

MULTICULTURALISM IN THE REGIONAL CIVIL SERVICE IN RUSSIA (THE CASE OF THE SARATOV REGION)

*Victoria K. Antonova**

Abstract

This paper presents some reflections on 20 interviews with regional senior civil servants from the different government departments in Saratov (Russia) on ethnic minorities and equal employment opportunities within the civil service. The interviews were conducted in April 2003. The paper focuses on opinions and attitudes of the respondents about ethnic minority employees, their qualifications and professional characteristics, and draws attention to existing and potential discrimination at work, offering some explanations.

Some conclusions are presented concerning the positive and negative factors influencing the necessity of introducing strategies and programs promoting equal opportunity and ethnic monitoring in the Saratov regional government.

1. The multicultural Russia – the monocultural civil service: is anything wrong?

Despite great administrative reform and change, Russia has spent very little time, effort, or money on attracting ethnic minority staff, as well as improving and enhancing the role and status of its civil servants from ethnic minority groups. Training and refreshing programmes for civil servants are also lacking courses touching upon the necessity for civil service in Russia to be ethnically and culturally diverse. To date, few systematic studies of that situation have been undertaken. It can be argued that public service reform and development cannot be attained if it continues to ignore the multicultural nature of the civil service. According to the 2002 Census data non-Russian nationalities constitute 20,2% of Russia's population¹ and this has yet to be reflected in the civil service institution of the Russian Federation. As such, any governmental reform that fails to address multiculturalism and the expression of ethnic diversity within the public workplace is likely to be incomplete.

The paper reveals some preliminary results of the study "Multiculturalism in the Civil Service in the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation". This is a qualitative research based on the in-depth interviews with the senior civil servants in Russia and in the UK. The series of interviews in Saratov regional government began in April 2003 in Saratov and they are still under way². The purpose of the research is to describe the influence of multiculturalism on the civil service institution in Russia. In other words the aim of the study is to determine whether the civil service institutions incorporate multicultural principles (equal opportunity for all citizens; social inclusion, understanding and respect of ethnic/cultural diversity) and try to offer some strategies which may be launched to promote ethnic diversity accommodation and equal opportunity employment in the civil service in Russia.

* Victoria K. Antonova is a professor of the Perm State Technical University, Department of the Humanities, city of Perm, Russia.

¹ O nekotoryh itogah Vserossiiskoi perepisi naselenija 2002 goda. Official Goskomstat Site: <http://www.gks.ru/PEREPIS/report.htm>

² The first series of the interviews with civil servants in Saratov has become available due to the funding support in the form of Graduate Small Grant provided by the department of Sociology, University of Essex in April 2003.

Although I am not going to present the comparative analysis of the situation with multiculturalism in the UK and in Russia, I think it might be useful for the methodology justification simply to list the reasons for choosing these two particular countries for the research. Among them:

- civil service systems in our countries have much in common;
- neither Russia nor the United Kingdom runs *multiculturalism* as a policy, unlike Canada, for example;
- the imperial historical background of two countries have been giving rise to ideas of ‘Brithishness’ and ‘Russian idea’ for several decades if not for centuries and the multicultural paradigm can be seen as the alternative to both .
- during last decade both Russia and the United Kingdom has appeared increasingly multicultural
- immigration issue is the main concern for the Russian and British governments in terms of multiculturalism.

2. The multicultural settings in the Saratov region.

To be more elaborative on the point of choosing Russia and particularly the Saratov region for the research, it is necessary to say, that Saratov region can be considered as a local projection of Russian Federation in terms of ethnic background of population. There are about 112 nationalities in the Saratov region. Although the majority of population in the region , as well as in Russia as a whole, is ethnic Russians (about 81% of the region’s population)³ , the ethnic minorities such as Tatars (2,3 %), Mordva (0,8%), Chuvashi (0,7%), Kazakhs (3,0%), Jewish (1,2%) consider themselves as valuable ethnic groups in the Saratov region. These minorities seem to be integrated into the mainstream.

