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BETWEEN IDEL
AND ANGARA –
THE SEARCH FOR
RECOGNITION AND
IDENTITY ISSUES
AMONG TATAR
ORGANISATIONS IN
SIBERIA

Between Idel and Angara – the search for recognition and identity issues among Tatar organisations in Siberia[1]

Artem Rabogoshvili[2]

Abstract

The paper is concerned with the rise and development of the Tatar national cultural movement in Russia from the viewpoint of the search for recognition by Tatar organisations in the country and the undergirding identity discourses among Tatar people. Focusing on two regions of East Siberia, Irkutsk Oblast and the Republic of Buryatia, I provide a comprehensive comparison of these two Tatar communities in terms of their migration history, the subsequent establishment of Tatar organisations and their activities, the role of national-cultural autonomies, and the growing significance of Islam. I argue, first, that despite the centralisation and homogenisation agenda promoted by the Russian federal authorities, the Tatar national cultural movement in the country has been underpinned to a greater extent by the strategic relationships between Tatarstan and other administrative regions of the country as well as by the policies of the local authorities towards Tatar organisations, rather than by the state-level policies of the Russian Federation. Second, despite a certain inconsistency and variability of motives within the Tatar cultural movement across the regions of Russia, the theme of Tatar identity has been central to the local discourses and as such involved the contestation of the Soviet-era definitions of ethnicity by the new meanings and/or religious forms of identity.

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Introduction

The first meeting with Sazhida Batalova, the current chairperson of the Tatar national-cultural autonomy of the Buryat Republic, took place in early April 2011 in her office at the Academy of Culture and Art, one of the higher education institutions in Ulan-Ude, the capital city of the republic. The initial conversation went pretty well and subsequently I had multiple opportunities to interact with her on a regular basis and also in less formal settings. During those meetings with the leader of the Tatar autonomy in Buryatia, my role as an investigator of the Tatar community in Siberia was to foster a free-floating and convivial style of communication, allowing Sazhida to freely express her opinion about the past, present, and future of the Tatars on this territory. One of the major points, which gradually evolved into the centrepiece of conversations with Sazhida, was discussing the specificity of the region in terms of the conditions for the Tatars' consolidation and preservation of their culture. Naturally enough, we tended to draw comparisons to the situation in other regions of the country and paid much attention to the life of the Tatar community in East Siberia.

Once Sazhida told me what she thought could be the major difference between the Tatars in Buryatia and in other, more centrally located parts of the country, including more western Irkutsk Oblast. She said: "Their task [of the Tatar organisations] is to preserve and develop what they still possess, while, here, we have to do everything from scratch, we have to produce everything anew. That is the basic difference."[3] Indeed, for me, Sazhida's views resonated with the words of another informant. Fagilya Tenchikova, one of the oldest activists of the Tatar-Bashkir cultural centre in Irkutsk and one of the most knowledgeable specialists in Tatar history in the region, has been very responsive to my many questions. Being aware of my research activities in the two regions, she once commented to me:

> "In Buryatia, the situation is much more favourable for the Tatars. The local authorities provide much more assistance to them, and their leader is based in a professional institution. Moreover, they have a national-cultural autonomy and we, here, are deprived of all that (…) And, the authorities are hard on us – that's really frustrating".
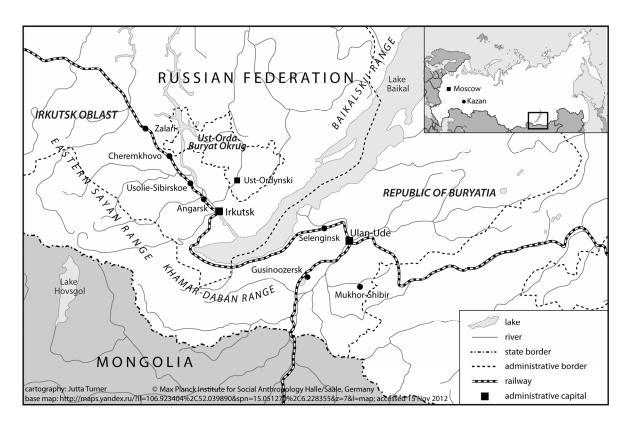
These conversations helped me to shape the research questions and the research programme for most of my work among the Tatar and Bashkir people in Siberia.

The Tatar and Bashkir people are recognised as two different nationalities in the Russian Federation, but due to the cultural and linguistic similarities, they usually regard themselves and are regarded by others as 'brotherly people'. With the population of around 5.5 million, the Tatars, apart from the Russians, form the biggest group in the country. Although many of the Tatar people live in the Republic of Tatarstan (about 2 million), significant minority populations are dispersed across the Volga and Ural region, the vast expanses of Siberia, and the Russian Far East as well as in many countries outside Russia (Vishevskiy 2000; Iskhakov 2002; Sokolovskiy 2002).

As a part of my research, I was working with the organisations of the Tatar people in East Siberia, focusing on two separate, but neighbouring regions (federation subjects) – the Republic of Buryatia and Irkutsk Oblast. The former federation subject takes its name from the Buryats, one of the Mongolian people indigenous to East Siberia (apart from the Evenki and Tofa people) and

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[3] This quote from Sazhida Batalova as well as the quote from Fagilya Tenchikova (below) is translated from Russian by the author.

living today within a number of administrative territories of the Russian Federation, including Buryatia, Irkutsk Oblast, and Zabaikalski Krai.[4] The Tatar people, along with the Russians and some other ethnic groups, are considered to be non-indigenous to the region, a population that formed as a result of the gradual colonisation of Siberia during previous periods. In sheer numbers, the Tatar population of Irkutsk Oblast is currently about 23 thousand, while the total number of the *oblast*'s population is 2.4 million. Ranking fourth in the ethnic break-down of the *oblast* (after Russians, Buryats, and Ukrainians) they amount roughly to one per cent of the entire population. In Buryatia, the number of Tatars is about 6,800, which makes them the third largest ethnic group (after Russians and Buryats) in the Republic, whose total population is about 970 thousand.[5]

Regularly commuting between the respective administrative centres of the two regions – the cities of Ulan-Ude and Irkutsk – I spent roughly equal periods of time in each of them, meeting and speaking with the members of the Tatar community – leaders of ethnicity-based organisations and their rank-and-file personnel, cultural and religious activists, business people and university students, all identifying themselves as "Tatars" or "Bashkirs". I was particularly struck by the significant differences between their organisations in the two regions: their ideals, visions, and work methods, let alone the fact that the number of such organisations has been increasing over the past years.

Reflecting on Sazhida's words, devoted to the comparison of "us" and "them", I put forward the following research questions: to what extent and to what effect have the regional differences (geographical, historical, demographic, and economic) across Siberia shaped the identity of the local Tatars and determined the style of their social activism in the frames of Tatar national-cultural

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[4] *Oblast*, *krai* and *okrug* are different names for administrative units subsumed as federation subjects in the Russian Federation.
[5] See http://www.perepis-2010.ru/results_of_the_census/results-inform.php (web portal of the All-Russian population census-2010).

organisations? Second, to what extent has the recognition politics of the Russian state, compartmentalised territorially and structurally, been facilitating or discouraging the activities of Tatar organisations in the country?

Based on the assumption that the differences between the Tatar communities have not been contingent but rather are indicative of the political, economic, and social conditions in the different regions of the Russian Federation and using the words of my informants as a certain guide, I argue two main points. First, contrary to the common perception of Russia as a homogenous political unit headed by the Russian federal authorities, the Tatar national cultural movement in the country has been underpinned to a greater extent by the strategic relationships between Tatarstan and other administrative regions of the country as well as by the policies of the local authorities towards Tatar organisations, rather than by the state-level policies of the Russian Federation. Second, despite a certain inconsistency and variability of motives within the Tatar cultural movement across the regions of Russia, the theme of Tatar identity has been central to the local discourses and as such involved the contestation of the soviet-era definitions of ethnicity by the new meanings and/or religious forms of identity.

The paper is structured as follows: in the first section, I show how the pre-soviet practices of population categorisation and, more importantly, the soviet-era nationality politics produced a certain historical background against which the identities of the Tatar people in Siberia have been shaped up to the present. In the second section, I look at the process of the institutionalisation of Tatar and Bashkir ethnicity in Siberia in the post-soviet period. In the next section I go on to discuss the ambiguities of the Tatars' national-cultural autonomies as a specific form of cultural organisations in Russia. In the final section, I examine the rising importance of identity issues and the contested role of Islam for the members of Tatar organisations in the region.

