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Russia’s National Cultural Autonomy and Social-Humanitarian Work: A Case of Collective Responsibility?

Introduction

This paper analyses the interconnection of Russia’s ethnic institutions and forms of social-humanitarian work, linking them to notions of ethnic boundary-making and collective responsibility. It uses data from interviews with persons from ethnic institutions (mostly National Cultural Autonomies – NCAs) to show that ethnicity-based categorisations were widespread among the respondents. At the same time, groupist attitudes did not remain unchallenged, while the web of networks that formed around ethnic groups were much more complex than the simple division of society along ethnic lines. Despite this, the paper argues that (perceptions of) ethnic boundaries continue to be consolidated, and linked to the idea of collective responsibility. This approach is promoted by the Russian state and (to varying degrees and in different ways) by ethnic leaders. Meanwhile, the actions of ethnic leaders also reflect particular ‘struggles’ within social fields.

This paper refers to Bourdieusian theory and the conceptualisation of boundary-making developed by Wimmer (2013). The paper can be seen in the context of literature that has applied Bourdieusian theory to the study of ethnicity [add ref].¹ Yet it focuses on the significance and implications of (constructed) ethnic boundaries in the context of ethnic organisations’ humanitarian activities, linking them to notions of (ethnicity-based) collective responsibility. Thus, while in the past I have considered the relations between ‘culture’ and politics’ with reference to NCA (Prina, 2018), here I analyse the interaction of the cultural and the social dimensions of NCA activities.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I elaborate on the construction of boundaries in contemporary Russia: I outline the ideas of ‘groupness’ which emerged from interviews with respondents, link them to other – seemingly less overt – patterns of social relations, and examine the reproduction of ethnic boundaries. Second, I look at group representation and collective responsibility in relation to the same ethnic boundaries. Third, I consider the same notions in the context of social-humanitarian work conducted by ethnicity-based civil society organisations, and particularly NCAs.

Interviews were conducted with a range of respondents, encompassing Finno-Ugric groups, Tatars, and persons originating from the (North and South) Caucasus and Central Asia.² The study was part of a wider research project on non-territorial national cultural autonomy in Central and Eastern Europe undertaken by the University of Glasgow.³ Semi-structured, in-

¹ [Bentley has used Bourdieu’s habitus theory to explain why cultural differences easily—but not automatically—translate into perceptions of ethnic difference (Bentley 1987)]

² Ten respondents did not belong to an ethnic minority.

³ The research for this article was carried out under the project ‘National Minority Rights and Democratic Political Community: Practices of Non-Territorial Autonomy in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe’ (2014-2017).

depth interviews were conducted between June 2015 and June 2016 in six cities of the Russian Federation: in four ethnic republics – Saransk (Republic of Mordovia), Petrozavodsk (Karelia), Kazan (Tatarstan) and Ufa (Bashkortostan) – as well as in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In total 76 persons were interviewed; 66 respondents were from minority organisations (national cultural autonomies and NGOs operating in the sphere of minority issues); 25 respondents were academics or public officials,⁴ some of whom were also active in minority organisations (resulting in a partial overlap of categories). Ethnic affiliation was determined on the basis of self-identification by the respondents. Interview questions were on a range of subjects relating to Russia’s inter-ethnic relations, national cultural autonomy, and minority rights. Unless otherwise indicated, the respondents cited in this article represented minority organisations.

It has to be recalled that the respondents were not ‘average citizens’, but for the most part persons who had chosen to establish or join ethnic institutions. They might, therefore, have possessed a more marked ethnic consciousness than the average person. The expressions ‘group’ and ‘community’ are used interchangeably in this paper, in the sense of ethnic community (*natsionalnost*).

Boundary-making

During the Soviet period ethnic institutions led to the crystallisation of particular forms of ethnic consciousness, with the population positioning themselves in relation to a pre-established grid of nationalities. In line with the ‘institutionalist account’ promoted by various authors (Brubaker, 1994; Gorenburg, 2003), this paper espouses the view that Soviet classifications, along with ‘ethnic engineering’, contributed to creating ‘thick’ ethnic identities. The resulting tendency to classification and ethnic essentialism has continued in the post-Soviet period (Tishkov, 1997). Drawing on Brubaker, and his concept of ‘groupism’ [add], Osipov has argued that the idea of ‘groups’ interacting with one another continue to be prevalent in the post-Soviet period [add ref].⁵

Since the end of the Soviet Union, several practices which had contributed to consolidating (the perception of) ethnic boundaries have been discontinued. One of them is the specification of one’s nationality (ethnicity) in documents: ethnicity was indicated in Soviet internal passports and reproduced in official documents, which continuously reinforced the ethnic self-identification within the Soviet social structure (Gorenburg, 2003). In post-Soviet Russia the social significance of ethnicity is complex. On the one hand, the decreased emphasis placed on it (e.g. removal from official documents) can be expected to make ethnic boundaries more tenuous. And, following an ethnic renaissance in several of Russia’s regions in the 1990s (Derluigan, 2005; Gorenburg, 2003), ethnicity has, overall, had an ‘underwhelming’ effect on Russian politics (Giuliano and Gorenburg, 2012). This is partially linked to state policies: political parties on the basis of ethnicity have been banned, against the backdrop of a drive to ‘de-ethnify’ post-Soviet Russia [Russian government’s report to the CoE, add ref]. Indeed, the Russian state has sought to detract attention from ethnicity and de-link it from political claims [NCA law and reducing the autonomy of the ethnic regions]. On the other hand, it has been argued that perceptions of a society divided into distinct ethnic groups have become more pronounced since the end of the Soviet Union, with a hardening of the imaginary boundaries

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⁴ In some cases *former* public officials.

