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THE REGIONS OF VOLGA FEDERAL DISTRICT:
ETHNIC IDENTITY AS A POLITICAL PROJECT

SUMMARY. The author makes an attempt to analyze the methods and mechanisms of the actualization of ethnic identity in the regions of Volga Federal District. The working hypothesis is the thesis that a big political project is necessary for a successful actualization of ethnic identity. Three examples are used as the argument – successful use of ethnic identity in Tatarstan, the unsuccessful attempt to actualize the ethnic identity of the Bashkirs, and the long-term Finno-Ugric project, which is oriented to the future. The main conclusion of the paper is that a strong connection exists between the process of actualization of ethnic identity in the regions of Volga Federal District and questions of national security. Any attempt to use ethnic identity for political aims brings threat to the political system of the Russian Federation.

KEY WORDS: ethnic identity, political process, ethnic groups, Volga Federal District, Russian Federation

The identity of ethnic groups or ethnic identity has been a factor of political stability rather than of the cultural development of society during the short history of the new Russia. The use of nationalist slogans by different political forces has become a common event in public politics in this country. Many scientists specify economic possibilities of using ethnicity in the political struggle [Тишков 1997], others focus on the situation between the centre and the regions (especially national-territorial regions) [Туровский 2006] when analyzing ethnic-political processes; however; the overwhelming majority agree that ethnic identity is used as an instrument in the political struggle by different actors [Сикевич; Epstein 1978; Скворцов 1997 and others]. The use of this factor is effective in nearly each region of Russia, as polyethnicity is typical almost of the whole territory of the country to a greater or lesser extent.

It is to be noted that there are regions on the territory of Russia where polyethnicity is an original feature in forming a political framework. The Volga-Ural Region, which has been politically formalized as Volga Federal
District since 2000, is the most demonstrative in this sense. The experience of interethnic communications in this district is about 500-600 years old [Шапаров 2009]. The relations between ethnic groups and the formation of an ethno-social and ethno-political image of the region supported by the active participation of Russian state institutions have a history of almost six centuries. Therefore, we can call this region one of the most active concerning the use of technologies related to ethnicity in the political process (in this context, religious self-identification is also a factor related to ethnicity as there is a rigid reference between ethnicity and 'native' religion for most ethnic groups [Скворцов 1995].

Nowadays, processes associated with the matter that ethnic identity is of immediate interest in the regions of Volga Federal District acquire a particular meaning in the context of the formation of the political space and political self-identification of the Russian society, as well as the political integrity of Russia. Here we can see a complex of political and social technologies related to ethnic identity. This issue is especially urgent for 'titular nations' (ethnic groups after which the subjects of the Russian Federation were named, i.e., the Republic of Tatarstan, the Republic of Bashkortostan and others). Being ethnic minorities formally (on the scale of Russia), they occupy the upper state in ethno-social stratification within separate subjects of the Russian Federation and have appendant rights based on the fact that they belong to the 'titular' ethnic group only.

The task of this paper is to analyze the methodology of using ethnic identity as an instrument in political processes on the territory of the regions of Volga Federal District. We shall briefly analyze the potentialities of ethnic identity as an instrument for forming political processes both within separate regions and on a scale close to Russia as a whole (in this case, Volga Federal District will be taken as an integer region).

However, before starting to analyze the methodology and technologies related to the use of ethnic identity in political processes, it is necessary to examine in greater detail the theoretical basis of some terms and statements that will be used herein.

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1 The starting point for the formation of federal districts was the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of May 13, 2000 'On Plenipotentiary Representatives of the President of the Russian Federation in Federal Districts' that defined 7 federal districts (there are 8 federal districts now); each district had a subdivision of the Administration of the President with controlling and consulting functions.

2 Each national-territorial subject of the Russian Federation has its own system of ethno-social stratification. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the upper level of the hierarchy of ethnic groups is occupied by titular nations, whose representatives hold principal positions in the structures of management and regional business.