Tatar Migration to Siberia and the Policies of the Russian State

Historically, the ethnonym "Tatars" was used by the Russian authorities of the pre-soviet era to refer to a wide variety of Turkic-speaking peoples living across the Russian Empire. As an overarching name, equally used to denote some of the indigenous people of the Crimean peninsula, Transcaucasia, the Volga-Ural region, and Siberia, who spoke similar languages and in many cases professed Islam, it has been largely insensitive to the considerable differences in the origin and identity of these people. Rather, following the faith-based policy for classification of population in the Tsarist period, most of the country's Muslim people were also commonly defined as "Magometans". Using the collective name for all these peoples, the country's bureaucracy seems to have been habitually associating Tatars, subjects of the Russian Empire, with the Tatar-Mongol invasion on Rus in the 13th century and its subsequent vassalic dependence on the nomads of the Golden Horde. However, since the conquest of Kazan in 1552 and its integration into the Russian state, the roles of 'the oppressor' and 'the oppressed' have swapped, as the Tsarist administration put the annexed territories under its tight supervision and implemented state-level policies and projects with little regard for the issues of the country's ethnic and religious minorities. The relocation of population from the central parts of the Russian Empire to Siberia and the Far East as a means to gradually colonise those territories is one such large-scale project undertaken by the Russian state over the course of several centuries, which affected generations of the Tatar people. In this process, a distinction should be made, of course, between the so-called Siberian Tatars, a

group of the indigenous Turkic-speaking peoples living mainly in the western parts of Siberia, and the descendants of resettlers from the Volga-Ural region.

The Tatar population of the Volga-Ural region had been resettling beyond the Ural Mountains already before the colonisation of Siberia by the Russian people, but their earliest large-scale migration to Siberia dates back to the middle of the 19th century (Korusenko and Tomilov 2011). Driven by the scarcity of land resources for cultivation and famines caused by occasional harvest failures in the central parts of the country, an increasing number of impoverished agriculturalists, representing a wide range of ethnic and religious communities of the Russian Empire, had to relocate to Siberia in the pursuit of better opportunities for life sustenance. The relocation movement, in which Tatar peasants took an active part, further increased with the construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad by the end of the 19th century and resulted in the foundation of the newcomers' settlements on the territories, stretching eastwards along the railway main route. In this process, the position of the Russian government gradually changed from banning peasant migration to encouraging it, which led to the official allocation of land plots to the resettlers on the new territories. For example, the period from 1885 to 1903 saw the allocation of 1,545 land plots in West Siberia, 683 in East Siberia, and 235 in the Far East of the country (Bobkova 2009: 62). By the beginning of the 20th century, the relocation of Tatars to Siberia took a regular turn and reached its apex under the agricultural reform of the Russian Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin between 1910 and 1914.

It should be noted that most of Tatar migrants moved to Siberia as entire households, some members of which not even able to speak Russian – the official language of the Empire – and for many of whom departure to Siberia meant a complete break with their ties home. Despite all the deprivations of economic and cultural character, the Tatar resettlers tended to live in closely-knit communities in rural areas, where they founded ethnically homogenous villages and gave them typical Tatar names (Bobkova 2002). With regard to the number of Tatar migrants to Siberia during the Stolypin reforms, only rough numbers can be estimated based on the figures of the adjacent census years of 1897 and 1920. According to the Tatar researcher Galiya Bobkova, the number of Tatars for Irkutsk *gubernia* – an administrative unit in the Tsarist period – changed in that period from 6,435 to 9,220, which amounts to about 3,000 persons who were relocated in the intercensal period (Bobkova 2009: 76). Apart from the rural settlements, however, Tatar migrants to Siberia found employment in towns as craftsmen, factory workers, or labourers, while some achieved prosperity as merchants specialising in grain, salt, or leather trade (Forsyth 1992: 196).

In the history of Russia, the Tatar people have traditionally been active proponents of Islamic culture and contributed to the construction of the religious facilities on this territory. As the biggest group of Muslim people in Russia, they were also important providers of Islamic clergy, forming the core membership of the religious organisations and responsible for defining the character of Islam in the country. Since the adoption of Islam in 922 by the Volga Bulgars, considered as the ancestors of Tatars, most of the Tatar people have adhered to the Hanafi *madhhab*, one of the four major schools of Sunni Islam law, which has been considered by them as the most flexible out of the four schools and the most liberal towards the institutions of the secular state (Yemelianova 2007; Kemper et al. 2010).

Indeed, the importance of Islam as one of the sources of collective identity for the Tatar resettlers in Siberia at that time cannot be underestimated – the mosques built with donations of the rich Tatar tradesmen in the major locations inhabited by the Tatars across Siberia were known to serve

as the centres of both the communal and religious life of the local Muslim population (*mahalla*). On the state level, the religious matters of the Muslim people in this period were rested with the Department for Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Confessions, also responsible for the state policy on all other non-Christian and non-Orthodox subjects of the Russian Empire. In this respect, any large business or even purely religious undertaking, such as building a mosque in an urban area, often required dealing with unwieldy bureaucratic procedures and petitioning to the superior authorities for permission (Bobkova 2009: 138). While in Irkutsk, the building of the brick mosque was launched in 1897 and completed in 1905 with the generous donations of the Shafigullin brothers, influential Tatar merchants, Verkhneudinsk (name of Ulan-Ude before 1934) saw the construction of a wooden mosque a few years thereafter (Bobkova 2009; Kalmina 2009). The constructed mosques in both cities functioned as institutions uniting the local Muslim community until the end of the 1930s, when – by the repressive decision of the Soviet authorities – the mosque in Irkutsk was closed down and the one in Ulan-Ude entirely destroyed.

While it is not my aim here to provide a comprehensive account of the church-society relations in the pre-soviet period, I would argue two important points about the imperial policies of the Russian Empire. First, by making a clear-cut distinction between ethnically Russian Orthodox Christians and all other non-Orthodox peoples, those commonly designated by the official discourse as 'aliens' (*inorodtsy*) and legally put in a more disadvantaged position, imperial policies facilitated the relocations of the latter from the more centrally located areas to the remote and scarcely populated territories on the margins of the Empire. And second, from a long-term perspective, those policies also paved the way for the Bolsheviks' take-over in the regions, populated by the national minorities after 1917.

The situation for the ethnic and religious minorities in the country started to change after the Bolsheviks seized power, emphasising their commitment to denounce the old regime and reaching out to the non-Russian nationalist movements throughout the country. The new state policies declared the equality of all peoples, conceptualised them as separate 'nationalities', and guaranteed ethnic minorities the fulfilment of their 'right to self-determination'. Navigating their way between the need to ensure the loyalty of the local authorities in the non-Russian regions of the former empire and the aspiration to conform to the Marxist ideology, prioritising internationalism before nationalism, the Bolshevik government embarked on a policy of de-Russification, aiming to forestall what was seen by them as the spread of Great Russian chauvinism and the oppression of national minorities. Following the tenets of Marxism, "all nations were conceived as divided into 'oppressed' and 'oppressor' nations" (Slezkine 2000: 315).

Perhaps even more important were the complex changes brought about by the state in the frame of the nativisation policies (*korenizatsiia*), which not only assigned all the non-Russians to their own territorial units within the country, but also attempted to produce all the attributes that would characterise 'nation', including the territories' own national culture, language, and elite (Slezkine 2000; Martin 2001). The system, put into place by the Bolsheviks, "would be extended downward into smaller and smaller national territories (national districts, village soviets, collective farms) until it merged seamlessly with the personal nationality of each Soviet citizen" (Martin 2001: 10), inscribed in his or her passport. In practice, the implementation of the *korenizatsiia* policy, by which some ethnic minority territories acquired a more autonomous status of republics, and were to privilege the use of its national language, promote its national elite into leadership positions, and allocate ethnicity-based quotas for education and employment, not only caused hidden tensions and

open conflicts between the Russian and non-Russian peoples throughout the country, but also brought about a certain discord between the republics themselves.

The system of national-territorial division of the Soviet state established an unequal hierarchy between the territorial units of the country, which included Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), or union republics, treated as sovereign socialist states within the USSR and Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs), which were incorporated into union republics and, unlike them, were not formally granted the right to disaffiliate themselves from the Soviet Union. The rationale for assigning one or the other administrative status available to national minorities hinged upon a number of factors, in particular the size of its population and the geopolitical location of its national territory, which in turn had important consequences for the population of the ethnofederal unit in terms of its access to cultural resources. The establishment of the Tatar Republic in 1920 as an ASSR within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist State (RSFSR) instead of a higher-level SSR as well as the demarcation of the Republic's boundaries in such a way so as not to encompass large numbers of Tatars was considered by the local Tatar elites as an anti-Tatar policy of the Soviets, and it provided an important agenda for the upgrading of the Republic's status in later periods (Beissinger 2002: 118).

Originally, the idea of the united autonomous republic for the Tatars and Bashkirs had found its advocates among both of the local populations of the Volga-Ural region, however, under the pressure of the local nationalist leaders, the creation of national republics was to take place along narrow national criteria rather than on the basis of the Muslim identity (Smith 1999). As a result, instead of the initial proposal of the People's Commissariat of Nationalities for a Tatar-Bashkir Autonomous Republic, the Bashkir people were granted a republic of their own in 1919 while the Tatar ASSR was founded in the following year.