⁵ In this context, and NCAs continue to exist and to be established.

between them: Tolz and Harding (2015, pp. 455–6), for example, refer to a post-Soviet ‘highly hierarchical account of cultural diversity’. Processes of racialisation [add ref] – often linked to forms of migrantphobia and primarily affecting persons of ‘non-Slavic appearance’ – continue to reproduce the idea of the ethnic stratification of society.

Following Wimmer (2013), I consider boundary-making and boundary preservation as processes, rather than conceiving groups as having different identities per se.⁶ Boundary-making⁷ unfolds in connection with power distribution, social networks and institutions [Wimmer], which produce a societal ‘structuration’ [Giddens]. In particular, the state possesses the symbolic power to consolidate particular social categories. Individuals are immersed in (and influenced by) such structures, yet they also struggle within social fields, in relation to a constellation of forces that are continuously shifting [Bourdieu, *Distinction*]. Thus, the construction of boundaries is accompanied by struggles of individuals, on matters such as where exactly boundaries should be located, acquisition of resources on the basis of such boundaries, etc. Individuals act strategically to gain benefits, which may be linked to tangible resources, but also recognition (what we could call ‘symbolic capital’ in Bourdieu’s terms).⁸ On the basis of a range of factors, including social structures and personal inclinations, individuals position themselves in a social field, forming a web of networks that can lead co-ethnics to cluster together. At the same time, Wimmer emphasises that we also have to be mindful of non-ethnic processes that unfold alongside ethnic ones, and which can equally influence tie-formations [add ref] (as outlined below).

Ethnic Boundaries and Beyond

Group ‘essence’

Two and a half decades after the end of the Soviet Union, most respondents still tended to hold on to the idea of ethnic categories (and the notions of ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’). As noted, interviews were carried out with persons from ethnic minority institutions, mostly non-territorial national cultural autonomy (NCA). These institutions were established following the adoption, in 1996, of the Federal Law on National Cultural Autonomy [add ref]. Osipov has argued [ref] that the concept and application of NCA in Russia is closely associated to a form of ‘groupism’, in Brubaker’s sense of the expression (a tendency to perceive groups as internally homogeneous).

Participants referred to particular traits of their and other ethnic groups that seemed to be conceived as immutable, and were reminiscent of a group ‘essence’. Particular communities were often associated with particular characteristics, such as impulsivity and a tendency towards particular behaviours, which went beyond practices developed through historical circumstances. The expression ‘mentality’ (*mentalitet*) was often used. It reflected Stalin’s definition of a nation [add].

At times such an essence was linked to something concrete, such as language (rather than a general sense of identity/belonging), which could be transmitted from generation to generation. Thus, respondents often displayed a perennialist approach to ethnicity. The perceptions described were close to a Herderian view, implying that a community has a unique culture and

⁶ [Similarly, Bourdieu focuses on relations, not groups themselves]

⁷ [add on boundary making v boundary ‘work’]

⁸ [advantages can be symbolic (a name) and material – *Distinction*]

language, and its members are united by the same, shared culture. In this sense, a community's members are conceived as sharing a unique universe, which they will either attempt to retain, or lose through assimilation.

No respondent referred to forms of *plural* ethnic identity/ies. There were references to persons belonging to different groups interacting with each other, but not to a possible 'fusion' of cultures, which might manifest itself in various (and unexpected) ways. Categories continued to be primarily viewed as exclusionary. For example, a Mordovian respondent considered himself Mordovian despite having some Russian [*russkii*] family members, but, not as *both* (and simultaneously) Mordovian and Russian.⁹ Another respondent (in answering a question on her views on *rossiiskaya natsiya*) stated:

A nation [*natsiya*] is defined by language, culture, history. Do you remember that people used to talk about the Soviet nation, the Soviet *chelovek*? And for the Americans it's easy to call themselves 'Americans', because they were gathered there from the beginning. But we have our culture. What differentiates one nation from the other? Its identity/essence (*samobytnost'*), its language, its traditions, its history. And what history does *rossiiskaya natsiya* have? [...] I'm a Tatar (*Tatarka*), I know my roots for 27 generations. To the 14th century. I am *rossianka*, but not *russskaya*, I'm a Tatar. And things such as *rossiiskaya natsiya*, I think that it's not right. I'm a Tatar. A Bashkir is a Bashkir. A Russian (*russkii*) is a Russian. They have their own language, their tradition, culture, history. We are different from each other [...] ¹⁰

This respondent referred clearly to the idea of an essence (*samobytnost'*), transmitted through generations. The fact that distinct cultures were present in Russia required, she added, mutual tolerance.

By analysing data from interviews we can unpack the elements of the perceived essence of ethnic communities. First, the idea of a specific *culture* was often mentioned, and linked to a particular language and tradition. Respondents often referred in succession to 'culture', 'language' and 'history'. 'Tradition' was also often associated to a general concept of ethnic belonging (as per the respondent's citation above), emphasising the idea of uninterrupted practices, rather than evolving habits (and evolving consciousness). Respondents often spoke about the 'preservation' (*sokhranenie*) of culture, rather than its expression more generally; they did not talk about evolution or hybridisation of culture(s).

Second, pride in one's community's *history* and achievements was often treated as something acquired as part of one's heritage, which could not be removed from a community, and those identifying with it. It was often linked to a past portrayed as a golden era. The pride in one's nation/national community was sometimes contrasted to (what some respondents called) the Russian 'imperial mentality', which continued to perceive non-Russians as divided into simplistic categories from the Soviet grid of nationalities.

