Muslim Immigration—Hard Task for the EU

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Abstract: The article studies the range of problems emerging due to the growing immigration from Muslim countries into the EU. While describing functions of immigrants’ communities the authors focus on their political role in receiving states. The study of historical development of government-diaspora relations in the three cases of the UK, France and Germany shows that the role and influence of diaspora members in these countries does not reflect their economic and cultural role, which in the future might threaten the EU security, unless the countries develop a new approach to their assimilation policies.

Key words: Immigration • Muslim communities • Assimilation and “acculturation” policies • Identities • “Euro-Islam”

INTRODUCTION

Immigration from Muslim countries into the EU is becoming a priority in today’s agenda of key European states [1, 2]. After the end of the Second World War Western Europe has become one of the main attractions for immigrants from poor countries due to their ties with some European states since the era of colonialism, the geographical proximity and the demand of European industries for cheap labor force.

On the one hand, due to aging of Europeans and their depopulation [3] immigration is perceived as a vital source for economic development. On the other, it causes a variety of cultural, political and socio-economic problems that pose a threat to social stability and national identity [4].

European politicians – as well as an increasing number of Western scholars – have been paying special attention to Muslim communities lately. However, setbacks in assimilation strategies and lack of efficient integration policy for immigrants from other cultures along with inevitable soaring of migration flows pose a serious challenge for the EU nation-states. As a result, the attempts to consolidate European societies by means of multiculturalism are often bound to lead to their fragmentation without any notable positive effects.

The mentioned above facts stipulate the relevance and importance of the research. It aims to determine trends and characteristics of Muslim immigration in Western Europe, to apprehend the impact of Muslim immigration for European states and offer ways of solving the existing problems.

Role of Diasporas: There are two main characteristics of diasporas in modern Europe: one of them deals with their growing economic influence and the other concerns their so-called “preservation” function.

First of all, immigrants that compose a community may have specific work skills that the population of the receiving country lacks. These work skills and economic specializations may stem from immigrants’ ethnic and cultural characteristics formed by economic and cultural patterns that they traditionally follow under specific geographic and social conditions.

Secondly, immigrant communities may in some cases accumulate large sums of money and other assets, which leads to their domination in various economic spheres. For instance, trade in South-East Asia is traditionally controlled by Chinese, Indian and Arab communities. In Europe and the Middle East Turkish capital is becoming more and more influential, which brings along strengthening of the country’s political weight in the world.
Thirdly, ethnic communities’ economic leadership is underpinned by their socio-demographic structure. The majority of immigrants are usually highly educated males of working age with professional skills who are more economically active than their compatriots at home. This makes them more successful than the natives of the receiving country, which reflects in higher living standards.

Finally, an important factor underlying economic prosperity is corporate culture of communities. While society in a receiving country is largely atomized, members of communities try to hold on to each other. The latter is especially relevant to Muslims. This interconnection manifests in the intra-community relations of mutual assistance among its members and the relations of a community with its motherland, native ethnic groups and other communities with the same – or similar – traditions or religious beliefs.

Apart from that, communities follow the aim of “preservation” [5], which includes: preservation of the native language, ethnic culture and identity as well as preservation of social rights. Culture plays the most important role in communities’ self-identification. Since communities lack such attributes of identity as territory, political institutes or specific economic structure, culture becomes the only identification factor for them. As far as social rights are concerned, community members are very sensitive to any discrimination from the receiving nation.

Along with economic and cultural influence communities are beginning to play political role both in receiving countries and on the international arena. The former manifests in electoral and other political processes. The latter stems from the fact that communities are closely connected to their native countries and could promote interests of their states.

In this respect Turkey, which pays special attention to maintaining ties with its former citizens, is a striking example. Turks who are German residents have become in a way a political lever for the country’s foreign policy. Turkish government tries to use them when lobbying its political and economic interests in Germany. Turkey is interested in becoming a full-fledged EU member, but it faces opposition from the ruling Christian Democrats led by Angela Merkel. Accordingly, Turkey plans to promote its interests by increasing a number of politicians with Turkish background. For instance, one of the ardent advocates of full EU membership for Turkey is Cem Özdemir, a chairman of Alliance ’90/The Greens in Germany, who supports multiculturalism and strengthening of Turkish communities.

