Changing religious identity of Muslim youth: case of Moscow, Russia residing youth

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Abstract

It is common sense that Muslims follow religious practices more strictly than the Christians. Islam is also an instrument of identification, a form of religious nationalism for many ethnic groups. Religion provides a sense of belonging, but new circumstances often activate the transformation process and new social identities can be developed. This thesis investigates changing religiosity of Muslim immigrants in Russian cities.

The first part of the thesis explores the concept of changing religious identity and its research appropriate measurements. Next, it explains how people with religious backgrounds adopt a new religious identity and what are the factors that influence said changes. The second half of the thesis tests these factors through a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 18-30 years old young adults coming from Russian Muslim origin households. The thesis finds that major factors that influence religious identity changes can be primarily classified as individualistic and based on the cost-benefits analysis, but their showing heavily depends on the gender and the ethnic group of a respondent.

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Chapter 1: Changing meaning of what it is to be a Muslim

It is common knowledge that Muslims follow religious practices more strictly than the Christian part of the population: Russia not being an exception (Kalyukov 2019). Islam for some minority ethnic groups is also an instrument of identification, a form of religious nationalism (Musin 2001, Simons 2019, 174): to be a member of a certain ethnic community is also to be a Muslim: to employ a special attitude towards Islam and its symbolic images from generation to generation: to the Quran, the Arabic language, the mosque, clothing, Islamic amulet (such as šamail, Shamail), the ethical and moral code.

Religion is more of a heritage than a choice in places with a Muslim majority (McPhail 2019, 92). Nine of the Russian republics can be asserted as Muslim or having Muslim majority of the population: Tatarstan, Bashkortostan (both are located in the Volga region, Islam in this part of the country is considered to be more moderate in comparison with Islam in the North Caucasian region), Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Northern Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachayevo-Cherkessia (North Caucasus region of Russia), and Adygea (Southern region of the country, to the west of the North Caucasus region) (Kerimov 1996, 183). While there are important differences among the republics, one can expect that all the postulates will be followed by the Muslim-identifying groups and communities, or that at least some sort of attachment to religious traditions and beliefs will be usually present in one form or another.

We can expect more religious Muslims to have read or to know about the seven parts of the Quran and share the opinion that Allah (God) is omnipotent and is one; to learn classic Arabic or be able to recite some of the ayats (verses) and suras from Quaran, respect the property of mosques and view them as places of worship or resting, follow the Islamic dress code or have resentments about dressing up in supposedly "immodest" way justifying it through religious notions, have certain physical presence of Islamic culture at home or other private places (such as Shamail, Quaran, prayer

beads, etc.), and let the Quran and the Traditions of the Prophet to a certain extent be their moral compass. Children are expected to follow in the footsteps of their parents and carry on their legacy, sticking to the well-known religious affiliations that they were first exposed to (Hall 1996). It is a long-time established tradition: according to a socialization hypothesis the things we most value in life are the reflection of what we have been conditioned to value before we reached adulthood (Inglehart 1977) (even though notion of «adulthood» is debatable this paper will refer to the beginning of adulthood as reaching the age of 18-30).

However, initial socialization of an individual can be challenged by the need to adapt to the new circumstances and fit in in new groups as a member (for example, going from familial groups socialization to joining student groups during the University years or even just being put in an unfamiliar environment and having to make it work for yourself). These new circumstances can affect the development of new identities, including religious identity. This is especially true for descendants of Muslim origin families as new circumstances can shape individuals' self-concepts and their outlook on the world, and their values (Tajfel 1974).

From preliminary research conducted in 2019-2020 that've been partially used as a base for this paper (in-depth interviews with 7 descendants of religious Russian Muslim origin families, including internal migrants and descendants of external migrants, unpublished, but the interviewees have given consent to use their data anonymously) (Sabirova 2020) we can detect that there are certain similarities between people coming from different ethnic backgrounds in the way they view their religious identities, but the way religious identity is performed by Muslim youth depends on what kind of memberships a person has and the intensity of their connections to various social groups, including new and old social ties. Therefore, the main goal of this thesis is to find patterns in such developments and to identify which factors influence the changes in religious identity of young adults from the Russian Muslim households.

Assumptions about a person's moral code and religious influence on it can be made when a person claims to be a part of a certain religious community, even without following its postulates and

rules (Filatov 2006, 35), which aligns with the concept of a "lived religion" (Ammerman 2007, McGuire 2008) when a researcher must look deeper into the practices and experiences of a person, beyond expected externalities but the inner perceptions of what it means to be religious as well. The alternative is also considered: Muslim youth that denounces their religion or does not identify as religious in their own words still can feel a connection to religion through the contacts with their relatives and Muslim members of their communities. Preliminary research discovered that respondents, even if they explicitly stated that they are «not Muslim, don't believe in God», still indicated in their responses that they felt attached to Islam and openly defended it, performed certain religious rituals unconsciously, and sometimes acted religious in front of their families. To explain this contradiction the thesis relies on the lived religion paradigm that admits the fluidity of religiousness of an individual and the existence of several, sometimes opposing beliefs, in one system of values (Ammerman 2007, McGuire 2008, McPhail 2019, 90). This is linked to the phenomena of identity changes becoming more or less religious due to certain factors at play.

The thesis' main goal is to identify plausible causal mechanisms behind changes in religiosity and religious identities for descendants of Russian Muslim origin families that might explain why a subset of people with religious backgrounds adopts a new less religious identity while others do not or become even more religious. We know that new identities cannot form until old identities no longer suffice the need for an explanation of the world and the surroundings, so religious identities must have a reason to be replaced, influenced by certain identifiable factors (Kriesi 1999, 409). The same applies for the religious identities, which also are best described as fluid – they cannot be only defined by the bound of one moment or frame (Dinç 2014, 40), depending on a variety of things happening in the lives of the people that lead them to face and either to reject or to accept certain changes, which is especially relevant for people entering their adolescences years and coming to adulthood, when identity is formed by putting oneself in different life situations and having to make long-term decisions (Arnett 2000).

Chapter 1 of the thesis explores theoretical assumptions about the factors that influence the changes in the religious identities of young adults and maps out hypothesis that are tested later on the example of 21 young adults coming from the Russian Muslim households. Chapter 2 tests out these hypotheses identified in Chapter 1 and presents the analysis of the interviews, conducted based on the theoretical assumptions identified earlier, and concludes with information about which factors appear to have a bigger influence on the religious identities of the chosen subgroup.

1.1 Novelty of the research

A significant part of the related literature on identity change focuses on the identities of external migrants, since their external circumstances and the environment that they find themselves in changes drastically and they must try and adopt old or implement new behavioral patterns to fit in and find their place in a new country. However, there is a gap in knowledge concerning both descendants of internal migrants (moving from one part of the country to another part, most often to more populated urban areas) and second-generation migrants born and raised in the host country (and holding that country's national passport, for example, children of immigrants from the post-Soviet Middle Asian region bloc or of labor immigrants from the Middle East). Literature only partially addresses well educated internal migrants, who in themselves present a different case for research, since most of the internal migrants and Russia-born children of immigrants know the official language of the country, its history, and they do not have to go through the naturalization process, however, they still go through the host identity integration process.

It is worth mentioning that there is no standard statistic that identifies the exact number of Muslim Russian citizens: results heavily depend on the agency's methodology that conducts the poll and the way they acquire the data. However, the estimate is somewhere between 5-10 % of the population[1]. To access their religious identities, Muslim respondents are usually asked the question about their praying practices and whether they pray five times a daily (and, therefore, follow one of the

[1] At the beginning of 2015 the population of Russian Federation amounted to 142,3 millions of people, including 2,3 millions of people from the Crimean region according to Federal State Statistics Service.

main Pillars of Islam) and 23 % percent of the Russian Muslim population has said that they do pray five times a day (Pew Research Center 2017). This research will also identify religious Muslim parents as Muslims that follow this pillar.

The case of Moscow (with the inclusion of the Moscow region) is worth looking at: first, data shows that it accounts for 15,1% of the total migration inflow. Along with Saint Petersburg it amounts to one of the main target regions for migration in the country. (Fantazzini et al 2021, 782). Second, it has the highest number of students studying among all the other Russian regions (Kozlov 2017, 9). Third, it is a region where 8 % of the teenage and young adult population (14-29 years old) identifies as Muslims, which leaves the researcher enough room to identify them as the confessional minority that must adapt to a world where religious groups are mostly represented by the Orthodox Christians (Kublitskaya, Franchuk 2018, 236). Fourth, it is a place of attraction for a variety of Muslim origin immigrants, internal and external, from Tatars and Bashkirs to Chechens and Avars to kids born in mixed families (such as Afghan, Syrian, and Kurd, and many others), enriching the results of the research by expanding the coverage of respondents.

1.2 Scope of work

There are several explanatory factors for religious identity change that were identified by preliminary research and by the relevant literature on the topic. The first of them are the new conditions that shape the perception of the world of children while they are growing up and how different they might be from the conditions that shaped the perception of their parents. One of the most important measuring indicators of these conditions is the level of education of the next generation (Inglehart 2008, 133).

The second seems to be the respondent's gender: research shows that (more so older) women are more religious than young men (Montogomery, Winter 2015, p. 386). For some women change of environment can affect their religiosity levels either way: it can decline, or they can become even more religious (Berghammer 2014, 98). However, the preliminary research of Muslim youth is Russia shows that young women were more likely to be more critical of their parents' expectations of their

religious identity and were more likely to be open with their parents about not following Islam dogmas. Research explores the theory that gender roles in Muslim communities are more conservative (McPhail 2019, 92), and more restrictive for women therefore causing a conflict for them in a situation of colliding group identities, where one is more non-conformist.

