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DOES THE ISLAMIC “PROBLEM” EXIST IN POLAND? POLISH MUSLIMS IN THE DAYS OF INTEGRATION AND OPENING OF THE BORDERS IN EUROPE

1. INTRODUCTION

For several years, Western Europe, especially the “old” states of European Union are shaken by the anxieties of religious origin, which significantly influence the safety destabilization of the identity of individuals and communities who live in those countries. Those, who call themselves the zealous believers of Islam, are responsible for most of such situations. They justify their extreme activities by the principles of their religion. These activities usually take the form of terrorist acts. Victims of these, often fatal acts, are always innocent people. For politicians from many countries, the struggle with this phenomenon, defined as Muslim fundamentalism, became an important element of their public activity¹. Also a large part of society of these countries regards the fight against the Islamic fundamentalism as one of the biggest challenges of contemporary Europe. Unfortunately, in common opinion the phenomenon of the fundamentalism is treated identically with Islam, which results in acknowledging all Islam believers as a potential threat to Europe’s safety. However, a clear distinction should be introduced between Muslim fundamentalism and Muslim religion. Let us remember, that Islam is a divine universal religion, therefore the difference between Islam and fundamentalism is the same as in the case of other

¹ This phenomenon is common in many countries of so-called Old Europe, especially those, where large clusters of Islam believers can be found (France, Germany, Great Britain), but also those where the number of Muslims, although not significant in absolute values, is large in comparison to the whole population (Benelux countries).

universal religions. The connection between Muslim fundamentalism and Muslim religion is reduced to the statement that totalitarian ideology is based on consciously chosen element, which is Islam. Fundamentalism recognizes only the morality which is selectively chosen from its own religion and which is subjected to political and absolute processes. Muslim fundamentalism is characterized mainly by the rejection of democracy, seen as the “solution imported from the West”, and rejection of contemporary countries based on sovereignty of their nations, seen as enemies of Islam, that serve to break the Muslim community apart. All these activities are interpreted by fundamentalists as the plot of the West, whose aim is to stretch its domination over the “Islamic world”. Therefore, fundamentalists are striving to rescue the world from Western values.

Having in mind this essential difference, it is worth to deliberate if the so-called Islamic problem exists in Poland. The aim of the article is to show the local Muslims’ clusters – their origin, socio-ethnic structures and chosen spheres of their activity, together with the influence of integration and opening of borders in Europe on this minority.

2. MUSLIMS’ ORIGINS WITHIN POLISH TERRITORIES

First Muslims reached Polish territories in the 13th century, mainly as merchants, travelers, and invaders fighting in Mongolians armies. However, they have not created permanent clusters. Muslim community in Polish territories originates from Tatars, who derive from Mongol population which assimilated with the Turkish people. Tatars, who in the 14th century arrived in the Great Duchy of Lithuania, were usually refugees from the Golden Horde and prisoners of war. Together with their arrival in the Polish-Lithuanian state territories, the durable development of Tatar-Muslim colonization started (Fig. 1).

Many of the Tatar-Muslim clusters formed during this period, survived until the Second World War, despite the gradual assimilation of Tatar population with the ethnically, culturally and religiously strange surroundings, and even in spite of the emigration of some of their representatives (Fig. 2). After the war, as a result of state borders’ change, only a few clusters of Muslims of Tatar origin remained in Poland. During the repatriation, part of Muslims from the so-called borderlands has joined them and settled in the so-called Regained Territories.

