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Ethnicity as a tool and nationalities policy as practice: the case of Stavropol *krai*

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ABSTRACT

The article examines contemporary nationalities policy in Russia, based on a case study of Stavropol *krai* in the northern Caucasus. In order to reveal the informal mechanisms of nationalities policy this research analyses the practices of the ethnic group-making used by the regional bureaucracy. The key argument is that the ethnic divisions, rather than being embedded within the society as everyday social categorizations, are imposed by the bureaucracy in order to make social space more transparent and manageable. The resulting use of ethnicity as a political tool has much in common with the Soviet approach in this field. However, unlike the Soviet nationalities policy, in today's Russia ethnicity is not pervasive, and the nationalities policy as described is directed only at a small share of the population.

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To what extent, and how, is contemporary Russian nationalities policy informed by the historically ambivalent Soviet approach to ethnicity as both a problem to be solved, and a means to solve that problem? The broadly shared academic view is that the legacy of Soviet nationalities policy still deeply informs the ways in which today's Russian state deals with the political implications of ethnic diversity. But there is lively discussion among scholars, as to what are the exact points of continuity and change between the Soviet and Russian nationalities policies.

Soviet nationalities policy was characterized by the intensive efforts of the state to strengthen, sometimes even create, and maintain ethnic identities. The Soviet model of institutionalized ethnicity implied two core elements. The first, as Terry Martin puts it, was a "crucial connection between ethnic identity and administrative control of territory … further entwined with a third category: land ownership" (Martin 2001, 42). This was reflected in the hierarchical system of territorial ethnic autonomous units from the level of district up to union republics. The second was the legal category of individual ethnicity, registered in personal documents, and defined according to the ethnic identity of one's parents. "Ethnic nationality *(natsional'nost')* was not only a *statistical category* (…) It was, more distinctively, an obligatory and mainly ascriptive *legal category,* a key element of an individual's legal status" (Brubaker 1996, 31). Less cited in the discussions on today's Russia nationalities policy is Martin's argument on the ambivalent role of ethnicity in the communist party's political course. On the one hand, ethnicity was a problem,

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since Bolsheviks saw the mobilizing power of nationalism in Eastern and Central Europe during World War I and understood the obstacles it could make for their rule in the territory of the former multiethnic empire. On the other, it was seen as a tool to strengthen their rule. Nationalism was expected to be disarmed "by granting the forms of nationhood" (Martin 2001, 8). National identity was expected to be depoliticized by emphasized respect to non-Russian identities (Martin 2001, 13). The politics of *korenizatsiya* (indigenization) in the North Caucasus helped to shape new elites, rooted in local societies and loyal to communist party (Karpov 2017).

In Russia, after 1991 minorities' ethnic mobilizations were developing on the base of institutional structures inherited form the Soviet times, namely the structures of the ethnic republics (Gorenburg 2003; Giuliano 2011). Dmitry Gorenburg called the republics "the repositories of Soviet primordialist ideas on ethnicity" (Gorenburg 2003, 77–78). But the scale of the ethnic mobilization and the degree of freedom the republics afforded in their relations with the federal centre significantly varied. The connection between ethnicity and administrative control of the territory was seriously weakened due to the new constitutional framework, especially after Vladimir Putin's centralizing reforms in the beginning of the 2000s (Blakkisrud 2004; Foxall 2015).

The Soviet legal category of the individual citizen's ethnicity was abolished by passport reform. Sener Akturk and Sven Simmonsen suppose that the removal of ethnicity line from internal passports in post-Soviet Russia was clear evidence of a new approach towards nationalities policy and symbolized a rather abrupt break with the Soviet legacy, though both of them assume that the reform met with resistance and was a matter of sharp political struggle in Russia (Akturk 2010; Simonsen 1999).

However, the nature of today's Russian nationalities policy is debated. Cristiano Codagnone and Vassily Filippov insist that in the 1990s Russia attempted to forge a new concept of national community, based on which they call "multicultural constitutional patriotism". They note, however, that ethnic federalism and the ambiguous position of ethnic Russians created obstacles for the new political project (Codagnone and Filippov 2000). J. Paul Goode highlights the inherent controversies in post-Soviet Russia's nationalities policy. On the one hand, at least on the level of official statements, the federal centre in the 1990s declared the building of a civic national identity based on territory and citizenship. On the other, in relation to Russian communities in the former USSR the Kremlin preferred to apply an ethnic understanding of the nation. The nature of Russian hybrid political regime is the source of ambivalence in central government approaches towards ethnicity, Goode argues (Goode 2019). Peter Rutland defines the break between the Soviet nationalities policy and the Russian one in negative terms. He states that the allegedly strict, coherent, and ordered Soviet system of managing ethnicity collapsed with the USSR, and post-Soviet Russia failed to develop its' own policy in this sphere (Rutland 2010). With some irony, Rutland notes that the most important symbols of the whole-Russian unity remain the same as those of the Soviet people: the victory over fascism in 1945 and the first man in space (Rutland 2010, 124). Both Goode and Rutland point out that the institutional framework for nationalities policy in post-Soviet Russia is very unstable, and thus it symbolizes the instability, ambiguity and inherent controversies of the nationalities policy itself. Helge Blakkisrud believes that there was no important difference between Soviet and Russian approaches, and the Russian civic nation, proclaimed after 1991, is in essence the same Soviet people under another name and within

reduced territory, because both emphasize the loyalty to the state as the central element of identity notwithstanding ethnic or religious diversity. In his view, things began to change only during Vladimir Putin's third presidential term, when the Russian leader "redefined the national 'self' from a predominantly civic understanding based on citizenship and identification with the state, to a more ethnic one focused on Russian language and culture" (Blakkisrud 2016).

