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Identity and cultural assimilation of the Turks in Exile

Abstract

In the article describe a short history of mutual relations Poles and Turks, their national identity and elements of cultural assimilation in the foreign environment related to their social and economic lives. Particular emphasis is put on presenting the stereotype of a Turk in the perception of the Poles and the feedback, namely the cultural characteristics of the Poles in the opinion of the Turks.

Keywords: *the Turks, migrants, cultural assimilation, national identity*

Introduction: contemporary „polish” Turks – who are they?

The analysis of the identity of the Turkish diaspora in Poland necessitates an overall analysis of its socio-demographic characteristics. At the outset, it is worth asking the question: what characteristics does a statistical Turk living in Poland present?

In the vast majority it is a man at a relatively young age. Data from the Office for Foreigners shows that in the period from 2013 to the end of June 2015 there was 1 woman for every 5 male Turks. The Turks' material status is quite diversified, since there is a clear gap in living standards of “old” and “new” migrants. Those who arrived within the last five years, represent a somewhat lower social class (beyond those whose families have lived in Poland for a long time), but they are not considered as the poor. The Turks having resided in Poland since the early 1990s are people with relatively high financial status, representing the middle class and usually running their own businesses, which influences their tendency to settle in big cities or on their outskirts.

This trend is confirmed by the number of 1294 Turks living in Warsaw, in Wólka Kosowska and Raszyn, where they pursue commercial activities. According to Konrad Pędziwiatr, smaller Turkish communities can be also found in large towns in the Łódzkie, Śląskie and Małopolska Provinces. Except economic activity the Turks are closely involved in social and cultural life – they establish social organisations as well as religious sites, such as the Sikh Gurdwara Singh Sabha in Raszyn (Pędziwiatr 2015, p. 3).

In addition to “new and old” Turkish migrants arriving in Poland for economic purposes, there are other groups of representatives of this nationality. According to data presented by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education, in 2014 in Poland among 36 thousand foreign students at Polish universities, the Turks constituted a fairly large population – of 1 thousand (*Studentzi z Turcji coraz chętniej podejmują studia w Polsce* 2014).

The main reasons why they pursue university education in Poland is the fact that costs of learning are lower than in Turkey as well as the possibility of gaining a university diploma in the country of the European Union. Such a diploma gives a better chance of getting work in other EU countries and a certain kind of prestige. The ERASMUS exchange program offers enormous opportunities to study in Poland, and not only; students from Turkey constitute as much as 20% of all students under this program in Europe.

Interestingly, students from Turkey the most frequently choose Poland within the ERASMUS and it left behind such countries as e.g. Germany. International relations, management and information technology (ibidem) are faculties which enjoy the greatest

interest of Turkish students as evidenced by the statements of Turkish students and graduates of Polish universities.

One of them – Said Murat, the graduate of IT engineering at the Academy of Finance and Business Vistula in Warsaw; in response to the question about the motivation to study in Poland he said: “I had a few reasons, but the main one was a different educational system than in Turkey. 4-5 years ago it was quite unfavourable. So I was looking for a European country where I could study. I contacted my friend who was studying in Poznań, and then he was a lover of Poland. It was also a good reason for me to choose Poland” (*Said z Turcji: gdy wyjeżdżam za granicę tęsknię za Polską* 2013).

In the report of the Institute of Public Affairs on “Mobility and social identity of migrants from selected Asian countries in Poland” one also finds other reasons for the Turks’ arrivals to Poland. One of them is establishing contacts called “holiday loves” which are the effect of the increasing attractiveness of Turkey for Polish tourists (*Turcja: Ruch turystyczny rośnie* 2013). In the course of this type of contacts young, attractive Turks pursue relationships with Polish, usually rich, female tourists. The women’s partners are men without prospects, work and qualifications, who usually remain in Poland and are dependent on them (Pawłowska-Salińska, 2015). Statistical data shows that only in 2013 Polish tourists’ interest in Turkey increased by 18.7% in comparison with 2012 (*Turcja: Ruch turystyczny rośnie* 2013).

The report shows that there is one more important reason why the Turks come to Poland, namely young men leave Turkey out of fear of difficult six-month compulsory military service. Thanks to work or study abroad the service may be shortened to the period of 28 days, but in exchange for a tribute of a few thousand of Euros (Pawłowska-Salińska, 2015). In view of the fact that Poland gives opportunities to study and conduct business, as well as the purchasing power of the Euro in Poland is higher than in Turkey, its attractiveness for „escapers from military service” increases. The phenomenon of ethnic stratification (layering related to living standards) disappear, as a Turk in Poland usually lives a prosperous life.