Providing funding for this affirmative action, Soviet authorities made a distinction between the "culturally advanced" (mostly the nationalities in the western parts of the Soviet Union having a high rate of literacy and education) and "culturally backward" peoples (nationalities of the east and north), which led to the strategic uses of ethnicity by the minorities in some regions, and, reversely, stimulated them to disguise their nationality in others. Interestingly, the official documents only listed those Tatars as "culturally backward" who lived outside their republic, which not only pitted the Tatar resettlers throughout the Soviet Union against their co-ethnics in Tatarstan, but also might have stimulated some negative predispositions towards their ethnicity and language (Martin 2001). In fact, the issue of the dispersed nationalities – ethnic minority groups living outside their assigned national territory – began to figure prominently in Soviet nationality politics. Fostering the formation of national cultures within the respective autonomous republics, state authorities tended to provide assistance to the so-called 'titular nationalities' whereas all other national minorities had no particular leverage to maintain their culture and language. Moreover, even though agricultural colonisation of the Soviet Union's eastern national territories was stopped in the early 1920s, by 1927 the Soviet authorities lifted the ban on internal migration, which ultimately led to even greater ethnic diversification of the administrative units with non-Russian population in the country and put the issues of cultural assimilation of those peoples at stake (Martin 2001: 15).

Interestingly, confronted with certain dilemmas about the structure of their future state, the Bolsheviks could obviously choose another option based on the idea of non-territorial autonomy. The concept of non-territorial autonomy was originally elaborated by the Austro-Marxist thinkers, including Otto Bauer and Karl Renner, who believed that that it would be possible, through

political intervention, to separate the principle of cultural nationality from territorial location and political rights (Bowring 2002, 2007; Osipov and Nikiforov 2008; Smith and Hiden 2012). The latter idea, however, was subsequently opposed by Vladimir Lenin, who rather championed territorially-bounded autonomy for the newly proclaimed Soviet national minorities and implemented it as such in practice (Slezkine 2000; Martin 2001).

The early Soviet period was also crucial for reshaping the meaning of the ethnonym 'Tatars'. Indeed, the incorporation of the word 'Tatar' into the official name of the Tatar Autonomous Republic was not unreasonable, as it not only enabled the local historians to legitimately trace the nationhood of this administrative unit back to the Golden Horde period and even further back to the state of the Volga Bulgars, but it also made it possible for the local political elite to reach out to all the Turkic-speaking people in the region as members of a single Tatar nation (Frank 1998: 179; Sokolovskiy 2002: 52). In the following decades, however, it was the central authorities of the Soviet state who took the lead in reshaping the boundaries of 'the Tatar nation' through practices of gerrymandering and census-making.

In the Siberian context, gerrymandering also took place in the frame of establishing national territories for the local indigenous people. Thus, with the spread of the Soviet administration across East Siberia, the Buryat people were granted a territorially-bounded autonomy of their own, which in 1923 became the Buryat-Mongol ASSR. At a later stage, in 1937 the hitherto single Buryat territory was split into three disparate parts with the Buryat-Mongol Republic as the titular republic of the Buryat people (renamed into Buryat ASSR in 1958), Ust-Orda Autonomous Okrug under the administration of Irkutsk Oblast west of Buryatia, and Aga Autonomous Okrug under the administration of Chita Oblast east of the Buryat-Mongol Republic.

Population censuses came as yet another point of intervention for the Soviet state, tending to manipulate with the ethnonym 'Tatars' to its own advantage. Thus, while the first Soviet census of 1926 registered such groups as Mishars and Teptyars, culturally and linguistically close to the Kazan Tatars, as well as much more distantly related Turkic-speaking inhabitants of Siberia as separate categories, the next Soviet census of 1937 either incorporated some of these groups into more populous categories (e.g. Yenisei Tatars were counted as Khakas people) or ignored the existing differences among the ethnic groups, subsuming them under the integral category of 'Tatars' (e.g. Baraba Tatars were counted only as Tatars). In a sense, the fusion of registration categories, undertaken by the state authorities with regard to the Tatar people during the Soviet censuses, can be seen as a bureaucratic act, guided by the logics of simplifying the classificatory grid, and as such be partly explained by the regular migrations of the Tatars from the Volga-Ural region to different parts of Siberia throughout the Soviet period and their subsequent mingling with the Siberian Tatars through intermarriage (Sokolovskiy 2002).

Since the late 1920s, the country saw a gradual move away from the policy of radical *korenizatsiia* towards a more moderate and unifying stance, which emphasised the importance of the Soviet identity and the role of the Russian people as the core ethnos of the Union. Apart from that, Soviet authorities embarked on the politics of terror, resorting to the purging of local nationality elites, ethnic cleansing, and the deportation of entire populations (Martin 2001). In this respect, the deportation of the Crimean Tatars, suspected of collaborating with the Nazis, to the regions of Ural and Central Asia in 1944, is highly indicative of this policy change. In the wake of the deportation, the ethnonym 'Crimean Tatars' disappeared from the Soviet censuses and was not

mentioned in the official documents until their formal rehabilitation in 1967 (Sokolovskiy 2002; Uehling 2004).

Following the denunciation of Stalinism under Khruschev in the mid-1950s, the country saw a new turn in the nationality politics, characterised by the contradictory tendencies of concession-making to the national elite in the field of cultural production, on the one hand, and maintaining the primacy of the Soviet identity together with the preponderance of the Russian language in the public sphere, on the other hand. Remarkably, the same period was also marked by the continuous process of Tatar migration to Siberia in the frame of industrial and construction projects, undertaken by the state in order to redistribute labour resources from the central part of the country to its periphery, required for the economic development of the region. While these acts of household migration were not all forced by the state and (unlike the wartime deportation of the Crimean Tatars) did not commonly involve physical violence, the process by which migration decisions were made by the future relocatees was undoubtedly affected by the pervasiveness of the state ideology, which prioritised state interests over individual needs, as well as by the lack of accurate information about people's destinations.

The subsequent period of cohabitation of the Tatar resettlers with people of other ethnic backgrounds has been conducive to a high rate of intermarriage and bilingualism (or even trilingualism) among the Tatars in Siberia. Yet, the cases of multilingualism wherein the newcomers to Siberia could not only speak Russian – obligatory in all schools of the Soviet Union by that time – but also acquired the local languages have mostly been typical for rural areas, where the Tatars co-habited in villages with the indigenous population. By extension, the growing number of city dwellers among Tatar resettlers and their descendants, who preferred to reside in the urban area, had even more difficulty to learn the local language but also to learn and practice the Tatar language.

As the Soviet state had formally declared its concern for the culture and languages of ethnic minorities dispersed across the country, the 1950–1960s saw the practice of relocating university graduates from Tatarstan as language teachers to the remote territories of the Soviet Union inhabited by Tatar communities. When this practice was finally discontinued by the authorities at the end of the 1960s, some of those educated specialists remained in Siberia for life, while many others chose to go back to Tatarstan. Under these circumstances, the next generations of Tatar resettlers – mainly those socialised in the late Soviet era, and even more so the generation raised during or after the breakup of the Soviet Union – came to be almost fully russified, since many of them have never spoken the Tatar language and have never been to Tatarstan. The maintenance of Tatar identity has been further complicated by the high rate of intermarriage of Tatars with the people of other nationalities and also by the lingering association of the national minority status with lower prestige or exoticism.

Origin and Rise of Tatar Organisations in Siberia and Beyond

Having outlined the major landmarks of Tatar migration to Siberia in the previous section, I will proceed further by comparing the circumstances under which the first Tatar cultural organisations were founded in the region in the 1990s. It is important to refer briefly to the more general political and social context that dominated the establishment of such organisations. The formation of ethnicity-based organisations throughout the country became possible with the advent of political

liberalisation and social democratisation, commonly referred to as *glasnost*, launched by Mikhail Gorbachev in the second half of the 1980s. The period of social changes in the ethno-federal units of the Soviet Union, identified by Mark Beissinger (2002) as "the mobilization cycles and tides of nationalism", led to the consolidation of nationalist movements and the development of secessionist aspirations among the local political elite in the union republics. The spread of popular protests in the Baltic states, leading to the declaration of sovereignty by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the years 1988–1989, as well as the outbreak of interethnic violence in some parts of the Soviet Union not only necessitated the establishment of the State Committee for Nationality Affairs in Moscow but also alerted the local authorities throughout the country to the nationality issues on their respective territories. As a consequence, departments responsible for nationality relations were also set up in most of the regions of the country, including those populated by ethnic minority people.

