



RUSSIANS IN EGYPT: ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION

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Abstract: *The article studies mechanisms of preserving cultural and religious identity by the Russian residents in contemporary Egypt. Since the beginning of the XX century, three waves of Russian immigration to Egypt took place, each bearing its characteristic and unique features. Formation of the first sizeable Russian community in Egypt dates back to the beginning of the XX century when a number of the "White" emigrants from the Russian Empire, escaping from the October Socialist Revolution of 1917, arrived in Alexandria. The second wave of Russians, or Soviets to be precise, appears in Egypt starting from the beginning of 1960-es: after getting their higher education or academic degrees in the USSR young Egyptian men return to Egypt with their Russian wives. The third wave of Russian nationals emerge in Egypt from middle 1990-es due to a tremendously intensified tourist flow from Russia to Egypt: Russian females start travelling to the Red Sea resorts, particularly to Hurghada and Sharm-El-Sheikh, get acquainted with the Egyptian men working, as a rule, in tourism industry, get married and relocate to Egypt.*

The present day Russian community in Egypt is comprised predominantly from the so-called "Soviet" and "Russian" wives of the Egyptians, whose adaptation in a foreign cultural environment is analyzed according to the model suggested by Professor John Berry. He suggests that acculturation is being realized in four strategies: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization. The study of acculturation strategies used by the Russian residents in contemporary Egypt reveals difference between the generation of "Soviets" and "Russians": the first category used mainly separation and rarely integration, while the second category on the contrary is characterized by a high degree of integration into the local social environment, while separation strategy could be rarely observed.

Key words: culture, identity, acculturation, immigration, Russia, Russian community in Egypt, "Soviet" and "Russian", Egypt, religion.

Migration since recent years has become one of the most debatable issues in both social discussions and academic discourses as most of human flows

started to intensely moving from south to north and from east to west. Syrian humanitarian catastrophe resulted in a tremendous emigration of Syrians (by 2017 the number

reached 6.9 million people according Migration Data Portal¹) to several European countries, which expressed readiness to accept them as potentially new citizens. Indeed, the second half of the XX century a global migration triggered off due to complex and contradictory processes resembling tectonic shifts in social structure, economy, ecology and culture [Silantieva, 2008: 84].

However, reverse migration processes from west to east and from north to south also take place, but definitely at a much lesser scale, which still has all reasons to be taken into consideration and carefully studied. Especially taking into account that problems of cultural and religious self-identity of migrants in both cases turn to be fundamentally similar. The only paramount difference would be in perception of newcomers by the local population: for example, mass communication in Sweden could not refrain from concerns over the changes in country's ethnic and religious composition [Dianina, 2014: 128] as immigrants from the developing countries arrive in significant numbers. Needless to say that such worries have no grounds in the developing countries with a little migration flow, including Egypt and its Russian immigration, which still remains rather poorly explored.

During the last twenty years multi-million flow of Russian tourists to Egypt (according to The Russian Federal Agency for Tourism, until 2015 Egypt was annually receiving up to three million tourists from Russia)² caused solid increase of Russian community in the Land of Pyramids. While there is no official information about quantitative picture of Russians permanently living in Egypt, according to non-official sources, this number makes not less than thirty thousand people. Gender structure of this community is distinctive: dominating majority (up to 90%) are Russian wives of Egyptians.

The prime self-identification factor of Russians in Egypt is Russian culture, which

is absorbing and transforming all other components: based on cultural memory self-identification is inevitably comprised from various components, including ethnic, national, historical, social, etc. [Glagolev, 2008: 51].

Formation of the first sizeable Russian community in Egypt dates back to the beginning of the XX century when a number of the "White" emigrants from the Russian Empire, escaping from the October Socialist Revolution of 1917, arrived in Alexandria. Later many of them would leave Egypt and relocate to other countries for permanent residence, but in 1920-es their presence in Alexandria was tangible: Russian refugees came to Egypt in five ships and their number reached 4350, of which men were making majority [Belyakov, 2003: 136]. According to archive documents, by the end of 1921 the Russian camp at Sidi Bishr hosted about 1800 refugees among them 1200 men, 400 women and 200 children. During their force stay in Egypt the Russian refugees made their utmost to preserve cultural and religious identity. Facts have it that the most numerous entity in the Russian camp was the "Russian Cultural-Educational Society", while public, educational and children libraries as well as a reading hall functioned permanently. Magazine "At Foreign Land" was published monthly; there also operated musical and theatre group "Bayan", a crew from the Great Russian Balalaika Chorus, Russian brass band, Russian symphonic orchestra, Russian mixed choir, as well as a church choir. Besides there functioned three Christian Orthodox churches [Belyakov, 2003: 138]. Naturally, at those times the talk about either integration or assimilation of Russians in Egypt was impossible due to a wide range of social, cultural and religious reasons, which are beyond the scope of the present paper.