3 The main trend in the 'legal' anchoring of ethnic identity is the creation of a system of privileges for representatives of the titular nation in getting a higher education and access to state services. This is achieved by language qualifications and the creation of special branches of higher educational establishments where a system of privileges for representatives of the titular nation functions. This generates a feeling of equality between ethnic identity and the legal state among representatives of the titular nation (young people especially). In fact, the regional political elite equates them.
Despite the fact that the problem of ethnic identity is more completely studied in the works of specialists in psychology, we shall focus our attention on the social-political component of this phenomenon. In our opinion, the works of constructivists and instrumentalists are the most adequate for understanding the political side of ethnic identity. The founder of constructivism F. Barth [1989], his followers and critics E. Erikson [1993 and 1995], B. Anderson [Андерсон 1996], A. Cohen [1974] emphasized the fact that ethnic identity is, first of all, a phenomenon related to self-perception and self-positioning by an individual within a social medium [Bernal and Knight 1993]. This is the first provision that we can state as one of the important characteristics of ethnic identity. The majority of scientists (non-constructivists including) tend to believe that ethnic identity is formed only when an individual interacts with other members of society, but sources for forming the identity can be various: from social institutions (family, clan and so on) [Erikson 1995] to political technologies (for example, educational system or mass media) [Андерсон 1996]. The second characteristic of ethnic identity that is important for us is its relationship to political institutions, formed due to the affiliation of components of ethnic identity (based on blood relationship or other consolidating features, i.e., families, clans, kins and others, including unrelated consolidations) with state authorities. Here ethnic identity acts as an instrument for the legitimization of the rule of separate communities [Андерсон 1996: 128]. The third characteristic that will be necessary in order to analyze the role of ethnic identity is its relationship to the cognitive (meaning-formative) space of human psychology. This characteristic defines the level of involvement of a concrete ethnic group in the political process (the higher the relationship, the higher the level of politicization of ethnic identity). Ethnic identity makes it possible to interpret the meaning of political ideologies in its own way.

In this paper, by ethnic identity, we shall mean a social-psychological characteristic of an individual that allows him/her to feel himself/herself a part of a culturally distinctive community with a set of features that demonstrate its individuality and difference from other ‘similar’ communities. Ethno-differentiating characteristics are language, norms and values, historical memory, religion, ideas about the native land, myths about common ancestors, national (ethnic) character, elements of material culture, folk and professional arts [Тишков 1997].

Despite, as it would seem, this ‘extremely psychological’ definition of ethnic identity that we use in our study we shall demonstrate its applicability in the political context.

The analysis of the political context for using ethnic identity in the regions of Volga Federal District will be the starting point of our research. The 14 subjects of the Russian Federation that make up the territory are a heterogeneous set of political mini-systems that have been forming for over 20 years.

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4 See, for example: [Erikson 1995], [Андреева et al. 1997] and [Авдуевская и Баклушинский 1995].
5 In this context, the term political mini-system implies that in each region, there exists a specific configuration of political actors that define the trend of the political process inside the region.
and are going through considerable changes now. In a number of ways, the support of great groups of the population in this epoch of changes is in fact the key for preserving power. The regions of Volga Federal District can be divided into 2 groups: subjects where ethnic identity plays an important role in the political process and subjects where ethnic identity plays a minor role in the political process. The first group is of interest for us; on the basis of its study, we can reveal the main technologies, methods and mechanisms associated with the use of ethnic identity. We refer the following regions formed by the national-territorial principle to this group: Bashkortostan, Mordovia, Mari El, Tatarstan, Chuvashia and Udmurtia. The other subjects of the Federation do not provide a great example of using ethnic identity for political purposes, since the portion of Russians exceeds 70% in them (Всероссийская перепись населения 2002 года) (in some regions it is more than 90%), therefore, ethnic communications are not a constant factor of the political process there (this does not imply that the issue of ethnic identity is not relevant among representatives of ethnic minorities).