How does the contemporary image of a Turk present in the perception of the Poles? The question almost immediately draws attention to two cognitive threads, which created and consolidated the stereotype of a Turk in the perception of the Poles. The first one relates to the Poles’ travels to Turkey for commercial purposes, in the framework of which his image as a tough negotiator and an efficient tradesman was reinforced. The turn of the 1980s and 1990s of the previous century, describes a kind of trade exodus of the Poles to Turkey, the scale of which cannot be assessed. Business travels

were very common and generated high profits for the Poles. During the period of political transformation Polish markets were dominated by textiles and leather goods originating in Turkey, Turkish jeans trousers, a sweater, boots and a leather jacket were the determinant of a Pole's welfare. The Turks also came to Poland for commercial purposes, that after 1989 was particularly profitable.

Many contemporary forms of commercial cooperation which in many cases transformed into serious entrepreneurship come from that period. Many Turks who live in Poland sell textile products and brag that they have had contractors for 20-30 years, but in the face of Chinese and Vietnamese competition they have been forced to change customer segment. Today, the Turks no longer sell cheap clothes and their offer is dedicated to richer parts of the Poles. Moreover, they are more and more often present in the construction sector and on the educational market. The example is the Vistula University operating in the Ursynów district in Warsaw, which was founded with the share of the Turkish capital, and its chancellor is the Turk Arif Erkol (Pawłowska-Salińska, 2015).

Currently, the Turks' economic activity in Poland evaluates both at the level of small business as well as large investments. In addition to the textile and leather sectors, there are more and more shops with Turkish food, as exemplified by the shop "Turkish Market" opened in 2012 in Warsaw. Almost immediately it gained high recognition from Polish customers (*Nowe miejsce – Turecki Market* 2012). It was founded by two brothers: Mehmet Kemal Ulusoy and Ali Ulusoy who under the influence of their father having lived in Poland for 20 years found a new market niche in the food sector (*Mehmet Kemal Ulusoy z bratem Alim Ulusoy, pochodzą z Turcji, mieszkają w Warszawie, gdzie prowadzą Market Turecki* (2014). They offer products that are unique and at the same time necessary for Turkish cuisine, as well as sweets and ice cream which are very popular.

As already stated, the Turkish economic expansion in Poland also takes place in the construction industry. The work of Turkish companies was the construction of several shopping malls in Warsaw, for instance Blue City and Arcadia, and Gulermak company is the contractor for a Warsaw underground section (Pawłowska-Salińska, 2015).

The second, more contemporary stereotype of a Turk dates from the mid 1990s when restaurants serving kebabs and other specialities from eastern cuisine emerged in Poland. As it turns out, a few of 5 thousand Turks living in Poland work in gastronomy and "kebab bars" are run mainly by the Syrians, the Egyptians and refugees from Iraq. Many the so called Turkish restaurants are a product of German "chain shops" which have been existing on the market "beyond the Odra River" and have little in common

with traditional Turkish cuisine. Thus, the stereotype of a Turk leading a bar with kebab is extremely misleading (Pawłowska-Salińska, 2015) and many Turks coming to Poland are surprised to see this type of restaurants.

One of the respondents of the interview published on the website <http://www.tur-tur.pl/> states: “(...) I regret the lack of decent Turkish restaurants. Only kebab is associated with Turkey, however the truth is that it has not much in common with the original kebab. It cries out for lokanta/a restaurant cultivating the best Turkish culinary traditions, with appetizers (meze) and raki in the first instance!” (*Polska oczkami Turka* 2012).

While the first stereotype – entrepreneurship is justified and, indeed, it is no longer a stereotype, but an objective feature of the Turks, so the second one, tied with food services, proves only the lack of cultural competence of the Poles. It is substantiated by the propensity to generalise foreigners coming from the world of Islam, and the as yet constantly increasing globalisation of culture. Beside the above described characteristics many Poles do not know anything more about Turkey, even in terms of ethnic language or cultural grounds, attributing to the Turks the use of the Arabic language, Islamic fundamentalism, greed and aggression. Giving them these characteristics creates the distorted image of a Turk in the perception of the Poles, that leads to mutual cultural antipathy and building the ethnic gap.

Both stereotypes and ethnic gap disappear when it comes to the contact of these two nationalities. Mutual interest arises, sometimes fascination, and the level of tolerance grows. Through contacts cultural competence increases, the effect of which is not only tolerance, but the willingness to apply the principles of cultural relativism by both nations as well.

