

How have Russia and France Dealt With the Issue of “race”?

Written by Anastasija Malachova

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ANASTASIJA MALACHOVA, OCT 13 2012

The issue of “race” has been present in the political agenda for quite a long time, however, it gained its prominence in the era of colonization and since then the concept of “race” has been widely and ardently discussed. But what is “race”? Today scholars tend to agree that “the concept of race, in reference to human beings, has nothing to do with biology”.^[1] Notwithstanding there is no scientific justification of the fact that human beings are biologically different on the basis of race, this concept still exists and it provokes intensive debates in political arena. Hence, the reasonable question should emerge: what is “race” then? According to Miles there are no “races” <...>, there is only a belief that there <is> such <a thing>; a belief which is used by some social groups to construct an Other (and therefore the Self) in thought as a prelude to exclusion and domination, and by other social groups to define Self (and so to construct an Other) as a means of resisting that exclusion.^[2]

Namely, “race” is nothing else but a social construct imposed by the global society to identify “human separateness and differences”^[3], it “is a concept that signifies and symbolizes socio-political conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies”.^[4] Nowadays, in my opinion, “race” can be regarded as a catch-all notion which serves to incorporate such concepts as ethnicity, nationality, culture, traditions, customs and, to some extent, even religion. In other words, “race” can be viewed “as <a form of human> identity in our society”.^[5]

Under those circumstances, it is important to observe the concept of “race” within the context of the particular state because, first of all, “race” may become the source of conflicts in the society and, thus, undermine the state’s stability. To be more precise, different “racial” groups (usually formed on the basis of ethnic origin) constitute a civil society; the way these groups interact between each other shapes the civil society and may make it volatile, weak and even scattered, whereas only strong and undispersed civil society is one of the key components of well-functioning and stable state. Secondly, “race” may be the source of discrimination and unequal social opportunities in terms of health care, education, employment, etc. In other words, people may be differentiated on the basis of “race”, that is to say, receive an unequal treatment by authorities as well as by native population of the country or may even be regarded as “inferior”. All in all, the attitudes of the government as well as society towards the issue of “race” and relations between different “races” within the state play an important role in politics as well as in the development of the particular state.

Today “most states and members of state elites claim to oppose discrimination, deny their continuing adherence to racialized views of their populations, and may even claim to be colorblind or differentialist.”^[6] However, in reality the situation is quite different; “the level of <“racial”> intolerance varies from one country to another, according to levels of industrialisation, history of migration and the size of the immigrant population.”^[7] The purpose of my essay is to consider the way Russia and France have been dealing with the issue of “race” and if possible, to evaluate whether one state has been more successful than the other.

France

Discrimination

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The issue of “race” gained its prominence in France mainly after decolonization when lots of people from former colonies (especially Algeria) rushed into France. These were people with almost completely different set of cultural values, customs, traditions and religion which were unusual and unacceptable for France and native French, who always praised their own culture and could be regarded to some extent as the chauvinistic ones. Besides the fact that immigrants have “infringed” on “sacred” French identity, “these newly urbanized groups soon mobilized and pressed for their political and social rights, contesting entrenched customs and institutionalized patterns of white supremacy.”[8] This sudden and numerous “invasion” was unexpected for France and native French, people who did not have enough experience in dealing with such racial diversity. As a result, France has faced the problems of racism, discrimination and xenophobia.

There are different forms of racism but, in general, racism can be defined as negative attitude towards “groups of persons that are characterized as communities” possessing distinct “biological features (<skin colour, eye shape, etc.>), appearance, cultural practices, customs, traditions, language, or socially stigmatized ancestors.”[9] I believe that racism is an extreme form of discrimination, usually accompanied with violent social acts aimed at expression of hatred towards people regarded as “different” in terms of features mentioned above. However, I am inclined to think that racism in France is neither driven by biological or appearance differences nor does it take extreme violent forms. In my opinion, reasons for racism in France are less straightforward and more “deep”. Thus, I tend to agree with Peabody and Stovall on the fact that “French racism is based on conformity or assimilation to French cultural norms.”[10] For this reason, I believe it would be more appropriate to avoid the notion of “racism” while referring to France and use more neutral concepts of “discrimination” and “unequal treatment”.

“The seemingly universal principle of non-discrimination is enshrined in a 1972 French law prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origins, nationality, race or religion.”[11] However, the reality is different and I tend to believe that discrimination is present in France. In my opinion, French discrimination is based not on ‘race’ (meant as biological differences like skin colour or eye shape) but rather on foreign origin, culture, religion and “unwillingness among the French themselves to incorporate relative newcomers.”[12]