If we analyze the level of 'workability' of using ethnic identity in the political process, here we can point out the representatives of the Tatar elite as the leaders. The political elite of the Republic of Tatarstan is a consolidated group of political and economic structures united with ties of blood and land that effectively uses Tatar ethnic identity as a political resource. For the purpose of this, a system of Tatar national and cultural social organizations was created; these function not only in Tatarstan but on the territory of all subjects of the Russian Federation where there is a sufficiently large group of Tatars. The principal function of these organizations is to support the feeling of consolidation among representatives of the ethnic group by reviving ideas about the native land, myth about common ancestors and other characteristics. Thanks, among other things, to the events organized by these organizations (e.g. the World Tatar Congress and the Federal National Cultural Autonomy of Tatars), assimilation processes between Tatars and Russians on the territory of the Republic itself have considerably slowed down. Moreover, the propaganda of these organizations among young people contributes to the fact that the Tatar language has become the principal factor for the identification of this ethnic group (proficiency in the Tatar language is one of the most vivid markers of membership to this ethnic group); the level of proficiency in the language has considerably increased among the Tatar urban population as

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6 These are the Nizhny Novgorod, Orenburg, Kirov, Samara, Saratov, Ulianovsk, Penza regions and Perm territory. Despite the presence of large blocks of ethnic minorities in some of them (Orenburg and Saratov regions first of all), ethnic identity is a minor factor in shaping political trends in these regions.

7 In Kirov and Nizhny Novgorod regions.

8 In all regions of Volga Federal Territory, there are national and cultural autonomies of Tatars that act as a unifying element of the Tatar ethnic group in this region. Undoubtedly, their performance varies by region, but the tasks that they solve are the same.

9 These organizations are supported by the Government of the Republic of Tatarstan and many of their officials are employed in permanent paid positions. They can realize projects on the federal level, of which almost all are politically charged.
compared to the 1980s. In 2009, youth subdivisions of these organizations conducted a mass action of signature collection for granting the status of the second state language in Russia to the Tatar language. The exploitation of conflict topics from the history of Tatars and Russians is also typical of them. For example, the day of seizure of Kazan by the Russian troops in 1552 is commemorated annually by Tatar social organizations as an event to be mourned.

It is possible to notice that the rates of integration of Tatar young people into the Russian social-political space have decreased. Applying the mechanisms of institutions of state authorities, the Tatar political elite has achieved a high level of loyalty of the titular nation towards itself. Among such mechanisms of revival of ethnic identity are the educational system (education is conducted in the native language on equal terms with the Russian language for all ethnic groups on the territory of Tatarstan)\textsuperscript{10}, undercover support of Islam as the 'state' religion of the region (in the vast majority of the regions of Volga Federal District, the heads of spiritual governances for Muslims are ethnic Tatars that support religious identification simultaneously with interethnic unity)\textsuperscript{11} as well as a system of preferences for representatives of the titular nation within the state apparatus (a stereotype is implanted in the mind of the population: the head of a large establishment must be a person that speaks Tatar and the head of the Republic can only be an ethnic Tatar)\textsuperscript{12}. The Tatar political elite is positioning itself, due to the maintenance of a high level of ethnic mobilization of the titular nation, as the sole legitimate actor in the political space of the region. There is no political opposition in the Republic of Tatarstan; and if such trends continue, it is unlikely that it will appear in the near future even with serious support from the federal centre.

However, such a situation has a dark side; the other ethnic groups of the region, especially Russians, feel it. Nowadays, the political elite of Tatarstan has chosen Turks as a reference ethnic group for Tatars. A great number of Turkish cultural centers and joint projects with Turkish companies and organizations enhance the relationships between the ethnic groups\textsuperscript{13}. Their common religious identification also enhances these tendencies. Tatar young people whose parents have a high status and economic level are the group most influenced by Turkey. The official policy of the Tatar political elite to segregate Tatars from Russians (it is revealed, for example, in the fact that it is preferable to marry an individual of one's own ethnic group) considerably impedes and sometimes stops integration processes (we mean representatives of Tatar youth organizations).

\textsuperscript{10} After the adoption of Federal Law No.309 of December 1, 2007, which specifies new standards of teaching native languages, the practice of teaching Russians the Tatar language without their desire will be, most likely, terminated.