That said, it is necessary to study the mechanisms of cooperation between a community and a receiving state, a community and its native country and transnational cooperation of communities. The United Kingdom, France and Germany are examples of three different types of government-community cooperation. The differences lie both in the “acculturation”, i.e. assimilation, policies adopted by the EU governments and in traditional characteristics of Muslim communities in the countries.

The UK Case: A key feature of Muslim communities in the UK is that they are highly organized with the number of different Muslim organizations growing through the second half of the 20th century. At the meantime the heterogenous Islamic ethnic groups of Pakistani, Turkish, Iranian and Arab origin have been trying with limited success to consolidate their positions in the British society by establishing a unified structure. Their efforts to assert the rights of Muslims in the UK [6] facilitated their consolidation and have made them a part of the British political life by the beginning of the 21st century.

An important step towards strengthening the Muslim community was the establishment of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) in 1997. It united more than 350 organizations and funds. The MCB principal mission was to coordinate the Muslim organizations in the country, promote Islam and maintain ties with the countries of origin. The MCB functions in close cooperation with the British government and organizes consultations with ministers and shadow cabinet members on the matters of Muslim community. The government considers MCB an important loyal body that reflects interests of the majority of the Muslims. It plays great role in countering islamophobia and extremism in the society.

At the same time, a number of radical Muslim organizations operate in the UK. They are associated with the countries of the Middle East both ideologically and financially and instead of bridging the gap between ethnic communities only exacerbate tensions between British natives and Muslim communities. The most notorious are Hizb ut-Tahrir [7] and Al-Muhajiroun.

Nonetheless, Muslim organizations in the UK mostly prefer to use legal political methods, even though some of them advocate sweeping reforms. Ideological platform has also drastically changed under the influence of the British society. As a result of socio-political development of the Muslim community during the recent decades Muslim representation in governing bodies has been increasing and the community itself is growing strong [8].
It is possible to distinguish three forms of Muslims’ political influence. Firstly, some members of the Muslim community are becoming directly involved into political life of Europe. Secondly, we are witnessing the rise of a so-called “political Islam” movement, which has no immediate connection with migration problem. According to Olivier Roy, the roots of “political Islam” go back to leftist radical movements of the 1960s with their idea of revolution of “poor South” against “wealthy North” [9]. Thirdly, the interconnection of problems related to Islam and those concerning immigration and naturalization bring sweeping changes to the political life of Western countries, creating new political identities.

There are specific national characteristics of the Muslim disaffection. Though the British Government tries to refrain from interfering into specific Muslim problems and implement cautious and coherent policy towards the Muslim community, the latter is often discontent with its position especially concerning the discrimination against it. For instance, soon after the Gulf War (1990-91) a British company in Sheffield announced that it was not going to employ Muslims any more. The following court appeal in which the company was accused of violating the Race Relations Act 1968 was not satisfied on the grounds that while the Muslims do not constitute a separate race.

Apart from that, some Muslim groups are trying to introduce a norm allowing to apply Sharia laws on personal status towards Muslims. In a compromise decision Muslims were allowed to have their case tried by a Muslim court which takes into consideration Sharia laws as long as they do not contradict national legislation. Thus, the UK case is an example of governmental efforts to involve Muslims into socio-political life and make them a political partner.

**The French Case:** Another case of community-government cooperation is France with its tradition of secular public life and religion as a part of personal life exclusively. Most importantly, the French Muslim community is extremely atomized. There is a number of quite large Arab Muslim organizations established in the country since late 1970s.

The governmental policy towards the Muslim community characterized by continuous efforts to set up a dialogue with its members has been seriously hindered by ethnical, cultural and ideological diversity of the French Muslims. Still the main goal of the French state is integration of Muslims into social and cultural life on the terms that do not contradict the republican form of government.

In 1999 Minister of domestic affairs Jean-Pierre Chevènement offered various Islamic associations to sign a document that set main legal framework of cooperation between the government and the Muslim community. No sooner than December 20, 2002 the conference in Paris declared the establishment of a consolidated organization of French Muslims – the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM). The new organization’s executive committee consisted of the leaders of the three largest Muslim organizations: the Union of Muslim leftists, the National Federation of the Muslims of France and Paris Mosque. The main goal of the organization was to represent French Muslims and protect their interests in the government [10].