Immigrants

According to the French National Institute for Demographic Studies there were 5.1 million immigrants living in France in 2007.[13] Most immigrants are arriving to France from former colonies in North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia), followed by immigrants from Europe and Asia (Turkey, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam).[14] The greatest inflow of immigrants to France was in the period following decolonization which also coincided with the rapid post war economic development, thus “France in common with other West European countries turned to immigrant labour to fill specific gaps in the labour force, in the light of massive economic expansion.”[15] Until the state had an economic interest in immigrants the problem of discrimination was not so prominent; “most Muslims, <for example>, agree that France has been generous in promoting their community’s development and respectful of its religious character.”[16] But when France was hit by the crisis and faced the problem of unemployment, it started to blame immigrants of the problems, to be more precise, “anti-foreign party called the National Front <blamed> them for France’s economic ills”[17] and even “<called> for the expulsion of immigrants to reduce French unemployment.”[18] That is to say, “immigrants are most welcome so long as they have an economically useful function.”[19]

Migrant workers in France (particularly from North Africa and Asia) have been discriminated in the job market as well as in different social aspects of life such as housing, for instance. According to a Eurobarometer Opinion Poll, for instance, “70% <of respondents> agreed with the statement that people from “minority groups are being discriminated against in the job market.”[20] Immigrants are treated unequally: they receive much lower wages than native French workers, do not have access to particular kinds of jobs (especially in the public sector, where only native French have priority) and are, to some extent, treated as “inferior”. Moreover, in the early 1960s -1970s immigrants, especially those from North Africa, were “discriminated against in housing, scorned in public transport and other public places, despised by petty clerks, brutalized by the police.”[21] Nowadays, some of the mentioned forms of discrimination still exist, especially housing discrimination, when immigrants are “forced” to live in slums, usually in insanitary conditions. That is to say, “all the immigrants are perceived in varying degrees as distinct from the rest of the population”[22] and, thus, they feel extreme psychological pressure due to discrimination, unequal

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treatment and constant perception as “foreigners”.

Integration/assimilation

Another problem I want to discuss is the integration of immigrants into the French society. In my opinion, the process of integration carried out by France can be regarded to some extent as discrimination. I would like to point out that there is a “normative equation of integration with assimilation”[23], in other words, French authorities do not see any substantial differences between those two notions. I tend to disagree with such a view as I believe that integration is less discriminative and implies more tolerance towards foreign immigrants, whereas assimilation promotes acceptance of “pre-existing French national cultural norms”[24] and practices and, thus, “complete abandonment of minority cultural norms.”[25]

French authorities as well as native French believe that in order for immigrants to integrate into French society, they should be “willing to embrace French culture- speak French, attend French schools, accept the ostensibly secular (though in fact Christian) calendar, eat French food, have French taste <and many more>.”[26] In my opinion, such a policy seems to be the only possible way for France to maintain its “sacred” identity. That is to say, “‘French’ <...> want to stay ‘French’”[27] and as they are unable to avoid such a great inflow of immigrants into their country, they want “the foreigner <...> <to> assimilate into the dominant mould, and therefore become invisible.”[28] That is why the issue of Muslim headscarves (hijab) has been a painful spot in French society. I believe that the ban of hijab is a discrimination of person on the grounds of culture and religion as a headscarf for Muslim women is an integral part of Muslim culture. However, French authorities as well as majority of native French name this as “essential religiosity of Arabs <and believe this is> an inherent stumbling block to their <...> incorporation into the French nation”[29] and does not fit into “commonly accepted criteria of integration (secularism, language, access to work and education, etc.).”[30] Moreover, hijab is regarded as ‘assimilation deficiency’ and there have been the cases when “nationality has been refused on the grounds of the applicant’s wearing a hijab.”[31] In addition to this, I think that headscarf, as believed by French, also jeopardizes “the Republican principle of *laïcité*”[32] which is extremely important for preservation of French identity. Furthermore, to my firm belief, hijab is associated with communalism which implies divided society and, thus, reluctance of the immigrants to become a part of French society, i.e. to assimilate. However, I think that the ban on hijab may have a reverse effect: this may strengthen traditional identification as well as communalism and thus, become an obstacle to french desired assimilation.

All things considered, I tend to agree with Bouteldja who states that “a chauvinist consensus on national identity exists across the political spectrum in France. Bound up with this consensus is a set of deeply held prejudices against Muslims and <other> immigrant communities.”[33] In order to overcome this situation, I believe that, first of all, French authorities have to “promote the teaching of mutual acceptance and respect in schools”[34] and, secondly, follow the idea of integration rather than complete assimilation.

Russia

Now let me turn to the analysis of the issue of “race” in Russia where this concept is not new while compared to France. People of different “races”, that is to say, ethnicities, nationalities and religions have been integrated into Russian society since tsarist times. That is why it is not so unusual for Slavic (native) Russians to deal with people of other “race”. An important point to be mentioned, in my opinion, is that those people were different from Slavs in terms of traditions, customs and cultural values (same as in case of France). However, as the “invasion” by foreigners was not so sudden but rather gradual and prolonged, they managed to integrate and even out the differences in terms of culture, traditions, etc., thus avoiding direct and painful “confrontations” with native Russians. However, this does not mean that the interaction between Slavs and foreigners has always been smooth and peaceful; during the past decades the issue of “race” has become especially acute and salient. Economic transformation and the process of globalization as well as the threats it imposes (terrorism, extremism, etc.) have made Russia and its society face such problems as “racism”, intolerance, discrimination and distrust towards people of different eye shape or skin colour. “The main targets <of discrimination> are non-Slavs, particularly Chechens, and other people from the North Caucasus, Central and <East> Asia”[35] as well as Africa.