Third, culture, as the expression of identity, was often linked to what may be described a form of spirituality (even if respondents did not use this expression). Being involved in cultural activities was often associated to respect for one's identity and also that of others (the two generally portrayed as juxtaposed). Culture was depicted as a form of inner wealth that

⁹ [respondent 11]

¹⁰ [respondent 12]

transcended (was ‘bigger than’) the individual, and was acquired through belonging and getting in touch with one’s roots. These notions were often linked to an idealised view of national identity and community life. For example, a respondent from a local Ukrainian NCA said:

It’s our culture, you see? [sighs] [...]. In the past 20 years, maybe because we became pensioners, we are this age, and we started thinking about our roots, about our ancestors, and we went to our historical homeland [region in Ukraine] [...]. We were very happy with the trip and the event was wonderful, we wore our national customs. Some of our relatives died there, and there was the flame [commemorative flame]. The festival was very good, with the participation of the administration of the district. It was very heartfelt. And we invited them in 2004 to Mordovia, and they came, they also met with the administration of the [our] town. There was an event in the [our] district [...]. They [local Ukrainians] didn’t have a celebration for 25 years, and people came from the whole of Russia, with their children, grandchildren. And we had a very very good festival. It was so wonderful, we had tears in our eyes. We were so happy to get to know each other [...] it’s incredible how good the festival was, and then we decided to establish the autonomy [NCA]. [...] And this year it’s 10 years of the existence of our organisation. And after this, we can have very close relations, with the internet, odnoklassnik etc. [...] We preserved our culture, and when we went to Ukraine, and we sang Ukrainian songs, we hadn’t lost the intonation or the text. Nothing changed. Like we sang, they [the locals in Ukraine] sang. We celebrated not only [town in Ukraine], but we had many guests [of other ethnicities] [...]. We showed the culture of all the peoples [*narody*] living in [town in Ukraine]. The cuisine, the concerts.

Culture, when conceived as permanent (mostly in the form of traditional songs, dances, customs, and cuisine) was often perceived as having the same type of meanings for all group members, with various respondents using a similar language to describe it.

Expressions indicating community belonging (and corresponding societal strata) used by respondents included ‘ours’ (*nashi*) or ‘compatriots’ (*sootchestvenniki*) to designate co-ethnics regardless of citizenship; and ‘homeland’ (*rodina*) to indicate a kin-state (also regardless of citizenship). Similar attitudes were present, the respondents noted, among the Russian majority, who, when speaking to the (minority) respondents referred to their co-ethnics as ‘your citizen’, ‘your compatriot’, etc [add ref].

Webs of relations: beyond the ‘group’

The respondent cited above,¹¹ who referred to an essence (*samobytnost’*) transmitted inter-generationally, in the same citation also indicated that this was not the case in all societies: this ‘essence’ might be lost or possibly never acquired. She employed the example of Americans, who were seen to have had high levels of intermingling from the beginning of settlement on American soil, resulting in a fusion of immigrant cultures.

Other respondents referred to the unfixity of ethnicity. Some respondents spoke of loss of identity; for example, a respondent referred to co-ethnics who had ‘disidentified’ as members of his community, and crossed the boundary to the Russian majority. He was speaking about the Republic of Mordovia, where, he said, persons of Mordovian ethnic background had started identifying themselves as Russians in the census, causing the percentage of Mordovians in the republic to drop; the same percentage rose again in the following census [add details], which

¹¹ [respondent 12]

can be attributed not to population growth but to a realignment of ethnic identification, following campaigning by Mordovian national organisations.¹² These processes implied boundary crossing from an exclusive identity to another, to return to the original form of self-identification. This was possible in the case of groups that were Slavic or Finno-Ugric, and were therefore not subjected to racialisation: acquiring a new, Russian (*russkii*) identity would have been more problematic for groups that were seen as the ‘ethnic other’ – groups that diverged more sharply from the Russian majority, ethnically and culturally [add explanation]. There were also references to ‘temporary’ boundary crossing – for example at festivals when persons participated in another ethnic community’s performances (e.g. singing or dancing in the performance of a different ethnic community, and wearing their national costumes).¹³

Another respondent, of Lithuanian background, and who had always lived in Russia, noted that:

If [I’m] in Russia, I am told ‘look what *your* president Dalia Grybauskaitė [president of Lithuania] said’. In Lithuania, people tell me the same about *my* president Vladimir Putin.¹⁴

This points to a situationalist reading of ethnicity [add ref], with perceptions varying according to the observers’ perspective. Similarly, different categories can be associated to the same person, in terms of both self-identification and societal perceptions (e.g. Tatar, Muslims, non-Slavic, etc). A respondent from Karelia referred to three levels of identification: being Jewish, originating from the Republic of Karelia (and being associated with Karelia when travelling to other parts of the Federation), and Russian citizen. And, unlike for the perceptions described by the Lithuanian respondent, these forms of identification were not exclusionary. Thus, ethnic classifications are multi-level and take different forms depending on the circumstances (Wimmer, 2013, p. 81)

The same Lithuanian respondent also added:

I would prefer to be a citizen of the world, to be free in my opinions and judgements. The less restrictions we have, the more open and independent we feel.

