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Research Note

Russia's Regions in Search of Identity

Irina Busygina

Introduction

The statement that regionalism has become one of the most crucial elements and characteristics of the post-Soviet development of the Russian Federation has already become commonplace. Various regional issues recently became extremely popular both for scientific and popular literature; one can even state that regional matters are becoming fashionable. The question of regional identity construction has emerged as one of the central concerns for regional political elites.

The new role gained by the regions – meaning federal entities – is absolutely obvious; the success they achieved in ten years of struggling for their place in the system of Russia's federative statehood is undisputable. But is this trend irreversible or it can be easily replaced by the opposite one, by defeat on the "regional front" due to an increase in pro-centralist orientation of the federal center, as the latest political developments in Russia suggest?

The answer to this question depends to a considerable degree upon the nature of Russia's regionalism, often perceived as a set of bargains and struggles between dynamically developing regional elites and the federal center. However, modern regionalism is much more than that. If we perceive region not as a physical space and way of life, but as an active actor in the political life of a nation, then we can also see regionalism as a special strategy based on consensus within a region and oriented at the creation of more modern and strong regional administrative and political structures to favor further development. Regionalism can be examined as an outward-looking and progressive phenomenon, in which tradition is employed as an instrument in modernization. As we can see on the territory of the European Union, modern regionalism can move away from its provincialist connotation and present a path to modernization and globalization, which is not less valid than the path presented by the nation state.[1] The new regionalists can be found amongst more educated and advanced strata of the population.

The crucial question in the creation of a strong and positive regionalism is the construction of regional identities – a task much more complicated and profound than creating a "class" of regional political leadership capable of defending regional interests at the national level or constructing new regional political institutions. Without a regional identity the task of social and political mobilization of the regional population cannot be solved, and regionalism would thus remain an "elite business," an activity dictated "from above" depending upon the current political situation. How do Russia's

1 M. Keating, *The New Regionalism in Western Europe* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1998).

regions progress in the field of regional identities construction? In the context of this article we only address the construction of identities in the "Russian" regions, i.e. *oblasti* and *kraia*, not touching on the republics and ethnicity-based identities, because the process of identities construction there has a different genesis and logic.

The task of this research note is rather modest – to put forward some questions relating to current trends in regional identities construction in Russia rather than answering and deeply exploring them. The article represents only the author's position, which can be well subject to critical observations.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Regional identities as well as national ones rest upon "imagined communities."[2] However, if Anderson saw nations as closed systems, the regions, on the contrary, can be examined as open (or at least more open) ones. Regional identity is a key element in constructing regions as social and political spaces and institutional systems. A traveler can observe and examine the existence of different values, norms and modes of behavior among regions within the same state, and draw a whole geographical map of value systems.[3] The most common sources of the values will be provided by religion and language, but in the context of our study we will not touch on them, because in the case of Russia they relate primarily to the republics and to a lesser extent to autonomous districts (*avtonomnye okruga*). We will try to approach another problem: to what extent can a territory as it is serve as a source of regional values for the production and finally construction of a regional identity. It is worth noting that regional identities do not replace or displace national ones; they are supplementary and as so represent often not binding but rather loose ties being placed within wider ones.[4]

As Frankenberg and Schuhbauer have pointed out, one can identify three main elements in analyzing regional identity and its relationship to political action.[5] The first element here will be the cognitive one: people should be aware of the existence of their region and its geographical limits. This requires knowledge of their own region and other ones; thus the home region can be compared with them and differentiated. A region's population should know the characteristics of their region – be it physical environment, historical legacy, special economic profile or special cuisine or folklore. A second element, which serves as a form of interpretation of the cognitive element, is the affective one, that is how the people feel about the region and the degree to which it provides a framework for a common identity and solidarity, which differs from other regions and the nation as a whole. The affective and cognitive elements are linked to the third one – the instrumental element, in which the region is used as the basis for

2 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

3 Keating, *The New Regionalism,* p. 85.

4 G. Marks, "Territorial Identities in the European Union," presentation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1997.

5 P. Frankenberg, J. Schuhbauer, "Raumbezogene Identitaet in der Geographie," in: G. Bossong, M. Erbe, P. Frankenberg, C. Grivel and W. Lilli, eds., *Westeuropaische Regionen und ihre Identitaet. Beitraege aus interdisziplinaerer Sicht* (Mannheim: J&J, 1994), pp. 85-105.

mobilization and collective action in order to achieve certain social, economic and political goals. Hence, the shaping of regional political parties in particular can be an expression as well as proof of the presence of the instrumental element of regional identity.

Another issue which is crucial for Russia at the moment concerns the creation and reproduction of identities. Regional identities may be rooted in regional history, traditions or myths (special interpretations of the past), but in their contemporary form they are being shaped under the influence of social, economic, political and cultural pressures.[6] Political leaders and regional and local economic actors play an important role in region-building. The revalorization of regional culture is also an important part of the creation of a modern regional identity, and here we should not underestimate the significance of intellectuals, producers of regional art, music and literature, and the role of the education system (the role of the Teacher) in the construction of regional identity.

What could be the political uses of regional identity? It could be used as a framework for the perception of all-national political issues as expressed primarily in the results of national election campaigns and referendums. The politicization of regional identity can proceed further with the demand for special status, or privileges for the region. Finally, political mobilization could result in shaping regional political parties, which can either struggle with the central government for regional interests or concentrate (if there is more than one political party established in a region) on political struggle within the region during regional electorate campaigns.