The third is, as mentioned above, is the ethnicity factor – religious identity being equal to the national identity (Musin 2001). Islam for the Northern Caucasian region habitats is considered to be the main factor that influences their social and political life (Falkowski 2018). Preliminary research conducted by the author of the following thesis did also show that the respondents from the said region of the country are more likely to present as religious during family gatherings and in their hometowns and keep their changing identity a secret. Islamophobia (and essentially xenophobia) is a serious issue for the Russian Muslim communities (UN CERD 2017, Herbert 2019). It affects all the Muslim republics to some extent, but the main issues are usually addressed regarding the North Caucasus, based on the memories of the war conflicts in that area and domestic terrorism cases (Malashenko 2006, 41). Islamophobia, of course, affects external migrants as well, however, this research will only touch up on it when discussing second generation Muslim youth – descendants of external migrants permanently residing in Moscow.

In the case of Moscow, Russia, when referring to occupational and educational opportunities of non-Russian (by ethnicity) people we are faced with unpleasant results. Moscow, being a leading work center in the country, shows different results for the employment chances and interview callback chances for non-Russians (by ethnicity): one of the more recent studies (Bessudnov, A., & Scherbak, A., 2018) shows that when applying for a job, even with identical work credentials and education, people with Russian sounding names and surnames are more likely to be invited for an interview than the others: while applicants with Russian names were invited in 41% of cases, Tatars were invited in 29% of cases, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Chechens, and Azerbaijanis - 28%, Armenians - 27%, Georgians - 26% (Vedomosti, 2018).

While we can observe that Muslim youth face problems in the labor markets, in case of Russia, however, the educational opportunities have been deemed somewhat equal with an introduction of a unifying state exam that grants access to the Russian Universities (the assumed equality is still debatable) (Gazeta.Ru 2021). We can expect ethnicity of an individual to influence their religious identity, even in a context of internal migration and in cases of second-generation migrants (Dinç 2014, 37): through the expectations and limits connected to the ethnic identity of a person which in the Muslim case often linked to the expectation of a certain ethnic group to follow Islam postulates. We can hypothesize that the stronger the said link the more likely ethnicity of an individual to influence the religious identity positively. Research explores how it can affect the changes in descendants of Russian Muslim origin families and what are the main outcomes of such connections.

The fourth is exposure to outer religious group connections. Social identity theory also points research in the direction of the importance of being a part of certain social groups and the emotional baggage attached to this membership (Tajfel 1974, 69). In the European context researchers point out that Muslim immigrants, when taken out of the context of their previous life and its rules, dictated by the local authorities, and the traditionally explained expectations they had to follow prior to the move, find themselves capable of forming their own religious identity individually and on their own terms (Dinç 2014, 36). Of course, this process is also affected by the groups an individual is a part of and how close his or her relationships with these groups and its members are, so identity, being a complex issue itself, becomes even more complicated. This can be applied to the Russian context as well since the process of extraction from one community to another is similar in its essence. Religiosity levels are believed to be influenced by the life-defining events individuals must face and social networks they participate in (McPhail 2019, 94), which can also be provided by beginning education at a multi-ethnic and multi-religious University.

Religious identity is also influenced by the way that religious institutions – Islamic cultural centers and mosque associations — can perform and distinguish themselves from the other organizations, and therefore continue to define what it means to be Muslim and a member of a certain ethnic

group (Dinç 2014, 39). The data shows that the higher density of the religious institutions in the country is positively related to the teenage religious identity changes (as in, the denser religious congregations the bigger rise in the participation of the religious practices and experiences is shown by the young adults) (Denton et al 2009, 282)[2]. The same can be hypothesized for the other groups as well, that an individual is a part of and that are a part of their socialization. These groups can have conflict of interests between them when their goals and requirements for involvement and calls of action differ. According to the theoretical part of the paper, we can assume that if the person is not a member of any of the religious institutions or cliques, they will be less religious, as opposed to being more religious if they are a part of such institutions.

The fifth is the strength of family ties. As have been mentioned above, ethnicity of the person can play a crucial role in the way they identify their religion and the strength of its influence. This is also relevant for the traditional background of the parents and its relation to the religious identity of the Muslim youth. Therefore, the connection between ethnicity and traditionality of the parents affects the religious identity of their children, which is referred to as a territorialized religious identity (Dinç 2014, 41). Third generation migrants in Europe, the ones that are deemed to be farther from the traditions of their ancestors and the migration experiences of their parents, are said to be more involved in how they themselves identify and what kind of choices and why they make, growing distinct from their parents. That is also has to do with more access to alternative information and more tools to comprehend it. We can hypothesize that for the internal migrants in Russia and second-generation Muslim youth born and raised in Moscow the situation might be similar. The things that make deeper socialization of third generation migrants in Europe possible: knowing the culture of the country, the language, having strong social ties with outer groups members (Dinç 2014, 38) – are already present in their case. Internal migrants in Russia and second-generation Muslim youth, however, most often live in close proximities of their religious parents or relatives or have a contact with them (either by

[2] According to the authors, however, this does not indicate whether the youth is following the faith because of the inner search for self and appeal to the religion or the higher religiosity levels just show how a certain country or a certain part of the country is more religious and therefore produces more religious associations and institutions.

visiting their hometowns or by being exposed to religion by their first-generation parents), so they must navigate between several important social groups and their ties to them. This process can be characterized by the social identity theory as a circumstance that affects changes in religious identity. That can go both ways, in a more secularized route or in a more religious route (Dinç 2014, 38, McPhail 2019), depending on the circumstances of being a part of such groups and the types of connections they were able to form with them (Hunsberger 1974, 247, Hall 1996).

Accordingly with the theoretical side of the research these explanatory factors help to explore several *hypotheses* and test them in a span of the conducted study.

Hypothesis 1: Internal migrants in Russia who moved to Moscow at a young age and second-generation Muslim youth born and raised in Moscow are exposed to alternatives (religious and non-religious) to a higher degree which is defined by several factors such as proximity of non-religious or religious parents or relatives and ties to the religious or non-religious groups. Exposure to more religious groups and stronger ties with religious peers and family members are expected to positively relate to the higher level of religiosity among the young adults.

Hypothesis 2: Since social networks young adults participate in affect their religiosity levels, this research hypothesizes that a young adult is more likely to be less religious if they are not a member of any of the religious institutions or associations, as opposed to being more religious if they are a part of such institutions or associations.

Hypothesis 3: The stronger the link between an ethnic group and the perceived expectations from the members of a said group to follow Islam dogmas the more likely ethnicity of an individual to influence the religious identity positively.

Hypothesis 4: Higher level of education negatively relates to the religiosity of young adults coming from religious Muslim households, since they are more exposed to new ideas beyond what they've been taught by their family members and childhood and teenage peers.

Hypothesis 5: Female young adults coming from Muslim households are more likely to be less religious than their male counterparts due to the higher levels of criticism they possess towards the popularized image of the role of the women in Islam.

To put these hypotheses to the test the following thesis establishes a series of interview questions that deal with collecting information on the demographic and social characteristics of the Muslim youth (specifically places where they were born and raised at, their childhood memories that can indicate to the researcher the role religion did play in their lives growing up, and general information about their parents), stories of their upbringing that paint a better picture related to the childhood and teenage memories, friends, relationships with parents and relatives and the outside world, on whether Muslim youth and their parents follow institutionalized religious practices or practices beyond the institutions, and probing questions about the key factors identified in the theory: level of education, role of the family ties, expectation from people of different genders and ethnic groups, and involvement in religious associations and groups.

The decisions made by the people regarding their religious identity and what they decide to follow can be placed on different levels of analysis: they can be performed on an individual level (through the academic choices, personal search for the universal truth, or things that are done by the person individually to understand what they are struggling with or finding difficult to understand). They can also be based on cost-benefit analysis and calculations (whether changing religious identity and partaking in certain actions or saying certain things is beneficial or costly for the person). They can also derive from the persuasion practices: outer and inner religious connections, family bonding and strength of family ties with religious and non-religious members), or expectations based on things such as belonging to a particular ethnic group.

All the aforementioned factors are later grouped into distinct categories. One of them is structural and follows the path-dependent legacy: something that has been mentioned above, young adults following in the footsteps of their parents or close relatives, to the point where the upbringing and the family dynamics affects the "temporary final" decision. The second category the author refers to is

the appearance of a moment of critical juncture: events that have sparked changes and have driven people towards making life-altering decisions. The third category is dedicated to honoring the community effects on the decisions made by the people and the pro-active actors that got people involved or played a role in the decision-making process related to the changes in the religious identity through different degrees and tools of persuasion. Certain factors are interconnected and dependent on the deeper analysis can be classified in one or more of the categories.

It is vital to point out that said categories and factors grouped into each of these categories can affect the religious identity in opposite ways: communities can be religious and non-religious, parents can be role models for their children and sometimes that is not the case. All of that is considered in the Chapter 2.

1.2.1 Methodology

The thesis explores the strength of factors that can influence such a transition (gender, ethnicity, education level, exposure to outer religious group connections, strength of family ties) through content analysis of a series of 21 in-depth interviews with 18-30 years old young adults coming from Russian Muslim origin families. As has been mentioned before, the concept of lived religion requires taking individual experiences and the self-defined values of the individuals into account, therefore the interviews will be semi-structured. Some of the contacts with potential interviewees were established earlier through close contacts, but the "snowballing" method of recruiting new respondents was also applied.

There are certain limitations of the research that should be addressed. First, most Russian Muslims belong to Sunni Islam (Simons 2019, 176), however, there are also Muslims permanently residing in Russia that are the followers of Shia Islam. This research admits the differences but will not make any conclusions about the way an Islamic movement can also affect the religious identity and its strength. Second, the research will only partially define how each individual participating in

research defines religiosity through five dimensions of religiosity established by Charles Glock (belief, practice, knowledge, experience, consequences) (Glock 1962) through a set of questions in an interview guide. The research does not intend to measure how secular on non-secular a person is and put the religiosity on a certain scale, but is interested in exploring how individuals reflect on their own beliefs, practices that they follow, their knowledge of the matters concerned with religion (as in, what exactly and why they are supposed to perform and to follow), their personal relationships with God, as much as the participants are willing to share in the interviews, and how these dimensions discussed influence their own personal lives.