Like this respondent, others referred to individuality. They observed that some individuals diverged from the ‘ethnic norm’ (acted in ways that were atypical from the point of view of the a community’s perceived dominant traits).¹⁵ Others noted that the media placed an excessive emphasis on ethnicity in reporting crimes,¹⁶ rendering ethnicity ‘the most important thing about a person’, and disagreed with this approach. Another respondent revealed an anti-essentialist

¹² [respondent 11]

¹³ More commonly they attended each other’s events and were spectators in other groups’ performances [‘we attend the Tatars’ festivals’ - Abd]. [Ukr res: The multi-national mosaic is very good, we wear national customs. Then we have a concert, and we invite all representatives of the different organisations. ‘They also watch our culture’ [oni tozhe nashu culture smotriat]. The Azerbaijanis every year have ‘Bairam’, it’s a festival and they invite all. Also the Jews not long ago had their own festival. ‘We all invite each other. At all events we try to invite [all], we are friends with each other [my druzhem]. We celebrate each other’s holidays.’ I have been around, going to celebrations by bus. They see me and they come to me. And they all ask: How are things in Ukraine, how are your people? ‘I believe that the Ministry of National Policy, and the government of course, they make the biggest effort to make sure that we live peacefully and friendly, so that we respect the culture of different people].

¹⁴ [respondent 10]

¹⁵ [respondent 3]

¹⁶ [respondent 3, respondent 13]

attitude to Tatareness, by noting that Tatar communities in different localities had developed diverging characteristics.¹⁷ Meanwhile, a respondent denounced essentialist attitudes in Russia society, but – perhaps inadvertently – displayed also essentialising attitudes as she referred to particular traits of ethnic communities.¹⁸

Among observers interviewed (mostly academics), some noted that ethnic leaders did not maintain contacts with the broader network of co-ethnics outside the main ‘core’ comprising activists [respondent 1]; others, who had migrants among co-ethnics, reportedly tried to distance themselves from newcomers [respondent 2, respondent 3]. This goes against the common assumption that solidarity networks will shape around ethnic lines. The same assumption is challenged by studies of non-ethnic mechanisms affecting networks in labour markets [add ref].

The interview questions did not enquire where exactly a community’s boundaries were located, and neither did the respondents volunteer their views on this issue. In this sense the community seemed to be an ‘imagined community’ with vague, undefined boundaries. The community could have potentially encompassed all persons with a particular ethnic background in a locality (region/state), or those who actively identified with such a background. As an indication, we can refer to common rules for joining a particular NCA or ethnic NGO, which generally involved a link to the community through lineage (being related to another person of that ethnic background). Thus, these rules primarily followed the principle of *ius sanguinis*, although some respondents also referred to acquired identity, usually through marriage to a person of a particular ethnicity.

While each community was conceived as representing a separate social category, some categories could be ‘grouped’ by ethno-linguistic affinity. Thus, for example, a range of ethnic groups were collapsed into the category of ‘Finno-Ugric peoples’, with the creation of an association, the Association of Finno-Ugric Peoples of Russia (AFUN).¹⁹ A respondent of Mordovian background noted a strong sense of belonging with the broader Finno-Ugric community:

Clearly we all know each other, and so [we] show the beauty of Udmurts, of Komi, Khanti, there are many *narodi* – [we] show that they have their own specificities/qualities [*osobennosti*], in the sphere of language, in rites, habits, ethnocultural, that they have their own character [*kharacter*] and national cultural – whether dances, rites, linguistic, different ... And we show to what extent they have also something in common among them, in their origins and history, and [that] an ethnic community is a small jewel, a small twinkle [*ogonek*]. And the Finno-Ugric [community] reveals a big, beautiful jewel. When Finno-Ugric people gather, you can’t imagine what kind of spiritual unity there is, people say: ‘relative [family member, *rodstvennik*], you are my relative!’ You know? Although the languages are not intelligible – there are all different languages. Finns would never understand the Mari or Udmurt or Mordovians. The linguists find some common features, but you wouldn’t understand. So the common project is to show the specificities and the commonalities and the beauty of all these peoples who live in our country and in others. [respondent 4]

¹⁷ Add ref*

¹⁸ [Respondent 3]

¹⁹ In fact AFUN also brought together Finno-Ugric communities located outside the Russian Federation, such as Hungarians (in Hungary) and Estonians (in Estonia).

Thus, ethnic boundaries were contained in broader units. Some respondents referred to both a ‘common humanity’ that was present in all individuals, regardless of ethnicity, and different ethnic categories present in the social space. An academic referred to networks and belonging that were not *only* defined by ethnicity but by exact region of provenance/origin [respondent 5, also support network]. Another observer spoke about clan structures and tribal networks splintering ethnic minorities into miniscule subsections [respondent 3].

Reproduction of boundaries

Thus, we see a complex, dense pattern of networks emerge. At the same time, as noted, the state is equipped with the symbolic power to consolidate the social significance of specific categories through its institutions, which can make *ethnic* boundaries more relevant than other types of categorisation and networks. Within this context, it is also important that we do not, as Wimmer puts it, ‘overstate the hegemonic power of dominant modes of ethnic boundary making’ (Wimmer, 2013, p. 94). Counterdiscourses, or ‘resistance’ to dominant narratives, also manifest themselves. This resistance is part of individual struggles.

Ethnicity-based classifications were inherited from the Soviet period, but continued to be reproduced after 1991. In particular, ethno-territorial federalism has been preserved;²⁰ and the Law on National Cultural Autonomy (NCA Law)²¹ consolidates the view of several ‘communities’ existing alongside the Russian majority, by organising them through separate ethnic representative institutions.

