



Muslim migrants in the Tatarstan Republic: religious solidarity or social exclusion?

Alsu M. Garaeva¹, Liliya R. Nizamova¹

1 Kazan Federal University, info@ores.su

Abstract

The inflow of migrants from Central Asia to Russian Federation and their accommodation are examined via a specific case of the Republic of Tatarstan with significant numbers of Tatar population historically adhered to Islam and often called ‘the Muslim Republic’ of Russia. Hypothesis on a greater loyalty and tolerance of ethnic Tatars towards migrant fellow believers, the role of common Turkic and religious identity of local residents and newcomers is explored on a basis of empirical sociological data. It is argued that there is a great similarity in the attitudes of the ‘Muslim’ (Tatar) and ‘Christian’ (Russian) population of the republic towards migrants; they are characterized by high degree of negativism and latent xenophobia. The numbers of Tatars with positive and inclusive opinions is small, yet multicultural Tatarstan with local Muslim believers and numerous mosques is taken by migrants from Central Asia as a rather comfortable place to work and stay.

Keywords: Islam, migrants, Russia, social exclusion, Tatarstan, xenophobia.



1 INTRODUCTION

Historical multinationality of present day Russia is accompanied by strengthening of its polyethnicity due to the intensification of migration inflow. In recent years not only the largest Russian cities – Moscow and St. Petersburg – became a place of attraction for migrants; geography of arrivals covers the entire territory of the country, both urban and rural areas. The structure of the external migration, defined by the objectives of arrival is very diverse, but the most of the public attention is attracted to voluntary labor migration that causes the strongest debates. The number of immigrants from the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus - Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan prevails in it. This is mainly a new generation of young men who have grown up under the revival of Islam in the newly created independent post-Soviet states and do not have the Soviet experience that has the older generation in these countries.

Accommodation and possible naturalization of migrants in Russian society is the subject of fierce debates. References to the public statements of European leaders about the "collapse of multiculturalism" are used to justify the policies of exclusion of "aliens." Foreign researchers note the changing nature of public rhetoric against Muslim immigrant groups after the events of 11 September 2001 in the United States. The criticism of multiculturalism causes an orientation on the new integration policy, yet, it is stressed that it is still not clear whether it will become a supplement or an alternative to the strategies for maintaining of a cultural pluralism (Banting K., Kymlicka W., 2006; 2). The attention is attracted by the tendency of unification of goals, standards and convergence of the migration policy in the European Union, which replaces the national-specific approaches to the reception and integration of migrants; the forefront is taken by anti-discriminatory strategies, orientation on inclusive citizenship and parallel retreat from multicultural recognition (Joppke, 2007). In Europe Muslims are more and more often are labeled as "others", and "Muslim" in the public discourse is opposed to "European", Islam is associated with an unacceptable patriarchy, a religious intolerance and a tendency to support authoritarian regimes (Langenohl, 2014; 179).

The criticism of multiculturalism in Russia, that is sensitive to the negative experience of adaptation of Muslim migrants in Europe, is particularly susceptible to allegations on the threats of terrorism and extremism emanating from Central Asia migrants, to the prevalence of non-traditional for Russia radical Islamic movements undermining national security. In this context,



the practice of interaction with the newcomers in Tatarstan which is often referred to as a "Muslim republic" of Russia is of a particular interest. About half of the region's population – vast majority of ethnic Tatars – identify themselves as Muslims, there are about 1 400 mosques and Islamic educational institutions, religious holidays are celebrated.

2 STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

In Tatarstan the dominant population are ethnic Tatars [53% according to the All-Russia Population Census held in 2010]; across the country their quantity does not exceed 3.9% (All-Russia Population Census held in 2010). Russians representing the majority in the country markedly yield in the Republic of Tatarstan to the number of Tatars, with no more than 40% of the population. The policy of strengthening of the territorial independence and autonomy (Derrick, 2008), or as identified by other authors, of national sovereignty (Rorlich, 1999; Faller, 2002), contributed to the development of a distinctive ethno-national identity of the Tatars. It contributed to the growth of religious consciousness and rebirth Islam as the religion of their ancestors. Tatarstan is a multicultural republic, which is the territory of fusion of Slavic and Turkic cultures, of Christian and Muslim religions. Influx of migrants into the republic from neighboring countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus allows to evaluate the Turkic loyalty of the Tatar population and the degree of religious solidarity with correligionists.