What these works have in common is the focus on the institutional and symbolic aspects of Russia's central government. Recent research by Andrey Shcherbak and Kristina Sych develops the similar approach. They analyse formal status of the republics within Russia, the cultural and language policy, and the recruitment of elites. They conclude that the main goal pursued by the Kremlin is the "de-ethnification of politics", although this does not imply latent russification. Unlike the Soviet period, while permanently intervening to the field of the nationalities policy at the actor level, the Kremlin tends to neglect the structural level (Shcherbak and Sych 2017, 322). The distinction between structural and actor levels is important because many authors assume that nationalities policy in Russia was less an issue of formal institutions and official documents, than of informal bargaining between powerful actors on both federal and regional levels (see (Goode 2019; Rutland 2010)).

Given the complexity of Russia's domestic political field, it is hardly surprising that the central government's nationalities policy looks inconsistent and ambiguous, whatever political power is in ascendance. There are strong ethnic minority identities inherited from the Soviet period and enhanced by some influential leaders of Russia's national republics. There is an obvious lack of non-ethnic and non-religious political identities, adding to the ambivalence and inconsistency of Russian nationalities policy. The federal centre's concerns over the assumed ethno-nationalist sentiments of the Russian ethnic majority and, more importantly, over the attempts of the opposition to use those sentiments for its own purpose (Laruelle 2009). Those concerns are complicated by the fragmented and fluid nature of Russian nationalism itself (Laruelle 2009; Hale 2016). The situation is far from being uniform and stable. The Kremlin's promotion of the state-nation is not futile and impacts on public attitudes towards issues of self-identification. Mikhail A. Alekseev concludes on the base of opinion polling data, that Putin's steps toward Crimea in 2014, though the president explained them with a good deal of Russian nationalist rhetoric, and contrary to some theoretical predictions, did not alienate Russia's ethnic minorities. The latter "were just as much in favour of Russian territorial expansion as were the ethnic Russians" (Alekseev 2016, 186). This might indirectly provide evidence that for many Russian citizens, regardless of their ethnic origins, belonging to the Russian state-nation is an important part of their identity. Besides that, the political significance and importance of ethnic distinctions may vary depending on the concrete situation and the geographical location. Recent research by Olga A. Avdeyeva and Richard E. Matland shows that ethnicity does not strongly define the behaviour of voters, and reflects itself politically in different degrees in regard to the region (Avdeyeva and Matland 2019). At the same time, in some cases ethnicity may play a far more important role than it played in the Soviet time. In their research on the conflicts in the North Caucasus, Denis Sokolov and Irina Starodubrovskaya claim that high demand for ethnic self-identification developed because of the failure of the state, and its inability to provide for a particular institutional order (Sokolov and Starodubrovskaja 2013, 128). These considerations give grounds to

suppose that neither majority nor minorities are homogeneous uniform entities throughout the whole territory of the country, being instead both situational and contingent.

This paper attempts to fill two gaps in the existing literature. First, it analyses the informal practices of the nationalities policy, which have not been given sufficient consideration in the literature. In order to reveal the bureaucratic practices, implying ethnic categorizing and ethnic group-making, it studies the case of nationalities policy in Stavropol *krai*, based on qualitative field research data. Second, it tries to find out to what degree the ambivalent Soviet approach to ethnicity as the problem and the tool is relevant to today's Russian nationalities policy.

Nationalities policy as a practice: the research design

In a recent study, Marlies Glasius raises the question as to how authoritarianism should be defined and studied beyond its structural understanding. The problem she points out is that some governments, though they are elected relatively freely and fairly, rule in a way which is denoted as authoritarian by journalists or civil activists. But political science lacks tools to analyse the phenomena of authoritarianism within established democracies, because the existing approaches remain focused on structural matters, such as the quality of elections. Glasius concludes that a practical perspective helps to capture the relevant phenomena, by filling the gap between the level of individual behaviour (of a leader or a voter) and the level of state structures (Glasius 2018).

This approach is instructive in relation to nationalities policy in Russia. On the one hand, structural level analysis as in the research carried out by Goode or Rutland, defines this policy in a negative way, explaining what it is not: there is neither an consistent attempt to build a civic nation nor a complete turn to Russian ethnic nationalism. Thus the only possible conclusion is that of ambivalence or even the absence of a nationalities policy in Russia. On the other hand, the studies of individual attitudes or behaviour, such as those by Alekseev or by Avdeyeva and Matland, show that the attempts of the central government to invent and implement state nationalism have achieved a certain success, and that ethnicity in many cases does not influence people's political choices. But they say little on the matter of the state policy which leads to those results. If authoritarianism is hardly detected on the level of state structures, it can be captured through the analysis of authoritarian and illiberal practices. If the nationalities policy cannot be clearly defined on the level of central government's institutions, a practice approach might shed light on its nature.

The concept of "practice" does not belong to any single theory and is applied in many disciplines, from philosophy, social theory, cultural anthropology (Schatzki 2001a), to security studies and international relations (Pouliot 2010; Adler and Pouliot 2011). Theodore R. Schatzki defines practices as "embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding" (Schatzki 2001a, 11) or as "sets of doings and sayings organized by a pool of understandings" (Schatzki 2001b, 61). Thus the concept both "contrasts sharply with the model of rationally calculated action" (Thévenot 2001, 64) and helps to avoid an essentialist understanding of structural phenomena. As Barry Barnes puts it, shared practices "are indeed not stable unitary essences, but neither are they clusters of habitual individual actions. Shared practices are the accomplishments of competent members of collectives" (Barnes 2001, 32).