The idea of integrating ethnic minorities via the establishment of national-cultural organisations was put forward at the end of 1980s, and local officials began to cautiously implement it by the beginning of the next decade. Throughout the 1990s, "National-Cultural Organisations" (NCOs) were established in Russia under the patronage of the political and intellectual elite, and Tatar activists were among the first during that period to register NCOs in the form of Tatar cultural centres. In the Siberian context, the establishment of formal Tatar organisations in the region was preceded by the Tatar Sabantuy[6] festival in the rural areas of Irkutsk Oblast. Since a considerable number of Tatars inhabited the rural areas of Ust-Orda Okrug and, apart from Russians and Buryats, had scattered their villages across the territory, the first Sabantuys in Irkutsk Oblast were staged in Ust-Orda and attracted an interested audience from the neighbouring city of Irkutsk and other urban centres. In turn, the organisation of the first Sabantuy in Ust-Orda in 1987 facilitated the consolidation of the urban Tatar intelligentsia and gave impetus to the establishment of the first Tatar organisation. From the very start, the Tatar organisation in Irkutsk grew as a public non-commercial organisation of Tatar activists, who relied heavily on the local authorities for meeting space and funding.

Following the all-country trend and responding to the popular nationalist rhetoric on their territories, the political elites of Russia's own national units started to make their own claims to statehood, and Tatarstan was no exception amidst other parts of the country. The process by which Soviet republics declared themselves to be sovereign states took a few years at the turn of the decade and culminated in the adoption of the Declaration of Sovereignty by Russia in June 1990. In contrast to most other territorial units of the Russian Federation, the political project of the Republic of Tatarstan was based on the idea of dealing with Moscow as an equal partner, relying primarily on treaty-like agreements and gaining as much political and economic freedom from Russia as it could provide. In this sense, the period of the early 1990s also went down in Russian history as the one wrought with continuous tensions over the status of Tatarstan between the Republic's administration led by Mintimer Shaimiev, the key figure behind the Tatarstan movement for sovereignty, and the Russian Government under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin. Through a series of mutual treaties with Moscow, the Republic of Tatarstan secured for itself important economic privileges, including favourable taxation, and its own trade missions abroad.

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[6] Sabantuy ("festival of the plough" – Tatar) is an annual festival, held by the Turkic-speaking population of the Volga region to celebrate the end of the land ploughing period, which has been particularly associated with Tatar culture in the rest of the country, and as such was seen as almost entirely abandoned by the Tatars during the Soviet era.

Examining the history of Tatarstan's quest for sovereignty in post-soviet Russia, Katherine Graney rightly considers it to be one of the most extreme and unique cases in Russia (Graney 2009). Indeed, apart from achieving important political and economic benefits at the beginning of the 1990s, the government of Tatarstan strove to reinforce its special status among other territories of the country through symbolic means. In this context, the idea of changing the name of the republic from "Tatarstan", as it was too laden with historical connotations, to another that would stress the pre-Russian history of statehood among the Tatars, was born and it also came to influence Tatar activists in other regions of the country. Thus, aware of the possible scenario of renaming Tatarstan into the state of Bulgars – people inhabiting the Volga region in ancient times – the newly opened Tatar cultural centre in Irkutsk was originally given a double name "Tatar (Bulgar) Cultural Centre" by the local activists.

In the subsequent periods, 47 of Russia's 88 federal subjects concluded some form of treaty with Moscow, delineating the jurisdictions between the centre and the region (Graney 2009). In this complex negotiatory process, the formerly autonomous soviet republics (ASSRs), populated by the 'titular' nationalities and putting forward particular claims to sovereignty, acquired a politically and administratively more independent status than other administrative territories, which was affirmed through the adoption of the republics' constitutions, passing their own legislation (supposedly conforming to the federal legislation) and the use of two official languages. The institutional asymmetry, which arose on the basis of subdividing the country's administrative-territorial units (federation subjects) into those populated with national minorities (mainly nationality republics or autonomous *okrug*s) as well as providing them with some special political or economic privileges, on the one hand, and all other territorial units, not designated ethnic territory (*oblast*s, *krai*s) and usually seen as more dependent on Moscow, on the other hand, generated certain disjunctures and disproportions in terms of the economic and political development of the federation subjects under the Yeltsin administration. At the same time, contrary to what might be expected, the administrative disparities between the federation subjects came to serve as an important platform for their mutual integration as well as cooperation between the more politically self-reliant and economically advanced territories and their less successful counterparts throughout the country. In this sense, the activities aimed at establishing cooperation with other subjects of the Russian Federation, pursued by the Tatarstan government throughout the 1990s, were not only beneficial to the Republic's internal economic development, but also enabled Tatarstan to solidify its position in different parts of Russia and, more importantly, reach out to the Tatar communities in these regions.

Indeed, the particular sovereignty project, espoused by Kazan and reinforced by the tangible economic achievements of the Republic of Tatarstan, formed the background against which the attitudes and allegiances of the Tatar business and intellectual establishment, the backbone of local Tatar national-cultural organisations, were shaped in East Siberia. In this sense, the Tatar organisation in Ulan-Ude started primarily as a commercial enterprise that drew inspiration and legitimacy from the development of political and economic relations between Tatarstan and Buryatia at the end of the 1990s. Starting in 1997, the two republics embarked on the path of mutual cooperation through exchanging legislature delegations and signing bilateral agreements. While for Kazan, Buryatia was mainly important as a trade partner, its cooperation with Tatarstan, apart from the obvious economic profitability, also provided Buryatia with an opportunity to evaluate the political and economic dimensions of Tatarstan's development project and, to the

possible extent, to utilise its experiences in the much different context of the Republic of Buryatia. The start-up of the Tatar organisation in Ulan-Ude, based on the political rapprochement and commercial relations between the two nationality republics, had far-reaching consequences in shaping its future development, for which it has been equally important to secure the recognition of the local authorities and those of Tatarstan.

Similarly to secular Tatar organisations, the institutionalisation of the Muslim communities in Siberia occurred under the idea of reviving Islam among the local Tatar people. By the time of the Soviet breakup, the territory of the present-day Russian Federation, with the exception of the North Caucasus, was under the responsibility of one major state-recognised Islamic organisation. However, starting in the first half of the 1990s, the institutional unity of the Russian Muslims was disrupted by the tensions among the high-ranking Islamic clergy and the subsequent formation of a plethora of new organisations, which were divided along the geographical lines and headed by their own muftis. At the same time, most of the Islamic organisations engaged in another process, i.e. that of joining one of three major Islamic associations in the country and thus integrating themselves into the hierarchical structure on different levels, including *mahalla* (local Islamic organisation working in a city or a village), *mukhtasibat* (Islamic organisation on district level), *kazyat* (Islamic organisation on regional level), *muftiiate* (Islamic organisation uniting all organisations of one federal district, such as Siberia). It should be noted that even though the introduced structures were directly modelled on the administrative bodies of the Muslims of the pre-Soviet period and thus adjusted to be maximally efficient in reaching out to the Muslim population, their actual effectiveness, as Yemelianova (2010) suggests, has been minimal. In particular, "*mahallas* continued to be primarily concerned with ritual functions and did not turn into genuine centers of spiritual life for their communities" (Yemelianova 2010: 40).

The situation proved even more complicated for the Muslims, living in those parts of Russia, where they have constituted just a minority group and as such had no sufficient human or administrative resources to implement the above-mentioned structure. However, a certain freedom in making decisions have led the local Muslim leaders to manipulate with the formal affiliation of their organisations, to set up their own *muftiiates* or, reversely, to integrate with other Islamic structures. By the beginning of the 2000s, three local Muslim organisations in Irkutsk Oblast, including one in Irkutsk, consolidated themselves into a *kazyat*, associated with the regional Spiritual Directorate for Asian Russia. Yet, five years thereafter the Muslim leader of Irkutsk made the decision to give up the organisation's membership in the regional Spiritual Directorate for Asian Russia and to establish an autonomous religious organisation – the Baikal *muftiiate* Apart from institutional affiliation, lack of religious infrastructure and qualified religious service have been of paramount importance in mobilising the local Tatars to search for alternative forms of organising collective worship while pursuing the idea of reconstructing mosques that were destroyed in the Soviet period. Mosque reconstruction projects have considerably impacted the activities of Tatar organisations in Siberia, forcing them to rely on the support of both local authorities and private donors.

Tatar National-Cultural Autonomies in Siberia

The active stance of Tatarstan authorities towards Tatar people living outside their republic has been underpinned by the concept of the indivisible Tatar nation and as such manifested itself

through the diverse activities and events, which are organised by Kazan on a regular basis in an attempt to raise the cultural awareness of the Tatar people both in Russia and abroad. The concept of the indivisible Tatar nation incorporating both those people who explicitly identify themselves as 'Tatar' and those who rather prefer being treated as 'Mishar' or 'Kryashen', has been assertively advocated by the Tatarstan's political and intellectual elite throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Gorenburg 2003). The contradictions surrounding the concept have nonetheless provoked certain public discussions and academic concerns, culminating in the period preceding the all-Russian census of 2002, during which the aspiration of Russian officials and Moscow-based anthropologists to capture and record all potential answers to the nationality questions pitted them against the Tatar decision-makers and academics, who suspected Moscow of conspiring against the Tatar people and deliberately intending to split "the indivisible Tatar nation" (Sokolovskiy 2002). Associating the results of the census with a possibility for the Tatar people to be underrepresented on the federal level or to become a minority in their own republic, the local political establishment submitted a series of petitions and open letters to the country's authorities asking them to interfere (Sokolovskiy 2002: 88).