There are few instances in contemporary Russia in which boundaries themselves are contested;²² rather, contestation relates to social hierarchies and levels of autonomy. Boundaries are often entrenched by groups themselves. Persons considering themselves part of a nation will seek to maintain this identity, and any status associated with it, such as the existence of a titular republic. Inversely, when the state attempts to eradicate traditional practices that are part of community rituals, such efforts may be resisted; for example, during the Soviet Union, when traditional practices were repressed as superstition, they often survived and re-emerged to be openly embraced in the post-Soviet period (Balzer, 1999); countervailing tendencies can contrast state intervention.

Clearly, there are differing degrees of ‘groupness’ [Jenkins 1997].²³ ‘Social closure’ [Wimmer] and high levels of ‘groupness’ will lead to symbolic boundary marking [Bourdieu, Weber]. Cases in which ethnic boundaries have little ambiguity and do correspond to cultural differences (and even political networks) can lead to a situation of path dependency [Wimmer].²⁴ While path dependency does not result in a complete fixity of social structures, respondents had a widely shared agreement as to who belonged to a particular group (as noted, mostly linked to – real or perceived – lineage); this generally leads to the transmission of ethnic

²⁰ Add on the mergers.

²¹ Add ref

²² Not a situation of this type:

If different actors pursue different strategies of boundary making, depending on their position in the hierarchies of power and the structure of their political networks, the social field will be characterized by competition and contestation between various modes of classification and various claims to moral superiority, rightful entitlement, and political solidarity associated with them (for examples, see Lyman and Douglass 1973: 363–365). [Wim, 97]

²³ Jenkins Richard. 1994. “Rethinking ethnicity: Identity, categorization and power.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17 (2): 197–223; Jenkins Richard. 1997. *Rethinking ethnicity: Arguments and explorations*. London: Sage.

²⁴ Even path dependency is, however, not fully deterministic and may be subject to change.

membership and the stability of groupness. Moreover, boundary-crossing referred to in the previous section – whether short-lived, long-term or permanent – effectively consolidates the notion of ethnic boundaries by stressing the absence of ‘in-between’ categories [see Wim, 58-9]. Thus, boundaries can be porous, allowing individuals to move back and forth, yet remain stable. Some boundaries are imagined as more unbridgeable than others; in the case of ‘hard’ boundaries between particular groups, they may not allow for the fluidity of individual choice, in light of ascribed characteristics: particular names, appearance or religious faith can mark persons as non-Russians [*nerusskie*] and result in an implicit bias.

In cases in which boundary-crossing was relatively simple (mostly Slavic, Finno-Ugric groups), respondents noted the importance of incentivising people to identify with the community in the census, but promoting a positive image of belonging. This can be considered part of the ‘struggle’, in which individuals use private initiative and employ means at their disposal to either reinforce boundaries (and prevalent narratives), or press for small alterations. Another source of struggle present in contemporary Russia relates to the types of policies concerning the management of diversity [explain], rather than the location of ‘boundaries’ themselves.

Boundaries can be reinforced by the specific interests of a community’s members, and means at their disposal to satisfy them. Different groups have different priorities: some have migrant co-ethnics, or are affiliated to various religious confessions. For example, non-Orthodox groups are confronted with the issue of distinct places of worship from the majority, while others who have migrant co-ethnics are primarily concerned with the newcomers’ adaptation to Russian society. In terms of resource allocation, we recall a tendency to advance claims on the basis of ethnicity during the Soviet period, for example by invoking aspects of *korenizatsiya* [explain], as outlined by Hirsch (2005) [see also Gorenburg]. [add, getting resources through NCAs today]

Another way ethnic boundaries were reinforced derived from – what the respondents described as – diverging perceptions between the Russian majority (government organs) and various communities, which was associated with culture/mentality. For example, a respondent of [check ethnicity] ethnic background said the following. He was answering a question as to whether NCAs could influence migration policy; he argued that it could, for the following reasons:

Мы, лидеры, живём среди своей нации, общаемся, знаем её культуру, менталитет, ведём мониторинг. Есть такие жесткие моменты в законе, которые наш менталитет, нашу культуру обижает или оскорбляет. Мы тогда говорим – так нельзя, народ может подняться, народ может быть недоволен. Мы своё видение говорим, а эксперты это потом анализируют и, если надо, что-то убирают, что-то добавляют.] [respondent 6]

This citation reveals the view of a fixed ‘mentality’ characterising a group. This ‘mentality’ is seen as being shared by the various members of the group, while a corresponding Russian ‘mentality’ emerges from particular aspects of Russian legislation and practices. These two perspectives were seen as potentially leading to (inter-ethnic) friction which ethnic leaders may help resolve.²⁵

²⁵ Cross-reference next session.

Though different dynamics, ethnic festivals also contribute to consolidating ethnic stratifications. They provide a visual representation of ethnic difference, the symbolic validation of all groups who ‘present’ their culture through a performance (as a form of cultural (re)production). Performances take place in succession, each allocated to a community. Even the language used to describe cultural programmes and events seems to reflect an interaction of communities (‘rainbow’ of talents, or multi-national ‘mosaic’, etc) [respondent 7]. Respondents referred to performances as an opportunity ‘to show your culture’, externalising it by sharing it with (part of) the broader society. This occurs through a consolidated type of performance, which is staged, and reproduced in the same manner through a myriad of similar events. In this way, ‘a culture’ (a community’s unique culture) is captured in one event and symbolically expressed.