Since the practice perspective cannot be confined to a single theory, its theoretical borders also cannot be clearly demarcated. Though the works by Rogers Brubaker on ethnicity and nationalism usually are not attributed to the "practice turn", they have some parallels with this tradition. Brubaker applied Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical insights to the problems of ethnicity and nationalism, while Bourdieu is one of the founders of the practice approach. Following Bourdieu's argument on the relationship between the representative and those who are represented and on the symbolic construction of groups and social categories, Brubaker calls for an understanding of nations not as substance or material entities but as a "principle of vision and division of the social world", as "practical categories" and "contingent events" (Brubaker 1996, 3, 18).

Brubaker also points out the importance of distinguishing categories and groups. While a group is a collectivity, a category is just a basis for group-making. For instance, ethnic categories, used in statistical records, do not imply that behind those categories there are "ethnic groups" as collectivities which act intentionally and coherently, though political entrepreneurs, if they make an effort, might succeed in forging groups on the basis of those categories. Here is the space for what Brubaker calls the "politics of categories" from above – as the categories are imposed by state apparatus, and from below – as contesting projects of categorization are being invented by leaders or activists, or as the categories appear and are used in everyday life. The other important distinction is between a group and an organization. These are organizations – in a broad sense of the term – which claim to represent groups, and which carry out "group-making projects" (Brubaker 2004, 12–16). That corresponds with Bourdieu's words of a representative who substitutes those whom he represents, and a group which exists only as far as it has a representative speaking in its name.[1] Group-making takes effort and leaves traces, "no work, no group", as practice theorist Bruno Latour puts it (Latur 2005, 34).

In the light of those theoretical findings it is clear what questions are to be raised on the matter of nationalities policy practice. What are the ethnic categories the policy operates with? Who does the work of creating those categories? How and why do some actors try to make groups on the base of those categories? Does social categorization deployed by the bureaucracy within nationalities policy correspond to the everyday categorizations used by ordinary people?

Unlike the republics, which maintain a variety of cultural institutions reproducing ethnic identities (though the extent of resources afforded to this function depends on a given republic's economic development), the "non-ethnic" Russian regions usually did not inherit such institutions from the Soviet period. This makes the case of Stavropol *krai* especially valuable. After 1991 (when the Karachay-Cherkess Republic, previously an autonomous *oblast'* (region) within the *krai*, became a federal subject) there were no ethnic connotations either in its name or in its administrative divisions. However, the population of the *krai* includes ethnic minorities: Armenians (161,300, 5.8% of the population), Dargins (49,300, 1.8%) and others. In recent decades people from the neighbouring North Caucasus republics (including Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria) immigrated into the *krai*. The Dargin population of the *krai* grew from 32,200–49,300 between the censuses of 1989 and 2010 respectively (Belozerov et al. 2014, 18). Therefore the issues of ethnic cleavages, tensions and conflicts in the *krai* are often perceived as rather acute. A number of studies on ethnic conflicts (Foxall 2012, 2013) and on Russian ethnic nationalism (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2017) were

carried out on the *krai*'s data. Andrew Foxall carried out the research on the nationalities policy conducted by Stavropol *krai*'s regional authorities. He came to the conclusion that regional government tries to hide ethnic tensions under political spectacles demonstrating inter-ethnic peace (Foxall 2014).

The present study aims to look at those issues in a different way. Instead of focusing on the events when the ethnicity comes to the forefront of region's politics (as it happens in a conflict), it concentrates on the routine practices of making and reproducing ethnic borders and groups.

First, we take a look at everyday understandings of social divisions in one of the *krai*'s peripheral towns, Budyonnovsk, as it appears in a focus-group held there in March 2015. Budyonnovsk was chosen because of several reasons. Due to physical, economic and geographical conditions Stavropolsky *krai* is divided into two parts. In its western and central districts the prevailing agriculture is grain production, and most of the farmers are former *kolkhoz* managers and specialists. Also in the west of the *krai* the largest industrial plants and tourist areas are situated. In the eastern districts, stock-breeding prevails, and a lot of farmers are from neighbouring North Caucasus republics, some of them arriving in Stavropol *krai* back in 1970s (Nefedova 2012, 16–17). These eastern districts of Stavropol *krai* simultaneously face long-term economic decline and intensive migrations from the neighbouring republics. In the academic literature the eastern districts are depicted as the territory with sharpest ethnic tensions (Kolosov, Galkina, and Krindach 2002; Efimov and Egorova 2012; Avksent'ev and Shul'ga 2013). Budyonnovsk lies on the border of those two parts of the *krai*. 1n 1995 it endured a terroristic attack by Chechen insurgents led by Shamil Basayev, a memory that is still important for local inhabitants. Issues of politicized ethnicity are still significant. The focus group consisted of 10 middle-aged residents of Budyonnovsk, men and women equally, of mixed ethnic origins and different occupations but excluding those either employed in public administration or involved in the activity of ethnic organizations of any kind. The focus group members were selected by the Viktoriya Galyapina,[2] who is a native of Budyonnovsk experienced in field work within the local community. Personal contacts were deployed to inform potential participants about the plan to hold the focus group in the town. Those who were ready to discuss the suggested issues took part in the focus group.