The empirical base of this study was the data of the mass survey of the population Republic of Tatarstan held in 2012 (1 590 respondents of 18 years of age and older), statistical materials and departmental documents (Federal Migration Service of Russia (hereinafter FMS), the Ministry of Health and Social Development), discourse analysis of Tatarstan's press for the period 2013 – 2014, interviews with migrants and employers.

According to the Department of the FMS in Tatarstan, the greatest increase in immigrants coming from Uzbekistan (33%), Tajikistan (10%), Azerbayzhdan (6%), Kazakhstan (5%), Kyrgyzstan and other countries was observed. Citizens of Turkey dominated among migrant workers from the 'far abroad' foreign countries. As it was evidenced during the interviews with migrants, they consider themselves Muslims, try to observe religious precepts and customs, so Tatarstan with its numerous mosques and close in terms of faith population is an attractive and generally comfortable place to stay.



3 RESULTS

The mass survey in the Republic of Tatarstan showed that the positions of the Tatars and Russians in the region in regard to migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus are basically similar. They are expressed in a discreet neutrality (41-43% of respondents) that is combined with both hidden and explicit negativity and xenophobia. The proportion of those who think of the presence of newcomers in a positive manner (12%) is several times inferior to the number of those who have expressed their opposition to the migrants (39% against work migrants, 42% against permanent residence). More or less certain social exclusion of foreigners is a significant concurrence for a position of cautious neutrality and indicates a specific potential for tensions in the interaction between the local population and the migrants.

The state of mass consciousness of Tatars in the republic is segmented, mosaic and even contradictory. There is a small percentage of those who perceive immigrants positively and focus on their social inclusion into the local or regional community, but the rest, and they prevail, have neutral or negative attitude in regard to foreigners from Central Asia, detachment and negativism are even slightly more common.

On the one hand, among those who treat the migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus states in a confidently positive way (this position is shared by a minimum number of respondents – only 6% of surveyed), Tatars have the vast majority, there are nearly two times more Tatars than Russians who express a positive attitude. On the other hand, the proportion of Russians having a neutral position is higher than among Tatars (respectively 48% and 39% for work migrants, 43% and 38% for permanent residence). The proportion of those who estimate immigrants negatively among Tatars and Russians is approximately equal (39% Russians and 41% Tatars in regard to work immigrants, 42% and 43%, respectively – in relation to migrants intending to stay for a permanent residence). However, if the position of neutrality among ethnic Russians is predominant, more or less certain negativism prevails among Tatars.

Sociological project examined also to which extent the local population is opened to relations with migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus at various distances of the social interaction: "far" distance (as new residents of Tatarstan and potential Russian co-nationals), "medium" (as co-workers and neighbors) and "close" (as a spouse and a member of the family). It is not surprising that the private sphere of family and kinship is the most closed to the representatives of outgroups. It is more noteworthy that the level of negativity for the 'far' social



roles is higher than for medium distance of interaction with newcomers: only 9% of Tatarstan population are ready to accept immigrants as fellow citizens and almost 47% (this is the dominant position) do not agree with such perspective, having also a significant proportion (37-38%) of respondents who remained neutral. A possible medium distance interaction – as with co-workers – is estimated more calmly, negative views in this case are more rare (40%). The position of Tatars and Russians onto this issue is strongly similar, therefore, a thesis of cultural and religious solidarity with foreign coreligionist is not seriously confirmed.

4 DISCUSSION

Another 5 - 7 years ago, the presence of migrants in Tatarstan did not cause any concern, and the relationship between locals and newcomers was estimated as prosperous. In addition, the situation in the regions of Russia attracted little attention because the main migration flow was focused on Moscow and St. Petersburg or border areas. The acuteness of the issue was linked directly to the number of migrants; it was not without reason assumed that the greater the migration burden on the territory, the higher is the possibility of conflicts with the local population. However, over time it became clear that the picture is much more complicated. In some regions even a small number of newcomers (not necessarily being foreigners) provoked social tensions (Grigoriev, 2007). The authors of the nationwide survey of cross-border migration into the country regions saw in this a manifestation of psychology of an "aggressive vigilance" and of behavioral strategies that can be qualified as an "anticipatory vengeance" however in a culturally heterogeneous community of Tatarstan "there [was] already nothing to lose" in this sense." (Golunov, 2008; 287).

Therefore, the first conflicts between migrants and residents of Tatarstan settlements – villages Shumkovo and Kurmanaevo – were a surprise. Events in Kurmanaevo questioned the thesis of cultural and religious affinity with people from Central Asia professing Islam. One of the main accusations addressed to migrants (it is notably often heard also in other conflict situations in the country, regardless of regional location), laid in the fact that the Tajiks who arrived in the village showed disrespect to the local people and local customs.

