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Construction of national identity through a social network: a case study of ethnic networks of immigrants to Russia from Central Asia

Andrey P. Glukhov[1,2]

Abstract In contemporary discourse devoted to identity formation, there is important debate about the nature of the construction of virtual identities on the Internet. The research focuses on the virtual identity of the individual features of self-presentation on the Web. The study of the theme design of group social identity (gender, class, ethnicity) remains a peripheral consideration. This article presents an analysis of the mechanisms by which ethnic identity in ethnic groups in the Russian social network VKontakte ("In Contact", similar to Facebook) is created. The study aims to identify the roles and functions of social networks in national reproduction and ethnic support of Russian immigrants from Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan). The study uses the method of semiotic analysis to describe the discursive rhetoric and symbols of national identity of immigrants in the ethnic communities on the Web. The author's research identifies a complex of paradigmatic and rhetorical elements that reflect an evolving ethnic identity of immigrants on social networks. These rhetorical techniques include the appeal to Islamic values, the Quran, and Sharia law; an appeal to Islamic unity, anti-Americanism, and Muslim fundamentalism; preaching the values of patriarchy and chaste behavior of Muslim women, and male dominance; the use of visual images and characters of national identity (images of animals, heroes); appeal to the heroic archaic time and national mythology, and the achievements of the national culture; and similar elements. In conclusion, the analysis of the context of immigrants in the ethnic community network on VKontakte shows two trends: on the one hand, ethnic segregation, the craving for Muslim fundamentalism, and aggression toward Western values and way of life, and on the other hand, secularization, gender emancipation, and consumer behavior assimilation in the modernized host Russian community.

1 Introduction

In contemporary ethnology, the problem of formation of ethnic and civic identity is relevant to discussion between primordialists and constructivists. Within the European tradition, primordialist Smith (1998) defines ethnicity as a community of people with a common name, having myths about ancestors, having common history and culture associated with a specific territory, and having a sense of solidarity. In the context of primordialism, ethnicity is considered a characteristic of the individual, either due to historical developments or biological evolution. The works of Gellner (1983), Anderson (1991), and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) express the constructivist approach to the nature of ethnicity as an intellectual construct. According to the logic of constructivism, ethnicity as an elite intellectual construct is broadcast to potential representatives of the ethnic group through mass media, education, government rhetoric, and other social institutions.

Gellner (1983), by metaphor, compares the nation to a giant aquarium where the flora and the necessary climate

✉ Andrey P. Glukhov
GlukhovAP@tspu.edu.ru

1 Tomsk State University, 36, Lenina Avenue, Tomsk 634050, Russian Federation

2 Tomsk State Pedagogical University, 60 Kievskaya Street, Tomsk 634061, Russian Federation

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must be maintained artificially. Such cultural devices as education, church, and mass media (due to its symbolic activity) play the role of cultural tools for maintaining national identity.

In Russian ethnological tradition, constructivist Tishkov (1996) defines ethnic identification as a conscious or forced choice on "their" social group as "imposed" sociality. According to Tishkov, ethnic groups are the product of the nation-building process.

The process of the "modernity project" is well embedded in the constructivist approach and determines the context of the trajectory of modern human life as a changing of various types of identities. In particular, the situation for the migrant in terms of constructivism is the choice between the options of ethnic identity preservation by deliberate segregation or its loss through the more or less conscious process of assimilation. A third variant, very common and requiring great skills in compromise, is to attempt to "embed" or combine ethnic identity with other types of civil and group loyalty.

The marginal situation of immigrants is further exacerbated by choices between the conflicting attitudes of the social environment of their children and displaced persons who are forced to absorb the parents and members of the diaspora ethnic group, and the message of civil and national identity posed by teachers and contemporaries.

Attempts to trace how communications flow that reproduce and transform national identity have already been studied by Russian researchers. Lukina (2006) in "Technology of production and approval of national identity" used a constructivist research methodology to trace these morphological forms of Russian culture as realistic literature, journalism, drama theater, and painting, which have acted as media for forming a Russian national "project" in the twentieth century. Lukina has underlined the elitist character of the project and has interpreted Russian identity as "imposed" by the intellectual elite and the authorities using pre-electronic media (education, literature, ritual, and ceremonial practices).