Several decades ago, one can hardly describe the Saratov region in terms of an ethnically-segmented or divided society. But during the period of transition the rise of ethnic self-identification emerged and now the region’s population can be seen as really diverse and multicultural. Even integrated minorities have their claims for native language protection, access to resources, fair treatment at the labor market.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union this particular region has become one of the most popular recipient-region for immigrants from the former Soviet Republics. As for the estimates of Regional Migration Service more than 260 thousands of people inflow into the Saratov region is expected by the year 2005. This will constitute about 9,5% of the modern region’s population. The vast majority of immigrants comes from the Northern Caucasus (Chechnya, Dagestan), Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine. These people do not usually have Russian citizenship, the significant part of them are refugees seeking for asylum.

The main problem is that regional government does not have any full-fledge policy dealing with multicultural nature of the region. Nor it has the understanding that multiculturalism should get recognition within the government and civil service themselves. The regional government doesn’t even take a stock of the regional civil servants by nationality or ethnic origin⁴.

³ *Normativnije Akti Po Nacionalnim Voprosam*. Saratov: Ministerstvo Vneshnih Svjasei Saratovsoi Oblasti (2001): 13.

⁴ Ruban, O.S. (2003). “ Nacionalno-Kadrovaja Predstavlenost’ Gosudarstvennoi Sluzhby Rossii”. In A.I. Turchinov (Ed.), *Gosudarstvennaja Sluzhba v Sovremennoi Rossii*. Moscow: RAN, S. 179.

3. The senior civil servants attitudes and opinions of ethnic diversity in the civil service.

The first attempt to make interviews in the Saratov regional government was rather successful and I would like to share some initial reflections of that small number of the interviews with you.

The main goal of the interviews taken was to find out if the “ethnic issue” or the “national question” so to speak exists within the civil service in the region, what are the attitudes of senior civil servants to that question and what can be done to eliminate the ethnic discrimination within the civil service if any discrimination can be revealed.

The senior civil servants participated in the interviews hold different positions with the main responsibilities regarding personnel management as well as recruitment and selection process. I can say that during the interviews they were friendly and I think sincere, in general.

The first thing that stroke me was that regardless of the fact that our region is one of the most peaceful in terms of interethnic relations, from the very beginning the majority of the respondents were reluctant to answer the questions about ethnic minority staff in the regional government. They were scared to articulate the very issue of ethnic differences and multiculturalism in the region. It is interesting that both rather young and elder people adhere to the position that it would be more wise not to make this question the center of public and civil service staff interest but speak about it in a whisper.

All the respondents pointed out that the “national question”, the issue of ethnic diversity is at the same time very important and very scaring question. “National question always appears to be very painful for Russian in any sphere of society’s life” – one of the respondents said.

“It is possible to say, that there is no “national question” on the regional civil service agenda at the moment, because, thanks God, there are no any conflicts connected to that question. It is also possible to say that there is no “national question” in the regional civil service because we don’t pay attention to the nationality of our civil servants. One more reason to say that we have no “national question” is few people of non-Russian descent among our civil servants”.

(The Head of the Regional Legislation Branch, woman, 53 years)

All the respondents underlined that the few minority people are there in the civil service, the less problems we need to manage. That seems to be a super motto of the civil servants being interviewed. Unfortunately it has a direct correlation with the well known proverb from the Stalin period: no man – no problem.

From the above positions two general ways of dealing with ethnic minorities in the civil service on the regional level in Russia can be derived. First way, when the senior staff prefer to be “color-blind” and pretend that we don’t see any differences in ethnicity of civil service employees. The second way is to reduce the number of minority civil servants and automatically withdraw an ethnic question within the civil service.