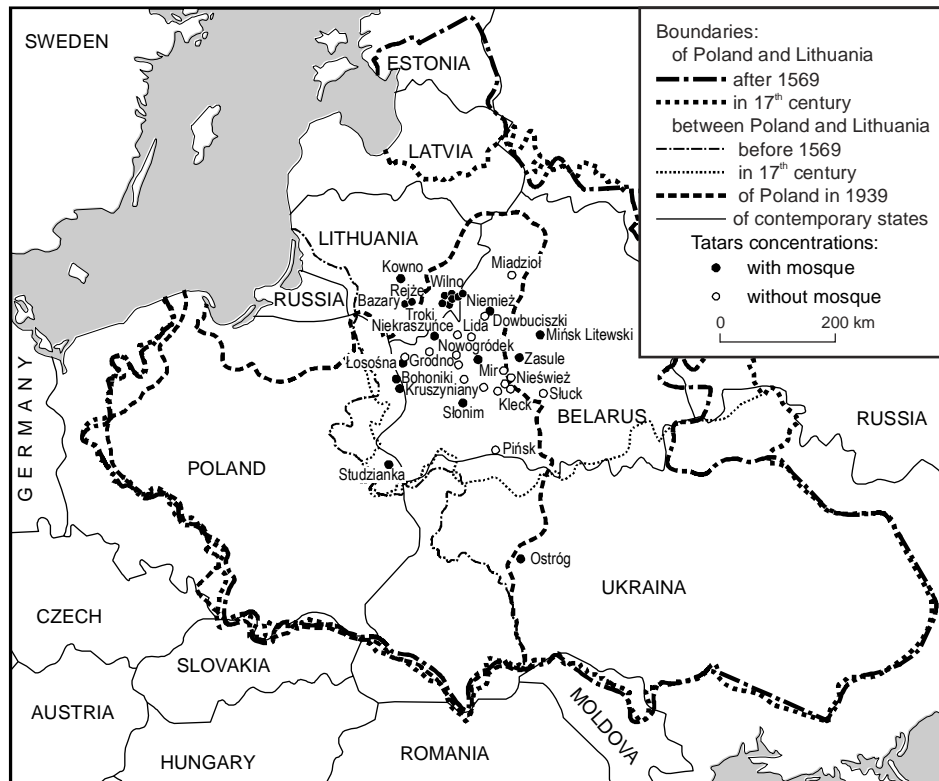
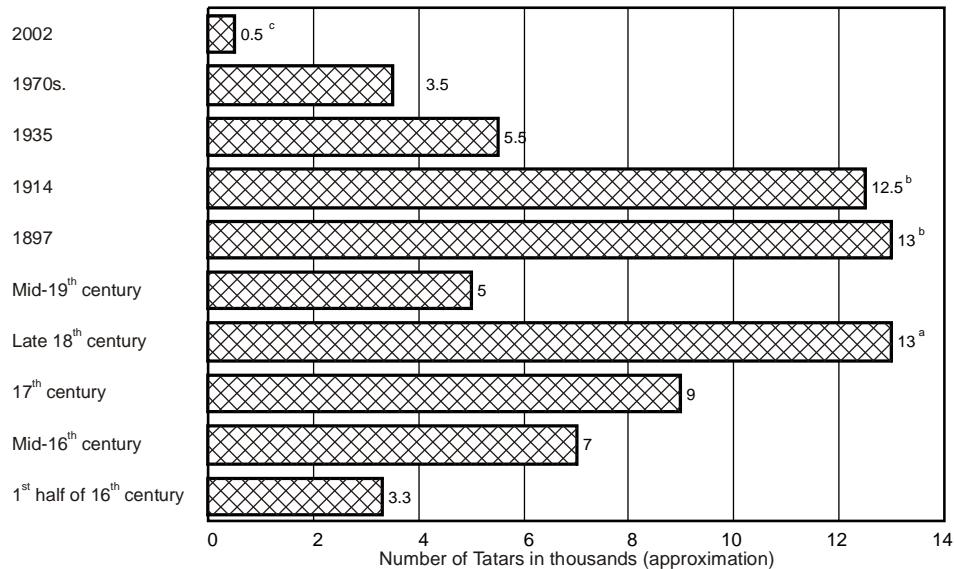


Fig. 1. The largest Tatar clusters (16–17th century)

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The role, which the Tatars played in the development of Muslim clusters in Polish territories, is enormous. Through centuries they were predominant, if not sole Islam believers in Poland. However, together with development of their colonization, some Muslims of different ethnic origin also reached Poland. As a result of political events, such as annexation of part of Polish territories by the Russian Empire, but also economic processes connected with development of the industry, particularly in 19th century, and new cultural trends which, among others, were bringing the interest of Orient culture, a number of Muslim merchants and small entrepreneurs arrived in Poland from Russia (mainly from the Crimea), Caucasus, Persia, Turkey and Arabian territories. Polish territories were also being populated by the representatives of Russian army and clergy, representing Russian authorities, who originated from Crimean Tatars, Azeris, Bashkirs, Uzbeks and Cherkas and finally, by the experts on Islamic art, artists and craftsmen.



^a Only Tatar land-owners along with their families are taken into account.

^b Including Tatars serving in Russian Army.

^c According to data taken from the 2002 census.