Conceptual meanings draw upon the constructivist theory of contemporary researchers such as Ashcroft (2001), Burbank and Cooper (2010), and Brubaker (1996). They have interpreted ethnic and national identity in a linguistic and cognitive way and have revised the established nation-centered approaches with a simple dichotomy of post-colonial models.

Within the context of identity virtualization research, the ethno-psychological interpretation of identity is important in the work of Makus and Kitayama (1988). They have indicated a difference in the understanding of one's own identity and "self-concept" in different ethnicities and cultures. In analysis of civilizational and cultural comparativistics and comparative ethno-psychology, Makus and Kitayama have offered a typology of personalities which is based on a dichotomy in the interpretation of their identity by different cultures—oriental collectivistic or Western individualistic. The approach of Marcus and Kitayama highlighted the important differences of the "self" role in the activity determination by axis "Orient/West". The phenomenon of the creation of virtual personalities has been reported by many researchers, including Reid and Ng (2003), Donath (1998), and Sempsey (1997).

The well-investigated (in the constructivist tradition) problems of ethno-national identity construction through the different tools of culture (such as institutions of education, the national literature and theater, journalism, and foremost, the traditional mass media television) have a different content in the reality of transfer of most communications in Internet online space. In the new virtual reality communications, the focus of the individual (including group communications) has been shifted to online space.

There is currently a lack of conceptualization and empirical description of the reproduction process and the construction of virtual migrant ethno-national identity in the ethnic community of social networks and social media. Analysis of the virtual ethnic construction identity seems of sufficient interest in terms of social and group identity (including ethnic and national), which is formed not only by media communication, but also, increasingly, by the virtual discourse of social networks. The empirical description of identity formation in the immigrant-specific process within the new space of Internet communication, together with partial transfer of communication with the diaspora into the virtual space, also excites much interest. Studies on the formation, transformation, and assimilation of immigrant ethnic identity at the personal level have been conducted using traditional tools (interviews, opinion polls, and focus groups). Study results need to be supplemented by analysis of discursive practices, which are aimed at ethno-identity reproduction in ethnic communities within Russian social networks (primarily VKontakte, Facebook, and Central Asian ethnic networks such as i-uzbek.com, I-kyrgyz.com, and i-kazakh.com). In this context, ethnic communities in social networks can be considered as the most important areas of the ethno-national discourse and reproduction of ethnic and national identity, while, at the same time, providing partial assimilation and adaptation to the Russian host community. In the ethnic social network communities, immigrants (particularly youth) receive legal, information, and symbolic support from the diaspora, which reinforces the development of certain attitudes, stereotypes, and values of both the national culture and the Russian host community. The study of assimilation, the modernizing processes, and the processes of ethnic traditional identity reproduction seem to be present in ethno-

sociology research, reflecting public discursive social networks space with a specific transparency. The marginal situation of virtual reconstruction of ethno-national identity of Asian immigrants and its transformation under the influence of modernizing Russia, as simulation processes in the social network space, permits highlighting the nature of ethnicity and the process of ethnic and civic value reproduction, ethnic attitudes and orientations, and auto- and hetero-ethnic stereotypes. This is because of the discourse transparency of social networks.

Studies of ethnic identity in a social network have expanded the research field of the identity virtualization process because of the transfer of a significant part of communication flow into Internet cyberspace. The problem of description of virtual identity and self-representation (especially for adolescents and youth) has been widely debated in social psychological research both in the West and in Russian literature during the last decade, but the emphasis is less on social than on the psychological aspects of identity construction and self-representation. The process of identifying social (including the ethnic) characteristics of immigrants' identity, their social and ethnic categorization due to the impact of active communication with the diaspora within the virtual ethnic community, remains open to investigation. Generally the adaptive-communicative role of virtual ethnic communities and their compensatory functions in the life of the migrant (who is segregated in the host Russian community either voluntarily or involuntarily) has remained poorly investigated due to the novelty of social network communication.