This is a dangerous approach which can lead to the different mistakes in employment and personnel management polices. First, not all the minority groups feel happy when employer don’t pay any attention to their specifics and claims in terms of faith, behavioral patterns, dress codes, etc. As Kennan Malik said in his presentation on the conference at the : Institute français in London, - previous generations struggled to be equal, today’s generation struggle to be different⁵. And this is

⁵ Malik, Kennan. (2002). *Can Multiculturalism Work?* The paper presented at the Attention Seeking: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition. London: Institute français (16 November, 2002).

the case for Russia as well. Second, reducing the number of ethnic minority staff reveals a discrimination within the regional civil service which prevents the state as an employer from bringing in talents. These are ethnic minority employees who can help to improve the quality of services delivery for the particular ethnic groups which can feel disadvantaged. Third, the lack of ethnic minority staff within the regional government prevents those working in different department to get an experience of functioning in the multicultural environment. That means that when these monocultural organization face the necessity of dealing with the people from the different ethnic backgrounds, it usually fail to manage that diversity. It is very important to attract talented people of all the nationalities available in the Saratov region to the civil service in order to let the Russian staff sample what it means to work along side with people from different ethnic group. From one hand, we won't be able to know the impact of ethnic minorities on the civil service institute until we hire them into different posts. From the other hand, we won't be able to know the real feedback from the majority Russian staff on the "national question" until they experience the years of collaborative business with ethnic minority colleagues within the civil service institute . Going ahead in sharing their feelings and observations on ethnic minority issue in the regional civil service they said the following:

“Of course, it can be recognized visually that some of the civil servants are not from the majority groups – that means they are not Russians, but in general it doesn't matter. The main thing is whether the person is good at his job and is a respectable employee. As a matter of fact, it seems to me, that it is better not to be focused on the nationality of civil servant. As soon as you do that – it means, you do this on purpose. And what this purpose can be? For instance, to find out, how these people do their job in comparison with Russians. It means right away that we keep in mind that Russians differ from non-Russians, some one is better, some one is worse. What else comes to your mind at once is the unpleasant incidents you've got in your everyday life concerned with the Armenians or Azerbaidjans in the market place and at the next moment you're getting into the bad mood”.

(The Head of the Ministry of Trade and Social Development, men, 47 years)

It is evident, that as far as the ethnic matter is concerned – civil servants make judgment, they compare ethnic groups and their representatives on case by case basis rather than merely respect and tolerate them. Another respondent – the Head of the Civil Service Agency – insisted that:

“There is no official discrimination in the civil service in Russia, because the Federal Law on the Basics of the Civil Service in the Russian Federation (1995) prohibits any discrimination on the basis of nationality, gender, age, etc. But each of us store in our subconsciousness the negative image of “other nationality”. Myself I very frequently keep thinking about that some of the nationalities are better then others, because some of them maintain friendly relations with us, I mean with Russians and Russia, - Chuvashi, Tatars for instance; but some of them don't – Georgians, for example. I used to be in a military service before I came here. I was in hot points – Abhasia and Chechnya – it will always influence my attitudes to “national question” , even in the civil service. Moreover, if assume that the significant part of the civil servants in Saratov

are from the minority groups, I am sure that it is not a positive fact. I can explain why it is so. Since “national question” is very tough both socially and psychologically for people’s perception, and public opinion to this problem is anxious, then trust and respect to the civil service will be undermined.”

(The Head of the Civil Service Agency, male, 42 years)

Here we come to the couple of factors that detract civil service staff in Saratov region from fair and equal treatment of ethnic minority representatives. The very firm stereotypes is the one factor, and the inaccurate human resources management policy in the civil service. What I mean here is that the previous life experience influences their present values and ambitions. That is why, from my point of view, hiring the former military officer with the war experience into the senior position at the Human Resources Group, is a rash action.