The purpose of the focus group was to reveal the everyday understanding of ethnicity among the people of the town. But in order to avoid as much as possible the reproduction of media clichés on the matter, the starting questions to the participants were formulated generally: what are the most important problems for your town; what local problems are mostly discussed among your relatives, friends and colleagues; why these problems are important; who is to blame for those problems. If the problem, which can be attributed to the field of ethnicity, appeared in the answers to those questions, then a deeper understanding of this problem was discussed with cautious avoidance of professional ethnic studies terminology from the moderator's side. In this part of the discussion the questions were asked about the concrete manifestations of an ethnic identity, the ways it is maintained and reproduced, the reasons for its significance, and also about the possible links between the social problems in the town and ethnicity.

The task was to learn how the participants see social divisions, which in academic terms may belong to ethnicity, without imposing professional "presets" on the discussion. The

focus group took place in the room in the public building, provided by the local administration. The discussion was conducted on a weekend, and no representative of the administration was present and so could not influence the answers. Since the moderator was well known to the participants, they were rather sincere in their reactions to the questions. The author of the present paper was observing the discussion without taking part in it.

Second, we analyse interviews taken from policy makers in Stavropol on February and March 2015 (in total 21 interviews). The respondents were the *krai*'s administration officials, including one minister of the region's government, one representative of *krai*'s court apparatus, several members of the regional legislature, including two deputy chairmen, high officials of Stavropol's city administration, and the leaders of several ethnic organizations. The contacts among the Stavropol political elite were set up with the help of its representative, then a member of Stavropol's city assembly. The contacts were further developed by snowball method. The field research was supported by presidential grant via ISEPR (Institute of Socio-economic and Political Research or ISEPI in Russian) foundation, then a think-tank close to the Russian presidential administration, and which made it relatively easy to contact officials, who, on the one hand, felt at ease, and, on the other, perceived the interview as a probable additional opportunity to communicate with Moscow.

Comparing the view on ethnic divisions, as they are reflected in the focus group discussion, with the data from interviews permits us to answer the question to what degree nationalities policy is informed by everyday discourse. To put it in other words, to what degree nationalities policy is a reaction to existing cleavages and to what degree does it shape those cleavages? Next, interviews answer the question, formulated in general terms, as: what do stakeholders do exactly while conducting nationalities policy? What are their immediate aims, not in terms of official documents, but in terms of bureaucratic raison d'être? Who are the beneficiaries of the nationalities policy, and what are the benefits? What group-making work is done and what are the results?

It should be noted also that though quantitative methods are applied to study the developments of the nationalities policy in Russia (Shcherbak and Sych 2017) and to analyse the mutual perceptions among different ethnic groups in the southern Russian regions (Avksent'ev and Aksiumov 2012), they would not work in our case. Quantitative tools imply certain categorizations, namely that the population of the region is divided into a number of ethnic groups, and each of those groups is supposed to have more or less shared political preferences. The very concept of "inter-ethnic relations", widely used in Russia both by public officials and researchers, conveys a "groupist" interpretation of the social world, i.e. that there are some "groups" and some "relations" between them (Brubaker 2004). Whereas our task is to look how the object of the nationalities policy is constructed by the stakeholders and how it actually works in practice.

Mosque, hijab, *lezghinka*

The first stage of the focus group discussion in Budyonnovsk – when the participants were asked to name the problems of the town which they or their relatives face most often – presented a topic that a researcher might call an "ethnic" one. The outflow of the native

population and the inflow of the people from Dagestan replacing the natives were distinguished among the problems of Budyonnovsk, although they were not the first ones on the list.

> Dagestan, that is all that territory, they come and settle actively here, begin to colonize. The newcomers are people that already have their own culture. But what's important, you know, they come … So be it, but they come showing off their culture. This showy culture.

As followed from further discussion, there are several features of the newcomers' culture that are viewed as ostentatious and provocative. The hijab is one of them.

> What is irritating? The fact that they are wearing those paranjas, those hijabs. This is really irritating. If you came to live in Russia, you should respect the Russian law, I think. One shouldn't go to school like that, girls' faces are covered and you can do nothing about it. These girls live in our neighborhood, they wear those dresses, they walk all wrapped up. I believe that such a situation is definitely too much of a show, they show off.

The features of the newcomers' culture include behavioural forms that are considered deviant, as well as insularity, which is often attributed to the newcomers.

> Impertinence in behaviour, that is their aggression. Rudeness, ignorance towards other people. And towards other religions.

> We also like dancing lezghinka. Why not? However, it shouldn't be forced upon other people. Look, they've brought a car, turned on lezghinka music at midnight. Who would like that? No one. Is this a demonstration of your culture? No, it's a demonstration of lack of culture.

> Don't show off in front of normal people. Behave in an adequate manner.

> For me personally, perhaps, it was a tragedy. I had some non-Russian friends, for example. We get along very well. As soon as there is someone of their nation in the company – that's it, from that very instance they do not know us any longer, they are in their native environment … We are strangers, we are not with them.

The members of the focus group also mentioned less rigid requirements of the newcomers, compared to the natives, vis-à-vis the quality of their housing. In their opinion, migrants from Dagestan are ready to live in big groups in small apartments, in houses without central heating, electricity, and with no glass in the windows. This is the reason why the natives prefer not to lease accommodation to them. This is another indicator of "deviant" behaviour distinguishing the newcomers.

Finally, the most significant marker of difference appears to be a mosque. The participants of the focus group representing the natives of Budyonnovsk were unanimous in pointing out that building a mosque in the town is unacceptable. To their mind, a mosque would symbolize that the surrounding land belongs to Muslim "newcomers" and not the "native" population. The newcomers would think themselves the lawful owners of the land, there will be more of them, and the natives will be totally pushed out. The discussion contained the idea that for as long as the newcomers still go back to their native places in order to bury their relatives, they do not consider Budyonnovsk as their property, they see themselves as guests in the town. The members of the focus group believed that if one day there is a mosque in the town the newcomers will bury their dead in the town, which will signify that the land belongs to them.

