

Polygyny Amongst Muslims in the Russian Federation

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Abstract

Polygynous families had been living legally in Russia in the areas inhabited by Muslims from the October Revolution to the mid-twentieth century. However, such a family model was not common among the followers of Islam. An act penalizing bigamy or polygamy was introduced into the Penal Code in 1960. During perestroika, and later changes in the political system, imams who came from abroad began to visit areas inhabited by Muslims. They contributed to the rebirth of religion and promoted the idea of polygamy. Polygyny is the visible sign of dissimilarity and Muslim identity and was an important point in their teaching. In this context the number of polygynous relationships in Russia has increased significantly. The article is dedicated to the analysis of social and political discourse in Russia that has been taking place for several years.

Keywords: Polygyny, Islam, Muslims in Russia, Nikah, the Census, discussion about the legalisation of polygyny

In Russia, Islam is one of four traditional religions, along with the Orthodox Church, Judaism and Buddhism. It is perceived as an element of the historical and cultural heritage of the country both in social perception and in relations with the state authorities. As opposed to other religious movements (such as Catholicism, or various other expansive sects), its activity in Russia is not perceived as proselytism. What is more, thanks to its status, just like in the case of the Orthodox Church, Judaism and Buddhism, its mission receives a positive acceptance from the state authorities. Of course it is proportional to the number and positions taken by Muslims in Russian society. Followers of Islam in the Russian Federation (RF) can be divided into two groups: native and migrant. The first group includes Muslims from North Caucasus, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan. The migrant group covers immigrants from the former Soviet Union republics in Central Asia and the non-Russian part of the Caucasus, which are today independent states. This migrant group seek work in order to improve their standard of living. The social mosaic is further complemented by Muslims from the Middle East and Africa, who emigrated for political reasons. Most followers of Islam in Russia belong to Sunni Islam's Hanafi law (Kobishchanov 62–70).

Changes in Russian social life was started by perestroika, as well as the process of religious re-birth (Malashenko, *Islamskoe vozrazhdenie v sovremennoi Rossii*, 68–101) – as it is described by some – with Islam legalisation in the areas inhabited by Muslim population (Gainutdin 71–129) leading to the institutionalisation of Islamic social activities. Religion, which used to be perceived as a relic, turned out to be for many citizens the only way to satisfy, spiritual hunger' after the fall of communism. For this reason, at the beginning of the twentieth century, we could observe practically in all of Russia the increased organisational activity of Muslims. Today Islam significantly shapes social awareness, and it is officially recognised by the state (together with the other main religions). Because of this, it plays a significant role in the social and political life of the state. What is interesting is that the Muslim case does not seem to be an isolated one. The national re-birth of practically all ethnic groups living in Russia was done through religion and not any lay ideology (Filatov 10). This fact may be surprising, as up until 1988 all religions in Soviet Union were in a state of lapse.

The transformation of the state of religion from being “dormant” to having full freedom happened in a relatively short space of time, which in turn influenced the character and “depth” of demands and expectations formulated by Muslims. Even if they do not concern fundamental or principle issues, but rather banal life issues (in other words, they concern the superficial Muslim awareness of self), they are treated with extraordinary seriousness. Alexey Malashenko claims that we can observe in Russia an interesting phenomenon. It is the desire to “Islamise” the environment Muslims are sharing with others. This is done not to convert, but as a result of growing awareness of their own belief identification. It seems

to be something more than just a fashion for religion (Malashenko, *Islam dlia Rossii*, 18). It is bound with the need to construct their own “I” through shaping the surrounding reality. Unimportant things, or things hidden in privacy are now publicly discussed. Muslims (at least some part of them) started to feel the need to manifest their identity. There are issues being discussed (even by non-Muslims) like women’s clothes, the issue of “cleanness” – the halal nature of grocery products, and the relations between men and women. The resolutions of the above – based on the principles of belief systems and traditions – became valid in general discourse (not only in Muslim ones) and also affect the followers of other religions. Therefore, this phenomenon has been described as a so-called “Islamisation” of the environment.