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Discrimination

Despite “Russia has introduced a range of laws to deal with extremism, racism, hate-speech and <other kinds of discrimination>”[36], people of different “race”, that is to say those who are of distinct ethnicity, nationality, religion or, simply, different appearance, are still treated unequally. One of the reasons why native Russians have preconceived and negative attitude towards foreigners, is the feeling of insecurity and even fear. With the inflow of immigrants some jobs previously occupied by Russians have become unavailable and the level of crimes in Russia has also increased. That is to say, many immigrants from Caucasus as well as Central Asia have been frequently engaged in criminal activities such as illegal drugs trade, prostitution, paedophilia, illegal children trade and many others. Moreover, many immigrants do not obey Russian laws or respect local culture as well as traditions, thus generating hostility, aggression and intolerance from the native Russians. I believe that, in general, Russian society is not as chauvinistic as French; however, such immigrants’ disrespect causes discrimination and “racial” tensions.

Another point to mention are immigrants from Central and East Asia who seek to find jobs in Russia. This category of immigrants is being discriminated in the job market and usually treated as “inferior” labour force. These people receive miserable wages, live in insanitary conditions and do not receive proper health care. I think that these problems may be partly attributed to their illegal status; however, discrimination on the basis of “race” still exists.

Furthermore, I strongly believe that people from North Caucasus also experience discrimination in Russia because of strong prejudices towards them. In my opinion, since the first Chechen war each person who looks Chechen (or the one from North Caucasus) is *a priori* regarded as an object of potential threat and insecurity. Thus, Chechens are usually discriminated in the labour market, at schools and in other social environment. The reason for such intolerance, distrust and discrimination, in my opinion, lays back in the Chechen war and the terrorist attacks that have been hitting Russia since 1990s. That is to say, “what began as specific anti-Chechen sentiment in the 1990s has turned into a homogenized xenophobia that lumps together Chechens with other Caucasians.”[37]

Skinheads

I would also like to discuss the problem of skinhead movement which, I believe, is an extreme and most violent form of “racism” and “racial” discrimination present in Russia nowadays. “Skinheads are groups professing a ‘racist’, neo-fascist and violent ideology, as well as other loose groupings of individuals who carry out attacks motivated by ‘racial’ hatred.”[38] According to Amnesty International,

anyone who does not look typically ethnic Russian, for example, individuals from ethnic groups of the North Caucasus, in particular Chechens, as well as members of the Jewish community, Roma and children of mixed parentage are at risk <of becoming the victim of skinheads>. Even ethnic Russians who are seen as sympathizing with foreigners or ethnic minority groups, for example, <...> campaigners against racism, have also been targeted as they are perceived as “unpatriotic” or “traitors”. [39]

To be more precise, the main idea of skinheads is “Russia for Russians”[40] which clearly reflects *a priori* hatred towards any non-Russian foreigner.

In my opinion, ‘racism’ and violent skinhead attacks do not stop, they even “flourish” due to the high level of corruption and disinterest of local authorities in resolving conflicts and punishing the guilty party. One more point to mention, is the strange fact that skinheads who attack foreigners almost always stay unpunished. Taking into account the fact that skinheads are usually young people or students who do not have enough “ties” and money for bribes, an impression that somebody patronizes skinheads and countenances such actions arises. But who needs this and why? The question is still open for discussion. For sure, such incidents with skinheads are covered by the media and the state loses its authority so it is in the interest of the state to stop “racism” and violence. However, “the authorities have failed <...> even to publicly recognize the attacks as being a problem. Politicians have ignored the issue and <police> have either failed to investigate attacks at all, or investigated them inadequately, <in many cases classifying> attacks as “hooliganism.”[41]

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All in all, different laws being adopted have no effect as police and local authorities do not obey those laws; the “struggle” against racism and discrimination is being held on the state level but not on local level (police, local authorities, etc.). I believe this “struggle” should start from the grassroots (from schools, families, communities) and be supported by the state, then, in my opinion, this would have an effect.

All things considered, in my opinion, there is more of nationalism rather than pure “racism” in both Russia and France, in other words, a strong desire to preserve national identity is present. Of course, there are some extreme and violent cases of “racism” in Russia, but these may be regarded not as general tendency in society but rather demonstration of ungrounded hatred towards people of different skin colour and eye shape. In my opinion, this form of behaviour resembles more of fascism (skinheads even use fascist symbols like ‘swastika’) rather than “racism”. Thus, “race may indeed be a mere pretext or it may be the aegis of a sincere fanaticism.”[42] As for the question of whether one state has been more successful than the other, I think that both have not been successful in dealing with the problem of “racial” discrimination and more effective and thorough measures should be undertaken in order to solve this problem.

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