THE SOVIET LEGACY OR "A MAN WITHOUT AN ADDRESS"

The legacy that Russia's regions inherited from the period of Soviet rule could hardly be described as favorable for the construction of new regional identities. Examining horizontal political sub-cultures in the Soviet Union and identifications of Russians with territories, S. White came to the conclusion that researchers rarely discussed such questions with very few exceptions such as, for instance, the historical competition between Moscow and Leningrad.[7] Under Soviet rule the main political line, the main "*ustanovka*" (aim) was to achieve social uniformity, to overcome territorial diversity and the class structure of the society.[8] In general suspicion and negative reaction towards every kind of diversity was a characteristic feature of the communist ideology. Elimination of contrasts, in particular interregional, has been declared to be the fundamental law of the socialist mode of production: thus, all the contrasts should disappear automatically under the influence of socialism. The general political line was to create one new society, a new community, the "Soviet people," and everyone should belong to it regardless of nationality, region, social strata, etc. One can easily remember the words of a Soviet song that once was very popular: "My address is not a house and not a street – my address is the Soviet Union." This song can now be seen as a clear reflection of a wish for one uniform community with shared values and attitudes.

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6 Keating, *The New Regionalism,* p. 87.

7 S. White, *Political Culture and Soviet Politics* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 193-194.

8 *Razvityi sotsialism: problemy teorii i praktiki* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1982), pp. 168-180.

The course of economic development (especially in 50-60s) also contributed to shaping such a "uniform" personality. We refer to the shift to the East – the extensive opening up of more and more physical space, leaving a degenerating periphery in the European part of the country. Unfortunately, the social sciences, first of all economics and especially economic geography, have contributed to this sad situation by presenting scientific explanations and justifications for the shift to the East and idea of elimination of all contrasts. Human geography did not exist in the Soviet Union, neither as a science nor as a discipline – only economic geography, a special "geography without people," was developed, which examined almost solely "productive forces" and "productive relations." Those who like the author studied geography in 70-80s, can easily remember this huge bias towards economic relations, thus neglecting differences in social and cultural ones.

One can easily find traces of the idea of this new uniform community construction (and a good proof of such efforts) even now in the extremely poor toponimic landscape of the country. Every town, be it large or small, had to name the main avenue "Lenin avenue" or "Lenin prospect." Many streets (over one hundred) all over the country were named after Kalinin. In small towns, especially in the province, the name "*Krasnaia*" was the most popular ("red" – the color of the Great October Socialist Revolution). Recently many of the streets were re-named, but still – the further from Moscow you travel, the more often you see the same signs of the Soviet past.

The massive migrations of the Soviet period to Siberia and the Far East (people followed economic decisions) have contributed to strengthening one of the features of the Russia's culture in general – its "*aspatial*" character.[9] This feature was formed primarily due to the gigantic size of the country, where people have never had the feeling of a clear and near border (unlike the peoples of the Western Europe), and the historical circumstances of the peopling of the country. As P. Vail and A. Genis expressed it poetically, Russia has bordered civilization on one side and infinity on the other.[10] Hence, Russia's culture reveals a relatively weak connection to space, i.e. the territory in many cases is not the reason for cultural change and modification. Such a situation certainly makes contacts between persons, for example, locals and new-comers, much easier, however it hampers the shaping of regional identities; regional communities remain vague and unstable. Migrations to Siberia, built on peoples' enthusiasm, petered out in the late 60s. When during Brezhnev's rule the Communist party tried to revive enthusiasm for the Baikal-Amur railway, the population did not respond.

One has to state that during the Soviet period the RSFSR was populated by people who with rare exceptions were indifferent towards the idea of regional patriotism and strengthening their regional identity. As for the regional political elites, they also had little room to maneuver in this respect, because they found themselves in a rather ambiguous position. On the one side they (I mean here first of all the obkom first secretaries) possessed almost absolute power over their territory. But at the same time they were in total, almost humiliating, dependence on Moscow, having very little possibilities to develop the peculiarities of their regional community. It was too risky, because

9 L. Smirniagin, "Russkie v prostranstve i prostranstvo v russkikh," *Znanie – sila* 5 (1995), pp. 28-33.

10 P. Vail, and A. Genis, *Shestidesiatye – Mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Moscow, 1996), p. 80.

they could easily be diagnosed by Moscow as "localists" – "*mestnichestvo*" – meaning deviation from the course prescribed by the official all-national ideology.

One more characteristic should be added to this picture: the relatively weak links between the regions as a consequence of the notorious Soviet hyper-centralization, in which all contacts were planned and developed via the capital. The absence of interregional links can be perfectly observed in aerial photographs, in which it is noticeable that the road system of a certain region does not reach the border of the neighboring one. Even now the road between, for example, Kaluga oblast and Moscow oblast (I do not mean the highway) is worst (almost impassable) at the points closest to the administrative border between the two regions.

It is worth mentioning here that such a culture, monotonous with regards to regional territorial differences, represents an inadequate basis for the federalism that we now seek to construct. The contradiction is obvious: true federalism must be laid upon diversity, upon strong and diversified regional communities; the concept was initially invented to defend the regions more than as a mode of political organization. Indeed, the concept represents a whole set of more profound ideas. If a country's territory is homogenous, consisting of uniform territorial units populated by people with the same values, it probably does not need federalism. Decentralization will be enough for effective territorial management. Federalism as a system of self-rule and shared rule is an instrument of managing multiple identities. Federalism is in particular a market, a market for different ideas, value systems, institutional, political and social innovations. If all the regions are alike they have nothing to share with each other, nothing to exchange. The "sacred" words for a federalist, "Unity in diversity," find so far little meaning in Russia.