The situation of ethnic communications transfer in the virtual social network environment requires a change in the methodological approach of study of ethnic identity. The focus of attention in the study of networks has shifted from the result to the process. The focus of analysis is on the intra-process communication and discursive practices in the social networks that impose a virtual (deliberately constructed and represented in the Internet) ethno-national identity, and the focus is not on the resulting review of the formation, transformation, and assimilation of ethnic identity of immigrants on a personal level (ethnic values, attitudes, orientations, and stereotypes).

Ethnic community environment in social networks has more transparency and is more public (in contrast to the rather closed domestic ethnic discursive research practices), which allows one to observe more clearly and vividly the remodeling and construction of ethno-national immigrants' identity. Social networks offer the ability to monitor both the strategies and tactics of the prescription of identity from other network participants, which may also include the appropriation of signs and symbolic resources, rhetorical tools, and visual images. Ethnic communities in social networks represent a public competition area for

different ethno-national identities, which is differentiated by the axis of traditionalism/modernism and offers varying interpretations of ethnic history and culture, value reproduction, and ethnic assimilation attitudes.

Virtual ethnic groups are important in social networks as construction tools for creating ethnic identity. Immigrants from Central Asia to Russia have problems with native broadcasting and non-professional use of digital communication technologies. They are unable to consume the content of the traditional media of their home country (press, radio, and television). Virtual ethnic public pages and groups of immigrants in Russian social networks, especially in VKontakte, operate as a partial replacement for them when transmitting traditions, identity, and news, and promoting religious dogmas. Thus, virtual ethnic public pages and groups involve users in a specific project of ethnic identity. It is important to note that immigrant users of social networks act as opinion leaders for the whole national diaspora because of their educational and social status, often because educational immigrants study at Russian universities (for example, the group "Uzbeks of MISiS (Moscow Institute of Steel and Alloys)" (http://vk.com/nust_misis_uz). Through offline communications, the users of network groups influence ethnic identity formation of those immigrant community members who are deprived of access to social networks.

2 Method and results

In order to identify the roles and functions of social networks in national reproduction and ethnic immigrant support, I have examined the phenomena of ethnic groups in the most popular Russian social network VKontakte (vk.com). Monitoring has been performed on ethnic groups from key nations of the Central Asian, post-Soviet regions: Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Tajiks.

According to the Federal Migration Service of Russia, on August 27, 2015, the number of registered immigrants in Russia who are citizens of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan had risen to 2843 thousand people. The distribution of these immigrants in Russia is presented in the table below (Table 1).

It should be noted that there are a large number of illegal immigrants in Russia. According to the information from Konstantin Romodanovsky, head of the Russian Federal Migration Service, the number of foreign citizens who are illegally living in Russia is about 3–4 million people, a large number of whom are immigrants from Central Asia. The total number of immigrants from Central Asia to Russia can be estimated at 4–5 million people. The total number of subscribers and members of the virtual Kyrgyz ethnic community groups on the social network VKontakte

Table 1 Distribution of registered immigrants—citizens of countries of Central Asia

Country	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan
Number of registered immigrants	520,328	966,789	2,029,945

Based on the data provided by the Federal Migration Service of Russia: http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/statistics/data/details/54891/

Table 2 Level of involvement of the immigrants from Central Asia to virtual communication in the social network Vkontakte

Country	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan
The number of immigrants registered in Russia	520,328	966,789	2,029,945
The number of participants in the virtual ethnic community in the social network VKontakte	40,000	100,000	70,000
The proportion of the members of ethnic groups in the virtual social network VKontakte in the total number of immigrants registered in Russia	7.7 %	10.34 %	3.4 %

is about 40 thousand users; for the Uzbek ethnic community there are 70 thousand users, and from the Tajik ethnic community, there are about 100 thousand users, according to our data obtained by quantification. Thus, the approximate percentage of immigrants from Central Asia registered in the Russian social network VKontakte is about 7.7 %, for Kyrgyz ethnic community, 10.34 %, for Tajik ethnic community, and 3.4 % for Uzbek ethnic community.