The second wave of Russians, or Soviets to be precise, appears in Egypt starting from the beginning of 1960-es: after getting their

¹ Syrian Arab Republic. Key migration statistics // Migration Data Portal. Available at: <https://migrationdataportal.org/?i=groups&t=2017&cm49=760> (accessed 10 June 2019).

² RST Named the number of tourists who would choose Russian resorts instead of foreign ones // Interfax. Available at: <https://tourism.interfax.ru/ru/news/articles/30911/> (accessed 10 June 2019).

higher education or academic degrees in the USSR young Egyptian men return to Egypt with their Russian wives³. This tendency continues until 1972 and terminates with the decision of the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat to cut off relations with its strategic ally USSR. Today these Soviet wives compose the oldest segment of the Russian community in Egypt.

The third wave of Russian nationals emerge in Egypt from middle 1990-es due to a tremendously intensified tourist flow from Russia to Egypt: Russian females start travelling to the Red Sea resorts, particularly to Hurghada and Sharm-El-Sheikh, get acquainted with the Egyptian men working, as a rule, in tourism industry, get married and relocate to Egypt. Since recent years, a large number of Russian wives begin to settle in Cairo and Alexandria. According to Russian officials there are around 35 000 Russian residents in Egypt most of whom are wives of Egyptians⁴.

Thus, at present there are two generations of Russians in Egypt: elderly generation of the so-called "Soviet wives" and a younger community of "Russian wives". Socialization of these two groups with Egyptians in a culturally alien environment is realized differently. The first group was leaving their Soviet homeland practically forever, having almost no hope to return. Having moved to Egypt these ladies were obliged to obtain entry visa to the USSR despite possessing Soviet citizenship. In addition to paper issues, the transport communication was not well developed: air flights were rare and tickets expensive. At that time alternative and mostly acceptable means of transportation were Soviet ships sailing off during navigation period along the route Odessa – Alexandria – Odessa. Consequently Soviet wives with their children were going to homeland as often as once a year during summer holidays. Other means of preserving contacts with USSR were post and telephone. However,

it took several months for letters to reach destination and telephone calls had been costly.

In addition, relatives, friends and acquaintances sometimes completely cut off contacts with these women, because communication with "traitors" was becoming a dangerously compromising, almost blackmailing factor: leaving Soviet motherland was often interpreted as betrayal.

As neither satellite TV nor social networks existed, the "Soviet wives" were compelled to preserve theirs and their kids' cultural identity on their own by enthusiastically creating amateur theatres, reading Russian books and giving lessons of Russian language.

At that time cultural life of Russian community was spinning around the Soviet Cultural Centers (in Cairo and Alexandria), where Soviet feasts were celebrated, including New Year, February 23rd, March 8th and of course the Victory Day on May 9th. In addition, Soviet Cultural Centers had regularly been organizing concerts, theatre performances, musical evenings and Soviet film screenings. There also functioned Russian language classes, libraries and other activities.

As long as Egyptian husbands of Soviet women used to study in the USSR acquiring a good knowledge of Russian language, at home as a rule they spoke Russian, read Russian literature and kept friendship with the similarly mixed "Russian families". Majority of children from such mixed Russian – Egyptian marriages report to belong to both cultures: besides fluent native Arabic language and Egyptian cultural identity they usually speak colloquial Russian, are familiar with the main Russian customs and traditions, perceive Russian culture as native. However, in reality bicultural phenomena is rare among Russian – Egyptian kids: their cultural identity is mainly shaped by the Egyptian culture due to two reasons. Firstly,

³ According to unofficial Russian sources the number of Egyptians, who studied in the Soviet Union reached 30 000 people, the overwhelming majority of them were males.

⁴ According to the Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots in Egypt the number of Russians permanently residing in Egypt by 2017 was over 50 000 people. See: <http://www.rusegypt.net/p34aa1.html> (accessed 10 June 2019).

the culture of one's permanent residence has a greater influence on identity formation; secondly, being collectivistic Egyptian culture suggests a person having not several, but one identity that is strongly related to the community belonging [Hofstede, 2010: 23].

At the same time, religious identity was not a priority to the "Soviet wives": originating from the USSR, a home to Marxist-Leninist atheist ideology, they naturally adhered to either atheistic or secular convictions, while their Egyptian husbands, who went through the Soviet acculturation, shared secular views or in case of remaining religious didn't impose religiosity upon their foreign wives.

As a result of such neutral attitude to religion "Soviet wives" often converted into Islam (if their husbands belonged to the Muslim confession of course), yet doing that mostly in a formal way to simplify juridical issues related to issuing necessary documents and managing matters of marriage, property and inheritance, which are regulated by Sharia in Egypt. Having religious belonging is compulsory to issue citizen's ID. Moreover, birth certificate, death certificate, and marriage certificate – all have a mandatory indication of one's religion [Khalil, 2016: 89].