In fact, the Turkish diaspora is featured by entrepreneurship, concern for order and cleanliness, very good organisation, a high level of collectivism and social inclusion, as well as high level of culture, respect for values such as family and traditions. Noteworthy is the relatively high level of education, which is at the secondary and higher levels, of a diversified profile and specialisation. Another specific feature is that Turkish entrepreneurs do not treat the Poles as competition in the market but try to establish cooperation with Polish entrepreneurs. It often happens that they employ them in their companies. In order to wind up the considerations on the identity of the Turks living in Poland and the profile of the stereotypical perceiving them by the Poles, it is worth paying attention to the level of sympathy to the Polish nationality.

According to data from the Central Statistical Office in Poland, the growing trend of the level of sympathy of the Poles to the Turks has been seen since 2005, and vice

versa. Despite the relative social symbiosis, there are certain factors triggering conflicts in mutual relations. Some of them have the historical background, particularly the Armenian genocide issue or the unregulated Kurdish issue. However, it should be emphasised, that both threads do not refer to the Polish-Turkish relations at the micro level, but they are the subject of media and political debate.

Another issue concerns the aforementioned lack of cultural competence among the Poles and the uncritical identification between the Turks and “violent” Islam and terrorism. This particularly detrimental stereotype constitutes a very serious problem in the relationship. In fact it perpetuates the cultural reluctance, which in many cases may take the form of the conflict of cultures.

In many social groups, especially among educated people showing knowledge about Turkey, the high level of fascination with Turkey is noticeable, particularly with regard to its national power created by social, economic, military power and the geographical location. The Polish people are aware of the unique role which Turkey plays in the world and fully support its aspiration to become a member of the European Union, despite the risks that are associated with its accession. The Poles’ awareness of the role of Turkey in the international arena also concerns economic and military issues. They realise that the state being the thirteenth global economy and aspiring to be on the tenth position in the world in 2023 (on the 100th anniversary of the Turkish Republic) (Bonikowska 2012) and possessing the second largest capacity and the size of the NATO army, the powerful maritime fleet and well-educated society is an essential element of security of Europe, especially in the realities of the expansion of the Islamic State and the war in Ukraine. For the Poles, especially the latter issue is important, as for centuries Turkey has been a catalyst for aggression from Russia. Thus, in the opinion of the Poles Turkey is a country enjoying the respect, perceived in terms of power.

The Poles and Poland in perception of the Turks

The general analysis of identity and cultural characteristics of the Turks in the perception of the Poles inclines to take a different look at relationships of the two nations from the perspective of a Turkish migrant. How is the profile of the stereotypical Poles’ perception in the opinion of the Turks living in Poland shaped and how do the Turks find Poland?

Here are questions that are difficult to answer objectively, since there is no reliable studies that describe the stereotype of a Pole in the perception of the Turks. The report elaborated on the perception of the Poles in the opinion of foreigners in Poland and

abroad (Sochańska-Kawiecka at. el. 2013) shows that Poland does not have an explicitly shaped image, and its overall stereotype is rather positive with certain exceptions.

The report contains the following opinions:

“Poland as a small country rather does not have its own image in the world. It's too small, too insignificant, at most, different national icons are known, or some special events which are, moreover, also associated with those icons, I mean, you know, Wałęsa, the Pope, Boniek (...) the image is mainly neutral and it is a very big advantage, because there are countries that have a negative image due to the large amount of negative stereotypes (...) It is seen as a leader of Central and Eastern Europe. The leader in economic terms, above all (...) seen as a country of entrepreneurial, open people, where it is good to do business” (ibidem, pp. 28-29).

“Poland is commonly perceived all over the world as not only having a bad image but simply having no image at all, and actually its main problem is that there is nothing we can be identified with. The only associations in the world are in Asia, of course, with Chopin, in Europe and the United States with the Pope, Solidarity, Lech Wałęsa. However, when it comes to products, it is terribly sad for Poland since we are not linked to any brand by anyone” (ibidem, p. 37).

The quantitative research presented in the report was conducted on the sample of 200 foreign respondents, including 84% from developed countries – the so called countries of “old Europe”, North America and Australia, where the dominant was constituted by tourists from: England (22%), Germany (20%) and Spain (16%). The second group under research – 16%, were respondents from developing countries of Eastern Europe, South America, Africa and Asia, such as the citizens of Russia (4%), the Czech Republic (4%), Hungary (2%) and **Turkey (1%)** (ibidem, p. 53).