There are several reasons why I can give only approximate data. The main one is that the number of members of virtual ethnic groups fluctuates greatly; the totals can change every day. Another important reason is that many immigrants from Central Asia do not have any formal registration in the Russian Federation. Additionally, many such immigrants, users of VKontakte who live in Russia, participate in several virtual ethnic communities at the same time. Also, some ethnic communities in these social networks include not only those immigrants who live in Russia but also the immigrants who live in some other countries; for example, there are many immigrants from Central Asia who live in Ukraine and use Russian social networks. We cannot extrapolate the data of views, opinions, and preferences of the immigrants who are members of virtual groups in the social network VKontakte to the whole diaspora of immigrants from Central Asia to Russia, because we do not have any representative sample. All these reasons make it difficult to give an exact number of immigrants in the Russian diaspora who use the social network VKontakte.

However, analysis of the content of the social networks is an important tool in monitoring the moods, attitudes, and opinions of immigrants. It is impossible to obtain relevant information from the respondents using traditional methods of sociological research such as face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and standardized polls because of their unwillingness to give out any information

to researchers who are representatives of the official power institutions.

Below are details about the representativeness of the position and views of the participants of virtual ethnic groups in the social network VKontakte in relation to the whole of the Russian diaspora of immigrants from the countries of Central Asia (Table 2).

Despite the fact that these figures demonstrate the low involvement of immigrants from Central Asia into the social network VKontakte, the opinions of the participants of the virtual groups are representative and meaningful for members of the diaspora at a certain extent.

In virtual ethnic groups, immigrants express their views and opinions quite openly and do not fear being "overheard." In addition, the immigrants who are members of ethnic groups in virtual social networks can be called opinion leaders in the diaspora, especially among young people, because they are more educated, know and use information technologies, and have a high level of life, all of which allows them to communicate in virtual networks.

During monitoring, 236 Kyrgyz ethnic communities have been found on the network VKontakte. The first and second place was shared between a group "Kyrgyz kyzdar/Kyrgyz girls" and "Kyrgyz El" with 3285 participants each. The third highest is "Kyrgyz iFace!" with 2084 participants. Kyrgyz ethnic group names indicate their thematic and cultural diversity: "Kyrgyz renaissance," "Kyrgyz abroad," "! Marry only Kyrgyz/marry only Kyrgyz women!!", "Kyrgyz REP," "Kyrgyz SSR" (KyrgyzstanSovettikSocialistikRespublikasy), "I am not Kirghiz, I—Kyrgyz."

There are 501 ethnic communities that have been identified in search results in the network VKontakte upon searching "Uzbeks." First place is an open group "Uzbekteam 1—Ozbek, Uzbeks, uzbek, uz, Uzbek" with 6529 participants, with the second highest number in

"MENUZBEK MAN" with 3163 participants; in third place is "Uzbek movie" with 1136 participants. The ethnic groups' names emphasize variety and unexpected anti-traditionalistic and modernist "advancement" of certain groups: "Uzbeks in Tomsk" (closed group with 85 participants), "For all advanced Uzbeks and Uzbek women all over the world," "The glamorous Uzbeks," "Modern Uzbeks," "Uzbeks of fashion in any weather," "Society of thinking Uzbeks," "Uzbeks are driving."

The majority of ethnic communities found in the VKontakte network are Tajik. There are 985 Tajik communities, with the website "Tajiks and Tajik women" leading with 6804 participants; in second place is the Internet book "Tajik-Persian classical poetry" with 5044 participants; and in third place is the club "Cheerful Tajik" with 3261 participants. The names of Tajik ethnic groups also have astonishing variety, humor, and self-irony: "Tajiks in Tomsk" (closed group, 14 participants), "Tajiks are all over the world," "Advanced Tajiks," "Tajik—sounds honorable!", "In all cases Tajiks are cool," KVN group team "Electric Tajiks," "We are Tajiks—united and invincible nation," "Tajiks sport," "Study, student—Tajik in Moscow," "Tajiks of the world, unite!", "Tajiks [in] Ivanovo," "Tajik doctors VKontakte," "Time to change stereotypes—Tajiks of Financial University," and "I'm probably a heavenly Tajik: I am building castles in the air." Ethnic communities' names have demonstrated a wide variety of attitudes and approaches of participants, from religious traditionalism to modernist emancipation.

