia’s Muslim heartlands, ‘the closer one gets to individuals, the more individual and idiosyncratic “Russian Islam” begins to seem’. Casting the net in such a way groups together wealthy businessmen such as Vagit Alekperov (9) and Alisher Usmanov (3), who run some of Russia’s most strategically important companies, and more regionally powerful players such as Airat (126) and Radik Shaimiev (127). While other studies of the business elite may categorise these individuals differently, their unification here allows this study to focus on the dynamics between religion and capitalism within as broad a group as possible.

Information pertaining to the religious identities of the Forbes-listed individuals was compiled from personal interviews in newspaper, radio and television archives, according to four research categories: 1) self-identification; 2) family identification; 3) religious observances; and 4) traditional religion of ethnic group. In all, the 21 individuals represent nine different ethnic groups traditionally affiliated with Muslim identities: Tatar (6), Chechen (3), Ingush (3), Azerbaijani (3), Uzbek (2), Kabardian (1), Avar (1), Lezgin (1), Jordanian (1). The strongest of these research categories, self-identification, included Chechen businessman Ruslan Baisarov (89), Uzbek businessman Alisher Usmanov (3), and former president of Kabardino-Balkaria Arsen Kanokov (160), who considers himself to be a law-abiding (pravovernyi) Muslim and undertakes the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj).

### Business as usual

How Russia’s business elite generated their initial wealth has fascinated scholars since the fall of the Soviet Union. Those who made their money in the murky years of the early 1990s have received particular attention in an attempt to unravel the close and complex relationship between business, organised crime, and the state. Muslim businessmen and their religious identities, however, have rarely dominated the debate, despite the fact that the majority began their commercial activities at the very same time and many of them have been open about their initial source of wealth in public interviews.

Foreign trade was one of the principal methods through which many of Russia’s business elite entered the commercial world at the end of the Soviet period. It was one of the three areas to benefit from the 1988 Law on Cooperatives introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev, which
permitted private ownership in the services, manufacturing and foreign trade sectors through the establishment of cooperatives. No special permission was required to establish a cooperative and it legalised the trading of goods which had previously been bought and sold on the black or grey markets. As a result, from 1988 through the early 1990s, the law enabled those with and without privileged access to start making money.

Over half the MBE made their initial wealth in foreign trade. Low-value consumer goods such as cigarettes and food were quickly replaced in 1991 and 1992 by electrical appliances, computers and other office equipment and, in the case of Uzbek businessman Iskander Makhmudov (21), larger commodities such as coal and metal. Some of the most successful traders were Tatar businessmen Albert Shigabutdinov (132) and Rustem Sulteev (131), who established one of the biggest foreign trading cooperatives in Tatarstan. Others saw trade as a stepping-stone to other industries, and for one member of the MBE, the change in commercial activity was explicitly driven by religious beliefs. In an interview with Vedomosti in 2003 in which he discussed his early business activities, Alisher Usmanov (3) stated that he chose to stop trading cigarettes because ‘as a Muslim [he] could not sell poison’.

In the early 1990s, banking and finance also became a growing area for private commercial activity following the introduction of the Central Bank Law and the new Commercial Banking Law in December 1990, marking the beginning of Russia’s market-based financial system. These laws created a two-tier banking system by separating the Central Bank’s operations from commercial banking functions, and allowed for the relatively straightforward establishment of new commercial banks by resident or foreign entities. A number of the MBE took advantage of this new banking legislation and shifted their focus from trade to finance in the early 1990s. Ingush businessman Mikhail Gutseriev (16) established one of the first cooperative banks in Moscow and used it to hold the accounts of companies registering in the newly created free economic zone of Ingushetia. As he boasted in an interview with a Financial Times correspondent in 1994, ‘twenty-three billion roubles [more than US $10 million at the time] flowed into our accounts today alone. And it’s like this every single day’. Dagestani businessman Ziyavudin Magomedov (93) also reported that he made his first ‘serious money’ in finance, having traded computers and other electrical appliances while still at university from 1988 to 1990. In 1993 he created Interfinance Company alongside his brother Magomed Magomedov and cousin Akhmed Bilalov and began managing internal currency bonds from foreign trade.
associations, accumulating US $15 million of their own money and US $50–$60 million under management by 1994.\textsuperscript{25}

The large privatisation auctions were an area in which the MBE made fewer financial gains than their non-Muslim counterparts of the mid-1990s in Russia. The main exceptions were the four TAIF shareholders, who benefitted from the second wave of privatisations in 1994 when the Tatar government created Tatar American Investments and Finance (TAIF) to hold the government’s stakes in newly privatised assets such as Tatneft and Nizhnekamskneftekhim. Albert Shigabutdinov (132) and Rustem Sulteev (131) were given a 14 per cent stake and they now control the company alongside Airat (126) and Radik Shaimiev (127).