Polygamy in the Russian Federation, without the media and hyperbole, (especially in the perspective of large demographic numbers) is not statistically a significant issue – either for Russian society or Muslims living there. For this reason, it is difficult to treat it as a manifestation of the above mentioned “Islamisation.” However, due to the fact that the topic is captivating in a media sense, it seems to be an interesting case. Irrespective of its future in the federation (whether it gains in popularity, becoming a real socio-political problem, or if it remains at its present level) it will automatically be linked with Muslims from the public’s perspective. We are only a step away from building stereotypes about polygamy and Muslims in Russia. From this aspect, it may represent an element of society’s “Islamisation.” Polygyny as a type of marriage, in which a man is in a marital relationship with more than one woman is permitted in Islam. It is commonly known that the Koran allows for restricted polygamy: “And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four; but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them), then (marry) only one or what your right hands possess; this is more proper, that you may not deviate from the right course (K 4:3).” A Muslim man is allowed to marry more than one woman but not more than four at the same time. However according to religious law a number of conditions should be observed. The first one is the just treatment of wives. It pertains to providing equally for, and treating equally, all of them. Responsibility solely rests with the husband. This rule also refers to the distribution of time and attention, which should be given equally to all wives. It is worth mentioning here that polygyny is permitted but it is not obligatory. Polygyny cannot be used to satisfy desire, it should be based on the compassion for widows and orphans. The question is then how is it interpreted and put into practice by Muslims in Russia.

According to Kazan Orientalist – Rais Suleymanov – up until the October Revolution polygynic families had a legal status in Russia in the regions inhabited by Muslims. However, they represented a minority, since more than one marriage could have only been afforded by affluent people. A second wife generally appeared

if the first one was childless (Fiodorova). Polygamy was not widespread to the same degree in all Muslim regions. Suleymanov claimed that Tatar women rarely agreed to share their husband with another woman (Fiodorova). Highland women from the western part of the Northern Caucasus also felt disinclined to agree to this. According to Madina Pashtova from the Adyghe Regional University of Humanistic Studies – “in Cherkessia’s version of Caucasus culture there has never been approval of polygamy. It was only permitted formally by Islam and Adat if there in the case of a childless wife, or if a wife only gave birth to girls. But in reality, Cherkessia women’s mentality did not allow for any form of submission” (Nefliasheva, *Chto na vostochnom Kavkaze – tyl, to na zapadnom – front*). It is very well illustrated in the language, where the biggest insult is a phrase that means: “they are as two wives of one husband,” and a series of proverbs and sayings which are negative in connotation and refer to polygynic relationships (Nefliasheva, *Chto na vostochnom Kavkaze – tyl, to na zapadnom – front*). However, in the south of Northern Caucasus – in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia – polygyny is a normal phenomenon. What is more it is deeply rooted in family and social life. Vakha Bogatyrev (a LDPR politician from Dagestan) admitted in 2006 when asked about the necessity for polygyny legalisation: We live quite well without that law. “My mother was eighth wife (sic) of my father. I have only one wife, but my younger brother has got three” (Gamov and Pleshakova).

A man in the Caucasus marries another wife usually for four reasons:

- the first wife cannot have children, and her husband does not wish to abandon her, divorce her, and in doing so, put her in an unfavourable life situation;
- if a man is not satisfied with the intimate aspect of the marriage, and he would like to avoid the sin of adultery, or he does not want to enter a brief and informal relationship;
- for love;
- for the need to have many offspring (every new wife brings him closer to this aim) (Nefliasheva, *Chto na vostochnom Kavkaze – tyl, to na zapadnom – front*).

In 1960, Soviet law did not accept bigamy, or polygamy. But it did not have any special forms of punishment for people living in these relationships. Their presence was tolerated and not only in Muslim societies. This liberal approach was related to USSR demographics after WWII. “In a starving country destroyed by war, women were made to give birth in all conditions. Men were allowed to practise polygamy” (Sobolevskii 26–27). This was unofficial as there was no formal possibility to register the marriage in registry office. However, the relationship was not perceived as a romantic affair practised outside marriage, but polygamy was understood as living a double life and working for the upkeep of the second family. In 1960, article 235 was added to the Penal Code penalising bigamy and polygamy. According to this new law, persons who perpetrated these forbidden acts were subject to one year in prison, or correctional work (Vlasov). However, according