Another limitation that should be stated is that the author of the thesis might be biased in her research, since she has a personal connection to the issue and is coming from a Muslim household herself. The author oaths to be very transparent in her findings and reflects on how her own opinions might have affected the interviews conducted and the results of the research itself.

The thesis presents the author's findings on the factors that affect the religious identity of Muslim youth. It provides a qualitative analysis of the said factors and their influence in the context of the Russian Muslim households. Variety of respondents provides an opportunity to research certain commonalities between different ethnic and academic groups, at the same time providing researchers with information about certain specifics that can be identified for the said groups and researched further in the future papers. The thesis therefore also provides more personal and in-depth results of the conversations on a sensitive topic of religious identity, since it does not disclose information about the identities of the respondents.

Chapter 2: Conducting interviews

21 interviews with Moscow, Russia residing youth coming from Muslim households were conducted during the research. The interviewees were people of different ethnic backgrounds, gender, sexual orientation, and current place of residence.

At least one of the interviewees' parents is Muslim and the family has been residing in Moscow for longer than five years and/or the person studied at the Moscow University attending classes on site.

Part of the respondents were recruited from the pool of people that have participated in the pilot study (Sabirova 2020). All the other ones' contacts were collected through the snowballing method, with people referring to their acquaintances, friends, people that they knew somehow from the University or places of work.

All the potential respondents were approached via social media and have been sent the same initiation letter, also indicating the name of a person who has referred them in order to gain initial trust. The author admitted that she will be speaking with Muslim youth of varying ethnic backgrounds to get various impressions of their experiences with Islam and the role it played in their lives. Potential respondents were asked to confirm that they are part of the Moscow residing youth or youth that have spent a substantial part of their young adulthood in Moscow. Answers and identities of the respondents were promised to be treated as confidential. Due to the complications with conducting field research in Moscow, Russia, all the interviews were conducted via Zoom. Most of the interviews lasted approximately one hour and 30 minutes, but many did exceed the limit of two hours. The initiation letter template can be found under the Appendices I.

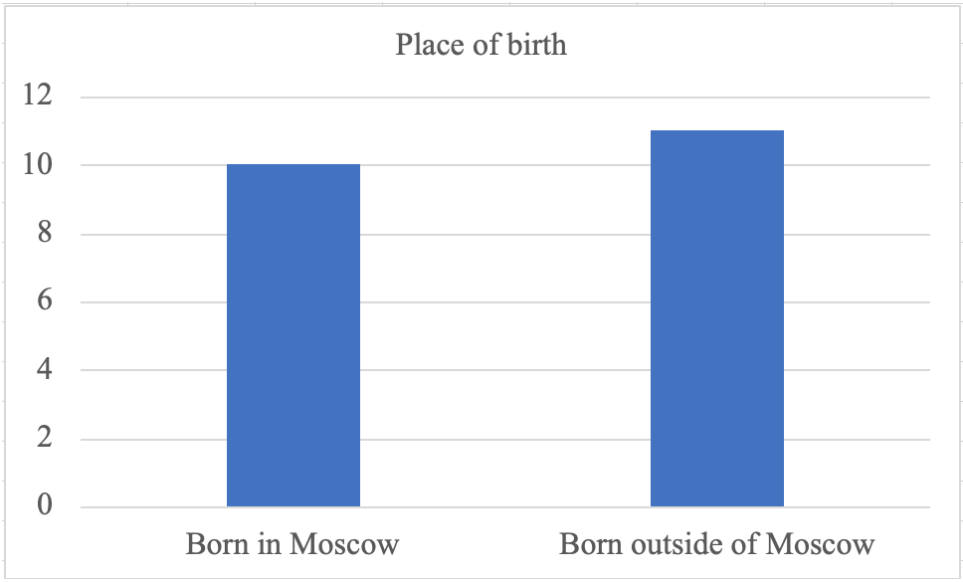
Discussing religious identity is a complicated and sensitive issue. Several of my respondents have asked numerous times to ensure that their identifying information will not be used in any of the papers written based on the interviews, even though they've all been assured that information will

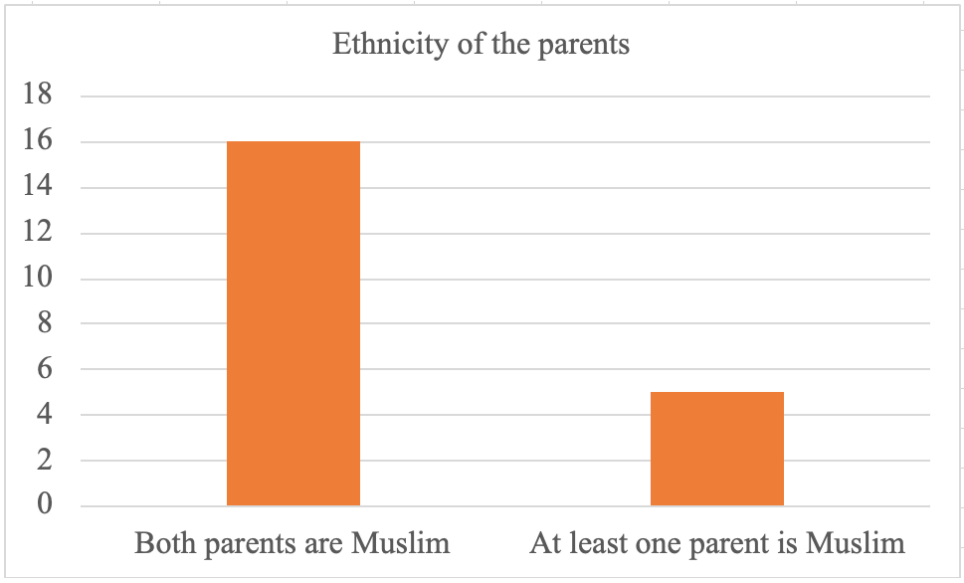
remain confidential. Four respondents out of 21 have shared that talking with an interviewer was therapeutic for them and that they have lost track of time while recapping their stories. Sometimes the author had to share their own confidential information to gain trust of the participants without trying to intervene with their answers and providing interviewees with a platform to share their thoughts.

All the interviewees were born between 1989 and 2002. Seven of the respondents were male, 14 were female. Most currently reside in Moscow, Russia, however, some have emigrated from Russia to the other countries for safety reasons. Five people out of 21 have attended one of the STEM educational programs (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), four have attended Arts and Design related educational programs, and the rest have attended an educational program related to social sciences. The interview guide can be found under the Appendices II. After the interviews were transcribed and translated from Russian to English, they were analyzed manually and through the help of text and qualitative data analysis services such as MAXQDA and others. More information about the interviewees is in the Appendices III.

2.2 Demographics of the respondents

The first part of the interviews followed up on the demographic information of the interviewees, including questions about the region an interviewee comes from and its memorable characteristics. Place of birth of the parents and reasons for leaving a hometown were also major points of interest. Respondents were asked to describe their hometowns and the most memorable parts of their childhood memories connected to the places they grew up in. Some of the respondents were from Moscow, but in all these families at least one parent did emigrate to Moscow, Russia in 1970-1990s from a majority Muslim region of Russia or from another majority Muslim country. If that was the case, respondents were asked to share whether their families used to go back to their homeland and bring their children on trips.





Several of the respondents have admitted that, even though they did say that they were born in Moscow, Russia, their passports tell a different story. Parents of said respondents have decided to give birth to a child in their own hometowns due to practical reasons and the need to have a support group most often in the face of their relatives and then bring the baby back to Moscow almost immediately after the procedure was finished.

2.3 Upbringing

The second part of the interviews was focused on how the person describes their upbringing and their relationships with their parents, relatives, and childhood and University friends. This part also covered questions about the role that religion played in the lives of the interviewees.

Interviewees were asked about their childhood and sometimes were probed to talk about the most memorable parts of their childhood. These questions derived from the questions from the first block and the answers to the part about going back to the parents' homeland on certain occasions or during the holidays. Majority of the interviewees have admitted to visiting their homeland as little kids, especially in the summer, but doing it less and less as years went by. Many have stated that they have stopped going to their parents' homelands around the age of 15-16, most often referring to having more activities to attend to as young adults in Moscow or in bigger cities and not feeling the need to spend three months away from their high school and University friends. It was a pattern among several respondents to say that they have loved coming to these places as children, but then feeling more remorse towards their hometowns and avoiding trips back home. Close connections with people in their parents' homelands were almost never mentioned, some going as far as stating that they felt alienated from the people who were born and raised there. However, some have stated that it also applied to their lives in Moscow and xenophobic comments they had to face from their classmates and acquaintances for their skin color and the presuppositions about their ethnic group characteristics by the outsiders. It was the case with most of the North Caucasians raised in Moscow or with second-generation immigrants, but other ethnic groups with darker skin tones were mentioning the same struggles as well. Religion in that sense was not mentioned by the respondents, but most of the respondents (18 people) did they that they do characterize their ethnic group as predominantly following Islam (interestingly, two of the Kurd respondents have said that this is completely not the case for them). For people who moved to Moscow at a certain stage in their lives, questions about being from a particular ethnic group and looking a particular type of way were considered more relevant than questions related to their religious background. Issues of belonging for the respondents, when brought up, were identified as sensitive but mostly dating back to their childhood memories, most often up until they started attending the University. Several respondents, when probed to explain why they think that was the case, have indicated that they think that the times have changed, and people became more accepting as the years went by. *"I didn't like what I saw in Ingushetia because I was*

always a stranger there. I was a stranger here [in Moscow] as well. Somehow, you are not your own everywhere. [] It changed during my university years; I found my kind of people" (Int14); *"[] I, for example, just lived in a Syrian village. [] And there it is fixated on you going out [to the gatherings]. And I'm not a very social person. And around the guests it looked like I was this girl from Russia who was shown to everybody. That's why, well, I didn't like it very much."* (Int2)

"I have been trying to remember for a long time whether there were any problems, you know, with my environment []. Contradictions or quarrels or conflict. But I do not think Islam played such a significant role. The big role was played by ethnicity. That is, of course, I remember that when I was in kindergarten, at school, there were people who mocked me [] because I was not Russian and all that. I mean there were all kinds of words like "go back to your place." But as I got older, there was less and less of that." (Int19)

Respondents were also asked questions about feeling the presence of religion in their lives and the role it played in their lives while they were growing up. It is interesting to mention that even for the respondents that did say that religion did not play any/a crucial role in their lives they still mentioned its presence in one form or another. Most of the mentions did relate to the role that their grandparents have played in their lives and childhood memories connected to, specifically, grandmothers teaching their children certain prayers or gifting them Islamic memorabilia (religious necklaces, hand-made writings in Arabic, etc.).