> If there is at least one mosque, all of us will leave this place in a year. That's it. This is definite. It does not matter how strong our own will is, I, for instance, always talk of tolerance, but in this case we are simply … Like a nationalist I say – this is unacceptable!"[3]

All of these could be defined as a set of ethnic (or confessional) phobias, if there was no other rhetoric being formed in parallel, one that could explain the difference between the newcomers and the natives and to move the distinguishing characteristics of the newcomers into a realm beyond ethnicity. The focus group participants demonstrated capacities for deconstructing phobias equal to any sociologist. Several such strategies of deconstruction were outlined. Thus, the focus group participants challenged the extent of the differences between the natives and the newcomers. Yes, Muslim women do wear the hijab, but this ostentation hides ordinary and comprehensible common weaknesses; the newcomers are far from a tough monolith in terms of their religion, which may be the first impression:

> We've got here, well, you, locals, must know that medical school, and a small vendor stall next to it. And as of today we have mainly Nogais and Muslims in that medical school. That is how it turned out to be, there are very many of them. And, I mean, they are all cocooned in their hijabs, in those scarves, all the rest is covered with clothes. So I'm walking about and see them hiding behind that vendor stall, they are sitting there in their scarves, smoking.

> Here we go again, we have a lot of acquaintances, you know. I have some quite intelligent ones. We've been in touch for a long time now. They invite us to their homes, we invite them to ours. And we always ask: Renat, what menu do we want for dinner today? He replies: What menu? What a silly question! Everything as … and we begin. For the barbeque we take lamb, pork, mushrooms. That is mushrooms is not allowed for them by the law, it's got something to do with the devil. Bacon is not allowed, nor pork nor vodka. And I say, how can we do without all this?"

> I once spoke to some lady. She said: "Yes, I have such beautiful, fine hair, how nice would it be to comb it! But what if I'm seen by some of my people, what will they say?" (…) That is why I think that the young people that cover themselves like that do not necessarily like doing that – they are just brought up like that in their family.

Another rhetorical strategy consists in changing the nature of the division between the natives and the newcomers, eliminating its ethnic and religious character. The division between alleged ethnic groups transforms into the division between imagined social strata. In reality Dagestan is completely different, and people from that republic who find themselves in the eastern parts of Stavropol *krai* and in Budyonnovsk simply belong to the Dagestani lower class of poor education and upbringing, – several stories told in the focus group were supposed to illustrate this idea.

> You know, I have a friend. A very good friend. He works here, he's lived all his life here. His mother died, his father married an Avar woman, if I'm not mistaken. She lives in Makhachkala. The father is dead. She remains his stepmother. And he always goes to visit her. He comes to Makhachkala, he comes and says: those, who come to us, are not … as if they are not true Dargins, Lezghins or some other ethnicity. They themselves live there, in Makhachkala – such intelligent, good-mannered people. As for those who came down from the mountains. They have nowhere to go. They can't find themselves in their big cities. As if they were outsiders, they come here. (…) He says: I visit Makhachkala, Derbent, everywhere. They have such people – warm-heartedness, politeness, generosity. Those who come here are indeed from there, but they are not the best people. (…) Same thing with our own reality – they are social outcasts, torn away from their roots …

This can also be considered as some sort of "folk ethnography", meaning impressions formed about various ethnic and social groups of different statuses who are present, in the focus group participants' view, in Dagestan. There are prestigious families or groups, as well as those who are not so prestigious; the latter cannot count on any substantial success at home, so they come to Stavropol *krai*. This argument does not eliminate the barrier between the natives and the newcomers, but it is being symbolically shifted to Dagestan: it is not in Budyonnovsk that the apparent differences among people originate, but rather the newcomers bring this barrier with them from the places where they were born.

> Even our local Tabasarans. No man or woman from Makhachkala, or Lezghin, or Avar will ever marry a Tabasaran person, because they are considered people of a lower social class. (…) Financially unsupported there, unwanted there, they do not find a place for themselves there, they come here.

Another rhetorical layer relates to the description of the features of migration in general, when the experience of the newcomers from Dagestan was compared to the experience of the natives of Budyonnovsk or of Stavropol *krai* who moved to big cities: at the new place the migrants tend to hold together.

> At our place, it seems, they feel better. That's it. (…) Many of our people go to the capitals. Our people go there, there as well a person feels better. This migration process was and will be forever. And once again let us not touch upon … We are touching upon the national question. Our people who move from small towns and little villages to big metropolitan cities, they too have difficulties, those who come here – they too experience the same problems. And again, we do not consider the national diaspora. But everywhere there is, for instance, well … not tribes, but … I don't know what to call them. A group of people from Budyonnovsk in Moscow. They are all the same … In Saint Petersburg, for example, a group of, I don't know, of people from Stavropol. Anyway people are gathered in groups. They need their own, not national …
>
> – Their own native blood.
>
> – Yes. Blood that is thicker than water. You can't avoid that. That's why it was and it will be. And there is nothing bad about it.