The fact that conflicts did not happen in Kazan, the capital of the republic with a population of over 1 million people but in the countryside, did not fit into the above logic ("the more migrants, the more difficult is their adaptation and integration"). This situation also was contradictory to the image of Tatarstan as an "attractive region for resettlement and migrant labor" (Ismagilov, 2014). Support of Tajiks on behalf of Tatars in the face of the local Muslim clergy



contributed indeed to their legal settlement in the village. Muslim solidarity was directly pointed out by the press as a motive for the actions of the local imams (Sulejmanov, 2013). However, most part of the local population – who are ethnic Tatars – demanded that the workers leave the village, accusing local officials and clergy of corruption. The media of the Republic widely covered the conflict in the Tatar village Kurmanaevo, with a total of just over 700 residents, with a few settled there Tajik families. Journalists noted: "although Tatarstan authorities kept for a while silence about this incident, they still perceived the conflicts in Shumkovo and Kurmanaevo as a wake-up call" (Electronic Newspaper of Republic of Tatarstan, 2013).

Mass survey data states that the percentage of those hostile to migrants in the countryside is nearly the same as in the metropolitan Kazan, where there is the highest concentration of newcomers. Consequently, even despite a small influx of migrants the countryside, notable for its relative cultural homogeneity, adherence to the settled way of life and a severe social and economic deprivation, becomes the environment the least disposed to the social inclusion of the "others". It is nutrient for xenophobia not only to foreigners, but generally to the representatives of the alien nationality.

Migratory pressure on the Republic's capital – the city of Kazan, where about 70% of work permits to migrants from abroad are registered – enhances the competition for an access to social benefits in terms of the more acutely perceived socio-economic inequality, widespread of an incomplete and shadow employment of the local population. On a wider scale, both in rural and urban areas, there is an unwillingness to accept transformation of social relations in the country with its new hierarchies, competition, balance of power, larger openness of the borders, human mobility and dynamism of social practices.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Interpretation of the obtained empirical data foresees its evaluation from the perspective of a post-secular society (Habermas, 2006). The religious situation in the region is characterized by a number of "paradoxes" and contradictions. The vast majority of Tatars consider themselves as believers, associate themselves with Islam, acting at the same time massively more as "non-practicing ethnic Muslims" who attend mosques rarely or not at all, do not fast and do not carry out canonical prayers. Secular orienteers and benchmarks continue to have a broad support, the idea of approval of a state religion is rejected by the majority, although the federal and regional



authorities support the traditional churches in order to enhance their multifaceted impact on the society. The post-secular society increases the importance of an inter-religious dialogue, which is rather successfully carried out in the region. Under these conditions intra-religious differences and divergences of points of view became more vulnerable; intra-confessional conflicts are often projected into the relations of the local population with the migrants.

Since 2012, when a resonant attempt at Mufti of the Republic of Tatarstan was committed in Kazan, the counteraction to the religious extremism and Wahhabism as well as support of typical for the republic traditional Islam have become important components of the domestic and migration policy of Russia and Tatarstan. Mass media reports on the involvement of migrants in the spread of radical ideas contributed to the anti-migrant attitudes and became an integral part of a restrictive immigration discourse that emerged in the country; it largely undermines the cultural and religious solidarity with fellow believers from neighboring countries.

Therefore, the expectations of migrants arriving in Kazan and Tatarstan as in a "Muslim region" where they can count on the solidarity on the part of Tatar population are not always justified. On the one hand, the Republic of Tatarstan appears to be a more comfortable for Muslims and migrant workers area than many others, and the relationship between the locals and newcomers are evaluated as "calm". Besides the regional ethno-cultural policy is aimed at the strengthening of tolerance and favorable climate of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional relations. On the other hand, mass concerns, socio-psychological dissatisfaction and vigilance of the population in face of the current socio-economic reforms and socio-cultural transformations become foundation for the hidden and explicit negativity towards migrants and diverse manifestations of xenophobia. They are aggravated by the social class polarization, the reduction of social obligations of the state, the intensified competition for access to social benefits. Increasing openness and changeability of the society on a global scale, multiplication of various social risks and uncertainty – all these diverse factors contribute to actualization of mass ethnic, racial and religious prejudices and phobias in the regional as well as in the national arenas.

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