"Well, [religion played an] absolutely minuscule [role], [] of course, there were some [] religious [] attributes, [] pictures with those Arabic scripts, some prayers []. Grandmother put them in the car, carried in her pocket []." (Int10)

Some have described their religiousness during childhood as "situational": performed in hopes of affecting a course of events or controlling a situation. For example, in the families where at least one of the parents was described as religious or if the respondents have stated that religion did play a certain role in their childhood, even if the said role was described by them as not the most influential type of experience, it was often the case that kids did pick up some of the things from their religious parents or grandparents or their relatives. For example, it was often the case when the respondents alluded to being exposed to a more religious environment for a long time. One of the respondents (Int2) did say that after staying at her father's homeland for most of the summer she did

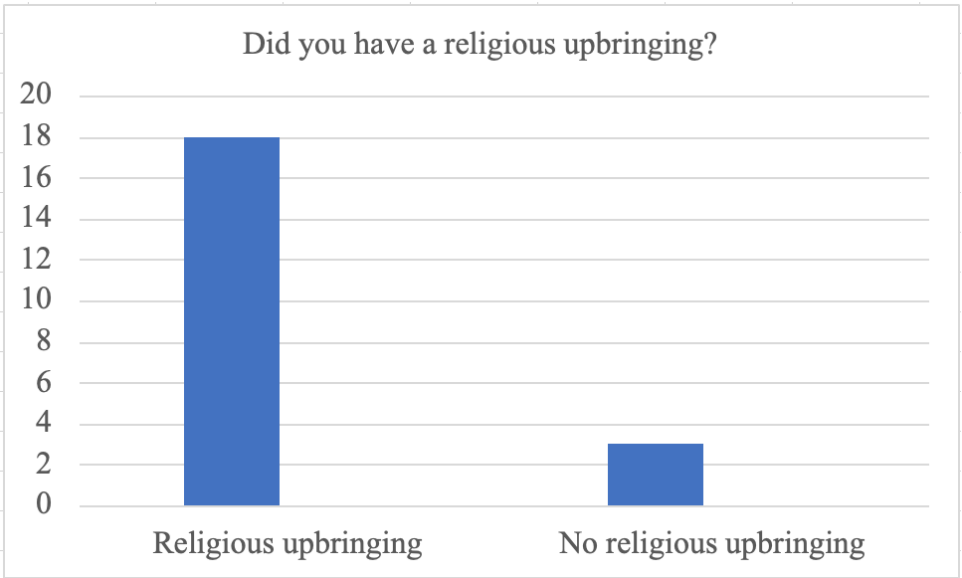
engage in religious practices that she never engaged in otherwise, including back in Moscow: when flying back to Russia from her long summer trip to the father's side of the family she confessed that she used to recite a prayer, without "*really understanding anything about it"* and make up additional rituals *"along with it, like jumping on my left foot in front of the plane" i*n hopes that it will help her prevent things that she did not have any real control over, such as plane crushing and her never seeing her mother again. Such practices were described by the respondents as *"a very, very childish religiosity"* and not really identified as a religious experience by her own standards now, in the older age.

For some of the respondents, religion was more present in their childhood, not just when they were visiting their parents' homeland or hometowns. Four respondents (Int16, Int17, Int8, Int9) have said that their parents sent them to a Muslim school (madrassa); none of the respondents have indicated that it was their own conscious choice. While for some attending a Muslim school was a fun experience ("*a fun time"* and a chance to socialize with *"non-Russian and non-Christian"* kids (Int16)) or just a routine (Int17), some of the others have indicated that it turned them away from religion at least for a brief period of time.

One of the participants have also said that the moment which she can identify as her parents doing something towards the religious upbringing of her and her siblings was when they sent her younger sibling to the Muslim school *"as punishment."* (In19) to discipline her because she was not acting according to their expectations. The author did not get a chance to speak to the sibling of Int19, but according to the latter the former's experience with religion and the way she described she was treated in the madrassa left her angry and recalling it still brings back traumatic memories (*"when [the mother] brings it up, she [the younger sister] starts yelling and cannot talk about it calmly."*). The same experience of being treated badly opposed to the expectations respondents had about the experience of studying at the Muslim school were popping up in two out of four of the interviews. They referred to the feeling of "otherness" even in a situation where they felt like they should be judged based only on the one factor all the attendees had in common. *"The conditions were terrible*

not physically, but psychologically, because it was really like an army. [] And then I hated Islam just for such hypocrisy, because all these girls, all our teachers were so nice, so sweet with our mothers. [] It was a terrible time for me." (Int9) Two of the other respondents, while not necessarily relating to the experience of attending a madrassa, pointed out that they felt reluctant to believe or to research religion when they felt that they were forced to do so by their parents or their close relatives. In fact, they came to rely on religion more when they got a chance to learn about it on their own terms. The author notes that this might indicate that the period of time between 13-17 years old is shown as the most influential for the respondents, and the outcomes of the search for oneself and the answers to the questions about the world depended heavily on how well religion fit in with the respondents' inner struggles and helped to resolve them at times when teenagers were trying to find the answers on their own (including to the gender and xenophobic injustices of the world).

18 out of 21 respondents have stated that they did have a religious upbringing, although some of the information about the level of its influence differed, also depending on the region where the respondent was coming from and the ethnic group they belonged to.



However, even in cases when a respondent identified clearly that they do not think that religion was ever a significant or even a small part of their life they did refer to some memories or

unconscious practices that were connected to the role of Islam in their lives: religious rituals they picked up on even if they did not know exactly what or why they were doing something, Islamic memorabilia that was present at their parents' houses or houses of their grandparents, and even parents' expectations about the role of a woman or a man (often in the contexts of the expectations of a certain ethnic group or from a perspective of what a Muslim man or a women is supposed to do). For example, one respondent who has explicitly stated that she does not believe in God, has carried with her throughout the years a childhood practice of repeating a prayer that she wrote down as a child in times of feeling strong emotions, mostly fear and anxiety. On this topic it is worth mentioning that many of the respondents had problems differentiating between the influence of religion and the influence of the traditions they assigned to their ethnic group. In several interviews, respondents, when thinking about their answers, unprompted said that they are not sure whether a certain thing related to their experience (strictness of parents, gender role expectations) should be classified in one or the other category. For example, Int2 has said that some things she has been affected as (her style of clothing, the nature of her character) were a part of her upbringing but *"it could have been due not so much to religion, but basically to norms in my dad's mind, which he transmitted to me."*

2.3.1 A believer vs a religious person: is there a difference?

Some of the most interesting questions for the respondents, that have taken people more time to reply to, were the questions concerned with what they think it means to be a religious person and whether they can consider themselves a religious person by their own definition. Many of the respondents felt the need to speak on the difference between a religious person and a believer. There is a divide between the answers, and it heavily depends on the general outlook the respondents have on religion: even if the descriptions are similar the connotations of the assigned characteristics were different. Religion was described by most of the respondents as a set of rules, however, around half of them have said that such rules might make the life of a person easier or can just be one of the ways to structure it (*"gives some kind of code"* (Int19)), saying they understand that it works for some,

while the rest have said it is a way for a person to justify their actions or a tool that controls people and is described as a less neutral and a more negative thing. Part of the respondents have clearly stated or alluded to not feeling comfortable with the doctrinal concept of the religion, its institutionalized version: *"I just don't like religion as an institution. I have always thought of religion as a tool of control. [] That's the kind of thing that really bugs me when people do things out of religion."* (Int15)

Here the issues of what it means to be "a true Muslim", what Islam is actually about, according to the respondents, were also brought up, with five people out of 21 across all ethnic groups saying that religion is often times interpreted differently, accordingly to the interpretators' personal agendas, almost opposing these people to the true believers, which some have described as more of an ethereal thing, an inner thing, which some have found more inspiring as an example that can be followed. *"A true believer, he will not impose anything, and he will not try to explain something and involve the others in it. He will simply believe. You look at him and you might, say, want to live that way."* (Int14) Some have drawn emotional/rational lines to map out the differences between the two: "*Faith is about emotion. But religion is all about character, because religion, [] its wisdom, religion is a doctrine."* (Int19)

Most of the respondents have considered to believe in "something" (not necessarily Allah/God, but a higher power) describing relationships with the said higher power as personal (17 out of 21 respondents). It is interesting to notice that in one of the cases where a respondent was coming from a religious household where she described two of her parents as religious and have described herself as being very religious before the start of the University the respondent said that they actively choose not to believe in anything aside from the rational, but they do occasionally engage in conversations with a higher power even if to argue with it or to complain at (not to) them: *"Out of habit, I guess there's still some dialogue with God that I don't believe in. [] Well, I don't know, as a person I can say anything, man. I do not believe in you. I mean, what kind of idiot are you? With negative thoughts."* (Int18) Religion and the connection to a higher power was still unconsciously present in

her life, even though she did chose not believing in it and the tools available to her to critique the system were still engraved in religious practices.