I describe a preliminary structural and functional analysis of the role and functions of virtual ethnic groups in the adaptation of immigrants that is based on monitoring of the most popular Central Asian ethnic groups in the VKontakte network. Preliminary structural and functional analysis of the virtual ethnic environment shows that ethnically organized groups in the social network VKontakte perform the following functions:

- Broadcasting national culture (religion, poetry, music, painting, dancing, cuisine, arts) through the tools of graphics, and audio and video content;

Fig. 1 Examples of the use of visual images in the Uzbek community in the virtual social network VKontakte
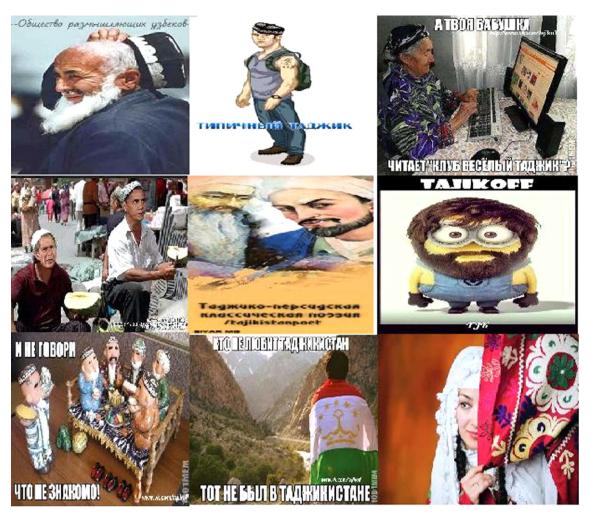
Fig. 2 Examples of the use of visual images in the Tajik community in the virtual social network VKontakte

- Preserving national language through communication to friends, groups, and communities via tapes and writing in Cyrillic;
- Coordinating activity with national off-line communities by announcing cultural and national events, national, and religious holidays (for example Nowruz);
- Providing assistance in cultural adaptation and legalization of status, and in employment opportunities and recruitment (including commercial);
- Maintaining cultural links of the diaspora with the historical homeland, including broadcasting of national news; and
- Assisting in emotional support of compatriots and in expression of ethnic solidarity (Figs. 1, 2).

3 Discussion

I have conducted a semiotic analysis of the most popular virtual Central Asian ethnic communities in the social network VKontakte in order to identify signs and symbols of resource requirements reflecting immigrants' ethnic identity. Objects for analysis were paradigmatic elements of cultural vocabulary (symbols of Islam, national animal identity symbols, and national landscape images), as a type of visual dictionary of national identity, historical and mythological narratives, and rhetorical methods of persuasion.

I have proceeded from the conceptual scheme of Roland Barthes (1997), which has drawn attention to the message ideology realized in a set of connotative, meaningful symbols that have become generally accepted as interpretation in the framework of a particular culture and that impose the appropriate meaning of a message.

The purpose of my research was not to determine the number or frequency of the sign-symbolic and rhetorical elements in the virtual ethnic communities, but to identify generalized characteristics of symbolic national imagery. Therefore, the qualitative content analysis of ethnic communication in virtual groups had been relevantly limited. The paradigmatic, narrative, and rhetorical analysis of the

communication content in virtual ethnic groups has revealed a connotative set of references to the symbolic national image. In the ethnic communities of Central Asia in the social network VKontakte, as has been shown by the pilot semiotic analysis, are very similar visual and discursive rhetoric and symbolic requirements and reproduction of national identity through an appeal to common values, emotional images, nostalgia, familiar conventions of common consciousness, and national emblems. Content analysis of the most numerous ethnic groups of Central Asia has shown that the following paradigmatic elements and rhetorical tools comprise a prescription of ethnic identity:

- Appeal to Islamic values, the Quran, Sharia laws;
- Appeal to Islamic unity, anti-Americanism, Muslim fundamentalism;
- Sermon on chaste behavior of Muslim women, traditional patriarchal values, male dominance;
- Exaggerated deference to seniors, motherhood, children;
- Reference to national music, movies, clips;
- Application of visual images and characters of national identification (images of animals: the eagle, wolf, donkey; images of brave heroes, landscapes of steppes and mountains; national cultural artifacts: felt shoes, hats, etc.);
- Historical projections, the heroic history and national mythology, the achievement of national culture (in particular in the poetry, literature, architecture, domestic masters' works);
- Reference to national and state symbols (flag, anthem)/national application of globalization symbols; and
- A retrospective appeal to the idea of Soviet peoples' friendship, ideas of ethnic tolerance.

It should be noted as a negative factor that for some nationalists, the invasion by other countries' forces, including fascist ones, with appeals and posts of anti-Islamic, pro-fascist, and xenophobic content as a consequence, has led some public ethnic groups to become more separated in closed groups and in virtual ethnic segregation.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the ethnic communities' content on the social network VKontakte has demonstrated (sometimes within the communication of a single virtual ethnic group) the presence of two opposite trends: (1) ethnic segregation, the trend to Islamic fundamentalism, aggression toward Western values and lifestyles, and simultaneously, (2) secularization, gender emancipation, and behavioral assimilation. These are natural consequences as immigrants transition from traditional societies of Central Asia into the relatively modernized Russian society.

The dichotomy of secularization/religious fundamentalism represented in the virtual ethnic groups of Russian social networks is extremely significant in its possible consequences, which can be twofold. On one hand, the immigrants can pursue religious commitment that leads to religious fundamentalism and can increase the number of social and religious conflicts with the residents of the host country; on the other, the immigrants can become secularized, which leads to assimilation. Today the majority of immigrants from Central Asia are positive and respectful to the host country, because they see possible sources of stable earnings, and some immigrants plan to stay in Russia for a long time or forever. The immigration of people from Central Asia to Russia for employment does not threaten the integrity or the cultural identity of the host country, because the majority of immigrants accept the tendency to cultural adaptation and assimilation.

However, unreasonable labor exploitation of immigrants and the lack of legal protection for them in the Russian host community, reinforced by xenophobia and direct abuse from the Russian nationalists and chauvinists (for example, the network VKontakte includes many groups of nationalists, including "For Russia without Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz", "Russia is not for Uzbeks": http://vk.com/uzbekiloxi), can lead to radicalization of peaceful labor and educational immigrants, who might adopt an aggressive fundamentalist type of Islam.

The monitoring of virtual networks of these ethnic groups shows the tendency to secularization and adaptation to the host community on one hand, and to conflicts, "ghettoization," and radical religious fundamentalism on the other. Both tendencies can be detected equally in the content and communication of these ethnic users of VKontakte.

Nowadays the national discourse is moving from the traditional media (the press and TV) to the social networks. This change is clearly seen in the immigrant community because the immigrants live outside the national broadcast area and can communicate with the representatives of their ethnic groups via social networks. This virtualization of the discourse of national identity has long-term consequences that can influence the process of designing and reproducing national identity. Not all of these consequences can be clearly seen now, but some of them have already appeared:

(1) Unlike the traditional media as the public arenas of identity discourse, in social networks there are not

only professional journalists, commentators, and analysts who have a voice but also those who are called citizen journalists and bloggers. These users begin to form and draft the identity agenda;

(2) The multimedia character of the virtual group content (utilizing text, graphics, audio, and video) suggests the possibility of a more integrated and effective involvement of users in projects of identity;

(3) Reproduction of national and cultural identity begins to acquire an extraterritorial nature, regardless of the place of residence of the users. An immigrant joining a virtual ethnic community in a social network is "at home" everywhere. Thus, traditional immigrant workers move to richer countries in search of a better life and transform themselves into "digital nomads" by virtue of social platforms.

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