\textsuperscript{11} Muftis are especially active in the regions where they are simultaneously members of governances of Tatar national cultural autonomies, for example, in Nizhny Novgorod region.

\textsuperscript{12} This guideline has existed since the Soviet Union; in modern Russia, it is a manifestation of the political ideology of elite groups at the level of national-territorial formations. In Tatarstan, this guideline has been in effect for more than 30 years.

\textsuperscript{13} A part of various cultural and educational centers, a series of Turkish firms and enterprises of different proprietary forms, including state Turkish corporations, operate on the territory of Tatarstan.
Thus using the mechanisms of institutions of state authorities and systems of discourses as technologies, the Tatar political elite is implementing a political project, whose final aim is the independence of the Republic of Tatarstan (in this case, the administration boundaries should not mislead anyone, as they can be reviewed in case of political instability). The nearest goal has been already achieved, namely: total control over the political process inside the region and complete absence of a structured opposition.

The second example that we shall consider is the situation in the Republic of Bashkortostan. This region is the most complicated from the perspective of the ethnic structure of the population and interdependency between the level of mobilization of the titular nation and the political situation inside the region. Bashkortostan does not have a consolidated ethnic elite as Bashkirs are the second in number ethnic group in the region (the first group is the Russian ethnic group; the third one the Tatars)\(^\text{14}\). The configuration of the political system of Bashkortostan is such that until recently, the centerpiece was its leader, M. Rakhimov. His discharge implied the impossibility of using the resource of ethnic identity in the political process by other authorities in Bashkortostan\(^\text{15}\). Several political projects were simultaneously realized on the territory of the Republic; none of them could fully use ethnic authority as an effective instrument in the race for power\(^\text{16}\). As we have mentioned earlier, the political elite of Bashkortostan is not consolidated by the principle of ethnicity; therefore, M. Rakhimov could not repeat the model of Tatarstan no matter how much he tried. Applying the institutional model proposed by Tatarstan, M. Rakhimov endeavored to develop a system of political authority linked with his family; the ethnic factor played a secondary role. This implied that the level of loyalty of the titular group to the ethnic political elite was not very high from the outset.

The political activity of M. Rakhimov and his officials did not have the principal element in constructing an effective model of using the ethnic identity of Bashkirs – a central project according to which mechanisms (state institutions) and technologies (a system of discourses) are constructed. Radicalization of national-cultural unions of Bashkirs and youth organizations especially (the Kuk Bure /Grey Wolves/, the Union of Bashkir Youth)\(^\text{17}\) was a product of the implementation of this model; these organizations could not distinctly express the main point of self-identification of Bashkirs today and used (and

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\(^\text{14}\) According to the Russian Population Census, in the Republic of Bashkortostan Russians make up 36.3%, Bashkirs 29.7% and Tatars 24.1%.

\(^\text{15}\) This is explained by their insignificant, as compared to Rakhimov, political weight. M. Rakhimov has considerable political capital and credibility within the Bashkir ethnic group. None of his close associates could expect to have comparable authority for the titular nation.

\(^\text{16}\) The process of Bashkir nation formation has not entered its final phase. This fact is explained by the vague ethnic identity of the titular nation in separate regions of Bashkortostan (including the North-West regions where there are a lot of Tatars) and an absence of sufficient human resources (the number of Bashkirs in Bashkortostan is not sufficient to form a stable political community that would represent an ethnic elite) to implement large-scale political projects.

\(^\text{17}\) These organizations, in fact projects of the Administration of the President of Bashkortostan, could not make the Bashkir youth national movement into a mass one. To a great extent, their radicalism was the result of poor propaganda and small overall numbers.
continue to use) references to the past (Salavat Yulaev, a semilegendary Bashkir hero, was the only relatively successful element in constructing the ethnic identity of Bashkirs). Bashkir youth organizations regularly conduct protest actions with political demands whose attendance, however, does not exceed several tens of people. At the same time, no substantive measures are made to correct the situation with the revival of Bashkir culture. As a result, advocates of the Union of Bashkir Youth and Kuk Bure were seen to take part in Islam extremist organizations that function on the territory of the Republic of Bashkortostan.