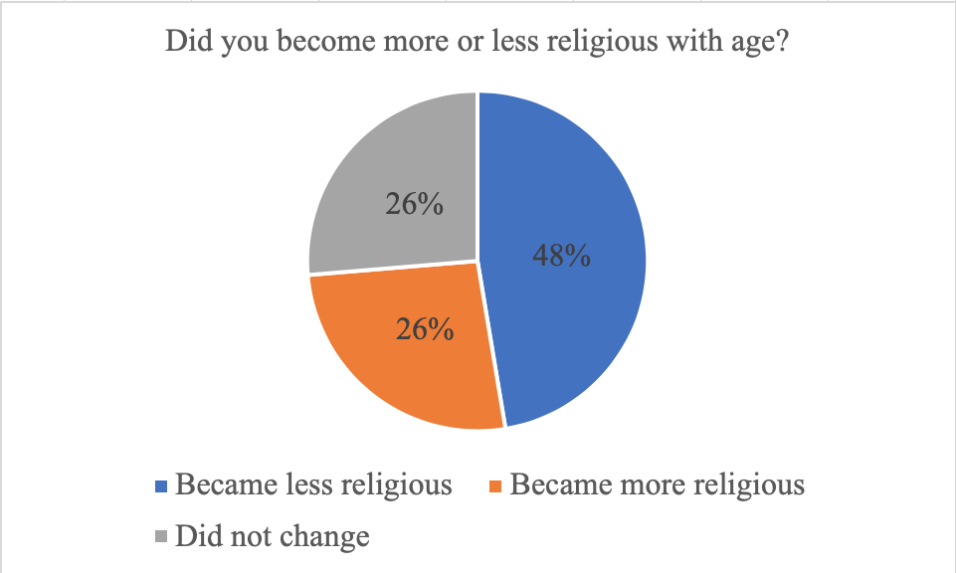
For some believing in Allah or a higher power is described to be about belonging to a bigger, an exclusive group ("[] *this is access to a world that's not available to the majority.")*, a link that can be achieved through common practices such as fasting ("*All over the world, my Muslim brothers, they are fasting. And all these good intentions, when we are connected in some way that is not visible, I feel it."* (Int16)), a link to the welcoming community of people (Int6). It is interesting to mention that the focus of these answers was on the things related to religious practices, "the pros" of following them and being a part of the Muslim community, despite the differences. This in a way echoes the expectations that the other respondents were putting on their experiences in Muslim schools, referring to them as places where the only thing that should matter should be the most basic commonality between all the attendees – their religious identity. What should also be brought up to the table is that the respondents that critiqued the madrassa system were female, and the ones who were neutral or enjoyed their experience with the madrassa were male. All the female respondents have spoken up unprompted or through answering probing questions that they felt that Islam has been interpreted mostly though the male lenses and that men are most likely to misinterpreted Quran to fit their narrative. Two out of 21 of the female respondents have said that by referring to the right of the man to have more than one wife and how it has been misinterpreted by men in a way that was, according to the respondents, not meant to be in the original text. *"And I realized that people who are now presenting Islam as we know it... it is not something that is written at all. And there are Muslim feminists, right? That struck me. It is very cool."* (Int9)

Interestingly some people have referred to the beauty of religion, describing it as a form of art that can be appreciated and followed. Similarly, several people have said that they go to the mosques not as to the places of worship but at the places that they find esthetically appealing and interesting, as fitting their aesthetic. "M*y philosophy of Islam and my Islam first is a historical paradigm. I am*

interested in Islam as a tool of formation not of faith or philosophy, first, but of human historical flows, i.e., interaction between cultures." (Int16)

Allah as a figure was also described by the self-identified religious respondents as more personal and less institutionalized, with two people specifically referring to him as a mixture of a friend, a parent, and a master, approaching him with utmost respect. Two people have clarified that "[Allah is] *omnipotent, but not cruel."* (Int5) and their own image of God was not the same as for their parents: *"he wasn't as cruel [] he was more merciful, more just and more patient"* (Int7)

It was important to establish whether interviewees thought that their opinion on their religiousness has changed over the last ten years (if they started praying more/less or started dressing according to the Islamic dress code, etc.) and what do they think influenced this decision the most. Many have pointed out that they went through changes during their teenage years, when they were around 13-17 years old, even before starting the University. This falls in line with the findings on religious participation of Christian young adults in the USA: it declines significantly around that age, at the start of the teenage years but before the start of the University (Ueker et al 2007, Denton et al 2009, 280). This period was described by several respondents as an "*age where a child can already sort of abstract themselves from other people's opinions, gains critical thinking; I had already begun to ask questions about myself and the book [Quran], and some answers were found and some I wasn't finding."* (Int19) Circling back to the previous findings of this thesis, we can notice that during this time teenagers, also due to their young nature, are more likely to rebel against their parents and to critically evaluate what they've been taught to believe for the majority of their lives, and finding an ultimate answer for them often depended on the factors such as strength of family ties and availability of plausible alternative options.



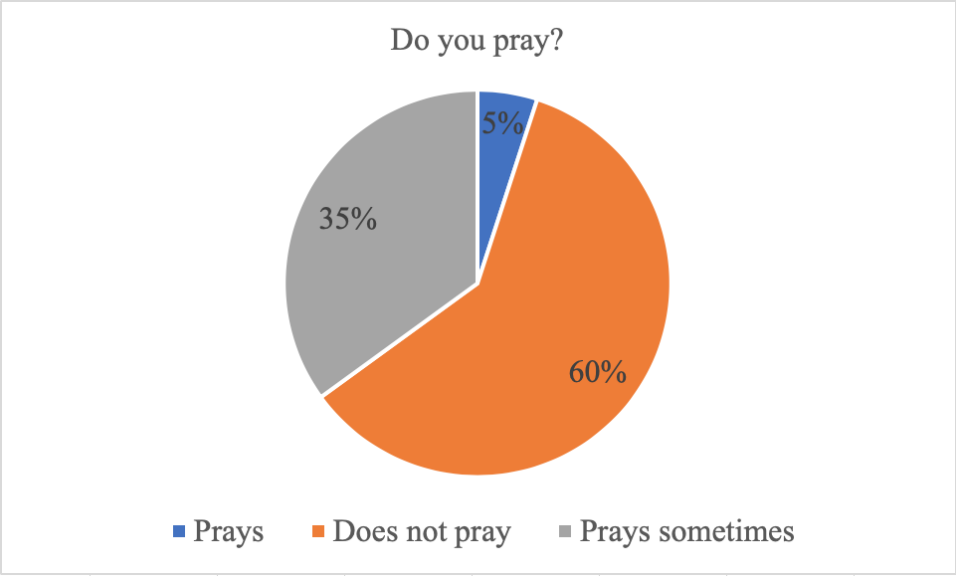
Religion was mentioned as important when the respondents felt surrounded by it, connected to it through the parents or the surrounding environment, going as far as saying that it was the only available choice of spirituality for them, or for defining the world around them: "*I had all these [] ideas about the world, it was really connected with religion."* (Int3), " *A person grows up in religion. [] Let us say, I mean, there is no other reality for me, I cannot be any other way."* (Int17). When turning to higher powers, that a person might believe in, (for example, when feeling anxious or scared), referring to Allah is the most fitting option for several respondents, when they do not see any alternatives: "*That's when this Islamic upbringing comes on because I do not know how else to turn to God, to higher powers. And all I know are some Muslim prayers that my grandmother taught [] my only tool available to me."* (Int19); "*And at some point, I focused and really prayed. And I felt relief. [] And that is when I realized that I am more comfortable with it, and I want to believe. And in my world my frame of reference will be Allah, so be it."* (Int9)

Losing this connection was not easy for the respondents, several people have mentioned that they do wish sometimes to be able to believe in Allah the same way that the others in their inner circle, but not being able to do it anymore: *"[my mom] told me how in difficult moments she just needs to read namaz [] how I envy her because I also want to do it for myself, but I have not succeeded and still do not succeed, and I am unlikely to succeed [in doing the same]"* (Int20).

2.4 Present life – presence or absence of religious practices

17 out of 21 of the respondents have stated that they do not eat pork, even if before that 12 out of these 17 people have said that they do not necessarily consider themselves to be religious. When asked to explain why they did not eat pork then, many have referred to it just never being a part of their ration and described pork as a "weird tasting meat", not really being able to provide a rationale behind their choices. 19 of the respondents, except for Int12 and Int17, have said that they do engage in drinking.

Only a handful of the respondents (three out of 21) have stated that they currently followed all or more than two of the five Islam pillars: profession of faith, prayer, alms, fasting, pilgrimage (MET 2013, Knott 2016). But even some of the ones that have spoken of themselves as believers or religious people did not necessarily read namaz or went to the Mosque (regularly or at all). None of the respondents went to Hajj, and only one of the respondents have said that they plan to do it (Int17).



This part of the interviews and the above-mentioned phenomena of people building their own understanding of their religiosity and their relationships with God follows the framework of "lived religion" (Ammerman 2007, McGuire 2008) that was discussed earlier in the theoretical chapter of the thesis. It has been established that even when people did not call themselves religious or have even said that they are non-believers they still practiced certain religious rituals or had a religious

upbringing that has a long-standing effect on them even if the full force of it is unexplainable by the respondents themselves. In cases of people saying that they do think of themselves as Muslims, only one of the people has admitted to following all the pillars; the others have mentioned certain religious dogmas as being irrelevant or too restrictive, stating that not following them will not hinder their relationships with God which for them was the most important thing.