However, we should not paint the picture of the Soviet legacy all black and consider it entirely negative. The situation was much more complicated and contradictory, because there existed a visible gap between the main ideological orientation and policy towards cultural levelling and day-to-day life, which produced and re-produced diversity. Certainly, the Soviet period provided at least some soil for further identity construction. There existed, for example, ties between those from the same region or macroregion (*zemliaki*), who re-settled in Moscow, for example. There existed regional literatures, regional festivals, regional sport competitions, etc. Migrants transferred information about their home regions and places. However, all these phenomena also can not be evaluated as contributing only positively to regional identities construction. First, these ties between "zemliaki" developed outside the home region; they were often not stable, disappearing when the special situation ended. Second, massive migrant flows not only transferred information but contributed to making regional communities in the point of destination more heterogeneous, less consolidated. Moreover, people normally did not re-settle to the neighboring region, they either crossed the whole country moving to the East or tried to find a way to live in the capital. The lack of knowledge of the country's territorial structure was combined with widespread stereotypes about certain territories: "The Far East is the outpost of the USSR on the Pacific Ocean" or "Leningrad is the window to Europe" or "Krasnodar oblast is the granary of the country," etc.

Thus, as regards the pre-conditions for regional identities construction, the Soviet legacy cannot and should not be estimated as all negative, but in my view the bias was toward unification rather than support of regional diversity.

SOURCES OF NEW IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Declaration of Russia's state sovereignty real horizontal differentiation of the political and social space soon became a fact. The population of each region was suddenly put into a quite different and new position that was determined by the fact that there was no "borderless" Soviet Union anymore, but geographically limited territories occupied by quite stable territorial communities having limited resources at their disposal. The mobility of the population greatly decreased. One can put forward the question: why have regional identities – as opposed to other identities – emerged as important ones in the post-Soviet context? I see two basic reasons for this phenomenon. First, the territorial disintegration of the Soviet Union has shown and proved the importance of the territorial factor especially for such a huge country as Russia. Territory proved to be a fundamental feature of political and social life, providing the framework for politics and social interaction. Second, in the ideological and institutional vacuum of that immediate post-1991 period the consolidation of power at the regional level around the executive branch provided possibilities to conduct politics on the basis of regional patriotism and solidarity. Hence, objective grounds for the creation of new identities were taking shape, but initially were not clearly formulated and fully recognized. New regional communities have found themselves faced with the task of recognizing, laying out the basics and articulating their identities, i.e. finding a clear address in the new country.

Initially, cultural resources determined the means of solving this task. Appeals to the most simple and archaic (but under the given circumstances rather effective) mechanisms became the rule.[11] In this situation, history distorted by a mythological vision was transformed into a kind of epos – a set of legends of "gods and heroes." The roles were played by really existing personalities, determined in each region. A region strove to find its own "cultural hero," but as soon as he was "found," by employing a more or less serious interpretation of history, his autonomous existence in history came to an end. He started to serve as a model for the construction of a regional identity, not independently but through the regional leader, as the latter acquired the features of the regional "cultural hero." For instance, the governor could be portrayed as the incarnation of one of the central figures of the regional historical pantheon. Little by little the region's neo-mythology acquired stability and started to live independently, sometimes even replacing reality.[12]

The regional "cultural hero" and his team (i.e. the political leadership of a region) started to construct a regional identity. Perceiving this process as extremely complex and multi-level, and in order to examine it systematically, we propose to distinguish

11 I. Maliakin, "Rossiiskaia regional'naia mifologiia: tri vozrasta," *Pro et Contra* 5 :1 (2000), p.111.

12 Ibid., p. 113.

between the efforts of the regional elites (political, economic and cultural) *per se* and the mass efforts inspired by those elites.

Political elites play obviously a key role in the process of regional identities construction. Here we can distinguish the shaping of regional ideology, the formation of the regional image and the formation of the image of the governor, who in many cases personifies the region. Let us examine these elements in consecutive order.

Regional ideologies as clear expressions of the priorities in the development and articulations of regional interests can be traced not in each Russia's region, but only in the most advanced ones with developed and consolidated regional elites. For instance, for Nizhnii Novgorod oblast under Boris Nemtsov it was an ideology of "break to the market." The manifestation of ideology was presented in the programmatic document "Nizhegorodskii prologue," prepared by the specialists of "Epicenter" headed by G. Iavlinskii.[13] According to the document the oblast was to be turned into an "exhibition of reforms." The main ideas of this project included middle class formation, the development of interregional and international links with the oblast, the advertisement of it as an open and prosperous territorial unit under the motto "Nizhnii – the third capital of Russia."

It is worth mentioning here that, as the example of Nizhnii Novgorod shows, these new regional ideologies so far do not present something stable and deeply rooted in the regional political culture, but exist as the creatures of a certain regional leader. The successor of Nemtsov, I. Skliarov, was not consistent in developing this liberal ideology further, did not perceive the region as "the window of Russia's capitalism," but turned more to current regional problems and away from loud slogans. Nizhnii Novgorod oblast has lost its unique face on the regional map – and quite painlessly; the slogan of "Nizhnii Novgorod for export" proved to be plain, one-dimensional, and not deeply rooted within regional society.