to Abdurashid Dudaev – the president of the International Muslim Mission – polygamy in the Caucasus and Central Asia has always been present and changes in the Penal Code did not greatly influence the practices of the inhabitants in these regions. The major change, which first appeared in the 1960s, was in the obligation to register a marital relationship in the Registry Office. However, this still did not present an obstacle for those in favour of polygamy. A man would register a relationship with one wife – usually the first one – and he would live with two, or three wives (Pestereva and Gridneva 3). He would marry the others in an Islamic wedding ceremony (*nikah* – a Muslim wedding ceremony usually performed in the presence of an Imam and two witnesses). The popularity of this arrangement among Soviet Muslims may be found in the opinion of Dagestan philosopher – Mikhail Vagabov; according to him, between 1960–1965 in Uzbekistan there were between 30 and 66 polygamy court cases a year, and in Tajikistan between 30 and 47 cases (Abashin 110). It is worth noting here that what was punished was not sexual intercourse, but the running of a household with more than one wife (Sobolevskii 174).

Imams from abroad began to visit, at the time of *perestroika* and later state changes, regions inhabited by Muslims. The religious re-birth of the time, which is attributed partially to them, favoured the idea of polygamy. Polygyny as a visible sign of distinctiveness and Muslim identity performed an important aspect of their teachings. Due to this, the number of polygynic relationships (even the ones not fully formalised) increased. According to Rais Suleymanov, a large proportion of marriages in the 1990s were characterised by the unequal position of the spouses. The man would choose to marry for the second time without informing his first wife, she would be presented with the result. A woman, left with no choice, who would not want to break the family, was forced to accept the situation by deciding to stay in a polygynous relationship (Fiodorova). There were cases of unknowing polygyny. Girls were made by their family to marry men without knowing that they were not their first wife. In the opinion of Kazan Imam Seidzhafar Lutfulin, it concerned only the relationships conceived from the trend to marry incoming Turks and Arabs. The above mentioned imam is not in favour of polygynous marriages, mainly due to the legal regulations present in the Russian Federation and the status of wives. In his opinion, they and their children are practically deprived of legal protection. For this reason – he claims – he does not marry people in the case of a second wife. He witnesses the effects everyday – which he calls – Wahhabi ideology, propagating, for example in Tatarstan, the idea of polygyny. Being in charge of the Zakat funds, he observed that 80% of women petitioning for help are homeless single mothers with two or three children, who after being married in a mosque were abandoned by their husbands (Fiodorova). Although the aspect of polygyny does not directly appear in this relation, it may be suspected that the problem concerns the second or other wives. When a woman in Russia – even when very religious – marries a man in any religious tradition she does not resign

from registering the marriage in the registry office. The registration is only possible in the case of the first wife. For this reason, we can assume that all the women mentioned above, later abandoned by their husbands, were only married in the mosque, and that they were second or later wives.

The proper interpretation of the Census shows that polygyny in the Russian Federation as a phenomenon may be rather widespread. The 2002 Census revealed that the number of married women was 65,000 higher than that of married men (Kuzichev). This, of course, does not provide grounds for assuming that all these women remain in polygynous relationships. And there are more rational explanations for these numbers. With great certainty, the number includes second, third and later wives. The Census from 2010 established with greater precision the scale of polygyny by allowing the respondents to select the right answer. The data shows that 1616 polygynous marriages were declared, in the following regions: Inigushetia – 30; Chechnya – 75; Kazan – 40 (Fiodorova); whereas in Petersburg – 382, and in Moscow – 732 (Sobolevskii 175). Taking the scale of the Russian Federation into consideration, these numbers may not look significant, but it is worth remembering that these practices, as discussed earlier, stay hidden from the public. It's interesting that in 1616 cases, the pollsters received an honest response. Based on the observation of media interest, researchers and observers of Russian Muslims' lives, we can tentatively assume here that the polygyny phenomenon – taking a second or third wife amongst Islam's followers – is not marginal, and in the last 25 years, despite formal obstacles, has gained in popularity. Polygyny is forbidden in the Russian Federation. Article 14 of the Family Code in the RF states: “marriage between persons who at least one is already married, is not allowed” (*Semeinyi kodeks RF*). According to article 27, marriages conducted against the above regulations are seen as invalid in the eyes of the law (*Semeinyi kodeks RF*). In this situation, the formal registration and legalisation of a relationship of a married man with another woman in a registry office is not possible.