**Commercial lobbying**

While the TAIF shareholders inevitably benefitted from the lobbying of the former President of Tatarstan and father of the Shaimiev brothers, Mintimir Shaimiev,\textsuperscript{26} the remaining MBE do not appear to have turned to their home regions for political support and lobbying. Instead, those who entered politics to lobby for their commercial interests did so through the same route as their non-Muslim counterparts.

The close relationship between business and the state in Russia has been cited as one of the defining methods by which the business elite made their wealth.\textsuperscript{27} At the fall of the Soviet Union, lobbying and political influence were still highly personalised, and personal political connections were crucial to obtaining favourable decisions.\textsuperscript{28} This personalised interaction between state and enterprise was inherited by the business elite in post-Soviet Russia, and remains part of the perceived *sistema* of governance in Russia.\textsuperscript{29} The business elite started to enter the political stage on a personal level after 1994, when their newly-formed business and financial groups had grown strong enough to carry sufficient economic and political influence.

Of the 21 members of the MBE, six have held high-level political positions in post-Soviet Russia (*Table 2.2*).

Of these positions, the State Duma offered the greatest opportunity for businessmen to lobby for their commercial interests, and access to Russia’s lower house was rumoured to be frequently facilitated by the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR).\textsuperscript{30} Many of Russia’s business elite entered politics this way to lobby for their commercial interests, and the MBE were no exception. Ingush businessman Mikhail Gutseriev (16),
Table 2.2  Political posts held by members of the Muslim business elite

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MBE member</th>
<th>Political position</th>
<th>Dates position held</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suleiman Kerimov</td>
<td>State Duma deputy</td>
<td>1999–2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Federation Council senator</td>
<td>2008–present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(representing the Republic of Dagestan)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikhail Gutseriev</td>
<td>State Duma deputy</td>
<td>1995–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sait-Salam Gutseriev</td>
<td>State Duma deputy</td>
<td>1999–2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farkhad Akhmedov</td>
<td>Federation Council senator</td>
<td>2004–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(representing the Krasnodar Region 2004–7 and the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region 2007–9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arsen Kanokov</td>
<td>State Duma deputy</td>
<td>2003–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>President of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria</td>
<td>2005–13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Federation Council senator</td>
<td>2013–present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(representing the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert Shigabutdinov</td>
<td>State Council member (for the Republic of Tatarstan)</td>
<td>2009–14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own research files.

for example, explicitly stated that he entered politics to further his business interests: ‘I understood that we [. . . ] were getting too big to keep on fighting the *chinovniki* [bureaucrats]. We had to join them.’  

All four members of the MBE who were State Duma deputies were elected on the LDPR party list, despite the fact that ideologically the LDPR was highly racist and suspicious of what it referred to as the ‘Southern problem’.  

In addition to those who chose politics as a lobbying instrument, many businessmen never directly engaged in personal politics. As Russian scholar Andrei Yakovlev argues, there were in fact many businesses which deliberately kept their distance from the state. From the 2000s onwards, this strategy was adopted by more and more businesses as Putin discouraged the business elite from engaging in politics. They began to promote themselves as ‘self-made’ businessmen to counter the negative connotations of the term ‘oligarch’, and many spoke publicly about their lack of political activity. In a televised interview, Uzbek trader Iskander Makhmudov (21), for example, rejected the term ‘oligarch’, claiming he had no connection with the government.
Outside the political arena, the business elite also promoted and supported their businesses through the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RUIE). This business association was arguably at its most influential in the aftermath of the August 1998 financial crisis, when many of the business elite joined the RUIE in an attempt to coordinate the general recovery of the Russian economy. Although significantly weakened under Putin, the RUIE has remained one of the primary lobbies for the business elite in Russia, and many of the MBE number among its management board and continue to engage with its various committees and councils. Vagit Alekperov (9) was one of the first high-profile members of the association’s management board in September 2000 and has remained an active member since, alongside four other members of the MBE: Alisher Usmanov (3), Mikhail Gutseriev (16), Aras Agalarov (55) and Ziyavudin Magomedov (93).