The formation of a regional image is closely linked to its ideology and can be seen as an integral part of the latter. The efforts here are concentrated primarily on the creation of the region's "prestige" (one of the most popular words in Russia's contemporary regional political lexicon: "This is prestigious – to live in our region"). But again we have to note that only rich and relatively prosperous regions with dynamically developing economies can allow themselves to work for the "prestige" of a region, as these efforts are usually very costly: such campaigns include in particular sets of pompous events – celebrations of anniversaries of the region (which acquire the character of annual rituals), the organization of festivals, exhibitions, fairs, and sponsorships of the region's sport teams, which are perceived as regional symbols. All events are combined and oriented as actions of political advertisement. In Samara oblast one of the widely advertised initiatives was the signing of a regional Treaty on Peace and Concord (analogous to the national one), signed by the leaders of political organizations, editors of the newspapers, directors of the main enterprises and heads of local government bodies.[14]

Sometimes such campaigns include the elaboration of regional orders, medals and badges of honor, which as a rule receive the names of historic personalities bearing

13 A. Magomedov, *Misteriia regionalizma* (Moscow: MONF, 2000), p. 183.

14 Ibid., p. 159.

relation to the region, and which are granted to the most respected citizens or those from the regional establishment. Such a campaign took place, for instance, in Tver' oblast. However, the prestige of these awards is normally not as high as the regional administration would expect; in any case it is much less than the prestige of the national awards. One more feature should be mentioned here: existing competitions between the regions for the image of "the most," "the third capital," or at least for the image of the capital of a macro-region, such as is taking place between Samara and Saratov oblast for the image of the capital of the Volga basin region.

The third element of the activities of the regional political elites is the creation of the personal image of a regional leader. It is no secret that in many cases we can speak about the "personalization" of a region ("my region – that's me"). The situation is often aggravated under the conditions of an existing "political desert," when the head of the ruling political elite grouping is the only real leader in a region. The consolidation of the regional political elite, the authoritarian character of the regional political regime, and the relatively high popularity of the governor prove to be the main conditions for the contribution of the regional leader image to the construction of the regional identity. Thus, the people should be able to determine without difficulty who has real power in the region. If the elite is fragmented, the current leader can hardly be perceived as "the face" of a region. The creation of an image can not be a single event; the image must be constantly reproduced, reaching its peak during regional election campaigns. Moreover, to be accepted as a source for regional identity the image of the leader should correspond to the expectations of the regional population, i.e. to its social, cultural, psychological and economic peculiarities. Let us distinguish three main directions in the formation of images of regional leaders:

1. "*Political entrepreneur-reformer.*" B. Nemtsov is the most pure example of this type (M. Prussak in Novgorod oblast has tried to copy to some extent the efforts of Nemtsov, however without his brilliance and with much more modest results). Here the governor is shining like "a star" around which life is moving. Such an image demands good improvisation qualities, high mobility and flexibility. This is the image of a public politician with good skills of a public speaker and a positive reputation in the West, which is used as an additional source for legitimation of the regional leadership. Such examples, remaining unique, can only be found in developed regions with diversified economic structures, large proportions of urban population and a high level of education.

2. "*Reformer-patriot.*" Examples are provided by the governors of Samara and Saratov regions as well as Iu. Luzhkov in Moscow. In this case interpretation of history and the creation of regional myths can be very useful to a leader. Thus, D. Aiatskov, the governor of the Saratov oblast, has clearly associated himself with Petr Stolypin, the governor of the pre-revolution Saratov guberniia and then Russia's prime-minister, thus striving to stress the element of continuity in the reform course. The name and the image of Stolypin (or the cult of Stolypin) were used to legitimate the newest political

15 This reform in particular was loudly advertised, but in fact proved to be more a political gesture than a functioning economic tool.

and economic innovations (first of all the land reform)[15] and the will of the present governor. This image is also possible only for rather developed regions so that the topics of reform can find an audience.

3. "*Patriot-father of the region.*" This image is more typically constructed in the republics, however some "Russian" regions, in particular, southern regions with agrarian economic profiles, tend to create this type. Agricultural regions of Russia, more than industrial ones, tend to re-produce mono-centric models of elite integration.[16] The former governor of the Krasnodar krai, N. Kondratenko, presents the best example. His unusually high popularity in the region (80-90 percent of the electorate in the countryside) is a surprise to sociologists. One can speak him as charismatic, cult figure in the mass mentality, the most genuine symbol of "all Kuban'" that has ever existed. The sympathies for and loyalty to the governor are based at least partially not on rational motives, but on emotional ones, which can hardly be explained in rational terms. The essential and winning part of the Kondratenko's image is that of the "people's defender and patron," who constantly fights for his people with dangerous enemies, for example the "world Jewish plot," Armenian expansion into the region, or the policies of the central government. "The people's defender" is ready to suffer for his people (by the way, the image of sufferer is traditionally very attractive in Russian culture). During his speeches at the Federation Council he made quite risky declarations against the Kremlin's policy, threatening to explode the pipelines that run through the region (certainly, none of these threats have ever been realized). This kind of leader manages to govern the instincts (often quite primitive) of a crowd, turning them to his advantage.