Tatar activists from outside Tatarstan stood out as yet another source for the legitimacy of Kazan's claims. Indeed, the pro-Kazan orientations of Tatar activists in the regions not only found expression in using symbolic double names, such as, for example, 'Baikal-Idel' or 'Idel-Angara'[7] for their projects, but have also been institutionalised through their participation in the activities of such organisations as the World Congress of Tatars, operating on worldwide level, and the Federal national-cultural autonomy of Tatars with primarily domestic outreach. The World Congress of Tatars, founded in 1992, has functioned as an umbrella organisation promoting cooperation between Tatar organisations in the world and through one branch, the World Forum of the Tatar Youth, has endeavoured to reach out to the Tatar communities in the formerly Soviet areas, Europe, and North America. In recent years, and with the spread of new communication technologies, in particular the Internet, the task of consolidating the younger and technologically savvy Tatars came to be considerably facilitated. While the use of the Tatar-language websites by young Tatars and their communication in the virtual Tatar-oriented groups in the social networking utilities (for example, the Russian "V Kontakte" or international "Facebook") was to build on the production of the 'online imagined community' of the Tatar people on the Internet, it was social networks, constructed through the virtual space, that could be used for the mobilisation of a great number of people for social or political goals (Suleymanova 2009). As an example, I refer to the recent campaign of the World Congress of Tatars, which used the Internet to collect signatures of Tatar activists from all over the world to oppose the installation of a mythological sculpture (seen by them as 'pagan') in the ancient Islamic town of Bulgar in the Republic of Tatarstan in the year 2012.[8]

The Federal National-Cultural Autonomy of the Tatars was founded in 1998 by Tatar activists in Kazan and was seen as an institution, the idea of which was originally proposed by the Austro-Marxists for ethnic minorities at the beginning of the 20th century but which could only be brought into being at the end of that century in Russia. National-Cultural Autonomies (NCAs), or non-

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[7] 'Idel' is the Tatar name for the Volga, while the Angara is one of the biggest rivers in East Siberia. It flows through Irkutsk Oblast and feeds into the Yenisei in Krasnoyarsk Krai.
[8] See http://tatclub.net/2012/03/obrashhenie-k-prezidentu-respubliki-tatarstan-o-nedopushhenii-ustanovki-na-territorii-bulgar-yazycheskogo-idola/ (accessed on 12 March 2013).

territorial autonomies, were introduced in Russia as a way of providing its ethnic minorities[9] with a certain autonomy and self-governance in defining their own cultural and language policies. The concept was re-discovered by the public discourse in the early 1990s, but it was not until Russia signed the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) in 1996 and ratified it two years thereafter that the institution was introduced in the country (Osipov 2004; Torode 2008).

Despite the fact that the national-cultural autonomies were envisioned by the Russian authorities as a facility for the ethnic minorities to realise their right to self-determination on an institutional basis, the functioning of NCAs in Russia has been evaluated by many experts as a failed project that has brought no real benefits to the ethnic minorities (Nimni 2005). Osipov (2010: 31) has emphasised an "existing gap between the high symbolic status of national-cultural autonomies and their negligible instrumental value or utilitarian usefulness". Indeed, although the federal-level law on the national-cultural autonomies (1996) has declared it the responsibility of the state authorities to finance these institutions and promised them other benefits as well, in practice this obligation has been rarely fulfilled or was seen as too unrealistic to be fulfilled on a regular basis. The non-functioning of the federal law on national-cultural autonomies in Russia has been one of the major reasons discouraging ethnic activists to apply for its establishment in regions where 'autonomy' is seen as an equivalent of an ordinary cultural organisation. As a way to maintain the symbolic status of cultural autonomies and to secure their funding on the local level, the regions' administrations have been active in adopting their variants of the law and "among the federation subjects it is Russia's nationality republics that have turned out to be mostly supportive of NCAs for minorities on their territories" (Osipov 2010: 45).

At present, the fully developed structure of the national-cultural autonomy in Russia is represented by a range of organisations on different levels – local, regional, and federal – roughly corresponding to the territorial-administrative structure of the country. According to the Russian legislation, local autonomies can be established by an assembly of people, who are citizens of the Russian Federation, associate themselves with a certain ethnic group, and permanently reside at a certain locality. Apart from individuals, national-cultural autonomies on a local level can be founded by already registered organisations, whose members likewise associate themselves with a certain ethnic group. There is some complexity, however, concerning which is the minimal administrative unit, for which a local autonomy can be legitimately registered. In legal terms, the local autonomies should correspond to what the Russian legislation designates as "municipal formation" or "municipal district" (*munitsipal'noe obrazovanie*), which refers to the level of administrative division below the level of a federation subject and subsumes quite a wide range of locations, from a rural settlement to the administrative centre of the respective federation subject. In practice, we can probably distinguish between two distinct types of autonomies on the local level – the one corresponding to the urban area (*gorodskaya avtonomiya*) and the one corresponding to the rural district (*raionnaya avtonomiya*). As I will show, these two types, although formally equal with regard to their hierarchical status, have strikingly different capacities in terms of their access to economic and human resources and their actual input for the functioning of the region level autonomy.

The regional national-cultural autonomy refers to the level of the federal subject and can be founded provided there are already two local autonomies in the region. The procedure whereby

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[9] National minority in the Russian context.

local autonomies can integrate themselves into the region-level autonomy includes presenting the charter of the organisation, holding the inaugural conference, providing relevant information concerning the autonomy in the local mass media, and submitting the required documents to the state authorities. According to the standard procedure, the regional autonomy in turn can apply for membership in the federal national-cultural autonomy or, together with another regional autonomy, can establish an autonomy on the federal level.

The hierarchical structure of the Tatar federal national-cultural autonomy is probably best suited for the redistribution of material resources as well as information, given the availability of such resources. Apart from the individual efforts of the organisation activists, what has been both implicitly understood and explicitly emphasised is the support and approval of these activities by Kazan. In a sense, the many activities of the Tatar organisations in the regions have been inspired and informed by the policies of Tatarstan, which focused on the consolidation of Tatar activists in the country through the structures of the federal autonomy. The efficiency of the structure has not only been bolstered through the spread of Tatar nationalism and the historical reminiscences of the Tatar people's 'glorious past', but even more importantly through the ability of the autonomy's high-ranking members to lobby for the interests of the whole structure (for example, the current chairman of the federal autonomy of the Tatars is a deputy of the Russian State Duma) and to provide guidance for the activists outside Tatarstan. The various meetings and workshops in Kazan, intended primarily for the Tatar intelligentsia and youths from throughout the country, have been another important source of inspiration for the Tatars in Siberia.

As of 2012, there were at least six Tatar regional national-cultural autonomies, registered in different regions (federation subjects) on the territory of Siberia out of the total number of 26 autonomies at this level throughout the country. They comprise the regional national-cultural autonomies of Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug, Tyumen, Omsk, Novosibirsk Oblasts, Krasnoyarsk Krai, and the Republic of Buryatia. The regional national-cultural autonomy of Buryatia was established in 2005 by uniting the local city-level autonomy and two rural district autonomies outside Ulan-Ude. Although the founding of the regional autonomy was made possible via the merging of three formally equal organisations, their input concerning the functioning of the whole umbrella organisation on the regional level has never been equal, considering their different access to the material resources, information flows, and human resources. Benefiting from being based in the urban area, Tatar activists of the city organisation have taken the lead in directing the activities of the local autonomies and in maintaining relations with the federal level autonomy in Kazan.

At present, the other two local autonomies in Buryatia are based in rural districts (*raionnaya avtonomiya*), located to the east and south-east of Ulan-Ude. Living in some of the remote villages there, the local Tatar population has faced quite a number of social problems, including those of unemployment and alcoholism. Aware of these problems, one of the main objectives for the city activists in the past years was to fight the social problems among their co-ethnics in the countryside, trying also to reduce the existing gap between the urban and rural organisations. This task in turn was to be carried out through regular voluntary trips made by the city-based activists to the rural areas and their engagement in the social work there. Besides, the organised visits of the Tatar imam from the city to the villages were intended to improve the spiritual and moral condition of the local inhabitants. In this context, the national-cultural autonomy in Buryatia, undoubtedly, started to exceed mere symbolic functions and assumed rather pragmatic ones.