Naturally Russian immigrants to Egypt were faced with the challenges of adaptation, including a complicated process of fitting into a new cultural reality – acculturation. Acculturation understood as a process of cultural and psychological changes happening in the course of contacts between different cultural groups and their members [Berry, 2010: 196] enables to define the degree of success in adapting to a new cultural environment. According to cross-cultural psychologist John Berry, there are four acculturation strategies: 1) assimilation: individuals do not wish to preserve their own cultural identity and do their best to communicate with representatives of another culture as much as possible; 2) separation: individuals are evaluating their own culture very highly and try to avoid interaction with other cultures; 3) integration: individuals preserve their own culture willing at the

same time to interact and learn from the new culture; 4) marginalization: individuals are not interested in neither one's own nor a foreign culture. It should be stressed however that there is significant difference between integration and assimilation as long as the first implies considerable degree of maintaining one's cultural identity [Berry, 2010: 199].

Proceeding from this classification, basic strategies used by the "Soviet wives" were mainly separation and integration, but at a much lesser scale though. Firstly, because majority of wives did not work – as a rule they were not sufficiently socialized with the local population, their contacts with Egyptians were limited by interacting with husband's relatives and/or by everyday needs (shops, concierges, workmen, etc.). Secondly, majority of them were able to communicate in their native language inside their families (husbands usually had a good command of Russian), which made them learn only colloquial dialect of Arabic languages sufficient only for basic communication, but definitely not enough for an overall acculturation. Thus, this segment of Russian community in Egypt is characterized mainly by basic and surface acculturation.

As for the "Russian wives", there was no need to overcome political or bureaucratic obstacles: being citizens of the open world, they could return homeland any time. Nevertheless, the process of their cultural adaptation was more difficult than that of the previous wave, because their Egyptian husbands never studied or lived in Russia and had no idea about Russian culture, psychology or traditions. So lack of cultural awareness on both sides has always been the main reason for conflicts and misunderstandings in such families, despite the fact that many of such couples have a good command of foreign languages – Russian ladies often speak English or Arabic and their Egyptian husbands speak English or Russian.

In modern times there appeared multiple means helping to preserve cultural identity: from freedom of travelling to free of charge talks with relatives and friends on daily basis via Internet (Viber, Skype, Messenger, etc.). A certain role belongs to the

Russian satellite TV channels, which are helping to sustain cultural identity abroad. In Egypt such Russian TV channels as "1", "Russia Planet", "Russia 24", "STS" and "TNT" are easily accessed free of charge. Due to Internet there is possibility of access to almost all Russian mass-communication sources, including social networks, the role of which in preserving Russian identity abroad can hardly be overestimated. In Facebook alone the following Russian groups are actively functioning: "Russian Hurghada", "Russians in Hurghada", "Russians in Hurghada. Help & Advices", "Hurghada. All kinds of repair works", "Russian Sharm", "Russian-speaking Sharm", "Russians in Cairo", "Russian-speaking New Cairo", "Russian Female Egyptians", "Russian Egypt", "Sun of Egypt", "Beauty in Egypt", "Information Board in Egypt", "Egyptian Needlewomen", "Emergency Aid in Egypt", "Egyptian Gardeners", "Information Book of Egypt" and others.

Local Russian-language newspaper "Moskovsky Komsomolets in Egypt" is published once in two weeks. In every Egyptian town that has Russian community regular Russian meetings are arranged. Successful private initiatives are also actively emerging – feasts and entertaining events of Russians take place in various parts of the country (especially those dedicated to traditional holidays, such as New Year, 8th of March and Victory Day).

Considerable number of Russians in Egypt work, many of them establish small manufactures or companies of their own usually in service sector. Unlike elder generation, today many Russians have good command of Arabic and English. Due to the abovementioned factors, their integration into the local society has a greater impact, while separation as acculturation strategy is rarely observed.

The issue of religious identity of "Russians wives" is more acute than before: post-Soviet generations of Russian women demonstrate high degrees of religiosity or at least serious inclination towards their religious identity. Consequently, they either convert to Islam quite often turning into vigorous adepts of their new faith typical for neophytes (unlike "Soviet wives", who

demonstrated mainly formal conversion), or forcefully defend their right to remain in their religious tradition (usually Orthodox Christianity). The latter have a chance to attend services at the Russian Orthodox Church of Dmitry Salunskiy in Cairo or at the Greek Orthodox cathedrals in various Egyptian governorates.

In 2016 we carried out a poll among forty Russians permanently residing in Egypt, among them 92% females and 8% males; age range 26 – 55 years old. Using observation method it is possible to claim that the poll results demonstrate high degree of validity.