Some respondents made the link between these events and the symbolic acceptance of diversity within Russian society.²⁶ At the same time, festivals have sometimes been described by authors [add ref] as demonstrative gestures obfuscating the lack of effective measures to combat ethnic discrimination. Discriminatory practices, clearly, entrench boundaries between those who discriminate and those who were discriminated against – with persons belonging to particular communities being routinely affected [add information].

Cultural activities were sometimes motivated by the rediscovery of pride in one’s identity after it was repressed in the Soviet period.²⁷ Part of the struggle in this case was to combat prejudice with the pride for (or celebration of) one’s identity [respondents talked about prejudice against Germans, against Tatars considered ‘savages’ (*diki*), through negative representations of history, and attempts at ‘reverse stigmatisation’, Wimmer, p.58]. The response was to revive traditional festivals and practices, redefining the meaning of boundaries as containers of a ‘good’ culture.

Finally, perceptions became locked into mechanisms motivated by pragmatic considerations, such as the drive to win a particular place within an existing social order, and struggles affected by power relations. The idea of collective responsibility contributes to the reproduction of ethnic boundaries, as will be seen below.

Boundaries and collective responsibility

Representation

Collective responsibility is acted out through representatives. While several ethnic organisations exist, we focus here on the system of representation created by the NCA system. NCAs are established according to a pyramidal structure – at the local, regional and, in some cases, federal level: local organisations can come together to establish a regional organisation, and regional organisations may join forces to establish an institution at the federal level. Representatives of NCAs are similarly found at these three levels.²⁸ As per a judgement of the Russian Constitutional Court [add ref], there may be only one NCA per ethnicity per locality [add]. Following the judgement, the principle was incorporate into the NCA law [add]. In practice, other ethnic institutions have been established, even though the rule of one NCA per ethnicity/locality has been generally applied.

²⁶ For some people ethnic festivals an expression of Soviet nostalgia (of the friendship of peoples) [Dudko]

²⁷ ‘as long as there is one old lady...’ [add ref]

²⁸ Periodic congresses see the gathering of representatives at various levels.

Valery Tishkov, who was Minister of Nationalities at the time the NCA Law was adopted, stated in an interview:

This [NCA] law [...] is built on the bureaucratisation of NCA. It stipulates that at the federal level there can only be one NCA per nationality; in my view there's no real explanation for this, except that for the authorities it's easier to interact with *one* main [glavnyi] Jew, *one* main Armenian, one main Russian German [organisation]... It was a source of conflict in the early days because at that time [when the Law was adopted] there were already three main Jewish social organisations, two or three for the Germans, and these even turned to the constitutional court. And the court came up with this ruling which in my view was not correct. There is an ethnos, a nation as some kind of collective body with one head, or maybe two heads, but this is a very fundamentalist, positivistic view of ethnicity.

This citation challenges the view that an entire ethnic group may be represented by one organisation (and one leader). The rule of one NCA per ethnic community at the local, regional and federal levels, and the drive to streamlining interaction between the state authorities and ethnic institutions, consolidates the perception of bounded groups, their leaders acting in the name of entire communities. Tishkov added:

[I]t seems to me that here, at least in our experience, many NCAs are quickly transformed into closed corporations where one person is in charge [...].²⁹ Moreover, they claim to represent the entire people [*narod*]; the Union of Armenians of Russia thinks it has the right to speak in the name of all Armenians. It is not so, because most Armenians probably don't even know who [name of leader] or the Union are [...].

Ethnicity-based classifications are preserved not only for reasons linked to path dependency through Soviet legacies, but also for pragmatic reasons. It reflects a drive for the state to interact with the quintessential ethnic core (e.g. the *main* Jew/Jewish leader) (even though in practice other organisations besides NCAs participate in events that involve discussions with the authorities). The type of representation envisaged here is a form of *descriptive representation* (by which the representative resembles the represented) rather than *substantive* representation (by which represented and representative might not be of the same background or share other common features, but the representative actively seeks to represent the interests of the represented in substance) (Pitkin, 1967). At the same time, NCA institutions operate at the margins of Russia's political community; they do not have the means to advance the interests of ethnic minorities through a system of representation and dialogue with the state that may influence policy-making.

A respondent, leader of a Tajik organisation, objected to societal structures at the federal level established along ethnic lines:

Personally, I am against the establishment of All-Russian organizations [at the federal level] of a mono-ethnic nature, like a Tajik one. Do you know why? If you establish some organization and name it after some ethnic group, this is the creation of some ethnic grouping. For example, here [in Russia] there is the Union of Armenians, [and] the Congress of Azerbaijani people. I participated in a meeting of Congress of

²⁹ He added that the same could apply to NGOs without an ethnic basis.

Azerbaijani people. They show films on Nagorno-Karabakh and blame Armenians [for the conflict]. I was also invited to a meeting of the Union of Armenians of Russia, [where] they blame Azerbaijan. At the same time, members of these two organizations are citizens of Russia, and they are against each other; they divide Russian citizens through their organizations. This is illogical. [...] Russia was formed as a polyethnic and polyreligious state. [...] Such a state should have become an example for everybody, since people have lived here together for centuries. The situation now is for the worst. Therefore, I wouldn't allow monoethnic organizations to be established. I would propose establishing polyethnic organizations, which would cater for the needs of some social groups: migrants, national minorities, people from Caucasus or Central Asia. [Davlatov, Tajik leader]

In this case the respondent objected to the way institutions were organised, although not to the Tajik ethnic category per se (or other ethnic categories).