The MBE have engaged far less actively with the recently established Association of Muslim Businessmen of the Russian Federation (AMBRF), founded in 2014 to represent and promote the commercial interests of Muslim businessmen in Russia and abroad. Unlike the Russian Jewish Congress (RJC), which was founded by a number of the Jewish business elite in 1996 to promote Jewish interests in Russia and which continues to be actively supported by these elite, the AMBRF currently has very limited interaction with members of the MBE.

**Lobbying from within**

Conversely, the MBE appear to have embraced one of the key *modus operandi* of Russia’s business and political elite in the post-Soviet space by lobbying for their commercial interests using those who know them best: family.

A third of the MBE have more than one family member on the *Forbes Russia* list: the Gutseriev (Mikhail (16), Sait-Salam (48) and their nephew Mikhail Shishkanov (46)), the Shaimiev (Radik (127) and Airat (126)) and the Bazhaevs (Musa (156) and Deni (155)). In *Forbes Russia’s* 2017 calculation of the 10 wealthiest families in Russia, all three families were included, alongside Ziyavudin Magomedov (93) and his brother Magomed. The combined wealth of these four families was estimated by *Forbes* to be US $15.3 billion, greater than the combined wealth of the remaining six families (US $12.7 billion).

The majority of the MBE also involve their immediate family members in key (board-level) management positions, and the proportion of children brought in to run part of their businesses is high. Notably,
Suleiman Kerimov’s (45) son Said runs much of his business activities to enable him to continue his role on the Federation Council, and Aras Agalarov’s (55) son Emin is Executive Vice President of Crocus Group. Female relatives have also been well-represented: Vagit Alekperov’s (9) sister Nelli Alekperova is President of the Lukoil charity fund; Radik Shaimiev’s (127) daughter Kamila was on the management board of TAIF, a decision that Kamila reports had been made by the family; and Rustem Sulteev’s (131) daughter Diana is on the management board of another of his commercial interests, the Bank Avers. This contrasts with many other companies represented on the Forbes Russia list, where family members less frequently hold such senior positions.

The importance of family for Muslims in business has been widely covered by scholars in the field. Rodney Wilson observed that there is a reluctance among Muslim businessmen to see family businesses moving to external shareholders. Indeed, Mikhail Gutseriev (16) has asserted that his business empire is a ‘brotherhood’ in which all assets, regardless of who acquired them, are divided between himself, his nephew Mikhail Shishkanov (46) and brother Sait-Salam Gutseriev (48), with 51 per cent, 24.5 per cent and 24.5 per cent respectively. More recently, this has also included his son Said. Although Mikhail Gutseriev (16) does not acknowledge any Muslim influence in this structure, there is a similarity with the Islamic principle of musharakah. Literally meaning sharing, in the context of business musharakah refers to a joint enterprise in which partners (or parties) to the enterprise share profits and losses, regardless of the amount invested.

Giving back

In addition to understanding how Russia’s business elite generated their initial wealth, scholars are increasingly examining how these businessmen spend it, a subject which has fascinated Western and Russian tabloid journalists since their glitzy displays of wealth in the early 1990s. Elisabeth Schimpfössl, in her research on Russia’s social upper class, demonstrates that the rise of philanthropy is an important component in their current quest for ‘culturedness’ and like their non-Muslim counterparts, the MBE are active in their philanthropic activities, both through corporate social responsibility programmes and personal foundations.

Philanthropy among the Russian business elite is typically focussed on a wide range of social initiatives – most prominently children, sport,
culture, education and healthcare — and a number of the MBE follow this model of charitable giving, such as Mikhail Gutseriev’s (16) charitable foundation SAFMAR. Patriotism also plays an important role in the engagement in (and promotion of) these initiatives, and many of the more public acts of philanthropy directly or indirectly benefit the Russian state. In 2007, for example, one of the most philanthropic members of the MBE, Alisher Usmanov (3), bought all 450 lots at a Sotheby’s Russian auction and donated them to Konstantinovsky Palace outside Saint Petersburg.

A number of the MBE have expanded this national patriotism to a form of regional patriotism, which has not been evident in their business investments. This regional commitment to social development is most clearly illustrated in Dagestan and Chechnya, where the Dagestani businessman Suleiman Kerimov (45) and, until shortly after his arrest, his fellow Dagestani Ziyavudin Magomedov (93), and the Chechens Ruslan Baisarov (89) and Musa Bazhaev (156), invest considerable funds for social projects in the regions. As well as supporting a number of charities in Dagestan, Suleiman Kerimov (45) also supports charities promoting his ethnic clan, the Lezgins, and the Lezgin language.