The second or third wife is left with *nikah*. But still, this ceremony does not give the woman or her children the same legal protection or guarantee as a marriage conducted in a registry office. They have no right to inherit from a deceased husband/father in the same way as the wife and children from the first marriage. Also a woman, who marries her husband in a mosque only but is later abandoned by him, has got a longer and more difficult struggle for alimony rights. It is important to note here that since 1996 the polygyny penalisation law has been removed from the Penal Code (Komissarov). That means that persons breaking, or avoiding Family Code regulations in this area are not subjected to penal system punishment. This opens a wide spectrum for the informal practice or even blossoming of the phenomenon of polygyny in this grey zone.

One of the visible sights of a polygyny grey zone is the returning media and public theme of polygyny. The particular aspects of life in such a family has been

for a long time one of the top topics undertaken on, for example, Muslim internet forums. Women search for advice on how to settle relations between the first and second wife. Some of them propose that the other wife should not be looked upon as a rival but as a sister in faith. To authenticate this opinion, they quote many verses from the Koran, which recall the life of the prophet Muhammad (*Kak sabliusti spravedlivost' mezhdue zhonami v poligamnom brake?*). But in most cases, when they are asked directly what they feel when they know that their husband spends a night with the other wife, they admit that they would prefer to be the only wife. Noone is surprised by the Internet dating portals, which give men two options to declare their status and intentions: “bachelor, I am interested in a relationship in order to marry” or “married, I am looking for another wife” (*Ishchu vtoruiu zhenu*). But in 2010, these options became the source for a major scandal. A newly launched dating portal “NikahRT”, which offered its services to Muslim women searching for a husband in accordance with their faith, allowed married men to register. And a number of men enthusiastically welcomed this possibility. In turn, this action invoked indignation amongst registered women. The portal’s administrators had to answer this outcry by publishing explanatory commentaries. However, sometimes it is not the man, but his first wife who is the one looking for a second wife for her husband on the Internet. This is a rather rare phenomenon, but it is not an isolated case. Women resort to this due to, for example, their ill health, or when they feel that they are losing their position in the marriage. They don’t want to wait passively, when they are pushed aside or when they are cheated on. This solution allows them to feel that they have some right in deciding about their own family’s future (*Musul'manki v Rossii*).

A popular form of polygynous marriage in contemporary Russia is a relationship in which there is a significant age difference. The pattern is always the same. A Muslim man about 40 years old or more has a wife at about the same age. He is interested in another partner who is 18–20 years old. Situations when a man decides to marry a second wife of a similar age to his first wife, or older, or a single mother raising children by herself are very rare. Naila Ziganshina – the leader of the Russian Muslim Women Association – claims that she knows many age-difference marriages and has a negative opinion of them and has compassion for the first wives (Fiodorova). On one hand, for some women the situation seems rather favourable. Young women who are impressed by mature men, may expect some benefits: care and upkeep.¹ On the other hand, there are some negative consequences that they are not aware of. In most polygynous relationships, the second wife stays hidden (Aliautdinov). Even members of the family are unaware of them, not to mention the first wife. Publicly the man never shows himself with his second spouse. There

¹ Kamilla from Samara is the fourth wife of her husband who is 30 years her senior. She studies law and believes that when she graduates from college her husband will find her a good job: Lolita. *Bez komoleksov: mnogozhenstvo*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcsKEyjdZdU>.

is also a widely held opinion that a young wife expects immediate satisfaction of her needs – without delay and without the difficulties of a life together. She uses the assets of the previous marriage (Fiodorova). Paradoxically this relationship can make both women unhappy. While the second wives, living a hidden life, are challenged by loneliness, they cannot participate in family celebrations, the first wives continue to ask themselves what they lack. They want to understand why their husband married another woman. Many can fall into depression. Women very often are ashamed of the situation in which they find themselves. But they remain in the relationship, as they do not want to break up the family (Aliautdinov).