At their family homes most of them did admit to still having certain physical presence of Islamic culture (such as Shamail, Quaran, prayer beads, etc.) and to participating in religious holidays, even though sometimes not voluntarily but feeling that they are forced to do it in the presence of their relatives and their families. Some of the respondents, however, have said that they think of such gatherings as not religious anymore but more of a cultural event to bring the family back together.

Three out of 21 respondents have said they do read namaz five times a day or less, but two out of three of these people have said that they do not do it regularly. Two of the other respondents have said that they also do pray – in their own ways, without reading namaz: before bed and in difficult moments (Int7) or when they feel grateful: "*in a moment where you feel such grace in your soul, [] you feel so good that you want to believe in a higher power [].*" (Int8)

Two out of 12 respondents who stated that they became less religious, when asked about what stops them from becoming more religious, have again referred to religion as a set of rules they are not ready to follow ("*I'm not ready to limit myself to anything"* (Int9)), referring to the classical definitions and the expectations for Muslims. "*But I'm not going to live by Shariah. And it seems in my mind that if you are a Muslim, you must live clearly by Shariah. [] I have my own tools of finding answers to [life] questions. I understand how I should live, what I should do. [] I live by them, I'm fine." (Int19).* Three people out of seven respondents that have become more religious or were always religious have said that the main thing that stops them from following all the five pillars is "laziness" or the lack of motivation stating that they are not fully ready to commit now since they in their own words can find time for something else but not for namaz or fasting. Three people out of 21 have

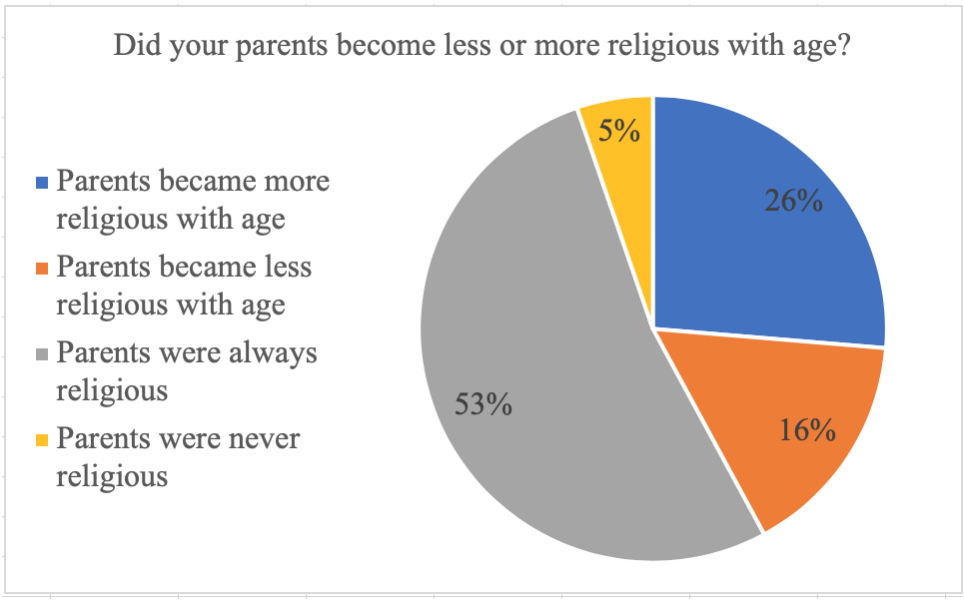
referred to the unfitting environment for being a Muslim in Moscow, where the planning and the infrastructure of the city are not suitable for following the doctrine to the letter as might be the case in the other parts of the country or outside of Russia from where their families are coming from. Interestingly, this again had brought up the necessity of such practices, with participants saying that religion just might not be about following the doctrine in their opinion and about something beyond that.

Several respondents also pointed out to the contradictions surrounding Islam in their opinion. Some have gone as far as to say that "Islam does not have a good public image" and their answers indicate that it does affect their religious identity (or at the very least public showing of it) in a negative way. There is already a debate about the public image of Islam and how it is constructed. Since the knowledge about Islam is not set in stone and cannot be studied the same way that science can be studied it is particularly susceptible to the "judgment and interpretations" of the people (Said 1997, 162) and on what knowledge they have already acquired about Islam. Therefore, the knowledge that is passed down by the western academics and by the media is influenced by what is already known and expected from Islam from various actors, from corporations to media (Said 1997). All the respondents that were elaborating on this issue have mentioned not being able to connect with Islam from what they have read or what they have listened to: *"I have a tough time with Muslims. [] I understand partly that this perception is too superficial, but I am not close to it. That is, from what I have read, listened to, it is all very not close to me. [] All in all, all of this in no way forms in my mind the appeal of this religion."* (Int9).

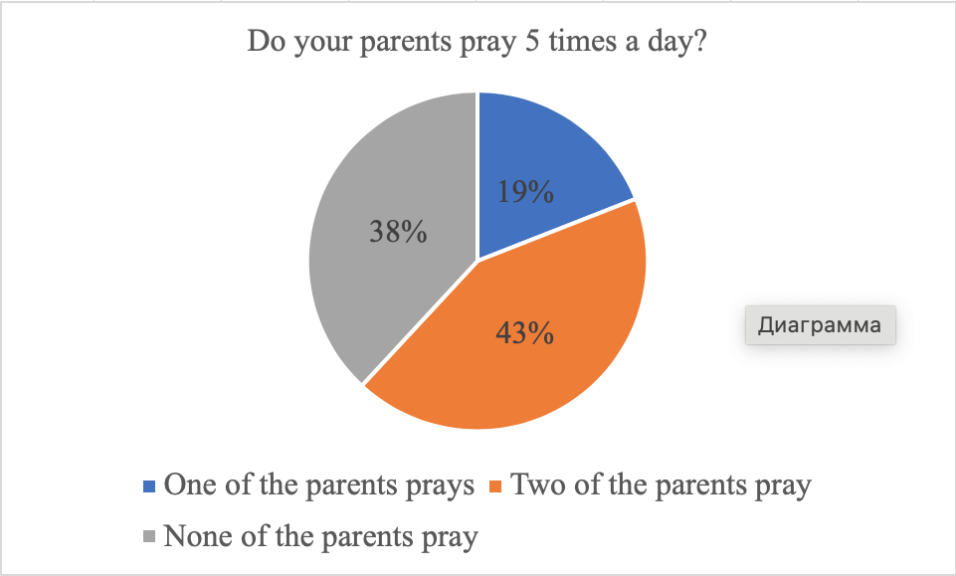
2.5 Information about close family: parents and relatives

Interviewees were asked to describe their parents and their relationships with their parents to gather an understanding of what the respondents thought of their parents themselves and which memorable characteristics they were assigning to them first.

When asked to describe their parents five respondents have said that they did become more religious with age, ten have said that they were always religious, and three have stated that their parents became less religious over time and perform as religious mostly during family gatherings: *"My mom [] went to visit her parents and she covered up, long skirt and so on. [] even though in her life she always wore jeans []. When she got out of the frame of her family, she realized what she liked []. But when she occasionally goes to Kazakhstan, she of course takes her skirt with her."* (Int11). Most of the respondents that have said that their parents became more religious have written it down to them getting older and re-evaluating their lives. Only one of the respondents has said that their parents were never religious, however, his grandparents were (Int10).



These numbers could be compared with information about how often the parents pray and whether they read namaz five times a day or not. In eight cases out of 21 the respondents have said that they parents do not read namaz five times a day, which in several cases they did not consider a definitive feature of a Muslim behavior, saying that their parents were religious, nonetheless: *"My parents believe that religion should only be between you and God. There is no need for any middle-men who make you pray five times a day"* (Int5).



Majority of the people with North Caucasian links (except for one person) did say they think of their parents as religious and felt the need to perform more religiously in front of their parents and/or relatives. In most cases it referred to the expectations that were put on the image of the family and how them not being an Islam devotee or, again, following certain traditions that were blurring the line between a religious and a cultural demand, would have hurt their parents and their honor: "[My uncle told me] if you embrace Christianity while living in Moscow, I will personally cut off your head and bury it in our backyard." (Int20). Two of the respondents (Int7, and the other is Int15) have said to have had more controversial conversations with their parents about religion often coming out as non-religious in such debates: it is interesting to see, though, that it was Int15, person with a North Caucasian links, who has said that her mother's argument towards her child being religious was that *"she would be a bad mother in hell for not being able to pass down religion to her child."* even though Int15 has described her mother as not having a particular *"religious upbringing, but it was obvious anyway"* out of all of the other people in the group.

On the other hand, nine people out of 12 people who identified as not religious have said that they do not tell their parents about not being devoted Muslims or even not thinking of themselves as Muslims in order not to hurt the feelings of their parents or to "break down" the image and the ex-

pectations they think their parents have of them. *"It was a prolonged period, actually. [] many sleepless nights []. You will never voice it. [] the thought that you say it and you might lose something else. [partially referring to parents]* (Int3)

In eight cases one of the parents was described as more religious than the other, which was often the case for marriages between a Russian person (often a Christian Orthodox on paper) and a person from a predominantly Muslim region of the country or the world. Only a handful of people have positively answered questions about their parents following certain religious practices (reading Namaz 5 times a day, following the Islamic dress code for men and women, reading Quran and reciting some of the suras). That is, however, many have said that their parents were sharing the opinion that Allah (God) is omnipotent, and Allah is one and had certain physical presence of Islamic culture at home or other private places, but in the eyes of their children their actions were often contradictory. One has referenced her religious dad facing financial problems and suffering from the alcohol abuse which she at the time did not understand but was confused that he was only believing and appealing to God *"once a year for a month"* and the rest of the time did not do that (Int5). Another person (Int8) has said that her dad says that he is a religious person, but she does not *"fully believe that"* and that in her opinion it is a way for him to shake off *"certain responsibilities in some matters now"*. This went hand in hand with how the respondents were evaluating Muslim followers and interpretations of Islam that they found to be too skewed from the origins. When parents were also performing religion in the way that the respondents found "faulty" or not up to the standards that institutionalized Islam sets, the respondents were more likely to note that they have become less religious with age.