Whereas the business elite on the whole has remained somewhat conservative in its vocal support of religious organisations, many channel their support through charitable donations, in particular to the renovation of churches and other religious buildings. This is particularly visible among the MBE. Over half of the MBE have supported religious causes as part of their philanthropic activities and 11 have supported the construction of mosques. Philanthropy is considered a central tenet of many religions, and Islam is no exception. Many Muslims regard charity as a form of worship and, according to traditional conceptions of Islam, it is one of the five pillars of the faith.

The most active member of the MBE in his charitable support of religious and specifically Muslim organisations and institutions is Suleiman Kerimov (45), through his charitable foundation, The Suleiman Kerimov Foundation. In addition to buildings, the Suleiman Kerimov Foundation supports a number of different Muslim celebrations and religious festivals, sponsoring thousands of Dagestani pilgrims to travel to Mecca for Hajj each year. In 2011 a similar trip for inhabitants of the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria was organised and sponsored by the republic’s former president, Arsen Kanokov (160). These events are similar to the activities of the RJC, which since 2012 has been organising pilgrimages to Israel to celebrate Passover. Unlike the Hajj pilgrimages, however, members of the Jewish business elite, including Mikhail Fridman (2)
and Andrei Rappaport (67), regularly take part in the pilgrimage, spending three days in the desert in the run-up to Passover.51

Very few of the MBE, however, direct their religious philanthropic activities just at Muslim causes, and the majority, including Suleiman Kerimov (45), Ziyavudin Magomedov (93) and Arsen Kanokov (160), have also supported institutions of other religious denominations. Mikhail Gutsereiev (16) has supported Russian Orthodoxy, Judaism and Buddhism, as well as Islam. This coincides with the central goals of Mikhail Gutsereiev's (16) principal charitable foundation, SAFMAR, promoting the revival of spiritual values to achieve ‘a constructive dialogue between [. . . ] traditional confessions in Russia’.52 This is in contrast to many of the Jewish business elite, such as the heads of the financial investment conglomerate, the Alfa Group, whose charitable activities in the area of religion solely focus on the support of Jewish causes and activities.

Other MBE highlight religious tolerance and diversity in Russia as the purpose of their religious charitable activities. Former president of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, Arsen Kanokov (160), revealed in an interview with Anna Politkovskaya in 2005 that he wanted to promote religious tolerance in the republic by constructing Russian Orthodox churches and Muslim mosques in close proximity.53 Vagit Alekperov (9) has also used the construction of religious buildings to promote peaceful interaction between religious groups in areas where his company LUKoil operates,54 and Iskander Makhmudov’s (21) metals and mining company UGMK details ‘spiritual revival’ as one of the principal goals of its corporate social responsibility.

Conclusion

It is within this last area of investigation – philanthropy – that we begin to see both marked similarities in the engagement of the MBE and clear distinctions with their non-Muslim counterparts. Over half the MBE support Muslim organisations, most frequently by financing mosques but also by supporting Hajj pilgrimages and Muslim festivals, and in recent years such donations have received growing support from local and federal authorities. Unlike their Jewish counterparts, the MBE’s engagement with other religions shows an acute awareness of the historical and current challenges associated with a minority religion such as Islam in Russia, and a desire to improve its reputation and standing in the country.

Public acknowledgements of the influence of Islam on the MBE’s business activities remain rare; only the Uzbek businessman Alisher Usmanov
(3) has reported that he had stopped trading cigarettes, a haram substance, in the 1990s because he was a Muslim. More indirect manifestations, however, appear in a range of areas, including the propensity for close family members to occupy senior management positions within the MBE’s businesses and the similarity between the profit-sharing structures of Mikhail Gutseriev (16) and the Muslim business practices of musharakah.

Suleiman Kerimov’s (45) sponsorship of the Moscow Cathedral Mosque not only improved his relationship with the Kremlin, it strengthened his association with Russia’s Muslim authorities, and following his arrest in France in November 2017 on charges of tax evasion, these authorities spoke out in his support. Political influence has often been sought by the business elite to promote their business interests and secure patronage from the state, but the support of both the federal and Muslim authorities in response to this act of religious philanthropy shows a level of engagement with the Muslim business community previously absent in Russia’s early years of capitalism.