As a result of the mobility of people searching for work throughout the entire post-Soviet region, we can observe the widespread phenomenon of marriages between women and Muslim migrants. They may not be immigrants from the Middle East, but they are citizens of post-Soviet republics, who live in the Russian Federation (RF) for work reasons. These men leave their own families behind in Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan. Women are often not aware that, once married, they can become the second wife. Often she finds out about this upon completion of the Muslim wedding ceremony (Aliautdinov). The man, while in Russia, decides on *nikah* for religious reasons. He thus avoids accusations of promiscuity or adultery. It is difficult to ascertain if the decision is based on formal or legal motivations. With certainty, we can say that the ritual does not bring any consequences which are written into state law. It cannot be used to legitimise a man's stay in the country. When the contract is up, or if the man loses his job, or if he resigns from his work, the husband goes back to his place of origin. To start with, he stays in touch with his Russian wife. But after a while, the contact stops. It appears that women, entering into marriage through *nikah*, have no awareness of the fact that the marriage is temporary. They do not know that they have just become part of a temporary arrangement (the marriage lasts as long as their husband's contract, after which the husband goes back to his country) (Aliautdinov). What is interesting is that this problem does not only concern Muslim women searching for Muslim husbands. It turns out to be the opposite. The "victims" appear to be women of other religions (most often Slavic women) who are also unaware of their husbands' marital status. Muslim men impress young women not only with their maturity or/and assets, but also with the fact that they do not drink alcohol, and that they may actively participate in raising the children. In the Russian reality, Russian men – according to women – are alcoholics, drug addicts, irresponsible people, lazy and abusive (*Zamuzhem za polumesiatsem*). It should be noted here that the above opinion is not solely based on prejudices. Research in Russia shows that for every ten men, three are alcoholics, two are impotent, one is a drug addict and one is homosexual (Gamov and Pleshakova). There are three healthy candidates left to become a husband and a father. We should not be surprised with the choices of Russian women bearing in mind the above and the fact that they are largely unaware of the principles

of Muslim marriage and family in Islamic tradition. On the other hand, women, who are fully aware of the dangers of polygamy, or temporary marriage, coolly calculate the pros and cons. In the opinion of some women living in a polygynous relationship, it is better to share an honest man with four other wives, than live with a slapdash husband (*Zamuzhem za polumesiatsem*).

There is another form of polygynous relationship as a result of non-traditional forms of Islam in Russia – a Muslim Salafi man marries a Muslim woman (a neophyte). Marriages with converted people used to be rather rare due to reasons outside religion such as the need to protect cultural and group identity. But Imams from abroad, who are rather indifferent to these particular aspects, and who propagate polygyny, encourage men to search for wives amongst newly converted Muslim women. On the other hand – as Rais Suleymanov explains – Russian girls accepting Islam express their religious interest more than anyone else. They agree to take the status of a third or even fourth wife. They believe that this is what their religion expects them to do (*Mnogozhenstvo v Tatarstane*). A perfect example may be found in the case of a 54-year-old Imam from the Bornay mosque in Kazan. He married his third wife – a 19-year-old Russian girl; or an imam from a mosque in Almet'yevsk for whom two wives out of four are neophytes (*Mnogozhenstvo v Tatarstane*). Russian Muslim women explain the change of faiths and choice of husband as being due to the lack of “normal” Russian men. In their opinion, the “entire youth is drunk,” where as a polygynous marriage, even with an older man of a different nationality, offers the chance of experiencing family bliss and raising children (Gumanova). Sometimes it is the men, who are over the moon with a promise of an easy life in polygyny. They marry four wives (if they could, they would marry more) only so that they provide for him (Gumanova). They expect the wives to bring in some extra money, but this is no reciprocation from these men to provide for each wife as is expected according to Muslim law. And it does not matter to them that polygyny is not a religious order, but a possibility which does not have to be used. The attitude to polygyny is often embodied in questions publicly posed by the men: “I am Muslim, as far as I know I can be the lord of four wives” (Aliautdinov) writes 31 year old Aman who expects a positive response.