2.6 Key factors identified in theory

2.6.1 Religious upbringing

Building on the previous findings on the factors that influence the religious identity of a person in case of the studies subgroup, we must circle back to the theoretical part which states that Islam is not only a cultural phenomenon, but a politically motivated religion as well, considered to be more

demanding than other religions in that sense. It echoed through the interviews with people referring to the expectations to be Mislim put on their ethnic groups, expectations of what a real Muslim should act like and what they have noticed instead, and religious effects on their daily lives. Two people have explicitly compared Islam to Christianity, saying that "[in Islam] r*eligion is always embedded in daily life."* (Int6) and in the demands that people from both sides are expected (or not expected) to meet: *"You ask any child growing up in a Christian family who identifies himself as Christian, to recite his prayer. He will not recite it to you in his life. I was raised very differently."* (Int8).

Throughout the interviews the author had to keep in mind that certain stories must be probed deeper since it was evident in several cases that people might have said something that then their own examples have contradicted with. Several factors had to be considered hand in hand. For example, the apparent absence of the religious upbringing but the celebration of the religious holidays or the marriage expectations, or not necessarily following the 5 pillars but considering oneself a religious person.

What can be identified is that the way the respondents were describing their parents and how religious they were influenced the perception of religion by a child. Religious upbringing, even by the parents or relatives that do not necessarily fit the criteria of a devoted Muslim that was established before (as in, reads namaz five times a day), and close relationships with parents were a leading factor in determining whether a person considers themself a religious person or a believer. The so-called "apostates" (non-believers) (Hunsberger 1974), coming from religious Muslim households were more likely to debate their parents and contradict them and generally do not have close relationships with them or share confidential information with them.

2.6.2 Getting a University degree and making friends

When asked to describe their circle of friends as a child many had problems giving any characteristics about the families of their friends and whether they were coming from religious households. Almost all the respondents have said that they do not stay connected with their childhood

friends. That was not the case for the University friends however: this is a time that many of the respondents (18 out of 21), especially respondents that have said that they did not fit in as children, made close friends that they try to stay connected with even today. Most of the University friends of the respondents were described by them as atheists or agnostics, and while the respondents did not say that it was intentional, they have admitted that they were looking for someone who shared their values: "In order to build a relationship, it is important to share some values. And the friends I am in contact with now are related to the fact that I had a change of values, I lost my religion. With a deeply religious person [] we have too different visions of some events." (Int20). Coming back to the data about how most of the respondents have questioned their faith at the ages of 13-17, we see that only two out of 21 of the respondents have said that they think attending the University in Moscow made them less religious (Int7, Int18), 19 respondents have said that the University did not affect their religious identity but was more of a prolongation of the process that have started earlier.

2.6.2.1 Personal relationships and gender roles

Most of the respondents also have stated that they did not introduce their non-Muslim partners to their parents, which has been especially striking in the examples of the respondents from the North Caucasian region. One of the respondents have admitted to dating a Russian girl for more than three years, but never having intention to introduce her to his parents for the fear of putting his family name under risk and becoming a target for his relatives, giving them an advantage in the future arguments: "*if it is not a Muslim woman, it would kind of be my weak spot. I mean any conversation, any kind of quarrel, any kind of contradiction and not just within the family, it is going to be like a giant rock in my backyard" (Int12)* and going as far as to say that he has given his parents a green light to organize an arranged marriage for him in Dagestan. Others have been met with the limitations of dating only a Muslim person, however, in all such cases, parents were also hoping that their children did marry into the same ethnic group (even in a family where one of the parents was Russian or of another ethnic group). Even in cases when a person, who grew up in a religious household, but did become

less religious over the years, relationships were kept secret from the parents for prolonged periods: out of the fear of disappointing the parents (especially fathers) or making them angry and not necessarily knowing what they might do. The author reflects on it as a piece of information that the respondents can control since it was not deemed detrimental to share right away. In one of the examples, a respondent has admitted that she was ready to take a next stop with her partner and was strategizing about the best way to come out about her secret to her parents (Int4).

However, it is noticeable that women respondents did say that marrying a "dedicated" Muslim person is not their top priority, sometimes even saying that they would prefer not to marry a Muslim person. Reasons were personal and had to do with trying to avoid "being restricted" by their partners and being scared. On a side note, several of these respondents did say that "moderate Muslims" or "cultural Muslims" or "secularized Muslims" will be a better fit for them, and they can see themselves connecting with these people, because they would be more understandable of their culture, but also on the same page with them on how religious they expect each other to be.

What is also worth mentioning for female respondents is that they felt neglected by how religious relatives or parents treated them differently as opposed to their brothers or male cousins. Many of them have stated that Islam in their eyes is "bad" for women, but some have also referred to the differences in interpretations. For example, one of the respondents have said that she "hated" Islam, also for the way she thought it was oppressive towards women and disrespectful towards children, however, in the ninth grade she tried to analyze her hatred and *"[] realized that I do not really have anything to hate. I can hate human interpretation [] And I am just taking it a little easier. [] It is just beautifully interesting."* (Int8) This serves as one of the examples of how a traditionalist interpretation of Islam is in clash with the person interpretation of Islam, the latter being considered closer to the original source.

2.6.3 Religious institutions and religious leaders

Almost all the respondents have said that they are currently not a member of any Muslim associations or cultural centers in Moscow or outside of the city and were not and are not a part of the Moscow Muslim community. Religious institutions were referred to by the respondents when discussing how people interpret the Quran and the religious Islamic dogmas and the true meaning behind them. One of the respondents have said that, even though she does consider herself to be a Muslim, she does not "*like listening to Muslims" (Int5),* because of the agenda that she thinks they might have. For majority of the respondents that have stated that they consider themselves religious people, going to Islamic events, including visiting a Mosque, was not necessary to connect with Allah. "*It is not like my prayer will be somehow less accepted than the one that was done in the mosque."* (Int5).

Two of the interviewees referred to people not knowing not to pray properly: being distracted and not fully involved in the prayer, or not knowing what exactly they are saying during the prayer, "*without even knowing what they're praying for."* "*Go to a mosque sometime, see, everyone prays differently there. No one knows how to pray. []"* (Int12) Several respondents found the rules of Islam told through the religious institutions or through religious leaders confusing and uncomfortable in a sense that following them felt very scripted and too algorithmic. The author comes to the conclusion that this outer performance of religious practices is again in conflict with the personal interpretations of the respondents and the former as seen as more formal and, therefore, detached from the spiritual origins of Islam.

One of the respondents has mentioned a conversation with his father who was happy that his son showed more interest with Islam as he was growing up but warned him against joining any religious groups and collective activities for the fear of him joining "*something extremist"* (Int6). The said respondent tried to go to the Mosque to pray later in his life for the first time ever and described the experience as constraining, even though in end it was fun for him: *"When I prayed it was a very*

unsettling feeling. It is like when you come to family gatherings with all the uncles of the entire world. And they judge you."

However, six out of 21 respondents have stated that having a religious role model has changed their religious identity or alluded that in their own opinion it would have changed it had they been more exposed to it. Having an example in a form of a person or people that a respondent truly admires have driven people to become more religious and vice versa in the cases when said people though they did not have any worthy examples to follow or the examples that they have seen were not following all the pillars themselves: *"Everybody I know who says they follow Islam, they do not read namaz []. I mean, I do not know anybody who does it. And I feel like I probably do not have to. And if a person is doing it, they are probably kind of too faithful."* (Int15); *"I cannot even find five people of faith around me that I would want to be proud of or take as an example. Not enough examples."* (Int12)

For some said examples were in the form of their relatives: *"I was living with a relative [several years ago]. At that point she seemed to me to be the most stylish, smartest person ever. [] She gave me praying beads. I said I am kind of not a believer. And she was immediately alerted. [] She began to teach me how to pray, how to go through these rosary beads."* (Int5). Respondents referred to the desire to impress their relatives or to prove something to them: it partially led one of the respondents to start reading namaz and to wear a headscarf, even though in the end she said that practicing religion this way did not work out for her, and they felt that she was *"[] out of my environment, out of my skin. I was uncomfortable with myself []. That is why it ended."* (Int14). In one of the previous interviews done for the pilot study (Sabirova 2020) this person has said that she has stopped praying and wearing a hijab when she felt that she was doing things out of habit and not because she was fully involved in it, therefore feeling like she was being hypocritical.

For the others it was strangers that they have met and got inspired by, as was the case for Int21 who has met a person on the Internet that she first got into a fight with and then she got to ask them

questions and share her doubts about religion that the said person was able to mostly solve for her, making the acceptance of religion and its dogmas make more sense for the respondent. One of the respondents that had initially had an unpleasant experience with attending a madrassa has said that her outlook has changed when she had a teacher who taught the history of Islam at that school, and it motivated the respondent to study religion on her own and *"to immerse myself in it."* (Int9). The respondents were more likely to follow personal/social examples but to reject the formal religious institutions such as mosques or Muslim associations.

As for the people that have admitted to becoming less religious over the years some have brought up the way Islam did not fit their expectations: appealing to God did not solve their or world issues. The topic of justice was brought up by three of the respondents and when they were asked probing questions two of them have said that justice in the world does not exist and injustice will likely go unpunished, and for the "convenience" purposes they might have preferred to believe that "*god will set everything up later."* (Int6) or that being a bad person is a "*a punishment to yourself"* (Int1), while one of the respondents that have stated that she did become a believer later in life that justice for her personally has become a relative concept and she does not see a "*point in seeking neither justice nor truth."* (Int21), clarifying that injustice comes from the people themselves and not from God. For some, however, appealing to God was the main way to feel better in the aftermath of the life-shaking events, for example death of a close relative (two respondents out of 21 have experienced that in the last 10 years and that have turned them to become more religious).