As for the stereotypes, the civil servants are likely to extend their negative experience and attitudes they got from the contacts with minority people to the work place and relations between colleagues in the departments. Another respondent just confirms the previous opinion:

“... From my point of view, there is a kind of risk in attracting minority people to civil service. It is well known fact that the people of Armenian, Azerbaidjan, Uzbekistan, Chechen descent have the stronger feeling of cohesion, the feeling of solidarity than have the Russians. The minority people also have a strong wish to be distinguished among the others. Have you ever seen what kind of houses they build in Saratov and in the suburbs? You must have a look ! Most of them have two- or even three-storied houses, even if they use the only one floor for the accommodation of the family. They have this custom that it has to be shown that the head of the family provide this family and sometimes it is desirable to show that they are probably a bit more advantaged than the others. So, when the candidates of such nationalities enter civil service the fear appears that these minority representatives would expand their influence, their customs on to the civil service institutions. They would tend to give the job in the civil service to as many of their friends of the same nationality as they can”.

(The deputy-head of the Ministry of Culture, woman, 38 years)

One of the respondents shared his own opinion on the role of ethnic myths and stereotypes which is still very strong in the Russian civil service. I have asked my interviewees to imagine that they are at the position when they have to make a decision about the selection of non-Russian candidate for the post - whom would they prefer? One of the answers, which appears to be rather common point of view for all of the respondents, was as follows:

“As for myself, I can say that there are people of different nationalities amongst my friends – Tatars, Jews for instance, and I maintain friendly relations with them. But if assumed, that I had been given the number of candidates on different positions in civil service, I would tend to choose the Russian under other equal conditions. It is quite another matter if one of my colleagues, I have respect for, and who occupies the higher position than myself, will ask me for the particular non-Russian candidate – of course I will choose that

particular person. But it is necessary for that candidate to be of sufficient level of qualification for the post, it should be evident from his/her CV or Resume. You know, usually I answer a lot of phone calls from the candidates on different vacancies announced. It turns out sometimes, that they even can't speak Russian language fluently, but they are very brave and persistent in their intention to get a job in civil service. Of course it would be unfair to say that all of them are of the same kind".

(The The Head of the Regional Legislation Branch, woman, 53 years)

This example clearly shows the hidden discrimination. According to the Federal Law on the Basics of the Civil Service in the Russian Federation (enacted in 1995, with the Amendment of 27.05.2003) every citizen holding the citizenship of the Russian Federation can enter the civil service and become a civil servant if he/ she meets the requirements of the government department. However, as we can see from the interviews, selection is likely to be made in favor of non-minority candidate.

I would also like to call the attention for the fact that it is not fair to judge the ethnic group just by one or two representatives of these groups. It serves to rise of the national conflicts and strengthens stereotypes.

The following citation from the interview makes this idea even more clear:

"I would like to mention the member of the regional government – the Minister of Youth, Tourism and Sports Affairs, Sultan Akhmerov, he is Tartar. Look, how he has put in order the business of the whole ministry! Well done! It is not a secret that the governor doesn't pay a lot of attention to this ministry, much less than it is needed. But Akhmerov works hard and he does everything possible to run the work of the ministry properly, to put the youth problems on the agenda in the region, to organize the number of different activities and actions for the youth, to make the life of the young people more interesting. He gained his colleagues' respect and he is known as an energetic person, very active, the man of his word. In this case it doesn't matter that he is Tatar, not Russian, although everyone knows this fact. I can also give you the opposite example, from the business life of our regional government as well. I would like to mention the minister of The Transportation and The Roads Construction, Dzhlavjan Gevorg, he is Georgian. That is a horse of a different color. Everyone knows in the Saratov oblast, what are the conditions of our roads to date. And it is well known that the regional budget expenses on the roads are not modest, they are sufficient. So, may I ask you then what is this money spent for? People around want to know the result of the activity of the whole Ministry! They want to see the new roads being built. Mister Dzhlavjan doesn't really care of all that. Well, that is what we have – people say, Oh, that Georgian, he has put the budget money in his own pocket, all the Georgians are the same! That is why I am saying that there are less problems when the Russians dominate in civil service".