Fig. 2. Changes in number of Tatar population in Poland, from the early 16th century until 2002
Source: Authors' own elaboration

Intensification of contacts of independent Poland on the international arena in the 20th century was conducive to the inflow of subsequent immigrant groups from Muslim countries, especially: diplomats in the 1960s and on larger scale in 1970s – students and scientists. Together with the beginning of constitutional changes in Poland in 1990s, also a number of Muslim businessmen started to settle in Poland. However, it needs to be emphasized that only some groups of these people have settled in Poland for good. Muslim immigrant communities were also inhabited by the refugees – people, who reached Poland because of a justified fear of persecutions within their home countries. The persecutions had religious, national or political background. In addition to the aforementioned groups, Muslim minority also consists of people of Polish nationality who converted to Islam as a result of various influences (family, culture, tourism) of an Islamic tradition (both in Poland and beyond it), but also because of representing some specific social attitudes (the desire to challenge the existing social order).

3. ETHNIC STRUCTURE AND CHOSEN SPHERES OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY OF MUSLIMS IN POLAND

During the last two decades, the visible growth of Muslims’ number in Poland was observed. In the nineties, there were approximately 5 thousand Muslims in Poland, originating mainly from Tatar environment. According to various sources, there are between 20 and 30 thousand Muslims in contemporary Poland. There are between 2 and 5 thousand Tatars and people of Tatar origin among them, approx. 16–20 thousand foreigners (including approx. 7 thousand with permanent residence card), and also approx. 2 thousand Poles who converted to Islam (Fig. 3). One should suppose that this dynamically growing number of Muslims is owed to immigrants, converted Polish citizens, and also Polish Tatars who remained loyal to their beliefs. However, according to the National Census from 2002, the Tatar nationality (not equivalent with the religious identity) was declared only by 447 people. The period of the dynamic growth of Muslims’ number in Poland, is the time of both, principal transformation of the socio-ethnic structure of this community, as well as transformation of many spheres of its religious activity. While analyzing these issues, it is worth to link them with two principal groups of the described community: the Muslims of Tatar origin, and Muslim immigrants and people converted to Islam. Such approach allows to characterize possible differences between them, but also to seize the nature of change of this religious community as a whole.

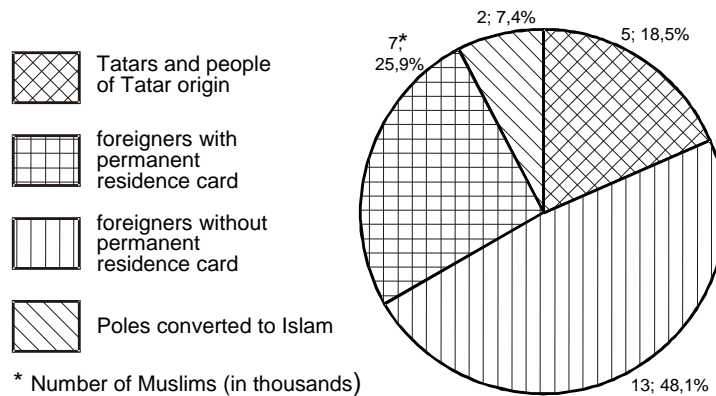


Fig. 3. The socio-ethnic structure of Muslims in Poland
Source: Authors’ own elaboration

Taking under consideration the ethnic consciousness of Muslim descendants living in Poland for centuries, one can notice that almost 60% of them declare themselves as Poles of Tatar origin, and subsequently as Polish Tatars – 33.3% or simply as Poles – 6.7%². Among the respondents, there were no people declaring themselves as Tatars. These indications prove the strong identification of these people with Poland as their motherland, with simultaneous consciousness of their Tatar roots. The Muslims with non-Tatar roots generally identify themselves with the countries of their origin. The rule of gradation, which is expressed in a double national identity, does not apply in their case, as opposed to people of Tatar origin. This group includes: Arabs, Poles, Iraqis, Palestinians and other nationalities.

For almost 90% of these people, their Tatar origin implies the membership in Muslim religious community. What is interesting, however, is the fact that only for 55% of the people of Tatar origin the Sunni faction of Islam, to which they belong, is of significant importance. About 45% however, considers themselves simply as Muslims, without identifying themselves with any specific faction. In case of people of non-Tatar nationality, such a declaration was made by considerably less people – 31%. Remaining respondents, declared their membership unambiguously: 64% to Sunni Islam and 5% to Shiite Islam. Existing division of Islam serves for those people as an essential basis of reference. This stands for higher degree of their religious consciousness, derived from the environment of their origin.

Differences between both analyzed groups are also reflected in the relation of their representatives to the confessed faith. In case of Tatars, believers who are practicing their religion only occasionally (63.4%) predominate; whereas regular practices are declared by almost 29%. Among the immigrants, the largest group consists of regularly practicing believers (49%). Irregular religious practices are reported by about 46%.