And on the final note 14 respondents have commented on how life in Russia and/or outside of traditionally Muslim places has affected their perception of religion and their performance of religious practices. One of the respondents referred to the variety of alternative opinions and options available to him in Moscow that he did get to experience, saying that *"Moscow is just a lucky place to exist. [] My environment was diverse. That is, I was presented with an alternative opinion, I could*

study it myself." (Int3) which led him to a decision that religion was "not for him". Another respondent has said that for her the "restrictions imposed" by Islam do not "correlate with her life here [in Moscow, Russia]" (Int6) and feel restrictive. However, one of the female respondents has mentioned the opposite, alluding to the limitations that were put on Muslim people, specifically women, in Moscow: *"there is such a thing, that it is already your label: you are a girl who wears a hijab, it is your identity."* (Int11) This is described by the author as an ambivalent type of relationship — having more alternative options parallel to how a respondent already expects that the alternative actions a priori have more weight over traditional religious practices in the new environment. However, as have been noticed before, detaching oneself from the latter is a complicated process that is not always resolved by the respondents through an analysis of external factors.

2.6.4 Conclusions and discussions

Therefore, the research has shown that the factors that are most likely to affect the religious identities of the studied subgroup of young adults coming from Muslim households are the strength or weakness of family ties (including strong or weak ties to the homeland and perceived religiosity level of the parents) and the variety of alternative options that are made available to the person and the presupposition of the other factors that a respondent considers in a cost-benefit analysis: such as, what they are ready or not ready to give up, a theme that has been resurfacing all throughout the interviews. These factors are related to the way a person perceives their assigned role in religion: women are more likely to be critical or attentive to the way that the image of a woman is being interpreted by the religious leaders. The same applies for people coming from a particular ethnic group, in case of the conducted research it shows that a perceived image of being a part of the group is related to being a part of the certain religious community as well (specifically for observed Muslims from Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Chechnya).

However, what is also observable from the interviews is how the cost-benefit analysis that the respondents have produced is deeply related to the emotional attachment they might have for the values of their relatives and their parents, and whether they find it suitable or comfortable for them

to follow. The process of becoming less religious or striving away from religion was described as painful and/or took a lengthy period of time. The choice was not being made between physical things, but between close relationships with parents, protecting the honor of the family, love for another person, inner turmoil about the world and how unjust or just it appears to be. Looking for the answers to the "what, who, and whys," seeking refuge in a help of a being that is believed to be understanding and kind and always listening attentively or, on the opposite, being mad at the said being for not meeting their expectations is a very personal, a very human feeling. Looking for the answers to the questions that might have seemed obvious in the childhood, done mechanically, is sometimes a traumatizing process, that can lead people to become less religious or can lead them to question their faith and come full circle, becoming even more religious than they were before.

Future research should be focused on the factors that are not necessarily pushed forward by the prior research and the theoretical frameworks of studying religious identities, such as exposure to the varying and negative images of religion, specifically in the case of the Islamic image in the western part of the world (Moscow, Russia included), and the effect of the presence of role models in life, not necessarily coming from the associations with Islamic institutions. Both factors had a considerable influence on the changes in the religious identities of the respondents.

Appendices I: Invitation to the interview and a consent form

Hello []!

I am Gulnaz Sabirova from the Department of Political Science at Central European University (CEU).

I speak to Muslim youth from Russia to get different impressions of the experiences of young people with Islam and the role that religion has played in their lives. I focus on Moscow youth or youth who have spent a sizable portion of their adult lives in Moscow (e.g., those who were educated at one of Moscow's universities). The research is being conducted as part of my master's thesis "Changing Religious Identity of Muslim Youth: Examples of Youth Residing in Moscow, Russia.

I will treat your responses as confidential. I will not include your name or any other identifying information in any reports I write.

Do you have any questions about the study?

Do you agree to be interviewed?

Do you agree to have me record our interview on a tape recorder? I am recording the session because I do not want to miss any of your comments. People say extremely useful things in interviews, and I cannot write fast enough to record everything and not miss anything.

Please also fill out a short questionnaire before our interview:

1. Gender
2. Year of birth
3. Place of birth
4. Place of residence at present
5. Level of education, university
6. Educational program (department)

Appendices II: Interview guide in English.

All the interviews were conducted in Russian and later translated into English.

Introduction & Rules	Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I am Gulnaz Sabirova from the Department of Political Science at the Central European University (CEU) conducting a study for the purpose of writing an MA Thesis. As I told you beforehand, I would like to talk to you about your childhood, your parents, about your circle of friends, your own thoughts, and feelings about Islam. I will record this conversation.

Demographics	Where are your parents from? Which city/town are you from? When did you leave your hometown? Reason? How often do you go back to the city/town you were born in? Would you describe your hometown? What are your most distinctive memories about your hometown from your childhood? Probing question: would you say that your hometown had a big Muslim population or not? If born in Moscow: Was it a habit for your family to go back to their native land or not? Did they take you with them or not?
Upbringing – any special pressure from family, friends/school, socialization	Please tell me about your childhood. Probing question: most memorable part of your childhood? What do you think it means to be a religious person? Do you think of yourself as a religious person? Do you think there is a difference between a religious person and a believer? Did you feel the presence of religion in your life growing up or not? How would you describe its role? How religious were you when you were a child? Did you think of being religious differently back then than now? Did you notice any changes or not?

	Have you ever changed your opinion on your religiousness over the last 10 years (started praying more/less, started dressing according to the Islamic dress code, etc.)? What do you think influenced your decision the most? Have you ever attended places of worship or Islam education facilities (Mosques, madrasas, language learning courses affiliated with Islamic institutions)? Have you ever tried to join the Moscow Muslim community when you moved to Moscow? Why? How would you describe your relationship with your parents? Are they close? How often do you talk to each other? Are there certain topics you avoid when talking to them? Do you or do you not feel the need to act more religious around your parents? Were you close with your relatives? What religion were most of your childhood friends following? How would you describe your circle of friends as a child? Has it changed since you became a high school student? A University student? Has it changed since you moved to Moscow on your own?
Present religious practices	Would you consider yourself a religious person? Do you speak Arabic? Have you read Quaran? Do you go to the Mosque or not? If yes, how often? Do you know any of the ayats (verses) in Quaran? Do you pray 5 times a day or less? Do you follow the Islamic dress code? Do you have certain physical presence of Islamic culture at home or other private places (such as Shamail, Quaran, prayer beads, etc.)? Do you think religion is important when it comes to marriage? Would you prefer to marry a Muslim person or not? If you would have children, do you think they should have religious education or not? Do you participate in celebration of religious holidays? Do you eat Halal food? Do you drink alcohol?
Family info	Please tell me about your mother. How would you describe her as a person? Mother – nationality, religion. Does she share the opinion that Allah (God) is omnipotent? Does she go to the mosque regularly (every week)? Has she read Quran (partially?)? Can she recite some of the ayats (verses)?

	Does she pray 5 times a day or less? Does she follow the Islamic dress code? Does she have certain physical presence of Islamic culture at home or other private places? Does she refer to Islam as her moral compass when making everyday decisions? Is there a difference between your parents? Is your father different from your mother? Do you think of your parents as religious people or not?
Key factors identified in theory	Do you think you became more or less religious when you started attending University in Moscow? If yes, when did you notice these changes? Do you think your parents and/or relatives treated you and your siblings (sisters, brothers, cousins) differently or not? How did you feel about it? Do you think it is expected of a [insert ethnic group] to be Muslim or not? Do you think the fact that you are [insert ethnic group] plays a role in how religious you are or not? How close do you think you are to your parents? Relatives? Do you feel the need to present as more religious during family gatherings and in your hometown or not? Do you have non-religious friends or not? How close would you say you are with. these people? Did religion ever stand in the way of your friendships or not? Have you ever had a non-Muslim partner? Did you introduce this person to your parents? Why? Are you a member of any Muslim associations or cultural centers? Why? Do you attend any places of worship or Islam education facilities now as an adult? Are you a part of the Moscow Muslim community?
Conclusions	Thank you for participating in the interview, we are all done now. Do you have anything to add? You can contact me after the interview and ask any remaining questions.

Appendices III: General information about the interviewees.

Code names	Mother	Father	Place of birth
Int1	Chechen	Chechen	Moscow, Russia
Int2	Russian	Syrian	Moscow, Russia
Int3	Chechen	Chechen	Moscow, Russia
Int4	Russian	Afghan	Moscow, Russia
Int5	Kirgiz	Kirgiz	Kyrgyzstan
Int6	Uzbek	Uzbek	Moscow, Russia
Int7	Tatar	Tatar	Uzbekistan
Int8	Uzbek	Uzbek	Kyrgyzstan,
Int9	Uzbek	Kyrgyz	Kyrgyzstan
Int10	Tatar	Tatar	Moscow, Russia
Int11	Kurd	Kurd	Kazakhstan
Int12	Dagestani	Dagestani	Russian Caucasian Region, Dagestan
Int13	Russian	Kurd	Moscow, Russia
Int14	Russian/Tadjik	Ingush	Russian Caucasian Region, x
Int15	Dagestani	Russian	Moscow, Russia
Int16	Tatar	Tatar	Kirov region, Russia
Int17	Dagestani	Dagestani	Russian Caucasian Region, Dagestan
Int18	Tatar	Syrian	Moscow, Russia
Int19	Uzbek	Uzbek	Kyrgyzstan
Int20	Dagestani	Dagestani	Russian Caucasian Region, Dagestan
Int21	Dagestani	Dagestani	Moscow, Russia

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