



Putin's War is Deepening Russia's Religious Divide

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More than seven months on, Russia's sputtering war effort in Ukraine is causing major problems for Vladimir Putin. Russia's strongman president has attempted to compensate through a series of policy decisions—including a "partial mobilization" of the Russian population, stage-managed referendums in four Ukrainian regions, and nuclear bluster directed at the West—intended to shore up his eroding position. But the particulars of Putin's plan run the risk of creating major domestic problems.

Putin's mobilization drive is a massively unpopular endeavor, and has prompted a veritable exodus of Russians, numbering nearly three-quarters of a million people, since it was announced in late September. But it is also exacerbating sectarian cleavages within Russia itself—namely, between the country's Slavic majority and its swelling Muslim underclass.

To understand why, it's first necessary to grasp Russia's deeply troubled demographics. The country has been on a path of protracted population decline for decades, with fertility well below "replenishment"—or just over two children per woman, on average. It has stayed that way despite assorted initiatives by the Kremlin designed to boost the national birth rate.

This decline isn't uniform, however. Parts of the country's population are faring comparatively well—Russia's Muslims most of all. They rank as Russia's fastest growing minority, with birth rates significantly outpacing the national norm. As a result, by 2034, Muslims are now projected to make up 30 percent of the Russian national population.

But their place in society is precarious. Over the past dozen years, under Putin's watchful eye, the country has trended in an increasingly authoritarian, ultra-nationalist direction—one that has little tolerance for citizens of differing ethnicities or faiths. Xenophobia has surged domestically as a result, leading to a sense of alienation among Russia's Muslim communities. Meanwhile, Moscow's policies in the Middle East, in particular its military intervention in support of the Syrian regime, has helped radicalize a significant portion of this cohort. For instance, at the height of the Islamic State's power half-a-decade ago, the Soufan Center, a leading counterterrorism think tank, estimated that Islamic extremists of Russian origin made up the single largest segment of foreign fighters active in Iraq and Syria.

Muslims prepare to pray on the first day of the Eid al-Adha in Moscow on July 9, 2022. KIRILL KUDRYAVTSEV/AFP via Getty Images

Now, Putin's Ukraine war is making matters much worse. The Kremlin's "partial mobilization," announced on Sept. 21, is in theory intended as a limited call-up of reservists, irrespective of ethnicity. In practice, however, the country's minorities—especially its Muslim ones—are bearing the brunt of Russia's war effort (and suffering disproportionate casualties as a result).

"[T]he majority of those mobilized there are representatives of the Muslim world," Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, has observed. "It so happened that they were born on the territory of the Russian Federation, especially in Tatarstan, Dagestan, and other Muslim communities."

All of which is beginning to generate a major backlash, both from Russia's Muslim minority itself and from co-religionists in the region. The majority-Muslim North Caucasus republic of Dagestan, for example, has been the site of some of the largest protests to date against Putin's mobilization order. Clerics in the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan have barred Muslims from participating in Russia's conflict, despite Moscow's offers of sweeteners like "fast-track citizenship" in the Russian Federation. And there are even signs that discontent over the Ukraine war may be stoking long-simmering secessionist tendencies in the mostly-Muslim republics of the North Caucasus.

In other words, in his efforts to solve one problem—boosting morale and manpower for his Ukraine campaign—Vladimir Putin has managed to create another. His policies are helping to deepen the internal divide between the Russian government and the country's fastest-growing minority. Where that leads, only time will tell.

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