The important testimony of Muslim religious activity is to obey the fasts which are one of the pillars of Islam. This duty is fulfilled by 70% of believers of Tatar origin (not fulfilled by 8.3%) and by 97% of the so-called new immigrants.

Even a larger difference between both groups of Islam believers can be observed in case of knowledge of Arabic language, which is Muslim liturgical language. 94.5% of Muslims who recently arrived in Poland and 35% of those who originate from the community living here for generations

² 115 Muslims (60- of Tatar and 55- of non-Tatar origin) participated in the questionnaire.

declare fluent or partial knowledge of the Arabic language. The knowledge of this language among the representatives of the first group is evident – the majority of them arrived in Poland from Arabic countries. Also a small degree of knowledge of Arabic language among Tatars is explicable. During many years of their existence in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth they were deprived of possibility to use this language frequently in contacts with other Muslims. Instead, they used mainly Tatar language and with time – as they assimilated into culturally and ethnically strange surroundings – also Polish and rarely Lithuanian. Therefore, even those “Polish Tatars” who declare partial knowledge of Arabic language, generally treat it as a skill of reading liturgical texts (sometimes without understanding of their content) or as knowledge of the basic words of this language.

The spatial distribution of contacts with coreligionists from other countries also shows significant differences in case of both analyzed groups. Among “Polish Tatars” most of their contacts live in Lithuania and Byelorussia, respectively 32% and 30%. Contacts with Muslims from these countries take a form of maintaining the family and social ties with Tatars who live there, with whom, before the war they shared the same citizenship. On the other hand, Muslims of non-Tatar origin do not indicate any contacts with Muslims from across the eastern Polish border. They maintain all kinds of ties with coreligionists living mainly in Poland (83%) or in Islamic countries, usually of their origin (17%).

Some important aspects about mutual perception of Muslims of Tatar and non-Tatar origin also reflect the relations within the Muslim community in Poland. A very positive or positive attitude towards Muslims who arrived in Poland recently is declared by 67% of “Tatars”. The negative attitude, resulting from cultural differences, is declared only by 8%. Similarly, 71% of non-Tatar Muslims declares a very positive or positive attitude towards their Tatar coreligionists. Both attitudes are conditioned by their common religion, which is a durable link between all Muslims, regardless of their nationality or ethnic origin. Undoubtedly, the positive attitude towards “Tatars” results from the respect, as for over six hundred years they fostered their beliefs in a religiously strange surrounding.

Taking into consideration the degree of rooting of both Muslim groups in Poland and having in mind the varied, sometimes very negative relations between Muslim environments and majorities surrounding them in Western European countries, the opinion of “Polish” Muslims about Poles is a very interesting one. Almost 91% of Polish Tatars speak about them in a very positive or positive way. Such opinions are conditioned by the common

history of both groups characterized by mutual respect, lack of larger conflicts and the possibility of obtaining high ranks by Polish Tatars (e.g. knighthood) and possessing military formations or land endowments. Such positive opinions among Islam believers also result from their sense of national awareness. Polish Tatars, in their declaration of national identification, express their relationship with Poland by defining themselves as “Poles”, “Polish Tatars” or “Poles of the Tatar origin”.

Such an enthusiastic attitude towards Poles is not expressed by Muslims of non-Tatar origin, although their opinions are not significantly different from their Tatar coreligionists. Very positive and positive opinions about Poles is declared by 60% of them, negative opinions (which were not observed among Tatars) – 16%. The favorable opinions result from the fact that these groups did not experience any verbal or physical manifestation of aversion from the Polish environment. The mutual negative relations are usually a consequence of Polish attitudes towards Muslims who are treated equally with the representatives of extreme fundamentalists and Islamic terrorists.

The Muslims’ formal distinction between those living in Poland for generations, those who arrived here recently and those who converted, is also reflected in their organizational membership. “Tatars” are usually associated within Muslim Religious Association. Their number exceeds 5 thousand members. Poles, who converted to Islam, usually belong to two Shiite communities – Association of Muslim Unity (57 members), and the Ahl-hive Bayt Islamic Congregation (52 members). The youngest, however the most active Islamic organization in Poland, is the Muslim League which unites, among others, the most orthodox Sunni-Muslims. It also consists of members of two other Islamic associations operating in the country, which are Muslim Students’ Association and Muslim Association of Cultural Education. The members of the League consist mainly of Arabs and Poles converted to Islam.

