

POLITICAL AND CIVIC NARRATIVES OF THE LATVIAN MUSLIM YOUTH

Jānis Priede

Compared with other European countries Latvian society can be considered quite tolerant, e.g. a survey carried out by Eurobarometer in 2012 shows that fewer respondents compared to other European countries indicated that there was discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin and religion in Latvia. However, there is a tendency in Latvia, too, to see Islam as a threat to the public, and it is a particularly sensitive problem for the Arab community, affected with negative stereotypes as 'terrorists'. Stereotypes, which may result in sowing the seeds of Islamophobia, set up the distinction between 'good' and 'bad Muslims'. In this juxtaposition, 'good' Muslims are the ones who arrived in Latvia during the Soviet period mainly from the Caucasus and Central Asia, whose second and third generations live in Latvia and who do not exhibit their affiliation to Islam publicly. In turn, the new immigrants, especially the ones from the Far East, are considered outsiders, the 'others' whose culture is contrary to the local European culture. Given arguments that broader efforts need to be made to prepare Latvian society for the arrival and integration of persons of different traditions, ensuring respect for their culture, religion and customs, but also that Muslims themselves need to do more to engage in dialogue with society, to overcome the difficulties they face and to take greater responsibility for integration in Latvia, young Muslims were chosen to as a case through which the social and political activities of the younger generation could be explored.

The fieldwork has enabled us to verify that it is wrong to talk about a homogeneous Muslim community in Latvia, where the number of Muslims is low. Such a position would reflect one of widespread Western misperceptions of Islam as a monolithic faith whose adherents possess a universal penchant for the proliferation of radical religious fundamentalism, irrespective of their variegated ethnic and national backgrounds. The element of submission plays an important role in Islam. In addition to its deference towards the older generation which is peculiar to Eastern cultures, this element has a determining function in building relationships among young people and among other members of the community. Although the number of young people is quite significant, they are not among its leaders. However, there is a dynamic interaction between the younger and older generations of the Latvian Muslim community and this interconnection is driven by the education migration factor: Muslim students have played and still play an important role in the community. Young people have been arriving from various Muslim-majority countries (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Lebanon) to study in Latvia since the 1970s. Soviet authorities had concluded cooperation agreements with these countries due to ideological and political considerations. Sections of these young people integrated into the labour market after their studies; therefore, currently this first generation of education immigrants belongs to the middle class. Since mainly males arrived to study here, families were founded with females from the local communities which provided an opportunity for them to successfully integrate into the local society by acquiring the local language and cultural traditions. It is the activity of these Muslim youngsters that changed the structure of the Muslim community in Latvia. The division between autochthonous Muslims and immigrant Muslims took place at community level since their respective models of religiosity are different.

The Latvian Muslim community can be considered as a melting pot where youth of different cultural, ethnical and political background and therefore with different historical memories meets in specific religious framework. The community is part of the focus group interviewed by the MYPLACE researchers of Daugavpils University within the 7th Framework Programme in order to establish how the community participation reshapes the impact of difficult collective memories, and how it influences the political and civic narratives of Latvian Muslim youth. The findings allows to conclude that (1) the religious group has an important role in involving the youth into adult-led movements; (2) the young Muslims have a strong perception of injustice and common lack of confidence towards established political outlets in Latvia; (3) the degree of political activism is variable, with most respondents having engaged in the more readily available non-traditional political activities; (4) since the religious community provides opportunities for youths to gain the necessary skills for political participation, religiosity and active membership in Muslim groups translates into high civic and political engagement in Latvia.