The intermittent influence of Muslim identities identified within this chapter highlights the importance of the study of religion in the context of Russia’s business elite and their interaction with the capitalist dynamics of the country. One-third of the MBE identified during this research have been on the Forbes Russia rich list since it was launched in 2005, having survived numerous financial crises and regime changes since they first entered business in the early 1990s. They form part of what Alena Ledeneva describes as Russia’s sistema, and the prominence and influence of these MBE on the business and political landscape of Russia will likely continue, if not grow, as Putin elevates Islam alongside Russian Orthodoxy as one of the country’s central religions and seeks to maintain close control over Russia’s ethnically Muslim regions.

Notes

1 This and all further numbers in brackets refer to the 2016 Forbes Russia ranking assigned to the individuals.
3 As demonstrated by the renovation of the Russian Orthodox Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow in the 1990s: Marc Bennetts, I’m Going to Ruin Their Lives: Inside Putin’s War on Russia’s Opposition (London: Oneworld Publications, 2014), 134.
4 Rich lists receive considerable criticism from individuals in academic and commercial circles alike. The addition of Sayfeddin Roustamov to the rich list in 2018, whose wealth had previously been hidden behind offshore companies, illustrates some of the limitations imposed by financial transparency and valuation. For discussion of the setbacks of rich lists and other sources of data on the rich, see: Anthony B. Atkinson, ‘Concentration among the Rich’, United Nations University 151 (2006): 5–10.
5 To reflect the broad sociological approach to the terms ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’ used during this research, and to highlight the multiple dynamic factors that contribute to a definition, or self-definition of an individual as ‘Muslim’, I use the term ‘Muslim identities’, rather than the singular ‘identity’.

6 This is closest in form to Nasar Meer’s reading of it as a ‘quasi-ethnic sociological formation’: Nasar Meer, *Citizenship, Identity and the Politics of Multiculturalism: The Rise of Muslim Consciousness* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 62.


10 This was complemented with information from personally approved websites such as official company, charity or personal websites, and where necessary, secondary reporting from a wide range of journalistic and academic sources.

11 For example, Aras Agalarov’s son, Emin, has stated that he is a ‘proud Muslim’: Brian Boyd, ‘Not Eminem: Just Emin’, *The Irish Times*, 22 March 2015, accessed 21 May 2018, www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/not-eminem-just-emin-1.2147234.


18 Here I use the term ‘privileged’ to include Communist Party members, Komsomol members and those born into families of the Soviet nomenklatura.


23 Freeland, ‘Meet Mikhail’.

24 In March 2018, Ziyavudin Magomedov was arrested in Russia and charged with racketeering and embezzlement of state funds. Since then, further charges have been brought against him and his brother. Ziyavudin Magomedov denies the charges but remained in pre-trial custody in August 2019.

Mintimir Shaimiev was President of the Republic of Tatarstan from 1990 to 2010.


Zhirinovsky’s 1993 political pamphlet ‘The Last Dash to the South’ proposed, among other things, the reoccupation of post-Soviet Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus and the annexation of Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan to Russia.


High-profile examples among the non-Muslim elite include Igor Rotenberg, who took over a number of his father’s businesses to limit the impact of US sanctions.


A sample of the main companies of the top 10 businessmen on the list, for example, lists no immediate family members on the companies’ board of directors. Companies searched: Novatek, Alfa Group, Metallinvest, Norilsk Nickel, Severstal, Rusal, NLMK and Lukoil.


Six of the MBE have been decorated by the Russian state specifically for their charitable activities: Alisher Usmanov, Mikhail Gutseriev, Suleiman Kerimov, Aras Agalarov, Musa Bazhaev and Arsen Kanokov.


Musa Bazhaev funds the Ziya ensemble, which is a children’s dance ensemble in Chechnya. Ruslan Baisarov sponsored the construction of a ski resort in Chechnya. Ziyavudin Magomedov dedicated a section of his charitable foundation to My Dagestan. Suleiman Kerimov’s charitable foundation is largely focused on education, children and religious causes in Dagestan.


In this, Muslim traditions bear a close relationship to medieval Christian ones, whereby rulers and other wealthy patrons contribute to the construction of religious buildings.

According to their 2014 annual return, 65 per cent of the foundation’s donations were spent on religious charities.
The first president of the RJC was Vladimir Gusinsky (1996–2001) who was one of the ‘seven bankers’. The current presidium includes many businessmen represented on the Forbes Russia 2016 List, including Mikhail Fridman, Len Blavatnik, God Nisanov (mountain Jew from Azerbaijan), German Khan and Boris Mints.


Bibliography


Diversifying the Super-Rich