Responsibility and Humanitarian Activity

Despite the perception of bounded ethnic groups, the reality is that ethnic ties are situated within an intricate web of networks (creating connections that can form wider, overarching neopatrimonial patterns [add ref]). Such ties sometimes criss-crossed constructed ethnic boundaries, sometimes coincided with them, whether through causal or fortuitous relations. Non-ethnic mechanisms were also at play, although ethnic boundaries were reinforced by Soviet legacies, as well as power distributions, and how ethnic leaders positioned themselves in relation to such networks.

The idea of ethnic boundaries has become intertwined with the notion of collective responsibility. Ethnic leaders are regarded by government organs as mediators between the state and their community. The interaction between the ethnic leaders and co-ethnics takes place at two levels: co-ethnics may request assistance from ethnic leaders and their organisations (bottom-up dynamics); and ethnic leaders (may) provide such assistance, but also intervene to manage issues that could lead to tensions between their co-ethnics and the state, and which may result in the potential destabilisation of societal relations (top-down dynamics).

As an example of top-down dynamics, a (Tajik) respondent spoke about reaching out to co-ethnics to ensure they complied with Russian legislation, and integrated without disadvantaging the receiving society. He said:

We explain that we have come to the Russian Federation and we have to respect the law [...]. And we tell them that they must respect all traditions, customs and culture of the place where they live, and respect the law [respondent 8]

Several respondents who had migrants among co-ethnic also referred to *profilakticheskaya rabota*, by which they monitored potential cases of tensions, and intervened if and when frictions materialised. For example, a [add ethnicity] stated:

[I]f a conflict appears, you have to suffocate it at an early stage. Our work, as public organisations, is to help if there is a conflict. There can be conflicts with Azeris, Uzbek, Armenians against Azerbaijanis. The representatives, the leaders go there [where a conflict has emerged]. When you speak to your own people in your own language, [and]

you explain the situation, this works out a lot faster than using law and order.
[respondent 9]

Another type of examples were provided by persons from other ethnic backgrounds – for example, the leader of a Lithuanian NCA. Her interventions had not been her initiative, and neither was it requested by co-ethnics. They were, instead, solicited by state officials:

I could tell you a story. One day, I received a call from Migration Service. They told me that two Lithuanians staying in Russia without permission had problems: one man is in hospital, since he had just had a stroke, a woman is in prison for being in Russia illegally; she also needs medical treatment. I went there, took care of this couple, we raised money for them, etc. It turned out that this couple came to Russia, to some remote village, stayed illegally and when they got sick, went to a city where it was found out that there had no documents. We solved this issue together with the General Consulate and Migration Service.

Another story. One day, the Federal Security Service from a small border-crossing station at the Russian-Finnish border called me. They told me that one Lithuanian (they, again, said ‘*your citizen*’) crossed the border with 2 kilograms of gun powder, which is illegal in Russia. However, they decided not to imprison him since he did this by mistake and therefore asked me to find a place for him to overnight. In result, he stayed in my apartment for 2 weeks, since he did not have money.

Q: Why they called you in both cases?

A: Because my phone number is indicated everywhere and I am officially representing the Lithuanian community in this region. You see, sometimes, I deal more with consular issues, like with this young guy or that Lithuanian couple. [respondent 10]

These examples reveal the involvement of ethnic leaders to sort out various social concerns at the local level which involved non-Russians (and non-citizens). The state’s wish to involve minority organisations in the management of inter-ethnic relations is evidenced by 2014 amendments of the Law on National Cultural Autonomy, which added to the objectives of NCA ‘the realisation of activities directed at the social and cultural adaptation and integration of migrants’.³⁰

Thus, NCAs have developed as organisations engaging in activities in the cultural, but also *social*, sphere. This aspect of their work involves, *inter alia*, assisting co-ethnic migrants comply with registration requirements, Russian language tuition, information and contacts. NCAs and other ethnic institutions also referred to practical assistance to co-ethnics, which involved assistance to disabled, the elderly, and persons suffering from illnesses who did not receive sufficient support from the state. In some cases the same persons involved in NCAs were also involved in other humanitarian organisations, with a blurring of the boundaries between institutions. The representative of a Jewish NCA related that co-ethnics sometimes asked for ‘consultation’ in order to receive advice on moving to Israel (he added that most people who approached them were not interested in Jewish culture).

³⁰ Added to Article 1 through Federal Law ‘On Introducing Amendments to Articles 1 and 4 of the Federal Law ‘On National Cultural Autonomy’, No. 336-FZ, 4 November 2014. Another objective added was ‘the strengthening of the unity of the civic Russian nation (*rossiiskaya natsiya*)’.

Effectively, NCA institutions have a dual responsibility: a responsibility to interact with co-ethnics, and a responsibility towards Russian society and the Russian state more generally. In the first case, ethnic institutions provide services which the state does not (sufficiently) provide – as, in a non-welfare (or impoverished) state, charities may step in to provide services that the state does not (or cannot) provide. The ethnic institutions seem to be regarded as having a ‘moral responsibility’ towards their co-ethnics [add Miller], and, consequently, some social services are provided along ethnic lines.³¹ Their activities also involved a ‘perspective responsibility’, of what could happen (as in the case of *profilakticheskaya rabota*). In these cases, ethnic boundaries are reinforced through the perception of collective responsibility. Members of a community are perceived as connected by the idea of an invisible link, and the sharing of responsibility. This may be seen as a modern version of *krugovaya paruka* [Ledeneva] intended as collective responsibility (rather than in the more modern (Soviet and post-Soviet) sense, of supporting each other, sometimes though illegal, or even criminal, activities).