We examined briefly the three main versions of the image of the governor, which are quite different but in fact represent three variables of the same general image – "the master of the region." Certainly, we have to address the "brightest" examples as only they can really contribute to the creation of a regional identity. However, in many regions the leadership is less well-known and not able to invest much in the creation of any special image, being satisfied with the common name of "*krepkii khoziaistvennik.*"

All of the above relates to the "inward" activities of regional identity construction, however, there exists an important "outward" one. An elected "cultural hero" declares his struggle to be with "chaos"; the federal center in this system is declared as the source and creator of this chaos. This could seem quite logical, because it was the center that generated the crisis of all-Union identity, the crises with which newly created regional communities have to cope, and without its assistance.[17] For instance, in Ul'ianovsk oblast the former governor, Iu. Goriachev, has built his ideology primarily on the idea of opposition to the federal center (correspondingly, federal mass media presented the region as "bastion" or "reserve" of communism).

Anti-Moscow rhetoric in the regions gained the peak of its popularity in the mid-90s. "During all the years of radical reforms we did not have one quiet, normal year... In fact, the governors played the role of crises managers, constantly having to take ac-

16 V. Gel'man, S. Ryzhenkov, I. Egorov, "Transformatsiia regional'nykh politicheskikh rezhimov v Rossii," in M. Afanasiev, ed., *Vlast' i obshchestvo v postsovetskoi Rossii: novye praktiki i instituty* (Moscow: MONF, 1999), pp. 116-117.

17 Maliakin, "Rossiiskaia regional'naia mifologiia," p. 116.

tion in extreme situation, under a regime of extinguishing the fire, decreasing the negative consequences of decisions taken at the Center... While the government was in full prostration, these were the leaders of the federal constituents, who managed the task of saving the lives of the regions and the country as a whole." This quotation is taken from an interview with E. Savchenko, the governor of Belgorod oblast, who normally refrains from radical declarations.[18] Hence, the consolidation of regional communities and construction of regional identities from the very beginning contained an essential, negative constituent part, directed against the center. For the regional leadership this was the easiest way of strengthening the region's identity (first of all for its affirmative and instrumental aspects) – by seeking the common enemy. Even in poor regions that depended upon the federal center almost completely, where the governor's regular trips to Moscow in search of more financing were unavoidable and presented the most important part of his activity in general, curses against the center and the expressed desire "to bite the hand of those who give" gained wide public support. For the remote regions, like those of the Far East, an additional aspect of the rhetoric against the federal center is provided by geography – their peripheral position, feeling of isolation, desolation, and feeling that they are undervalued. For instance, the governor of Primorskii krai, E. Nazdratenko, is trying to build a regional identity, in particular by speculating on topics crucial for national security and the region's special role in clarifying and solving the problems, like illegal Chinese immigration and the "creeping" Chinese invasion, border issues and the South Kurile Islands problem. All these anti-center declarations are good confirmation of an important feature of Russia's society: the traditionally strong "vertical aspect," huge gaps still existing between the state and the people, between center and periphery, between town and countryside.

Such a counter-productive construction of identity has one more aspect: rhetoric directed not against Moscow as the country's capital, where all the federal institutions are located, but against Moscow as the most privileged and richest region of the Federation, something extraordinary, beyond any competition at the "regional market." This phenomenon – *moskvoborchestvo* – has deep roots in the country's history and culture and was used over the centuries in the construction of "negative" territorial identities.

In fact, there is nothing unique in this phenomenon; as in many countries the public outside the capital dislikes the capital or the largest city, let it be Paris in France or New York in the USA, because it differs significantly from the country's average in terms of its size, cultural level, and welfare. However, in Russia such feelings are unusually expressed. Initially, "moskvoborchestvo" proved to be an easy and comfortable tool for developing regional identity based on opposition to Moscow. Indeed, reality can provide one (especially if he strives to find) with many facts "feeding" irritation against Moscow, presenting newer and newer arguments for such a position. The political and economic "exclusiveness" of Muscovites generates in them a feeling of superiority in comparison to the "backward and conservative" provinces. The capital still plays a hypertrophied role in the life of the country – in terms of quality of commodities, spectrum of services, life style, and innovations in all spheres. Visitors take home irritation born by the permanent contrast between Moscow and their home town. The polit-

18 R. Pyrma, "Agrarii," *Pro et Contra* 5 :1 (2000), p. 138.

ical style and "weight" of Moscow's mayor, Iu. Luzhkov, also generates irritation amongst the governors. Moscow (and to less extent Saint Petersburg) is perceived by the provincial population as a place with very low "moral standards," where politics is carried out by dirty means (although this is true for the province as well), where "everything is bought and sold."[19]

Such negative feelings are in fact normal *per se,* but can not be used as solid constructing material for regional identity because the latter should be fed more by inner sources; it should be directed first of all inside, not outside. This is already recognized by regional elites: for example, during the most recent regional election campaigns (2000) it was easy to notice that anti-Moscow rhetoric occupied a much smaller place in candidates' declarations, "anti-slogans" did not work as effectively as they had previously.

One important thing should be added here, that is the possible erosion of the regional identity due to a sharp conflict between regional capital and region as a whole. It is quite noticeable that the gaps between the regions are usually less than the gap within the region – between its capital and the other territory. In this manner nation-wide hyper-centralization is re-produced at the regional level. On average in Russia the regional capital is several times larger in terms of population than the "second" city (with the exception of Vologda and Kemerovo oblast, where the capitals Vologda and Kemerovo are smaller than the cities of Cherepovets and Novokuznetsk). The regional capital is normally by far the richest city of the region, sometimes the only donor to the budget. Such a situation gives birth to special attitudes amongst those who live in the capital towards the rest of the population: "We feed the whole region." The conflict between the mayor and the governor, quite typical at the moment, contributes to the creation of a negative local identity, built on opposition between the regional capital and the rest of the region's territory. Hence, regional identity in such cases does not overlap the local one but is fragmented, replaced by the latter.