As the popularity of polygyny is on the increase, there has been a continuing discussion for the past 15 years about the legalisation of polygyny in the Russian Federation. The supporters of the legislative changes justify their stance by emphasising the need to improve the demographic situation of the country. They claim that it would start to correct the gender imbalance (a worrying disproportion in the number of women compared to men: resulting in a catastrophic low birth rate). The supporters bring up the results from the latest Census. The last one, done in 2010, showed that in Russia there are 11 million less men than women. Amongst the arguments there is the legal situation of existing polygynous relationships – the need to provide the right protection for wives and children from such

marriages (*Legalizovat' mnogozhenstvo v Rossii*). Finally, there is the practical or common-sense aspect of the situation. As such marriages exist, there is no reason why we should pretend that polygyny is not practised. The legal system should be adjusted to the status quo. A political party favouring polygyny in Russia is the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia. Even though it is not a key part of their programme, the individual activity of its representatives creates this impression in the media. Sergei Semenov, LDPR MP (at the time a member of the Committee for Women, Family and Youth at The State Duma) proposed on October 30, 1996 a project that legalised polygynous relationships. It ascertained that for second or other marriages to take place, all family members had to give their permission. The project was welcomed by authorities in Inigushetia, the Altai Republic and three other administrative regions (*Semevov Sergei Sergeevich*). In June 1999, the president of Inigushetia, probably inspired by earlier attempts at federal level, legalised polygyny in the territory of his republic (at least giving some semblance of legality to his decisions). According to the presidential decree: "In the Republic of Inigushetia male citizens have the right to enter into four marriages with female citizens who are not bound by any other marriage" (Nefliasheva, *Dva tyla ili dva fronta? O mnogozhenstve na Severnom Kavkaze*). The new regulation concerned only people who could fulfil two conditions: every wife should be treated equally; a man marrying again should have the funds to provide for wives and children born as a result of their new relationship. The president justified his decision citing the demographic situation in the republic. As a result of the Ingush Ossetian conflict (1992–1993) a lot of men had died. Inigushetia authorities believed that the nation's re-birth, while holding on to monogamous relationships, was not possible (Pestereva and Gridneva 3). But as a result of a Russian Federation High Court decision the decree of Ruslan Aushev was repealed as it was contradictory to federal law (mainly Family Code) – which was rather predictable. Nevertheless during the time the act was active in Inigushetia, 15 men registered, in registry offices, their marriages with a second or third wife (Gamov and Pleshakova). Attempts to change the law appeared in the following years. For example on October 25, 2000 the State Duma rejected a proposal to legalise polygyny, by an LDPR MP. Even though the proposed act failed, it is important to note here that 21 out of 450 voted for the changes (*Semevov Sergei Sergeevich*). On the regional level, the Inigushetia case was not repeated, but another Caucasus politician clearly declared his support for polygyny legalisation. Ramzan Kadyrov – the president of Chechnya in 2006 decided that polygyny was indispensable for the future of the republic. According to statistical data, there is between 9% to 18% less men than women (due to war) (Podorozhnova). The president believes that polygyny was a solution for young widows and those women who could not find a partner (Amirov).

The most well-known person in Russian public and political life, who wholeheartedly supports polygynous relations is Vladimir Zhirinovskiy – the leader of

LDPR. As he is known for his controversial opinions, he seems to be supporting polygamy as one of the answers to the country's social problems. In 2006, he stated that his party has always supported the legalisation of such relations and he, having one wife, would love to marry two Chechen women (Podorozhnova). In 2010, he argued in favour of polygyny because of the need to fight a demographic disaster: "30% of children are born here out of wedlock, and if a man has the right to marry another woman, who gave birth to his child, without the necessity of dissolving the marriage with the first wife, whom he respects. As he does not wish to destroy the happiness of the family we should place upon him the responsibility for the second family" (*Zhirinovskii predlagaiet legalizovat' mnogozhenstvo v Rossii*). The last opinions concerning polygyny spoken by Zhirinovskiy are from March 2014. When he spoke in The State Duma, during a round table discussion dedicated to the problem of alcoholism, he expressed the opinion that according to him, men in Muslim countries do not drink because they clearly have no time for this. Having many wives, and with each having several children, they have to think all the time about how to provide for them. Extending this logic, he proposed removing from the family code three redundant words – those relating to limiting polygyny (Griciuk).

Polygyny legalisation was also supported – which many may find surprising – by a politician who was extremely different from Zhirinovskiy, Boris Nemtsov – the late leader of the Republican Party of Russia: Party of National Freedom. The leader of the opposition never tried to conceal the fact that he had three families. What is worth noting is the fact that this had no influence on the popularity of the politician and it did not translate into a fall in the polls. In 2006, Nemtsov said during an interview that "millions of men here have several wives, who were civil partners, because there is no possibility to legalise their relationship. However, a question now needs to be asked: are we ready to legalise something that already exists? Either the Chinese in 50 years will live in Russia, or polygyny will be legal. If the choice is between the Chinese and polygyny, I choose polygyny" (Gamov and Pleshakova).