4. CONCLUSIONS – THE SITUATION OF MUSLIMS IN POLAND IN RELATION TO THE INTEGRATION PROCESSES IN EUROPE

Muslim community in Poland, in terms of their population, is much smaller than in most of the Western European countries. Demographic potential determines the strength of their political and cultural influence –

which in relation to the aforementioned states, is scarce. Muslims in Poland, of both Tatar and non-Tatar origin, are still not well recognized in the area of social life. They function rather on the outskirts of the whole information circulation, which usually contributes to their stereotypical perception by the Polish society. Opinions about followers of Islam, including the ones living in Poland, are mostly the reflection of their image popularized in the western media, where they are often presented as religious extremists. This is confirmed by the results of the research which shows that as much as 70% of the Poles associate Islam mainly with terrorism³. Therefore, Poles’ attitude towards Muslims is generally not kind (Fig. 4). About 52% of them declare indifference towards Muslims, 26% – negative attitude, and only 13% have positive opinion about Muslims.

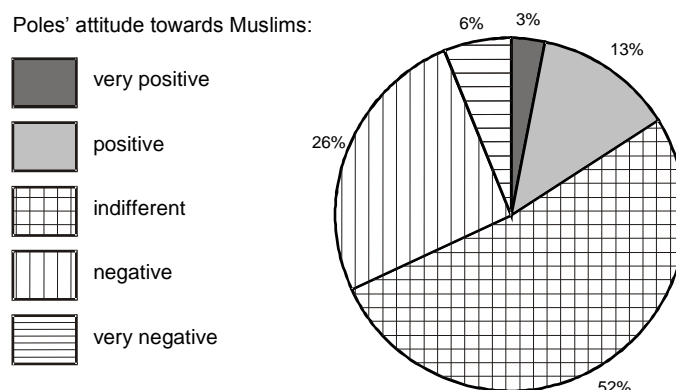


Fig. 4. Poles’ attitude towards Muslims

Source: Authors’ own elaboration

Muslim community in Poland differs from their counterparts in countries of Western Europe, not only by its demographic potential, but also by its local specifics. It consists of the oldest Polish Muslim descendants, namely Tatars, who adopted the cultural norms of Polish surrounding. Moreover, to some degree, they also identify themselves with these norms ethnically. They created the native, moderate model of Islam which can be qualified as “Tatar-European” model.

The main similarities to Polish Tatars, especially regarding the acceptance of moderate version of Islam and a certain degree of identification with

³ 200 people of Polish nationality participated in the questionnaire.

Polish culture, can be found among Muslim descendants, mainly economic immigrants and representatives of Muslim immigration from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

A whole different tradition, particularly in comparison to Polish Tatars' community, is represented by the generation of Muslim immigrants from the 1990s. These Muslims are more faithful to the principles of Islam in their everyday life than their Tatar coreligionists. It is caused by the fact that their religious identity was shaped in the Muslim culture, in the countries of their origin. Contrary to earlier immigrants, they do not show assimilative attitudes and distance themselves from Muslim Religious Association which is the organization with the longest tradition among Polish Muslims. Instead, they congregate in institutions they established themselves (e.g. the Muslim League). It should be emphasized, that these people arrived in Poland mainly for educational or economic reasons (to study at the university or start their own business). Majority of them (61%) is planning to return to their homeland after achieving all the basic aims of their stay in Poland.

Surely, one should not expect any significant changes among Muslim refugees' environment in Poland, as majority of them intend to emigrate further. Also Polish citizens converted to Islam often treat their new religion in superficial way, and eventually abandon it and return to their previous confession.

According to the results of the research, European integration and opening of the borders did not contribute neither to the inflow of Muslims from Western Europe, nor to the diffusion of ideas which are the foundation for extreme, orthodox Islam. However, during less than last twenty years, the socio-ethnic structure of this religious minority has undergone a significant transformation. It was conditioned mainly by constitutional changes in Poland, despite the dynamics of integration processes in Europe. The research results confirm, that the changes of proportions within the local Muslim minority, shaped over several years, gradually lead to the creation of two models of Islam in Poland: "Tatar-European" – a moderate model, rooted in Poland for centuries, and "Arabic-Middle East" model – considerably more orthodox, created by those who arrived in Poland recently or have recently converted to Islam.

The analyzed changes, though significant, do not efface the principal differences between the entire Muslim community in Poland and its Western counterpart. Therefore, one can quote after Smail Balica, the prominent representative of liberal Bosnian Islam, by recalling his description of Islam in the former Yugoslavia, that Islam in Poland remains in agreement with

“enlightened Europe and is open to the world, liberal and tolerant in the light of General Declaration of Human Rights. This Islam belongs to Europe in a geographical, historical, ethnical and cultural sense”. It still belongs to Europe.

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