The regional *economic elites* play a rather pragmatic but still essential role in the construction of regional identities, primarily by producing "regional brands" of food: bread, candies, milk, various cheeses and other milk products. One can notice the first signs of competition in this field between neighboring regions. The most famous and sometimes peculiar personalities amongst a region's "new Russians" are also included in the regional "pantheon," and become the heroes of numerous stories, thus personifying the region. In these cases the interpretation of history often serves to find continuity as with the political leadership: attempts are undertaken to find the roots of the "new Russians" amongst old merchant families. However, this explosion of regional identities finds its best reflection in the unprecedented variety of sorts of vodka, which have proved to be the most powerful source of regional patriotism. Regional specifics, the objects and events of special pride are cultivated in the regional names of sorts of vodka, which are often perceived as the region's business card.[20]

Regional *intellectual elites* also contribute to the creation of regional identities. "Great deeds" in this field are done by individuals with a lot of enthusiasm and passion, those

19 A. Shatilov, "Politiko-kul'turnoe izmerenie zhizni rossiiskikh regionov," in *Grazhdanskaia kul'tura v sovremennoi Rossii* (Moscow: MONF, 1999), p. 67.

20 N. Petrov, "Federalism po rossiiski," *Pro et Contra* 5:1 (2000), p. 22.

who exist always irrespective of the social and political order. Here the efforts of specialists in local lore (*kraevedy)* should be mentioned first of all. Interest in regional geography and history has increased, in particular due to the efforts of devoted journalists and editors of regional newspapers. The study of local lore has turned into one a school subject; a huge number of textbooks and school supplies on the history of pupils' homeland have appeared in the regions. For instance, the teachers in Moscow schools can choose from a whole variety of textbooks on *Moskvovedenie*. Now the task of regional identity formation as well as the responsibility for it lays mainly upon education. The teacher will be a key figure in the acceleration of this process.

However, the efforts of intellectual elites aimed at the formation of regional identity sometimes are also not free from the notorious "moskvoborchestvo." In some books (and unfortunately even in textbooks) we find wrathful passages against Moscow. For instance, in a textbook by two geographers from Saint Petersburg the authors juxtapose the "sub-ethnic" opposition of Muscovites to the rest of the Russian population.[21] Such contrasting juxtapositions can be considered to be the main sign of "real moskvoborchestvo."

REGIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES

As for *mass* manifestations, regional identity could reflect itself as a framework for the perception of national political issues during nation wide electoral campaigns and referendums. However, in Russia traces of regional identity can hardly be found in this context. One can only speak about the special electoral behavior of the capitals – Moscow and Saint Petersburg – with an increased share of votes for liberal democratic parties (first of all "*Iabloko*" and "*Soiuz Pravykh Sil*") and Luzhkov's "*Otechestvo – Vsia Rossiia.*" Examining election results, we can probably speak only about some traces of macro-regional identity, in particular the notorious "red belt" consolidated to the South of Moscow (although the very term "red belt" too greatly simplifies reality, giving only a label to the territory without explanations regarding the delayed industrialization and urbanization or the particular age structure of population) or about the famous phenomenon of the 55th parallel – that is the North/South delimitation of the country with the domination of pro-communist votes to the South and pro-democratic (pro-"*Edinstvo*" in the last Duma elections) to the North. This division is obviously much too general and vague, and will not move us far towards understanding regional identities.

Regional political parties (or even party systems, that is parties created around certain regional ideas and not structures subordinated to national parties) are the brightest expressions of the instrumental element of regional identity. The process of crystallization of regional party systems began in the mid-90s. Now, the trend of strengthening positions of the large parties and decreasing the number of the small ones is observed at the national as well as at the regional level. However, there are quite few examples of regions with functioning regional political parties on the map of Russia.

In recent years Sverdlovsk oblast has become well known in Russia creating a whole set of parties, political movements and blocks. The largest of them are "Preo-

21 Y. Gladkii, A. Chistobaev, *Osnovy regional'noi politiki* (St. Petersburg, 1998), p. 444.

brashenie Rossii" [The Transformation of Russia] (initially "Preobrashenie Urala"), "Nash Dom – Nash Gorod" [Our Home Is Our City] (this reflects the interests of the regional capital), "Mai" [May] and "Gornozavodskii Ural" [The Mining and Manufacturing Urals] (a party built on the idea of opposition to the regional capital, Ekaterinburg). Most of the regional political forces of Sverdlovsk oblast are obviously linked to national ("Moscow") structures but *de jure* they are independent political actors. The reasons for active party building are to be found in the proportional electorate system introduced in the region, as well as the high degree of political struggles and the high ambitions of regional elites.

In Perm region, neighboring Sverdlovsk, attempts at establishing regional political movements have been undertaken several times. One can recall the block "Region," created in 1994, as well as the movements "Guberniia," "Prikam'e – XXI vek" [The Kama Basin - the 21 Century] and "Delo zhizni," [The Affairs of Life] all created in 1999. All these movements failed to establish functioning structures and stopped playing any serious role in the region's political life.[22]

In general, the situation in the regional political systems of the Middle Urals is extremely different from the average picture in Russia's regions. We have to take into account that these regions are economically powerful, being net contributors to the federal budget. Political parties and movements there were formed almost exclusively as "personal electorate machines," as a rule for election to the State Duma. As the example of Sverdlovsk oblast demonstrates, regional parties can also be created as reflections of the struggle of several elite clans seeking to divide or to re-divide a region's property. Political and economic elites in the "poor" regions with depressed economies can hardly invest in creating personal parties.