Thus, 77.5% of Russians permanently living in Egypt have higher education, 12.5% have special secondary education. Almost half of them – 47.5% are working, 40% are not working and 5% are studying. Majority of respondents – 80% – know two or more languages.

The answers demonstrate importance of religious factor for Russian residents in Egypt: 42.5% consider themselves Orthodox Christians, 45% Muslims, 5% said they were atheists.

The marital picture looks as follows: 82.5% are married, 5% are unmarried and 2.5% are widows or widowers; 70% have children, 67.5% of Russians live in Egypt due to marriage and only 10% due to work. As for the durability of living in the Land of Pyramids the answers divided almost in half: 47.5% are living in Egypt since recently, i.e. less than 5 years, while 45% are living in Egypt longer than 5 years, 10% reside here for more than 20 years.

The following figures show high level of acculturation among the respondents: 70% know Arabic language at basic or medium level, 82.5% have friends among Egyptians, 52.5% have positive attitude towards Egyptians. Majority of respondents evaluated their level of adaptation in Egypt as high: 35% as 5/5, 40% as 4/5 and 22.5% as 3/5. Also 80% noted that they have changed after moving to Egypt. The optional question "What are these changes?" received the following replies: "I'm being influenced by the country's traditions", "My attitude to my compatriots worsened and I became more

cautious about them", "I'm no longer in a hurry, became more soft and morally flexible", "I became calmer and more sentimental", "I became more reserved". On the whole answers show that majority of positively estimate their life in Egypt: 20% evaluate it as 5/5, 52.5% as 4/5 and only 37.5% however only 37.5% wished to remain living in Egypt, while another 37.5% said they wished to move to another country and 2.5% expressed desire to return back to Russia.

Aspects related to identification features of Russians in Egypt could be detected from the following answers: 70% speak at home in Russian language, 60% communicate with other Russians very frequently. Among ways helping to sustain a good level of native language is mainly communication with other compatriots (50%) and to a lesser extent watching Russian TV (10%). Basic factor helping to keep ties with homeland are talks with relatives and friends by telephone and/or in social networks (50%), regular trips to

Russia (35%) attending various occasions organized by compatriots in Egypt (7.5%). Interesting that not a single respondent mentioned the work of the Russian Culture centers in Cairo and Alexandria (0%) as a source of cultural identity preservation.

The above analysis enables to draw the following conclusion. The process of preserving and keeping cultural identity by the two generations of Russians in Egypt developed in different ways: "Soviet" generation made considerable efforts not to lose their native language and culture and to pass it to their children. Moreover, considerable help was provided by the Soviet cultural centers. For the generation of "Russians" preserving cultural identity was a relatively easy thing as main mechanisms, such as mass communication (including Internet and TV) as well as possibility of non-limited trips to homeland, made the role of Russian cultural centers in this particular context reduced to minimum.

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РУССКИЕ В ЕГИПТЕ: АСПЕКТЫ РЕЛИГИОЗНОЙ И КУЛЬТУРНОЙ ИДЕНТИФИКАЦИИ

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Аннотация: В статье рассматриваются механизмы сохранения культурной и религиозной идентификации россиян, постоянно проживающих в Египте. С начала XX века в Египет из России прибывали три волны иммиграции, каждая из которых имела свои характерные и уникальные особенности.

Формирование первой значительной русской общины в Египте относится к началу XX века, когда в Александрию прибыли белые эмигранты, бежавшие из Российской империи в результате Октябрьской социалистической революции 1917 года. Вторая волна русских, а точнее, советских граждан, появляется в Египте с начала 1960-х годов: после получения высшего образования или ученой степени в СССР молодые египетские мужчины возвращаются в Египет со своими русскими женами. Третья волна российских граждан появилась в Египте с середины 1990-х годов благодаря чрезвычайно интенсивному туристическому потоку из России в Египет: русские женщины приезжают на курорты Красного моря, в частности в Хургаду и Шарм-Эль-Шейх, знакомятся с египтянами, работающими, как правило, в индустрии туризма, выходят за них замуж и переезжают на постоянное место жительства в Египет.

Современная русская община в Египте состоит в основном из так называемых «советских» и «русских» жен египтян, чья адаптация в инокультурной среде анализируется по модели, предложенной профессором Джоном Берри. Согласно данной модели аккультурация реализуется путем выбора четырех стратегий: ассимиляции, отделения, интеграции и маргинализации. Изучение стратегий аккультурации, используемых россиянами в современном Египте, выявляет разницу между поколениями «советских» и «российских» женщин: первая категория использовала в основном разделение и редко интеграцию, а аккультурация второй категории, напротив, характеризуется высокой степенью интеграции в местную социальную среду, в то время как стратегия разделения наблюдается крайне редко.

Ключевые слова: культура, идентификация, аккультурация, ассимиляция, интеграция, маргинализация, иммиграция, Россия, Египет, религия.

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