To some extent, the hierarchical structure of autonomies has been symptomatic of the specific predisposition of the state authorities to control everything while the spread of national-cultural autonomies in Russia in the 2000s coincided with the decisive re-centralisation of administrative power in the federal centre under Vladimir Putin's presidency. The restrictionist policies of the Russian state under Putin, in contrast to the permissive stance of the Yeltsin era, cut many of the privileges of Tatarstan, subordinating it to the logics of the highly centralised state. In this regard, the implementation of the law on national-cultural autonomies has been seen as potentially beneficial to the state apparatus, which nevertheless could not take into consideration all the regional and ethno-specific peculiarities on the local level. Thus, despite the existing advantage of the autonomy type for the Tatars, its establishment has never been a simple or an unambiguous issue for ethnic minorities. In Irkutsk, for example, the local activists of the Tatar-Bashkir cultural centre have not been able to register a regional autonomy, because the Russian law stipulates that one autonomy should be established for one nationality, in which case the members of this organisation or any other organisation, representing two closely-related ethnic groups, would have to either split or somehow disguise the presence of a second ethnic group in the organisation. In this context, the words of Fagilya about the existing pressures put on the Tatar people by the authorities, as mentioned in the introduction, derive their particular meaning from the fact that the disjunctures between the federal legislation, providing symbolic recognition to the nationalities through the institution of cultural autonomies, and the existing configurations on the local level have made it either impossible to implement the legislation or necessitated activists to find a way to circumvent it.

"Tatar Dances" and the Pillars of Islam: re-negotiating Tatar identity in Siberia

In the common perception of the outsiders – people not involved in the routine activities of national-cultural organisations and comprising most of the population in Siberia and in Russia – these organisations mostly perform their ethnicity on stage at the time of public celebrations. The more general conditions or circumstances that compel not only those organisations to engage in those public events but also the state authorities to provide the context and organise those festivities usually remain unnoticed or beyond reflexivity. In his book on *The Festive State*, David Guss argues that "cultural performances can be recognised as sites of social action where identities and relations are being continually reconfigured, the new social imaginaries are being produced and which could be in that capacity appropriated by the state" (Guss 2000: 12). Above, I referred to the role of the Russian state in manipulating Tatar identity through the interventionist practices of census-meddling and gerrymandering, yet what has been overlooked so far in this article is the degree of interiorisation of the historically and politically imposed definitions of ethnicity, which might not only influence the way people reflect their ethnic affiliations in their everyday lives, but also how they present themselves in public during festivals.

In many ways, the Soviet period saw the formation of a specific culture of celebrations, in which ethnicity was to be framed in terms of the Soviet nationality politics and as such utilised for the purposes of the state. Echoing Don Handelman's metaphor of 'mirrors', held up by the state to its citizens through the modern spectacle and designed to provide "an incisive vision of themselves as they should be" (Handelman 1997: 396), I would point here to the typically taxonomic organisation

of the Soviet festivals, celebrating the communal Soviet identity of an ethnically heterogeneous people and frequently referring to the trope of the 'friendship of peoples'.

In the Soviet context, the concept of the 'friendhip of people' found its manifestation, in particular, in the spread of such visually expressive genres as national dances, songs, folklore, poetry, and many others, familiar to those attending the festival events in the Soviet cities, and by corollary expect their participants to perform something on the stage that would stand for their nationality. In case of the Tatar people, for example, a staged performance would rely on the Tatar dances, singing, and playing the Qurai flute and would obviously downplay their Islamic identity, which despite being tolerated as an element of private life, could not be demonstrated during public events as it was deemed incompatible with the officially atheist rhetoric of the Soviet state.

As the post-soviet Russian state inherited much of the soviet-era experience of dealing with nationality issues, the organisation of what I term here as 'ethno-cultural festivals' has become central to the activities of the national-cultural organisations, while the requirement to go public has also evolved into an important source of dynamism and change for these organisations, turning the issue of Tatar ethnic identity into a site of active contestation. Reproducing ethnicity for public display as a way to showcase interethnic peace and cultural diversity in the region has been an important mechanism through which the local authorities have provided recognition to the cultural organisations in Russia. In this sense, the nationality republics of the Russian Federation seem to have been more committed than other administrative territories of the country to promoting their image as being both multi-ethnic and ethnically tolerant, while at the same time possessing more political leverage for modifying the federal legislation to their particular contexts. The existence of the Academy of Culture and Art in the capital of Buryatia, an educational institution training specialists in 'ethno-cultural management' for the local cultural centres, and the absence of such an institution in Irkutsk is rather indicative of that difference.

Parallel to the founding of Tatar cultural organisations throughout the country in the 1990s, the rising interest of Tatar people in the issues of their ethnicity, set against the devaluation of the Soviet identity, induced a wide spectrum of discourses on Tatar identity and its putative components. The search for historical roots, associated with the sedentary Bulgars, nomadic Kypchaks, or multi-ethnic hordes of Genghis Khan, has been complicated with the rising importance of religiosity and spirituality among the Tatars in the post-soviet period (Rorlich 1986; Frank 1998; Tomohiko 2002). The significance of religion, be it Islam for the majority of the Tatars, or Orthodox Christianity for Kryashens (Keräşen), a small group of baptised Tatars, has occasionally been contested to the point of either opposing the authority of the religious leader to secular organisations or, reversely, delegitimising the role of secular organisations in representing the truly Tatar identity, seen in this context as inseparable from Islam or, more broadly, from religiosity (Iskhakov 1994; Yemelianova 1999; Kefeli-Clay 2005). By the same token, the identity discourse in its extreme forms would either emphasise both the ethnic specificity and historical autonomy of the Tatar people, pointing to the importance of their pre-Islamic heritage, and, more often than not, approving of the public presentations of Tatar culture. Or it would alternatively argue for the primacy of the all-Islamic identity, discarding the relevance of ethnic distinctiveness for the sake of the Muslim unity, and therefore explicitly decrying secular concerns for visual self-presentation. In this complex process of the renegotiation of Tatar identity in post-soviet Russia, the role of the state, compartmentalised territorially (e.g. local authorities in Tatarstan and in Buryatia) and structurally (e.g. republic vs. non-republics), has been to act as an important source

of recognition as well as an arbiter for various conflicts, involving identity issues. In what follows, I provide ethnographic material, collected by me during the fieldwork in East Siberia in the year 2011 as a way to show under what circumstances Tatar identity has evolved into a site of active contestation and to what extent the structural forces, associated with the recognition politics of the state, have impacted the unity of the Tatar national-cultural movement on this territory.

By the end of the 1990s, Irkutsk Oblast had a considerable number of Tatar or joint Tatar-Bashkir cultural organisations, located both in the major urban centres of the *oblast* and in some of its rural locations. Apart from the region-level Tatar-Bashkir cultural centre, based in Irkutsk and serving as the coordination outpost for the Tatar activists, smaller autonomous organisations have been functioning in Angarsk, Cheremkhovo, Bratsk, Usolye-Sibirskoe, and some other places on the territory of Buryat Ust-Orda Okrug. Based mainly in the locations with at least some Tatar population, a considerable number of these organisations had been existing as folklore bands or initiative groups, interested in reconstructing their family histories and transmitting Tatar culture to the younger generation. Most of such smaller folklore groups drew human resources from the Tatar population of rural communities across the *oblast*, including the Tatar villages, scattered across its territory. To some extent, Tatar activism in the region has also been fuelled by the presence of material objects, symbolising the Tatars' historical and cultural legacy, such as Tatar museums or mosques, requiring collective efforts to be maintained or repaired. In the urban centres such as Irkutsk or Angarsk, much work has been done by the local Tatar intelligentsia to preserve their cultural legacy, notably by regularly reproducing the traditional programme of the so-called Tatar calendar, incorporating the most important folk festivals and Muslim holidays.

At the end of the 2000s, the unity of Tatar organisations in Irkutsk Oblast was disrupted, as a number of new organisations came into being, splitting off from the hitherto single Tatar-Bashkir cultural centre. Among those, who split off to form a separate organisation, was a group of young people, ethnically Tatar and Bashkir, studying in Irkutsk and stemming mainly from Cheremkhovo, a small town known for a historically sizeable Tatar-Bashkir population. Acting in opposition to the adult-dominated centre, they proclaimed the importance of "new methods" of work, emphasising, in their words, "the importance of producing something new", instead of "reproducing the same programme every year". The leader of the youth organisation, Rinat, 23 years old, was born in a small Buryat village of Ust-Orda Okrug. As a child, Rinat acquired both the Buryat and Tatar language, apart from Russian. At a later stage, he discovered his talent for singing and was regularly invited by different local cultural institutions to perform on stage. Despite his growing popularity as a singer of ethnic songs, having moved from the village to Irkutsk, the young man entered the department of medicine of a local university.

As a university student, Rinat came across the Tatar-Bashkir cultural centre in Irkutsk, and, having been invited to join it, became a regular member of the Tatar organisation. At this point, his career as a locally famous singer progressed even further as he attended some of the prestigious singing contests in Kazan and was awarded some prizes there. At the end of the 2000s, Rinat made a decision to separate from the adult-dominated Tatar centre and set up his own youth organisation in Irkutsk. Some of his coevals from the Tatar centre followed him and split off from other organisations to form the new Tatar-Bashkir youth cultural centre.