The The Head of the Regional Legislation Branch, woman, 53 years)

To avoid this situation and to prove the fair hiring strategy in the civil service in Russia a number of steps should be made. First of all the assessment of all civil servants should be made on merit basis. All the qualification exams and tests must be anonymous and held by the board of commissioners with the help of independent assessment agencies. Half of the respondents said that at the moment personnel policies and procedures are not operated fairly, based upon individual merit. Secondly, this is very important for promoting equal opportunity strategies that senior civil servants, the executives are aware of the necessity of valuing diversity. Thirdly, the leaders must demonstrate commitment to equal opportunities and diversity and take personal responsibility for making progress. Fourthly, senior civil servants have to “bring in and bring on” under represented talents. All the civil servants participated in the interview have had different examples in their professional experience of unfair, discriminatory treatment of civil servants from ethnic minority groups. Usually these examples dealt with not appointing minority person to some position because of his or her ethnic origin.

One of the respondent gave me the following example of “raising of national question in the civil service”:

“Yes, I had experienced the discrimination on the basis of nationality and not just once. I clearly remember the case from the past soviet times, about 15 years ago, when one women, she was Jewish, was not given an employment in our citizens complaints office. It was me, who recommended her to our chief, that Jewish woman, I’m speaking about, was absolutely perfect for working with clients. She was very experienced (she was a woman of experience) and high qualified specialist, more over, she was very patient, she was very good at listening people, she was tactful and polite. However, the chief didn’t accept her for that post because of her Jewish descent. It was evident that all the colleagues were very frustrated about the fact that we had failed to get such an experienced specialist, but we couldn’t do anything... That woman herself understood everything and she told us, that she had got accustomed to situations like that and she was not taking them closely to her heart and was not feeling that as if it were a tragedy”.

(The Deputy Head of the Committee on Public Relations, woman, 50 years)

4. Conclusions.

The ethnic diversity issue has yet to be addressed and the number of strategies promoting equal opportunity and ethnic monitoring have yet to be developed. This particular research project can be seen as the very first step on the road of careful attraction of minorities to the civil service of the regional level. All the respondents argued for the inquiry about ethnic minorities in the civil service, which is of great need and is expected to be very important for both the civil servants and the representatives of the ethnic minorities. The civil service in Russia must be truly diverse, because the civil service must, if it is to be effective, mirror the full diversity the public it serves.

The very idea of the multicultural civil service should be formulated and articulated from the top, and the senior civil servants must take personal responsibility for making progress. Since the civil service is a hierarchy of power the impulse of valuing diversity in the civil service should come from the executives.

At the present stage the serious scrutiny of the regional civil service in a multicultural settings is of great need and senior civil servants support this.

It is also very important to take the ethno-cultural situation in the region into account while developing equal opportunity strategies in the civil service. The will of the ethnic minorities to participate in regional government is also a fundamental factor that can be supportive in managing diversity within the civil service in the Saratov region.

Ethnic monitoring needs to be realized at all the career stages in the civil service – recruitment, selection, promotion, training, retaining.

Training programmers and refreshing courses for civil servants, especially for the senior levels, must have an ethnic diversity accent.

I would like also to underline two main features of civil service as a societal institution:

- in democratic societies civil service expresses the public interests rather than the interests of elite groups;
- civil service reflects the national governments policies.

In terms of the present paper that means that if the multicultural principles are in the very fabric of civil service that may indicate that multicultural principles are in the nature of the civil service of the state as well. In its turn it allows one to assume that multiculturalism is shared by both citizens (public) and governments. If multiculturalism works not only within the diverse minority communities along the society but it also works within the civil service which is the center of public administration – then it can be said that civil society, democracy, government institutions benefit from the multiculturalism as a social factor and multiculturalism should be developed along the diverse society and along the civil service itself. If the multicultural principles are not suitable for civil service and hence – for public administration – than something must be done to change the civil service performance in order to meet multicultural principles. Anyway multiculturalism is a challenge for civil service and for public administration, being successfully applied in the civil service it can also gain success in the society as a whole.

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