In the case of France the divide between the Muslims goes not along ethnic lines but rather is determined by political views and partly by their affiliation with a certain movement in Islam. Today it is obvious that the new organization will be unable to unite the Muslims of France. The Council will represent just some political and religious Muslim movements. It is worrisome, however, that the French government is eager to communicate with the most conservative part of the Muslim community while practically ignoring the Muslims who have already adjusted to living in France and have accepted its political culture.

**The German Case:** The third case is the relations of German government with its Muslim community. Its government first encountered Islam in World War I when Turkey was its major ally. Since that time the ties between Germany and Turkey have been developing and today Turks are the majority of the German Muslim community (there are also relatively small Iranian Shia communities).

It is worth mentioning that within German Turkish communities some organizations prohibited in Turkey were allowed and functioned. Among these were Islamist Suleimany, nationalist Milli Görüş, Nazi Grey Wolves, as well as Alawis, Dervish orders [11] and Kurdish groups.

Throughout last 60 years many members of the Turkish diaspora have acquired assets, received good education, become German citizens and most importantly started to identify themselves as Germans. Turkish expatriates have significantly benefited the German economy and become involved in political and cultural life. Every year the number of German politicians with Turkish origin grows. Such politicians promote Turkish businessmen.
Turkish government actively supports the Turkish community in Germany. Since the 1970s Turkey has carried out a number of projects in cultural and educational spheres. It sponsors building of mosques and schools, where teaching is in Turkish. Apart from that, Turkey considered the interests of the emigrants when amending the citizenship law. Now if the receiving country prohibits dual citizenship the Turkish law allows emigrants to have a so-called “Blue Card”, which grants them almost the same rights as the Turkish citizens have, it also allows exemption from conscription or some alternatives to it for the Turks permanently living abroad.

Turkish Muslim organizations in Germany are known to be the most disciplined and effective. They implement a series of projects targeting the German natives, such as educating about Islam, organizing open days in mosques for school trips [12]. In Germany the development of Muslim organizations is often spontaneous, which resembles the Turkish concept of “managed chaos”. German government has no political strategy towards Muslims and maintains dialogue with those who seek it, i.e. with Muslim organizations that have emerged on their own without any interference of the government.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the three models of Muslim communities’ assimilation in Europe show that the history of their relations with respective governments and their adaptation to life in the mentioned European societies have influenced them culturally, despite the “preservation” function of ethnic communities studied in the second part of the article.

In other words, European social and political realities, as well as interaction of various ethnic groups within Muslim communities, make Muslims search for new identity. Thus emerges the concept of “Euro-Islam” promoted mostly by French and German Muslims. “Euro-Islam” is, in fact, a whole new religion, which not all members of European Muslim communities are ready to accept. Nonetheless, it is obvious that Muslim assimilation, or “acculturation”, cannot take place with the Islamic identity preserved unchanged. This “acculturation” is only possible in the framework of the European political and cultural realities. The study demonstrates that in the German and French Muslims are scarcely willing to accept the fact, whereas in the UK both the communities and the government have been trying to work out this framework.

Naturally, success of Muslims’ participation in the life of European societies depends on many conditions, most importantly – on socio-political climate of a country and specific characteristics of the communities, their ability to establish organizations and groups of influence and to come to terms with each other settling various ethnic and religious differences.

However, Muslims do not have much influence on political life in Western Europe. Less than a half of them have the EU citizenship, Muslim organizations are disengaged and cannot come up with a single agenda. Some extremist organizations refuse to participate in social life at all. Apart from that, the swelling Muslim diaspora in Europe causes political problems manifested, for instance, in demonstrations in support of coreligionists in European capitals in front of US and Israeli Embassies. In general, the number of extremist Muslims in Europe is small, but they greatly depend on politics enacted by national governments.

Western Europe may face serious problems if it does not work out a coherent policy towards Muslim communities and Islamic organizations. Even radical Islamist organizations that are not very popular among European Muslims, are supported by international Islamist organizations. They provide human resources and perform coordinating and financial functions within international criminal organizations. On their own they do not pose any serious threat, but as they are cells of terrorist network and elements of Muslim economic pyramids in the long run they may influence European politics through economic leverages.

REFERENCES