Explaining his growing interest in the issues of Tatar ethnicity, Rinat refers to his previous trips to Kazan and his participation in the youth festivals in Tatarstan as the sources of his inspiration. Moreover, he emphasises the importance of the creation of a new-quality organisation that would

not only more extensively use mass media facilities and public relations management, but would also assist its members in reviving their 'truly' Tatar identity and Islamic heritage. As we can see from Rinat's words, the issues of ethnic identity came to the forefront among the youths of the Tatar-Bashkir centre. Drawing inspiration from their trips to Tatarstan and also from the cultural legacy of the local Tatars, the members of the youth centre claimed to be more religious than their older counterparts and explicitly stressed the priority of Islam for their activities. Although few of them could speak fluent Tatar or Bashkir or had ample knowledge of Islam, rather the lack thereof became the subject of their criticism of the older generation of the Tatar-Bashkir cultural centre. Unhappy with the 'old methods' of the 'old' organisation, the Tatar youths insisted that the cornerstone of a Tatar organisation should be in its professionalisation, based, inter alia, on its ability to use new information technologies and produce income out of its own activities – something which, in their words, their older peers lacked.

Reflecting upon the claims of the Tatar youths in Irkutsk, I will shift my attention to the present-day Tatar organisations on the opposite side of Lake Baikal to find something that, in my opinion, might suit the requirements of the Tatar youths in Irkutsk. In Ulan-Ude, the capital city of Buryatia, the Tatar youth organisation was established as a part of the education project, designed and undertaken by the Tatar activists, affiliated with the Academy of Culture and Art in Ulan-Ude. Here, too, the process whereby young people of Tatar ethnic background started to regularly congregate and engage themselves in the matters of their native culture was considerably facilitated by the support from the already existing Tatar organisation, based in the Academy and intent on motivating the younger generation for studying Tatar language and culture. Unlike in Irkutsk, however, the presence of professionalised staff and the availability of material resources, provided by the educational institution, not only came as an additional asset for the activities of the Tatar youths, but also in a way led to the closer integration of the young Tatar activists with their older counterparts under the umbrella of the national-cultural autonomy. Indeed, the start-up and development of the youth branch of the Tatar autonomy in Ulan-Ude seems to be indicative of the general situation specific to the ethnic minorities in the region – the lack of human resources, complicated by the cultural assimilation of Tatars in Buryatia, has compelled ethnic activists to apply significant efforts and, in a sense, 'to enforce' ethnic revival among the people of different ages. Thus, in contrast to Irkutsk, where the rise of Tatar youth organisations was mainly driven by the initiative of the young activists themselves, 'the Tamyrlar project', which was intended to unite Tatar youths in Buryatia, was set up by the leaders of the local national-cultural autonomy as a necessary step to reach out to the younger generation of Tatars.

By the spring of 2011, when I arrived for fieldwork in Ulan-Ude, the youth centre "Tamyrlar" ("Roots" in Tatar) had been in existence for no longer than one year. As of that moment, the organisation had no official registration and lacked a permanent meeting place, making due with temporary solutions provided by the Academy. Accordingly, with the average number of activists reaching 10 to 15 persons, the bulk of "Tamyrlar" members were students of the Academy, majoring in the disciplines relevant for the matters of cultural production. Apart from learning the Tatar language and the basics of Islam, the young people were actively involved in the activities of the autonomy, taking up some of the official positions within its structure and held responsible for staging the public celebrations of the Tatar festivals. The policy of promoting the young members of the autonomy into leadership positions in the organisation was based on the clear rationale to professionalise many of them as experts in managing ethno-cultural organisations. At the same

time, even though the young activists regularly used their social connections and the Internet for recruiting new members, the number of those participating in the activities of "Tamyrlar" remained rather limited, also considering that some of the students could eventually lose their connections with the centre after graduation or the change of their marital status.

Anna, 22 years old, is a student of the Academy of Culture and Art in Ulan-Ude and also an active member of "Tamyrlar". Even though Anna perceives her name as Russian, she identifies herself as 'Tatar', as her grandfather on her mother's side comes from Tatarstan. Joining "Tamyrlar" right after its formation, she became increasingly interested in Tatar culture and language. In her own words, what produced the greatest impression on her was her trip to Kazan and also to Novosibirsk to attend the country-level Tatar youth festival. Apart from the many activities of the festivals, it was during one of them that she met her future husband Zinnur, a Siberian Tatar from Novosibirsk. Influenced by his command of the Tatar language and dedication to Islam, Anna felt interested in her own ethnic background and started to attend Tatar language classes as well as classes at the local mosque.

As a university student, Anna majors in design studies and in this capacity has been of considerable importance for the activities of the youth centre. Together with other young Tatar activists, she has applied her skills to organise and to participate in the annual celebrations of Tatar festivals in the region, of which the organisation of the Tatar Sabantuy has been very exemplary. Using their professional qualifications, the Tatar students attempted to re-invent much of its 'traditional' elements, resorting to innovation and doing justice to the use of the information technologies, including the Internet. The commercialisation of their activities through selling ethnically Tatar craft items was to become another strand for their activities. At the same time, lacking the real expertise and the practical experience of observing Tatar folk or Muslim holidays in their everyday life, the local Tatars had to resort to the help of their counterparts in Irkutsk.

Indeed, most of the collective efforts of a relatively small number of Tatar activists in both regions have relied on and appealed to the sense of ethnic solidarity of other people, who share the Tatar identity and are in a position to provide assistance. Establishing ties and connections with such co-ethnics, standing high on the social ladder or having some economic leverage, has been key to the success of the activists' most important ventures, while the presence of individuals, notably ethnic entrepreneurs, feeling called upon to provide help or assist in getting things done has constituted an important form of social capital for the activists of local Tatar organisations. Extending beyond the formal membership in ethnic organisations, the clusters of relationships, based on ethnic solidarity has, of course, not been typical only of the Tatar people in Siberia. We can rather speak about certain recurrent forms of social organisation, by which members of the group consolidate themselves in response to disadvantages and which might be compared to ethnic niching here (Waldinger 2003). Following Waldinger, I would claim that in the Russian context the forging of ethnic niches, associated with the Tatar people, has been facilitated by their co-identification with the local Muslim community which for its sustenance has depended on certain economic practices (e.g. regular organisation of collective *hajj* to Mecca or gathering voluntary contributions for maintaining the mosque) and in which the Tatar and Bashkir clergy have commonly occupied managerial and leadership positions. Importantly, the common awareness of belonging to the Islamic faith has been uniting the Tatar people with a number of other Muslim peoples in the region. Starting from the early 2000s, with the influx of newcomers to Siberia, notably people from the labour-sending Central Asian countries and the Russian North Caucasus,

the sheer size of the Muslim communities in the Siberian cities rose immensely. Far from home, most of the recent newcomers found themselves in need of the appropriate religious infrastructure and imam services. This in turn has led to situations when Muslim adherents, belonging to different Islamic traditions and socialised in different cultural contexts, had to share the same religious infrastructure, including mosques, located in the urban surroundings of Siberian cities, bringing a certain sense of contestation and rivalry between Muslim ethnic communities.

Indeed, the Tatar people, forming the core of Islamic clergy in Siberia, have commonly emphasised the specific character of 'their' Islam as a relatively flexible and liberal version of the religion, re-interpreted through the ideas of Jadidism[10] and Euro-Islam[11] and as such being entirely compatible with the secular governance (Hunter 2004: 93).

Yet, the domination of the Tatar Islam in Russia, which has been the case in most of the Russian regions, with the notable exception of North Caucasus, has been questioned and in a way contested by those Muslims, representing other Islamic traditions in the Russian context. As a result, some devotees, presumably those who felt uncomfortable with the Islamic tradition of Hanafi *madhhab* or those who represented Muslim organisations, officially prohibited in Russia as militant or terrorist (such as, for example, Hizb ut-Tahrir), preferred not to congregate for the worship in the mosque as an officially designated place, but to use other facilities, including private or rented apartments. In this light, the Islamic mosque as a meeting place for the collective worship and a separate economic entity (based upon regular voluntary contributions and occasional state-provided funding), has evolved into a highly contested space, while the figure of the imam, a person responsible for the religious life of the Muslim community, has received special attention from the members of the community and local authorities alike. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Muslim communities, composed of ethnically diverse people, have experienced increasing tensions over ethnicity-related issues and not religious ones, which in some cases grew into a covert conflict or a public split.

Reflecting on the origin of ethnic conflicts Günther Schlee refers to the notion of the meta-ethnic systemic level, providing a terrain for the interaction of different ethnic groups. Engaging in interaction, ethnic groups "avoid competition by integrating different occupational niches and habitats, and by acting according to different norms and values" (Schlee 2008: 10). Indeed, while the Tatar people as mostly well-educated urbanites have been able to secure themselves quite "lucrative" positions in the social hierarchy of Siberian cities over a course of time, including but not limited to occupations in the local administration, businesses, academic and artistic circles, most of the ethnically diverse newcomers came to occupy considerably different economic niches, associated either with non-prestigious and low-paid jobs or with some specific business activities (such as, for example, construction business or petty trade). In this sense, the purely economic niches of the two groups have been different enough in order to avoid competition in this dimension, which nonetheless became unavoidable when it came to the issue of sharing common religious infrastructure.