In sum, these statements are not indicative of a set of phobias, but rather a flexible and wide spectrum of different stories, descriptions and explanations that can be applied in certain circumstances, and which immediately create categories and borders. These oral stories notably transcend any attempts at external classification. Let us pose the question differently: is it even possible to describe the picture presented by the focus group in Budyonnovsk in ethnic categories? When speaking of the barrier between the natives and the newcomers, the participants did not use categories of ethnicity. The words "Avars", "Dargins", "Tabasarans" appeared only in the part of the interview concerning the situation in Dagestan. When talking about Budyonnovsk no one goes into these "ethnic" details as such. There is a rather new category of the "Dagestani", but the term refers to the republic which is itself multiethnic. The existence of a barrier between the natives and the newcomers is evident for all members of the focus group. However, they define and explain the barrier in diverse ways, among which the ethnic one is not the only framework. Boundaries are marked first of all by behavioural differences expressed through particular in religious indicators (such as the hijab, or mosque). But

it is also difficult to describe this boundary as a confessional one. The participants of the focus group do not distinguish their own, native, group in accordance with their religion. Nor do they distinguish themselves by their ethnic origins. Armenians, as well as Russians, are part of the "native group"; what is more, when the participants of the discussion described the division between the Armenian natives and Armenian refugees who came to Budyonnovsk in the post-Soviet decades, the refugees referred to the local Armenian people as "Russian".

Boundaries are consequently very blurred, their definitions are not strict, possibilities for categorization are wide and diverse. It is telling that during the discussion the word "inter-ethnic" was mentioned only once and by the moderator. While one might enthusiastically describe the situation according to the logic of "inter-ethnic relations", such an effort would require the construction of at least one more level of interpretation, for example, through a public and statistically proven comparison of the ethnic composition of the population of Budyonnovsk twenty years ago and nowadays; through public statements about the "expansion of Islam"; or through the organized demonstration of cultural diversity, perhaps, through concerts of folk ensembles at the celebration in the name of the city But the environment of "everyday opinions" as such does not provide for this interpretation. "Ethnicity" turns out to be a political and academic abstraction and at least the participants of the focus group in Budyonnovsk manage without it when describing the world they are living in.

Bureaucratic group-making

In 2011 a document entitled "The Key Directions of the Implementation of the State Nationalities Policy in Stavropol *Krai*" was adopted by the *krai*'s authorities. Later it was amended with some points referring to the efforts to counter extremism, and it is still in effect. The document is clearly based on an essentialist and groupist understanding of ethnicity:

> There is competition among different ethnic groups in the spheres of property, business, entrepreneurship. (…) The underdevelopment of the Eastern districts of Stavropol *Krai* in terms of their socio-economic progress, which has a negative effect on the social well-being of the Russians, Nogais, Turkmens and other ethnic communities, is slowly reducing.[4]

"Ethnic groups" and "ethnic entities" are perceived as collective actors that can compete with each other and exhibit a certain state of well-being. This understanding implies that there should correspondingly exist the representatives of those groups. Since 2005, there has been a council for inter-ethnic relations under the governor's supervision. It consists of the *krai*'s officials, the heads of the regional agencies of federal executive bodies (such as the Ministry of Interior, and so on), representatives of the North Caucasus republics in Stavropol *krai*,[5] leaders of ethnic organizations, Christian clergy and Muslim *ulema*. In 2014, the Friendship Centre was established in Stavropol – a building where the municipal authorities provided a dozen ethnic and cultural organizations with rooms for offices. Occasionally the heads of the North Caucasus republics can play the role of representative of the corresponding ethnic group.

The authorities have a choice of which leader in particular they will select as representing this or that ethnic group. Several leaders might potentially compete for the right to

represent a certain group in communications with the regional authorities. It is curious that bureaucratic convenience influences the nomenclature of the ethnic groups. According to a high official from Stavropol's city administration, there are no separate ethnic and cultural organizations of Avars, Dargins, or other peoples of Dagestan; all of them are united in one organization that has the name of the republic. Chechens and Ingush are also united in one Vainakh organization.

What exactly do the politicians, state officials, ethnic activists do, when they implement nationalities policy? They conduct negotiations concerning possible inter-ethnic conflicts. They hold meetings, conferences, concerts, sports competitions, where they give speeches on the value of diversity and the importance of unity. Such public events demonstrate, on the one hand, cultural diversity, thus strengthening the ethnic boundaries, and on the other hand – the desired inter-ethnic peace. Such events also serve as an illustration of the power and leverage of the corresponding ethnic representatives: the head of one ethnic organization proudly informed that one of the competitions organized by him welcomed the key officials of the *krai*, including the heads of regional units of the police and of the Federal Security Service.

The most important issue of the nationalities policy is preventing ethnic conflicts. As a member of regional legislature put it:

> Ethnic conflicts – all heads of security agencies, of the municipality, authorities, *krai* government understand that as soon as there is an ethnic conflict on their territory they will get a kick in the back and will be dismissed from their positions, they will lose their shoulder boards, papakhas, offices and so on. That is why all the ethnic conflicts are by all means made into conventional ones.

The last quoted sentence deserves attention. Almost every one of our respondents from the *krai* or municipal authorities said that the representatives of ethnic organizations are expected to participate in the resolution of any conflicts that can be classified as ethnic. This implies the prevention of the possibility that any such conflict grows "from a conventional and rank-and-file (*bytovoi*) into an inter-ethnic one", i.e. not to let an ethnic interpretation of a conflict find popular support. What is important is not just the conciliation of the parties or assistance to the investigators of a problem, but also the symbolic power possessed by the representatives of the ethnic group, which power allows them to define the conflict as "conventional and rank-and-file" and not "inter-ethnic". Thus, the leaders of ethnic organizations should publicly declare on behalf of "their" group that a certain conflict is not of ethnic origin. They should do it as soon as possible, according to a regional government official:

> Here we will choose the following logic, like on a highway – there is the first hour when the ambulance comes, hospitalizes the patient and the person can be saved. The same is relevant for the conflicts, in which the first hours [are important] in order to let the diaspora[6] leaders become aware, meet and extinguish [the issue] without causing a situation when people begin to call others, gather in crowds and start a street fight.