It is to be noted that the conditions in which M. Rakhimov tried to implement the Tatar project towards Bashkirs were significantly different from the situation in Tatarstan. The intertwining of interests of different political actors, i.e., Rakhimov’s family, the federal centre, large-scale business, and neighboring Tatarstan resulted in the following: the more persistently the model of Tatarstan was sought to be introduced, the stronger the response of other political actors that used resources of ethnic identity of other ethnic groups in Bashkortostan. The protective potential of the Tatar ethnic group was used most effectively. As a result, the model that M. Rakhimov attempted to adopt suffered a defeat and he could not maintain power in the country (or hand it to his successor – R. Sarbaev). Bashkirs did not form a stable group with its own set of characteristics and their political resource was undermined by the actions of other political actors. It should be noted that after R. Khamitov’s accession to power, it is expected that the structure of interethnic communications between Tatars and Bashkirs in the region will change.

After analyzing both a successful project of using ethnic identity as an instrument of politics and an unsuccessful example, we shall consider a project that is in progress. We mean the situation in the regions where the titular nation is represented by peoples of the Finno-Ugric language group: Mari El, Mordovia and Udmurtia. Separately, these regions do not have a serious potential in launching ethnic identity projects; however, with the support by the Finno-Ugric project and foreign non-governmental organizations, the political weight of the elite of these regions is increasing.

The Finno-Ugric project is a complex of mechanisms and technologies for constructing a superethnic Finno-Ugric community that could position itself as a serious factor in the political process on the scale of Russia as a whole. The first stage of this project that is guided and ideologically fed by non-governmental organizations from Estonia, Finland and Hungary is the revival of ethnic identity of Maris, Udmurts, Mordvins (Moksha and Erzya) and other Finno-Ugric peoples on the territory of Russia. There are 3 subjects of the Federation in Volga Federal District where the Finno-Ugric project is implemented in full: Mari El, Mordovia and Udmurtia. Foreign non-governmental organizations are trying to revive the ethnic identity of the titular nations of

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18 The main issue was granting the status of state (regional) language to the Tatar language, which was unacceptable for M. Rakhimov.
19 For details, see www.finugor.ru, a site devoted to problems of the Finno-Ugric movement in Russia.
these subjects by a complex of events aimed at promoting the folklore component (traditional material and spiritual culture) in different spheres of Russian Finno-Ugric peoples. Here we can mention scientific events (scientific conferences, panel discussions, activity of cultural centers, the publishing of books and handbooks\textsuperscript{20}, educational events (development of educational programs for schools and higher educational establishments, internships in Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian higher educational establishments and so on)\textsuperscript{21}, mass cultural events (the 'Shubmat, Finno-Ugria!' Festival, which the heads of Russia, Finland, Estonia and Hungary visited in 2007, is the most demonstrative). The main target audience are youth and active advocates of national-cultural social organizations. They are taught to position and perceive themselves as representatives of a large community of Finno-Ugric peoples that must have a unified political position, although without a single political head. The principal aim of this project is to create conditions in which the ethnic identity of representatives of the titular nations of Mari El, Mordovia and Udmurtia will be a political resource for regional elites that will use it in relationships with the federal centre.

The efficiency of the actions of these organizations aimed at reviving ethnic awareness and the Finno-Ugric construct especially will greatly increase if resources of non-governmental (and, quite often, state) organizations from Finland, Hungary and Estonia are used. The M. A. Castrén Society is especially active. Its goal, according to the foundation documents, is 'to support the culture of people related in language that live on the territory of the USSR\textsuperscript{22} (the Society was created in 1990). The Society closely collaborates with the Ministry of Education of Finland and can be considered to be its subdivision. The M. A. Castrén Society contacts with Finno-Ugric regions through a special coordinator that is present in each subject of the Russian Federation with ethnic communities of the Finno-Ugric language group. The M. A. Castrén Society mainly deals with the distribution of finances from grants provided by the Government of Finland.