It is worth mentioning that in contrast to the Italian case, where macro-regional parties like the notorious *Lega Norda* were created in 1980-90s and supported by many, in particular as a response to disappointment with traditional national parties,[23] in Russia the development of national and regional party systems proceeded simultaneously but obviously on different scales.

What role do regional parties play in regional identities? At first glance they seem to play a marginal role, as they are the creatures of party engineering and do not have mass public support. However, this is not always the case: if a party leader has succeeded in creating a strong and positive image, his party has a good chance to gain public support, as was the case with "Preobrashenie Rossii" and its leader E. Rossel, the governor of Sverdlovsk oblast. Moreover, an energetic political life in a region is definitely good for regional identity, because it mobilizes the people, waking them up from apathy and giving them "food for thought." The presence of regional parties *per se* becomes a feature that clearly distinguishes some regions from others, sometimes becoming a source of pride and regional patriotism.

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22 O. Podvintsev, "Regional'nye partii v sovremennoi Rossii," *Obshchaia tetrad'* 2 (2000), p. 18.

23 C. Desideri, "Italian Regions in the European Community," in B. Jones and M. Keating, eds., *The European Union and the Regions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 65-88.

INTERREGIONAL ASSOCIATIONS OR FEDERAL DISTRICTS – A POSSIBLE FRAMEWORK FOR NEW MACRO-REGIONAL IDENTITIES?

The Interregional Associations of Economic Interaction (Associations) were created in the Russian Federation at the very beginning of the 90s, covering the whole territory of the country in a few months. They were presented by official declarations and the mass media as "initiatives from below," i.e. from the regions. However, the very speed of the process gave rise to rather natural suspicions amongst experts and analysts that the appearance of these institutions were at least to some extent inspired by the federal center. In general the goal of creating the Associations, which united some nine to eleven federal constituents, was to increase, strengthen and co-ordinate horizontal links amongst the regions (the goal was justified absolutely under Russia's conditions of hyper-centralization).

Nine years of functioning have shown quite clearly that in fact the Associations were not very effective at turning into "clubs of governors" and did not achieve a lot in helping regional economic actors. The reports on their activities were often much more impressive than the activities themselves, recalling the formal accounts of Soviet times. Basically, it became obvious that the very principle of formally uniting the regions on the basis of their territorial proximity in order to strengthen economic horizontal contacts and help local producers in finding partners was wrong. The Associations were unable to formulate any common position because everyone of them included regions with different (and in many cases contradictory) economic and political interests. Under such conditions the Associations failed to turn into independent actors in the national political and economic arena, remaining institutions with limited significance and necessity. Hence, they did not contribute to establishing macro-regional identities, but on the contrary revealed contradictions and tensions existing amongst the regions within Associations.

The seven Federal districts (Districts) present a conceptually different idea that is based not on economic but *political* grounds. The Districts, headed by Presidential representatives nominated by him personally, represent the first step of President Putin's administrative reform. They were introduced by a Presidential Decree with the general purpose to co-ordinate various federal agencies working in the regions.[24] In many cases these agencies previously were *de facto* "privatized" by a region's executive power and acted not in the interests of the federal center but rather in the interests of regional political elites.[25] Thus, the Decree presents an attempt to separate federal agencies from the influence of governors and to increase drastically the presence of the President in the regions. The new president has resolutely broken with the previous tradition of President Yeltsin, whose support in the regions was based on the governors' personal loyalty and on establishing personalized relations with them. Putin created a new institution between the President and the governors.

The practical work and political weight of the representatives in their Districts will depend a lot upon their personal qualities and ability to formulate clear and accept-

24 These are the regional agencies of the Ministry of Foreign Affaires, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense, Tax Service, Tax Police, etc., more than 380 thousand people in total.

25 L. Smirniagin, "Velikolepnaia semerka," *Russian Regional Bulletin* 2:10 (May 2000), p. 22.

able strategy. They had to start their work in conditions of resistance (direct or rather indirect) of the regional leaders. So far the representatives see their place in the Districts quite differently; they did not declare any common position on their role in political or economic processes. The position of S. Kirienko, ex-prime minister and now the representative of the President in Privolzhskii Federal District, sounds reasonable: he does not consider the representatives as independent actors in Russia's political process, but more as instruments for the 'inventarization' of the country, meaning a careful calculation of the resources available in the regions – not only natural and productive ones but first of all the available human capital, level and quality of education, existing schools of thought and cultural legacy. According to Kirienko, the history of this new institution should not and will not be the history of personal successes or failures: the representatives will either succeed or fail altogether as an institution.[26]

The introduction of the federal districts is more than pure technological rationalization invented to increase the effectiveness of territorial management of the country. At the first glance the idea of a creating macro-regional identity with the help of this project could seem odious, because the Districts were created in the interests of the presidency, and not in those of the regions. However, the initial logic of this institution could be well subject to future changes as has happened with many institutions in the country. We are witnessing now only the first steps of its development and it would not be productive to pass judgment on the future destination of the institution.

