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Militia and Ethnical Minorities: Interaction Practices (St. Petersburg Case)

1. Introduction

Legitimate law enforcement institutions are a fundamental part of the public structure of any state. The way these law enforcement bodies are organized as well as the professional attitudes and practices of their members usually reflect the important systemic peculiarities of the society in question. A look into the internal institutional logic of Russian militia (police) can give a clue to the social rules of interaction between Russia's state institutions and its citizens.

Structurally Russian Militia is made up of two parts – the Criminal Militia (CM) and the Public Security Militia (PSM) which differ in their functions, staff, as well as subordination and financing principle.

The PSM is in charge of the public order (primarily the Administrative Code). Its numerous staff makes PSM the biggest department of the Internal Ministry, and it is organized according to the territorial principle (there are local Militia units responsible for the public order and security in each municipal district). The PSM receives financing from both federal and regional budgets and thus has double subordination reporting to the Ministry in Moscow as well as to the local administration.

The CM is responsible for fighting crime (the Criminal Code) and its staff is smaller than that of the PSM. Its work is organized according to crime categories (one department deals with economic crimes, the other focuses on drugs, the third fights against organized crime). The CM is financed from the federal budget and reports directly to the Internal Ministry.

In this paper I will analyze the routine practices of the biggest unit of the Russian Internal Ministry – the PSM, which is also the closest to the population. For the majority of the population its officers represent state power, and it is by their work that people judge the militia in general.

I will speak about the typical interactions of the rank-and-file militia officers with ethnical minorities which I observed in St. Petersburg in 2006-2008. This research was part of the project *Militiamen and Ethnical Minorities: Interaction Practices in Kazan and St. Petersburg* carried out by two independent groups of sociologists: the Center for Independent Social Studies (St. Petersburg) and the Institute for Social Studies and Civil Initiatives (Kazan). Our aim was to observe and to understand the logic and the rules of interactions between militia and ethnic minorities in Russia. J. and C. McArthur Foundation (US) which supported this project wanted to know the reasons for the growing number of the media and human rights reports about the cases of ethnic discrimination by militiamen in Russia.

The empirical data was collected through the non-structured interviews (with officers, ethnic minorities and experts), participant observation, and the analysis of Russian media reports on the subject published in 2006-2008.

The process of empirical data collection was impeded by the secretiveness so characteristic of the law enforcement institutions in Russia with their phobia of publicity. More than a half of the 32 interviews with the militia officers were conducted without a dictaphone. It was done at the request of the interviewees who were afraid that the recorded interviews could damage their professional careers. Despite all the attempts of our research group St. Petersburg militia authorities denied us the official permission to do the research, which caused a lot of difficulties in carrying out participatory observation within territorial units. (Kazan group managed to secure such permission). While gathering data among ethnic labor migrants we confronted a different kind of difficulty. These social groups are also fairly closed for the outside observers. Such lack of openness can be explained by a busy working schedule of labor migrants (they work 12 to 14 hours a day), their bad knowledge of Russian, as well as their tendency to limit their communication to a tight group of relatives and compatriots.

2. Some Words on the Institutional Arrangement of Russian Militia

Before starting to analyze the interaction practices of militia officers and ethnic minorities a few words should be said about each of these social groups.

At the moment Russian Public Security Militia is in severe crises both as a state institution and a professional group. The Internal Ministry of Russia has proved to be a very stable and conservative body. It has successfully withstood any reforms and lives and develops according to its own internal rules resisting any external interventions. Nowadays Russian militia still maintains the majority of its old Soviet traditions which define the internal logic, aims and goals of its officers. Of all the institutional features inherited by modern militia from its Soviet past the three listed below seem most significant:

1. Predominance of order over law, law is understood as a flexible and selectively used “power leverage”
2. Soviet “planned” system of its performance assessment: Each district militia unit is to submit a regular 72 item report showing “the considerable improvement over the same parameters of the previous year”, thus the overall falsification of reported data
3. Punitive tendencies in the work of police officers who see their main function as suppressing crime and punishing offence against the law, whereas the service function of maintaining law and order and helping people is less prominent in their work.

While Soviet in its methods and organizational style the work of militia is also affected by its post-Soviet experience which includes low salaries, low social and legal protection of its members, high professional risks alongside with very limited material resources, as well as a negative public image of militiamen in today’s Russia.

Russian police force is currently experiencing severe institutional corrosion: market economy, relative freedom of information and the general distrust of Russians of any government authorities caused a dramatic drop in the professional prestige of its officers, which brought about four meaningful social consequences for this professional group:

- Value disorientation
- Abuse of the delegated power to provide for their own needs
- Self isolation from state and public institutions
- Professional degradation and the growing criminalization of its methods of work

The system currently developing within the PSM is, in fact, similar to the historical practice of *feeding* used in Old Russian Empire when *voevoda* (a military commander) did not receive any salary from the tsar, but *fed* himself and his men at the expense of the population of the territory he was appointed to control. Nowadays the *food* for the PSM officers is provided by the unprotected social groups such as small-scale entrepreneurs, young people, all sort of deviants (drug addicts, alcoholics, homeless, etc.), ethnic migrants and the *new poor*.