Moreover, in 1993, the Finno-Ugric Information Centre was established\textsuperscript{23} to create an information field for the project. The number of Internet sites and printed mass media in this field exceeds 50 in the Volga Federal District.

It is obvious that the Finno-Ugric project is long-term and that it is aimed at decreasing the loyalty of Finno-Ugric peoples towards the political leadership of Russia. However, its first outcomes will be able to be analyzed once actual activists from youth national organizations enter the organs of these republics. Finns were chosen as a reference group for Finno-Ugric peoples of

\textsuperscript{20} During 2009, in Volga Federal Territory, there were at least 34 scientific-practical conferences of regional and interregional levels devoted to the problems of Finno-Ugric peoples.

\textsuperscript{21} Annually, groups of Mari, Mordvin and Udmurt students have internship in Tartu University, which hosts the Paul Ariste Centre for Indigenous Finno-Ugric Peoples, and attend summer camp at Berzeseny Dániel Teacher Training College (the city of Szombathely, Hungary).

\textsuperscript{22} http://www.finnougoria.ru/community/project/project.php?SECTION_ID=408&ELEMENT_ID=2810

\textsuperscript{23} http://www.finugor.ru
Russia as the most successful Finno-Ugric people, with an independent and economically profitable state.

Of course, upon implementation, this project will reveal a sufficiently low degree of political nature of Russian Finno-Ugric peoples and a high degree of assimilation on the part of Russians. As a result, the Finno-Ugric project will be able to be extended all the way up to the end of the 21st century.

Summarizing our brief analysis, we can make a series of conclusions about the possibilities and purposes of using ethnic identity in the political process in the regions of Volga Federal District:

1. The use of ethnic identity in the political process in the regions of Volga Federal District is an integral part of the political process in national-territorial subjects of the Russian Federation.

2. To use ethnic identity for political purposes effectively, it is necessary to develop a long-term project focused on large political tasks that can be taken up by separate ethnic groups (for example, the creation of an independent state).

3. The use of ethnic identity for political purposes in any form undermines the political integrity of Russia. Ethnic identity itself has the potential for forming political ideologies (a cognitive component of ethnic identity) that view ethnic communities as political entities.

4. When ethnic identity is used for political purposes, its revival through a system of institutional mechanisms and discourse technologies is an obligatory condition. The creation of segregation trends among titular nations towards Russians and a change of reference ethnic groups is typical of the regions of Volga Federal District.

5. The use of ethnic identity as an instrument in the political struggle is possible only if there is a unified position towards the opponents. The ethnic group in this case must be the preferred social base of the political actor.

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РЕГИОНИ У ПОВОЛШКОМ ФЕДЕРАЛНОМ ДИСТРИКТУ: 
ЕТНИЧКИ ИДЕНТИТЕТКААОПОЛИТИЧКИ ПРОЈЕКТ

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Резиме

Аутори анализирају методе и механизме актуализације етничког идентитета у Поволшком Федералном Дистрикту Руске Федерације. Њихова радна хипотеза је да је за успех актуализације етничког идентитета потребан крупни политички пројект. Као аргумент за ову тезу служе три примера – успешна употреба етничког идентитета у Татарстану (политички пројект Турске), неуспеша покушај актуализације етничког идентитета Башкира (политички пројект екстремних исламистичких
и пантуранских група) и дугорочни финско-угарски пројект (Мађарске, Финске и Естоније), усмерен стратешки на будућност, а према Маријцима, Удмуртима, и Мордвинима (Мокшама и Ерзјама). Главни закључак до кога у овом раду аутор долази гласи: постоји снажна веза између процеса актуализације етничког идентитета у Поволшком Федералном Дистрикту и питања националне безбедности Русије: Сваки покушај употребе етничког идентитета у политичке сврхе угрожава политички систем Руске Федерације.

Кључне речи: етнички идентитет, политички пројект, титуларне етничке групе, Поволжје, Руска Федерација