The last attempt to change the legal status of polygyny was done at the federal level in 2012. It went much further than any other proposals, even further than the requests of Russian Muslims. The proposal's premise was to allow both men and women to marry more than one person. In the opinion of Yelena Borisova – the Chairman of the committee for Women, Family and Youth in the State Duma – the proposed change was not interested in "introducing a new law, but to abolish article 14 of the Family Code, which forbids having more than one spouse. We understand that the legalisation of polygyny and polyandry is an important step and therefore the work on the proposed change did not last a month. We need to take into consideration the multi-nationality of Russia and the fact that we have many different religions here. For this reason, forbidding Muslims polygynous marriage,

for whom it is a centuries old tradition, we may be in effect be showing a lack of respect for them.” According to Russian custom and culture norms, only monogamous relationships are allowed, but in some social groups a relationship between a man and many women are quite popular. “If a man can build and provide for a family in which there is more than one wife, and the wives are ready to live together, then what is the point in putting legislative limits in the area concerning people’s personal lives” notes Borisova. “The abolition of polygyny’s prohibition is not a call for everyone to give up monogamy in favour of polygamy, however, every person in Russia should decide for him or herself what their private life should be and the state should not restrict this freedom in law” (*V Rossii budet razresheno mnogoženstvo*). Ultimately this revolutionary change was not accepted.

Russian society is not very enthusiastic about the question of polygyny. A poll of 1500 respondents from 2006 conducted by a public opinion research centre showed that 62% of those asked were against polygyny legalisation with only 10% in favour unsurprisingly, women (72%) far outweighed the men (50%) in their opposition to such changes. It is surprising that the religion practised did not determine the answer. Amongst those who described themselves as Muslim, only 16% supported the legalisation while 59% were against. Those against – irrespective of their religion – called upon Russian tradition and morality in which legal polygyny is not a typical phenomenon. Ten per cent of respondents believed that love and marriage was for two people alone. Eight per cent of those asked considered the practical side of the problem, claiming that a Russian man could not provide for another family. On the other hand, supporters believed that polygyny may be a perfect solution to the problem of the lack of men and would help in increasing the birth rate. Some people argued that they had the right to choose what life style they led (Vovk 73).

There is definitely a discrepancy in the Russian media regarding polygyny, specifically what its legal situation is. What is interesting is this discrepancy does not seem to be the problem of the authorities. It is difficult to determine here why, but clearly the government assumes that as society (at least a part of it) approves and practices polygyny, then the least dangerous practice seems to be in the strategy where state bodies should not bother (or punish) people living in polygynous relationships. At the same time there are no (even veiled) suggestions that gives hope the chance of legalising the practice, since proposals from controversial politicians and other parties cannot not be taken as serious propositions. This situation has a number of problems. On the one hand, the state officially advocates the protection of its citizens’ morality. On the other, it accepts polygyny and approves of the functioning of “unofficial” law, regulation, and customs outside the area controlled by the state. If someone is not shocked with this prevarication, there is another practical aspect which gives rise to social problems. Under the cover of a respect for Muslim society, there are situations that are tolerated in which some citizens run their lives

in some ill-defined sphere, and poorly regulated formal-legal environment. What is more the consequences of these ambiguities and regulations are challenges faced by the weakest group of citizens – women and children. It is this group who suffer from the consequences of malfunctioning polygynous relationships. They are deprived of legal protection and have no way to assert their rights. In Russia we deal with “approved polygyny” sanctioned by both Muslim society and the State. Simply put, all interested parties express approval for these relations (Zyzik 124). It may be seen as a temporary means to solve the problem, but on the other hand it seems difficult to call a phenomenon which has existed for 50 years “temporary.” Undoubtedly, one particular aspect of polygyny may be evaluated positively. According to Dilara Larina, a psychologist, it is a question of demography in the face of the catastrophic state in the health of the Russian ‘me’ (Fiodorova).

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