With reference to responsibility towards the state and society, the predominant view was that ethnic leaders should ‘supervise’ their co-ethnics. Some respondents stated that, when they first established their organisations, their work was confined to cultural activities only, but they ultimately widened their field of activities because of demand, by state actors or co-ethnics [respondent 10]. Others continued with predominantly cultural activities, whether because there was no demand for particular forms of social work, or because they were unwilling or unable to provide it. For those who engaged in social-humanitarian work, the impetus often came from issues linked to immigration. Although the respondents’ motivations for engaging in social work could not be corroborated, we can expect a range of motivations, including responsibility towards their community and/or Russian society, and a desire to maintain (or improve) their particular position within the social field. In the second case, ethnic leaders likely attempted to demonstrate their ‘function’ within the existing social order. This points to what is not necessarily in-group solidarity, but an assumption of solidarity, which can translate into social norms (ethnic leaders will help their co-ethnics), and expectations that such norms will be complied with. Existing institutions and practices based on Russian nationalities policy favour the channelling of social support in this direction, even though a Russian citizen of, say, Uzbek ethnic background, born and bred in Russia, will, in all likelihood, have a greater affinity to ethnic Russians rather than Uzbek migrants.

The linking of cultural autonomy to particular social function has created hybrid social-cultural organisations. We could call some of the processes, in Bourdieu’s terminology, as translating cultural capital into social capital. These dynamics are also accompanied by individual struggles, by which persons seek benefits – in terms of a more prominent position within the social space, recognition for their community (or status for themselves), or contestation, within the limits of the possible, of some practices in the management of inter-ethnic relations.³²

Conclusions

While the respondents displayed different attitudes to ‘groupism’, the interview data generally yielded the sense of a community’s essence, which seemed to go beyond ‘just’ attitudes shaped by historical circumstances. The respondents revealed a ‘thick’ cultural identity, reproducing narratives that echoed Soviet ethnic essentialism. Thus, the after-effects of Soviet nationalities

³¹ This is not always the case, and some NGOs, for example, assist migrants regardless of ethnic background

³² This issue cannot be analysed here for reasons for space. Such struggles can be noted, for example, in disagreements on issues such as minority-language education [add ref].

policies still reverberated, mostly impervious to new influences, such as non-essentialist narratives by some Russian theorists [add]. At the same time, the groupist approach was not unchallenged.

Russian society is made up of complex webs of relations (taken here as units of analysis, rather than groups per se). The complexity of networks means that society is far from being reducible to system of bounded, internally homogeneous groups. The reality is a plurality of networks, overlapping or criss-crossing each other; individuals could be seen as having plural identities ('concentric circles around the individual' [add ref], such as, for example, Tatar, Turkic, Muslim, Russian citizen). At the same time, social interaction involving non-Russians continue to be conceived primarily around belonging to an ethnic group – through a form of social organisation that highlights continuity rather than rupture with the past. Non-ethnic networks affecting (members of) ethnic groups tend to be overlooked in dominant narratives, while particular connections and categories are rendered socially salient: the state employs its symbolic power to reinforce them, by affecting the (re)interpretation of discursive fields. In this sense we may say that state institutions act as a distorting lens.

Representation for non-Russians is organised around ethnic categories. NCA institutions' promotion of the welfare of community members tend to manifest itself through the principle of collective responsibility. The social function of NCA has been incorporated into the NCA law and an ethnic leader is effectively expected to intervene to resolve issues that may result in societal tensions by 'managing' co-ethnics. Intervention, then, provides basic assistance through a support network for co-ethnics to adjust to (and better integrate into) Russian society, rather than enabling a possible alteration of (what may well be) adverse structural conditions (something that NCAs are unequipped to do). This approach is linked to a perception of descriptive representation, based on social (and cultural) activities. The interview data revealed the sense of a convergence of group and individual concerns, mixing the *cultural* (preservation of tradition) with the *social* (community and societal stability, and, sometimes, welfare of co-ethnics).

The interpretation of social reality here described suggests fissures between groups – gaps that, at some levels, are conceived as unbridgeable. The representation of cultural identities through festivals tends to reflect the same categorization. The networks of representation and responsibility, and the assumed inseparability of the two, similarly reproduce group boundaries. Boundary reproduction is not only orchestrated by the state, as persons identifying with (and generally perceived as belonging to) particular groups will also gravitate towards them in order to obtain advantages for themselves and/or co-ethnics. Some non-ethnic mechanisms (not triggered by ethnic ties) might still act to reinforce boundaries when placed in the context of dominant narratives, and assumptions flowing from them.

This is not to imply that group boundaries are permanent. In fact the Russian state has simultaneously supported a more general discourse of citizenship and Russianness, resulting in an overall trend towards cultural homogenisation [add information/ref]. This could result in ethnic boundaries ultimately being dismantled. Thus, there are relatively stable boundaries as social structures are reinforced through ethnic institutions, yet also a decreasing significance of such boundaries, as minority languages and expression of ethnic identity occupy a shrinking space.

The (temporary?) reproduction of boundaries is a strategy (at least in the short- to medium-term), which likely derives from a combination of pragmatism on the part of the authorities,

and (Soviet) legacies in social classification which still generate expectations on the part of (persons identifying with) non-Russian communities. The state demands of ethnic leaders a degree of societal responsibility, assigning to them the management of relevant social networks. Yet, despite ethnic leaders' adjustment to the social order, struggles also take place within established social structures. These do not tend to relate to ethnic classifications, but rather accompanying meanings and manifestations of ethnic policies.

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