When the symbolic power of ethnic organizations' leaders is not enough to deal with the conflict, the heads of the republics may be asked to intervene. One may call it the highest degree of the ethnic representation. According to a senior Stavropol city official:

> Great work has been done here. Yevkurov [the head of Ingush Republic] came. He told off the Ingush guys as if they were boys. He said that they came there not to dance *lezghinka*, but they were guests. They would not have liked it if the Russians had begun to dance squatting in Magas or in Nazran. And you are newcomers here, so behave with dignity. Ramzan Kadyrov [head of Chechen Republic] did the same to his people. He talked to them more. We came to his republic, he didn't come here.

The status of the ethnic representative does not just give symbolic leverage, but also organizational leverage. Personal contacts with the key officials of the *krai* open up lobbying possibilities. One of the ethnic leaders mentioned in the interview that his close relative serves in the Investigative Committee. Many representatives of republics or leaders of ethnic and cultural organizations are co-opted from among entrepreneurs, for whom such a role becomes a means to expand their business. The leader of an ethnic group, when they have this status accepted by the authorities, has more opportunities for attracting supporters/clients. Lobbying spurs business, growing business revenues attract supporters, and the symbolic power of being an ethnic representative cements the whole set of those relations. Ethnic group-making is thus, in fact, patron-client network making. According to the representative of a North Caucasus republic in Stavropol *krai*:

> Enriched people use ethnicity as an instrument of further enrichment. (…) People who have money. There are not many of them. They stand out. That is where the gyms come from, financed by these people. There is definitely an instrument of attracting young people, some ethnic collective dances, gyms, but in reality this is a sort of demonstration of the power of possessing human resources, having people who are ready to go to the extremes. Now behind almost every ethnic group, there is family like this that is financing it.

Ethnic organizations, which often are hardly distinguishable from patron-client networks, socialize the youth from North Caucasus republics entering the universities in Stavropol *krai*. If a student, coming from a republic, joins the activity of the ethnic organization, this choice is perceived as natural. Both the authorities and the ethnic organization leaders are interested in this choice. For the ethnic leader it yields new supporters. The authorities want the organization they support to be sufficiently influential. More supporters/clients give the organization a more solid base to speak persuasively on behalf of the ethnic group. According to one leader of an ethnic organization: "Here comes a person from a republic, a young man, and taking into consideration what is already functioning here, he knows whom to address. At least he has an opportunity [to join an ethnic organization]."

One may define the logic of this nationalities policy as group-making for conflict prevention. But what makes the bureaucracy choose exactly this way of conflict prevention? The question reveals an important feature of the nationalities policy in Stavropol *krai*. The policy emerges in situations when regular administrative mechanisms cannot work, or work badly. Nationalities policy is applied first and foremost to communities and social environments which are beyond regular control. When there is a supposedly ethnic conflict, if the head of Ingushetia comes to Stavropol and meets with Ingush students, it shows that other means of control – from the universities' administrations up to the police – have failed to solve the problem. In this moment the representative of the ethnic group comes to the forefront. The nationalities policy appears to be the means to structure and to control those parts of the society which lie beyond regular bureaucratic access.

The excerpt from the interview with the *krai*'s government minister illustrates how the decision-makers in the region perceive this structuring role of ethnicity. The official responsible for the economic development of the eastern districts of Stavropol *krai*, described the complicated situation in those districts. He mentioned the mess with land property rights, devastating agricultural techniques, massive tax avoidance and growing radical Islamic groups. Then he turned to telling the story of his visit to Irgakly, the village in Stepnovsky district of Stavropol *krai*. Irgakly is populated by Nogais, and during recent decades has seen an inflow of migrants from Dagestan and outflow of ethnic Russians. He said:

> I gathered them – the ethnic community, the Nogais. I talked to them, tried to convince them. I explained, in particular, the idea that they, the native population, had to help us to improve crop farming technique. [That they are to] stop being greedy, and to stop tilling all the land around. I told them: "You will till not only all the land you have today, you will till the future for your children and grandchildren. You will leave them with no prospects". I said: "When did you come here? In the times of the khan Nogai. In the end, you are the people interested in further living on this land.

The subject of the discussion in Irgakly was the mode of agriculture and the use of land. But the partner, chosen by the minister to discuss this subject, was not farmers or municipal administration's officials. It was the ethnic organization. The subject was economic, but the argument was the ethnic one. The *krai*'s official was appealing to ethnic feelings, to the memories of earlier glory (he recalled Soviet time *udarniki*, "best workers", of Irgakly), to the long history of Nogais on their land, to the necessity of preserving the ethnic group and to provide for the well-being of its future generations. It was ethnicity that he tried to rely on. The choice of the partner constituted a certain social reality, in which the ethnic group of the Nogais, represented by the ethnic organization, had agency, interests, and will.

Conclusion

Comparing the focus group and the interviews one may see the difference between those, at whom the nationalities policy is supposed to be addressed, and those, who shape and conduct this policy in Stavropol *krai*. The focus group revealed social divisions, but not inevitably ethnic. It is the nationalities policy that makes those divisions ethnic, by applying and implementing particular social categories and constituting certain corresponding groups.