Thus, what is the image of Poland and a Pole in the opinion of the foreigners? According to the report, almost all respondents would recommend a visit to Poland to their friends, family or colleagues (99%), and 93% declared desire to return. To a lesser extent the willingness applies to respondents from developing countries (6% of them would not recommend arrival in Poland and do not intend to come back there) and people aged up to 30 years (3% and 4%) (ibidem, pp. 57-58). This proves that Poland in many aspects is attractive for foreigners and the Poles' traits have rather positive connotations.

Tab. 1. Selected characteristics of the Poles in the perception of the foreigners

Positive	Negative
Elegant, sincere, honest, proud, hardworking, funny, communicative, cheerful, family loving, well-mannered, patriots, religious, creative, clean, neat	Heavy drinkers, intolerant, xenophobic, prejudiced against other nations, vulgar, naughty, nervous, pessimistic

Source: own study based on: Sochańska-Kawiecka et. al. 2013, p. 61.

The presented research covered only 1% of respondents from Turkey, since there is no justification for extrapolating the perception of surveyed foreigners to the Turkish nation. Nevertheless, the profile of the stereotypical perception of the Poles in the opinion of other nationalities to a large extent reveals the truth about them. Some stereotypes radically changed and no longer correspond to reality. The example is the stereotype of a thief from Poland, formed in the 1990s as a result of mass car theft in Germany, France and the Benelux countries. For a long time it remained in the minds of citizens of Western Europe, although crimes committed by the Poles living abroad fell almost to zero. Excessive religiosity also includes no references to the facts, because statistically the number of practicing believers in Poland continues to decrease every year, and the Church is experiencing a certain crisis. These are just examples that show the way Poland and the Poles are perceived in the world.

When analysing the characteristics of the Poles shown in Table 1 one can see that many of them are confirmed in the opinion of the Turks coming to Poland. It is significant that the stereotype of the Pole in the perception of the Turkish nation was created by two forms of contacts.

The first one derives from the time of the “big trade” of the 1990s, when the Poles were the most numerous group of counterparties on the Turkish bazaars, and the second one is the stereotype of the Poles – tourists attracted by resorts primarily in Alanya, but also Antali, Kemer, Oludenis or the Aegean coast.

The first one is rather positive and gives them the characteristics almost identical to those presented in the analysis of the findings contained in the report “Opinion survey, determining the image that Poland should promote abroad”. The Poles’ typical features include: entrepreneurship, operational capabilities, playfulness, a sense of humor, pride, honour and religiosity. If one takes a look at the stereotype of a Pole – tourist the image is completely different and shows solely negative traits. They include: drunkenness, gluttony, vulgarity, noisiness, a lack of taste and unjustified arrogance. This image of a Pole

in almost every case gave rise the cultural reluctance and ethnic distance among Turks, which in turn resulted in a lack of willingness to establish contacts.

Summary

A very interesting observation (not only in Turkish resorts) is the famous terrible taste and snobbery of the Poles, whose brand became counterfeit clothes with inscriptions Dolce Gabana, Christian Dior or Versace bought at the Turkish marketplaces and worn on any occasion “accompanied” by the world famous sandals and socks. This last element is currently heavily exaggerated, but the stigma of a Pole dressed as “a Christmas tree at Christmas” in sandals and socks in many resorts has remained unchanged. The amazing thing is that radically different image of a Pole appears in the case of individual contacts.

According to one of the interviewed respondents (a Turk – an anonymous person nicknamed King), the attitude towards the Poles has changed after negative experiences with holidays and express cultural aversion to them. Several contacts and a short period of cultural assimilation shows fascination with Poland and the Polish culture. The respondent expresses respect for the traditions and values of the Polish culture and also draws attention to the kindness, which – as he claims – is lacking in Turkey, and the culture of drivers, calmness and composure. He points to intelligence and education as the Poles’ assets (*Polska oczami Turka* 2012).

Thus, what can such a differentiated image between the Poles–tourists and the Poles in everyday life be attributed to? The answer to this question is very difficult, and the reasons for such differences can be found in the mentality of the Poles who when on holiday feel at ease in a foreign country and use the variety of attractions available in resorts, as they share the principle “I pay so I have expectations and I use”, and, which is greatly unreasonable, they have a sense of superiority. This phenomenon is relatively new and involves change in the Poles’ system of values who fairly quickly moved from tradition to modernity and have revelled in the products of mass culture and attractions of the world “without borders”. However, it is important that a true cultural profile of the Poles, despite the stigma of “a holiday lout and drunkard” is still positive and is increasingly accepted by foreigners.

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