The possible reasons to approach the Districts as tools for the future construction of macro-regional identities could be seen in two aspects. First (and more important), as presented in the previous sections, different regions in Russia have inherited different preconditions for the construction of strong regional identities: politically and economically strong regions with rich cultural traditions have much better chances, while economically depressed and politically weak regions can hardly count on building strong identities. Besides that, the excessive number of units in the country's territorial structure presents a real barrier for federalization, because some of the regions objectively can not exist and function as subjects of the federation. They have no possibility to develop civil society and democratic institutions.[27] Thus, the realization of territorial reform in the future with the Districts as the new territorial entities seems quite probable. Within a macro-region the weaker regions could rely on a shared identity, becoming an integral part of a strong and larger entity. This process certainly should not be mechanistic or accelerated with violence; in any case it requires a longer period of time. Second, the calculation of the different kinds of resources concentrated in each macro-region could potentially lead to a search for common ground, especially regarding cultural legacy, forms and methods of education, and the possibilities of effective exploitation of these resources. Federal districts are probably too large in scale to produce within their borders one definitive regional identity, but at least they present a better framework for such attempts than the huge national one.

Of course, the current preconditions for creating macro-regional identities and the level of cohesion differ from region to region. This should be the subject for a special

26 S. Kirienko, "My ne iavliaemsia samostoiatel'nymi igrokami," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 25 October 2000, pp. 2-3.

27 Petrov, "Federalism po rossiiski," p. 27.

study. Here we will only mention that in Central Chernozem'e the situation looks more favorable, due to the population's stability and the inner cohesion of the macro-region around common values; in Siberia the population is recognized by many as an important Russian sub-ethnos, while in the European North, as some of the authors argue, systemic crises has undermined the territory's cultural and historical fundament, giving rise to numerous social contradictions: between locals and new-comers, between pioneers of different waves, etc.[28] The Far East is marked by its bright uniqueness. However, this macro-region is clearly divided into two sub-regions – Southern and Northern – with rather problematic chances for melting them into a common identity. Russia's South is characterized by the expressed wish "to be different," the feeling of "otherness."[29] However, this feeling *per se* does not provide the macro-region with better chances for accelerated construction of identity, because identity has to contain constructive constituent part: not only the statement that "we are different," but also an explanation of the essence of these differences. In general, the presence of a strong Southern identity (as opposed to the Northern one), with a special "Southern mentality," is typical for most large countries – USA, France, Italy, and Germany.

The question of whether the two mentioned aspects will ever turn into reality now remains open. The final sense of the new institution could differ from the sense that was initially thought by their creator. A lot will depend upon the position of the President and the Administration, their wish to develop true federalism in the country and the wish of the regions to accept or deny the new institution.

CONCLUSIONS

True regionalism is impossible without strong and positive regional identities. The construction of regional identities after the collapse of the Soviet Union acquired a rather explosive character. The very speed of the process has resulted in a situation, in which identity construction was initially based on creating a regional neo-mythology with the head of regional executive power as the "elected cultural hero" and various interpretations of national and regional history. A second source of identity was often found in opposition to Moscow in both of its incarnations: the place where the federal center is located and by far the richest and most advanced region of the country. Without getting rid of the "moskvoborchestvo" complex (a sort of inferiority complex) regionalism in Russia has no chance of getting rid of its provincial character. By strengthening their dislike toward Moscow, regional elites and the population at large only feed their provincialism.

In Russia the construction of regional identities proceeds primarily in relation to political action. Regional political elites did and still play he main part in the process, while economic and intellectual actors remain marginal, though in some regions rather significant. As for the population at large, in general it remains quite indifferent to the problem (though some shifts in mentality towards a perception of identity as a regional

28 E. Morozova, *Regional'naia Politicheskaia Kul'tura* (Krasnodar, 1998), pp. 242-244.

29 E. Morozova, *Politicheskaia kul'tura Iuga Rossii* (POLIS: Universitetskaia politologiia Rossii, Moscow), pp. 213-224.

public good are noticeable). However, a clear vision of regional interests has not taken shape; the establishment and functioning of regional parties and party systems in Russia is much more the exception than the rule.

Political elites have "privatized" the role of the main (and sometimes only) "identity-makers," misappropriating and interpreting the fruits of the other actors' activities in this field. Hence, regional identity (as well as regional political regimes) are being consolidated on a non-democratic basis reflecting the fragmentation of political space.

It has already been said that in order to achieve a sustainable character, the process of regional identity construction should get rid of its aggressive character, built on the feeling of opposition to Moscow. At the same time, it should not move too far in the opposite direction, becoming dependant on Moscow; this can only be achieved if the construction of identity will gradually loose its "elite" character. Education and the development of regional culture in the broad sense will be definitely the key words for the future, if one has in mind not the current political situation but the long-term and steady process of creation. The role of the federal center will be crucial: to what extent will it get busy developing true federalism (hence, diversity) and how successful will it be in maintaining the progressive development of the country?

The building of regional identities in contemporary Russia proceeds very unevenly, varying greatly from region to region. This is absolutely normal: if we examine any large country, we will easily find out that this process always develops differently in different territories. However, in Russia there are reasons to expect that this unevenness will even increase with time, especially with an increase of interregional disparities. Thus, no common solution will and should be found: some regions will succeed in creating strong identities, others will probably find their identities in larger macro-regions; while the existence of several local identities will possibly prevent the construction of a regional one.

Regional identities in Russia are now in the making. Thus, it would be counterproductive to systemize the results immediately; the matter has not yet been studied deeply enough. Serious efforts aimed at a careful examination of each regional identity will help to avoid the building of speculative scenarios and allow researchers to come to reliable conclusions; and then they will be able to create an "inventarization" of Russia's regional identities, imagining their whole palette.