Why does the bureaucracy in Stavropol choose exactly this vision and division of the social world? Ethnicity is perceived as the "natural base" for group-making, because the neighbouring North Caucasus republics are reservoirs of "ready-made" identities. The nationalities policy appears to be the means through which to maintain and to reproduce those identities beyond the borders of the republics. Consequently, ethnicity is the easiest and the most available principle with which to structure social space, especially those parts of it which are not under direct and regular bureaucratic control. Nationalities policy appears the instrument of indirect rule, that is, rule administered through intermediaries – the leaders of ethnic organizations, republican representatives, and so on. By the same token, it helps to deal with the local informal leaders, or even strongmen: to give them a certain political status, to involve them in cooperation with the regional bureaucracy

under the label of the ethnic organizations' leaders and thus to widen the regional authorities' political base.

The political significance assigned to ethnicity within the nationalities policy framework gives to the intermediary the symbolic capital essential for the execution of their functions. The budget resources allocated for the harmonization of inter-ethnic relations and other similar goals provide intermediaries with the resources necessary for the maintenance of nationalities policy practices, as well as allowing the regional authorities room for maneuver in choosing intermediaries. The nationalities policy as a set of practices is enabling in the face of an uncommon political challenge – to manage a sphere or an environment where regular mechanisms of administrative control do not function at all or do not function well – reducing it to a set of conventional and routine bureaucratic procedures. In other words, to govern the ungoverned, to simplify the social world, reducing it to the spectrum as seen by the state (Scott 1999).

This attitude to ethnicity has much in common with the Soviet one. Ethnicity appears to be the political tool of the elite. Like the Bolsheviks, Stravropol *krai*'s bureaucracy tries to lead ethnic group-making in order not to allow some other social or political actor or force to do so. The regional government's strategy implies taming nationalism by making it an element of the existing political order. The principal goal is to depoliticize ethnicity, which is clearly seen from the approach to alleged ethnic conflicts: they should be presented as conflicts without ethnic content. But this goal, paradoxically, is pursued through controlled politicization of ethnicity. In the same paradoxical way, Bolsheviks tried to achieve the same goal with similar means. The crucial divergence with Soviet practices, however, it is that ethnicity is not so pervasive in the contemporary Russian framework. The practices of nationalities policy involve rather small numbers of people, and it is not expected that every resident of Stavropol *krai* participates. Some public events, organized by the regional authorities in order to demonstrate inter-ethnic peace, may occasionally attract a large audience. But the main work of the nationalities policy is done within small groups. The focus group shows that the social categorization provided by the nationalities policy is not widely shared among the population.

The non-pervasiveness of ethnicity points to the other important divergence. Whereas in the Soviet period nationalities policy was a rather unavoidable everyday routine, in today's Stavropol *krai* it is a tool which is used only in cases when it is needed, for example, in situations where a conflict could be perceived as an ethnic one or in cases when it is necessary or desirable to perform inter-ethnic peace. In the long run, as "blind spots" beyond regular state control diminish, the need for such practices in the nationalities policy might diminish. To evaluate the efficiency of this nationalities policy is beyond the task of the present paper, but one may notice that, according to the Sova Center, manifestations of racism and radical nationalism in Stavropol *krai* have significantly decreased in recent years. In 2007, Sova registered 14 cases, in 2012 there were 5, in 2019 there were 3, and the last violent case was registered in 2015.[7] This suggests the decrease of the number of events, which can be interpreted as ethnic conflicts.

Any conclusions on nationalities policy at the level of the wider Russian state are obviously vulnerable if they are drawn from a single regional case study. However, Stavropol *krai* provides a perspective on the inconsistency and ambiguity of the federal government's course in this field. When informal mechanisms play an important role, policy is shaped and conducted ad hoc and the conditions in different regions are various and

rapidly change, it is conventional bureaucratic wisdom to avoid definite and determined public statements and to preserve a high degree of institutional flexibility.

Notes

1. "A class exists in so far as – and only in so far as – representatives with the *plena potentia agendi* may be and feel authorized to speak in its name" (Bourdieu 1991, 250).
2. Here and elsewhere in the article the text in italics signifies quotes taken from the transcripts of the focus group and interviews.
3. There was no member of the focus group who claimed to be of nationalistic political beliefs. The participants' political beliefs were not an object of the discussion. Likewise, in this particular case the phrase "like a nationalist" does not mean that the interviewee looks at the world through the perspective of his or her own beliefs. The phrase means that when one speaks of the idea of building a mosque, he or she is ready to think in the logic that, in their own opinion, is typical of nationalists. In general, the narrative where a person normatively should be tolerant was quite demonstratively present in the focus group.
4. *Osnovnye napravleniya realizatsii gosudarstvennoy natsional'noy politiki i gosudarstvennoy politiki v sfere protivodeystviya etnicheskomu i religioznomu ekstremizmu v Stavropol'skom krae na period do 2025 goda* (The Key Directions of the Implementation of the State Nationalities Policy and the State policy in the field of counterwork to ethnic and religious extremism in Stavropol *Krai* for the period up to 2025), adopted February 18, 2011; amended May 8, 2019.
5. These are officials, appointed by the heads of republics to represent the republic in Stavropol *krai*. They have little or no power, but their status is higher than leaders of ethnic organizations.
6. The respondents often used the word "diaspora" in the meaning of particular ethnic group living in Stavropol *krai*. The usage is incorrect but widely spread in the *krai*.
7. "Sova" Informational and Analitical Center. Racism and Xenophobia. Stavropol *krai*. https://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/news/racism-nationalism/stavropol/ The date of access is 2020.04.13.

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