The situation around the mosque in Irkutsk in the last couple of years suggests that the local authorities have been actively engaged in the processes of re-establishing the configuration of Muslim institutions in the region as a way to reinforce the position of Tatar Islam, which was later

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[10] Jadidism was a 19th century cultural movement among the Tatars and Bashkirs in the Russian Empire, which aimed at the educational reform and social modernisation within Islam.

[11] Euro-Islam is a modernist trend among the Muslim intellectuals, spread, in particular, in Tatarstan, and striving to reorient Islam towards the European norms and values (for more details, see Hunter 2004).

challenged due to the influx of new Muslim adherents to the region. Increasing tensions between different groups of Muslims in Irkutsk Oblast, although usually not easily observable by an outsider, came to the surface a couple of years ago in an open conflict around the leadership of the city mosque. What specifically happened in December 2008 in Irkutsk was a case of irreverence and physical violence against the imam, committed by some of the mosque parishioners. Following repressive police measures against the initiators of the conflict and demonstrations in the city centre organised by some of the non-local Muslims, who were unhappy with the imam service, the incident was widely covered by the local mass media and attracted much publicity as a conflict between different groups of believers. For the Tatar organisations in Siberia, the new circumstances reinvigorated the importance of the local authorities as the arbiter in conflict situations and an additional source of recognition in their claims for Islam.

At the same time, the religious dimension in this story was, probably, by no means the exhaustive one. The control of economic resources, accumulated through the activities of the Muslim organisation and the symbolic status of the leader of the Muslim community, could be an equally important driving force of the conflict. For the Tatar national-cultural organisations, whose members have also been part of the local Muslim community, the issue at stake was to retain the symbolic affiliation of the mosque with the Tatars. In this sense, the cultural and economic capital, possessed by the mosque, would be an additional asset for the activities of the local Tatar organisations. The engagement of Tatar activists in the management of the mosque and their ability to exert influence on the imam's activities has become an important non-formal agenda of Tatar organisations, while the local Muslim leaders, themselves part of the local Tatar establishment, felt justified to reach out to Tatar members of the secular organisations. For the upper-level Islamic organisations of the country, an increasing number of incidents between the 'old' and 'new' Muslim adherents came both as a threat of losing control over the situation in some of the regions and as an opportunity to re-negotiate the status and institutional affiliation of Muslim autonomous organisations in these regions. Finally, for the local authorities responsible for the issues of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, the possibility of the spread of radical Islam in the region made it necessary to strengthen control over the affairs of the Muslim community. In practice, this meant providing more support to the local imam and local Muslims and, reversely, keeping a check on the religious activities of the newcomers to the region.

Of particular importance for the Muslims of Buryatia has been the issue of proper religious leadership, as in previous years the local Islamic community found itself repeatedly led by a number of religious figures notorious for their fundamentalist views on religion and persecuted by the authorities. The most famous of them, Said Buryatski (that means "from Buryatia" in Russian), for example, was later assassinated by Russian troops as a leading militant in Chechnya. As a result, the local Muslim community became considerably concerned with issues of integration with the higher-level pro-state Islamic organisation in Russia and recruiting qualified religious personnel, who would expectedly preach liberal Islam to the believers. To achieve this, the local Muslim organisation had to contact one of the Islamic higher-education institutions in Tatarstan, requesting a university-educated imam, who would be able to consolidate the local Muslims.

Conclusion

Comparing Tatar organisations in the two federation subjects of Russia, I presented the differences in their development as resulting from a constellation of historical factors, the distinct political, administrative, and social profiles of the two regions. Living in the adjacent regions of East Siberia, the local Tatar people have commonly shared similar family histories and attitudes towards their ethnicity. While the older generation of Tatars, many of whom were born outside Siberia, has been able to maintain the Tatar language and culture on this territory, their children – presently middle-aged and born in the Soviet cultural environment and subsequently socialised as members of the Russian-speaking society – were unable to speak Tatar and remained mainly indifferent to their cultural heritage. The same holds true for the younger generation of Tatars, born and raised in the post-soviet period, who associate themselves with the 'Tatar ethnos' mainly through the remaining family histories and the stories of their ancestors' resettlement to Siberia. In this context, activists of Tatar national-cultural organisations, even considered together with their rank-and-file members, constitute just a small fraction of the Tatar population in the region. Despite that, the present-day Tatar cultural movement in Siberia has been steadily growing as it manifests itself through the rise of Tatar cultural organisations in this part of Russia.

As I argued in the paper, the development of Tatar organisations in Siberia has been underpinned to a great extent by the strategic relationships between Tatarstan and other administrative regions in the country as well as by the policies of local authorities towards Tatar organisations, rather than by the state-level policies of the Russian Federation. Indeed, guided by the concept of the indivisible Tatar nation and trying to reach out to the Tatar communities throughout the country, the Tatarstani authorities have been acting quite successfully through the structures of the Tatar World Congress and the Federal National-Cultural Autonomy. Perceiving loss of one's ethnic identity and native language as an important problem and a serious threat for their people, the leaders of the local Tatar organisations had to struggle to keep their organisations operational, to motivate their co-ethnics, and to secure external funding. The support and the social networks provided by the federal-level Tatar institutions have been an important incentive for the Tatar activists in Siberia.

From the very start, the local Tatar organisations faced strikingly different conditions for securing and maintaining recognition from Kazan. Throughout the 1990s, Tatar national-cultural organisations were established in Russia under the patronage of the political and intellectual elite, while Tatar activists were among the first during that period to register Tatar cultural centres. The establishment of the Tatar organisation in Buryatia was framed by the development of political and economic relations between the two nationality republics in the 1990s and seen as a natural product of said development. The commercial relations between Buryatia and Tatarstan in turn reinforced the economic platform of the local Tatar organisation. By contrast, the organisations in Irkutsk Oblast shied away from the development of inter-regional relations, thus finding themselves excluded from the integration process involving Tatar communities throughout the country and, as a result, depending more heavily on relations with local authorities.

In Buryatia, the presence of a comparatively small, but qualified staff has enabled the Tatar organisation in Ulan-Ude to mobilise more quickly for the establishment of a national-cultural autonomy and the integration with other rural-based Tatar organisations. The Buryatia organisation thus joined the Tatar establishment within the state-level structures and acquired important leverage for lobbying its own interests on the federal level. At the same time, the consolidation of Tatar

organisations under the autonomy structure in Buryatia was used by local activists as a mechanism to engage in social support work in rural areas of the republic populated by Tatars. By contrast, the Tatar organisations of Irkutsk Oblast, represented mainly by amateur activists and as such lacking access to the required information, faced problems establishing a regional autonomy.

My second argument was that, despite a certain inconsistency and variability of motives within the Tatar cultural movement across the regions of Russia, the theme of Tatar identity has been central to the local discourses and as such involved the contestation of the soviet-era definitions of ethnicity by the new meanings and/or religious forms of identity. Indeed, drawing on the concepts and definitions of ethnicity inherited from the Soviet era, the state authorities in Russia have encouraged the spread of attributes of nationalities such as dances, songs, folklore, and others while utilising national-cultural organisations to demonstrate the 'friendship of nationalities'. While a great number of Tatar activists took the situation for granted and continued reproducing the established programme on a regular basis, some grew dissatisfied with what they thought to be a superficial and outdated agenda. The pursuit of 'true' religiosity as opposed to the regular staging of secular public celebrations as one dimension as well as a certain aspiration to be modern through the use of information and social technologies seem to be the hallmarks of an emergent social trend among the activists of Tatar organisations in Siberia. Yet, even if we assume that the identity claims have not been equally important for all the members of the organisations, the idea of Tatar identity being based primarily on Islam has obviously been gaining prominence in the past years. The revived interest in religion among Tatars in Irkutsk Oblast seems natural, given a comparatively rich history of Islam among local Tatars in the region during the Tsarist era as well as the burgeoning Muslim community in East Siberia at present. In Buryatia, with its much smaller number of Tatars and the lack of specific cultural capital (Tatar villages, museums, or religious infrastructure), the importance of the above-mentioned identity discussions among Tatar activists proved somewhat less significant. Indeed, represented by just a handful of people, claiming to be Muslim devotees and regularly attending the places of Islamic worship, the local Tatar organisations encouraged religiosity among its members, but never made a point of making religion the cornerstone of their activities.

Lastly, the influx of newcomers to Siberia, including economic migrants from abroad or other regions of the Russian Federation, has added another dimension to the field of recognition politics for the Tatar organisations there. Adhering to a specific version of Islam and claiming possession of the Muslim infrastructure in the region, the Tatar communities have found their positions gradually weakened by new assertive groups of Islamic followers. This, in turn, has necessitated Tatar organisations to seek support from the local authorities and higher-level Islamic institutions recognised by the Russian state.

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