In the beginning of our research we were going to focus on the interactions between militiamen and a wide range of ethnic minorities in general, but we later understood that this big group had to be subdivided into several categories, since, as we discovered, the communicational patterns of the officers differ depending on whether they deal with 1) ethnic Russian citizens, 2) ethnic minorities with some kind of convertible resources (money, connections, status) and 3) ethnic labor migrants from the CIS.

Each of these groups has its own special way of interacting with militiamen. In this paper I will focus on the representatives of the third category – guest workers from Central Asia and the Caucasus. They comprise a numerous (15 million people in 2008) and socially less protected ethnic minority group in Russia. The control over illegal migration being one of the functions of Russia's Internal Ministry, ethnic migrants attract special attention of its officers.

3. Interaction Practices of Militiamen and Ethnic Minorities

We have discovered that the interactions between militia officers and ethnic minorities happen most typically under one of the following circumstances: in the streets when checking documents, during regular operations as part of the general fight against illegal migration, during militia's raids to construction sites, markets, and hostels.

These interactions are usually initiated by the militiamen while ethnic minority representatives are forced to obey. The latter are afraid of the men in militia uniform and see them rather as a potential threat than as agents of law and order. Such attitude of ethnic minorities to militia is rooted in the regular practice of *feeding* when the militiamen regard ethnic minorities as a source of their extra income. Hence such militia practices as ethnically selective approach to checking documents, illegal detention and violence towards ethnic minorities during all sorts of police operations (annual operation *Illegal Migrant*, campaign against foreign salesmen at the open-air markets (2007), anti-Georgian campaign (2008), ethnically biased anti-terrorist operations, etc.)

Growing xenophobia, nationalist rhetoric of many politicians and regular ethnically biased operations of Russian militia force ethnic minorities to adopt various tactics (as understood by M. de Certeau) in order to reduce risks when dealing with militia. As shown by our research most of these tactics are informal, while cases when ethnic minorities use legal instruments to protect themselves from militia discrimination being extremely rare.

The most common tactic is avoidance or reducing the contact with militia as much as possible. If, however, the interaction is inevitable ethnic minorities use the following three scenarios.

Most often the detainees try to find “a common language” with the officers, which mean that they try to work out the mutually beneficial terms of their release. In case of labor migrants the situation is usually resolved with the help of a small bribe.

During their encounters with militia many of our ethnic informants reported to adopt the tactic of “silent compliance”. As a rule it is used by ethnic minorities with Russian passports or ethnic labor migrants with reliable documents and local connections. This “silent compliance to the

demands of the officers” is the most formal and distanced interaction of obeying orders with hardly any comments.

The less common tactic is that of “assertive behavior” which implies active resistance to any abuse on the part of the officers. As a rule this tactic is adopted by the high status ethnic minorities with all sorts of resources (connections, official position, finances, etc.). Not always successful, this tactic, however, allows to save some dignity.

One of the main conclusions we came to during our research is that not any of the above mentioned tactics can be considered completely reliable in protecting people with “non-Slavic” appearance from ethnically selective attention of Russian militia.

Why it happens and what are the roots of the xenophobic practices of Russian police officers will be explained in the last part of my paper which discusses the sources of such discrimination towards ethnic labor migrants.

4. Sources of the Racist Practices of Russian Militiamen

We identified three main sources of widespread ethnic discrimination practiced by rank-and-file militia officers.

The institutional sources of these racist practices result from their participation in the xenophobic campaigns provoked by RF political leadership, from the planned system of accountability, from the growing legal illiteracy and professional decline of militia personnel.

Social and biographical roots of racism in Russian militia are connected with the in-house orders and statistics (the use of such categories as “ethnic crime”), with the xenophobic stereotypes¹ not infrequently translated by Russian media, as well as with personal negative experience of the officers gained during various biographical situations (stressful professional clashes with ethnic criminal groups, having lived and served in ethnically different environment, professional trips to Chechnya).

Economic sources of militia’s racist practices are connected to the low social and economic status of this professional group on one hand, and, on the other, to the even more marginal status of ethnic labor migrants, who amount to the major part of ethnic minorities in St. Petersburg. It is easy for the militiamen to identify the non-residents by their appearance and arbitrarily use their power converting it into extra income, plucking the unprotected labor migrants.

Militia’s unfavorable public image resulting in the frustrating self-esteem of its officers, their discontent with low pay and bad working conditions serve as an excuse for official crime and requisitions (“feeding”) when dealing with the less protected social groups.

In Russia any person endowed with power inevitably has more rights than anybody else who is further away from the power sinecures. Years ago Chaadayev quite simply and accurately characterized such society as *the Mongolian Horde* where “guardians of law and order” become tribute collectors. People voluntarily pay them to buy freedom or the right to violate the law. In this way militiamen sell power which was delegated to them.

¹ Some of the most popular stereotypes about ethnic migrants include the belief in the exceptionally high level of crime among them, the concern about migrants taking all the jobs and decreasing labor standards, about cultural, demographic and sanitary threat they present, etc.